

**NINE DAYS BEHIND THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN**

by Max Langert

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You probably won't believe me when I tell you all this, but I'm going to do it anyway.

When it all shook out, I was six months out of high school, holding a few part-time jobs here and there and taking classes at Pasadena City College on the weekends. My parents wanted me to go to a four-year institution – and I planned to apply, just not right away. I wanted a year to try to make it first. As in Make It. As in MAKE IT.

I was living just outside Pasadena in a town called San Marino. Mostly, I was a waiter at a downtown café and an intern for a small ad agency. I worked about twenty hours a week at the restaurant and ten hours at the agency. I barely made enough to pay my share of the rent and eat.

On one of my more productive dream-following days, I stopped in at the counseling office at Pasadena City College. They knew me pretty well because I went there all the time and had been talking about wanting to get into the entertainment business. Normally they encouraged me to get my degree first, but eventually they backed off and gave me advice about doing research on TV and movie studios, reading the right books, etc. I thanked them as always, went home, and casually figured I'd look into it more in a week or two.

The next morning, as I was stepping into my waiter garb, the phone rang. It was Tina Mitchell, one of the counselors at PCC. She said she'd just found out about a position that was available immediately as a production assistant in Hollywood. "*The Hollywood?*" my voice quavered.

It turned out that a semi-celebrity needed someone fast. And I, not one to let an opportunity like this pass me by, was on the phone in a flash.

That's where my story begins. What follows is the account of exactly what happened in that star-studded city of gold-paved streets, and what it was that caused me, a pretty good kid from a pretty good home, to see the murder of Hollywood pseudo-personality Vincent Blakely as my only viable option.

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### **FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12th**

I get a call from Tina Mitchell at ten o'clock this morning. She says she's just gotten off the phone with Vincent Blakely's assistant and that they're looking for someone to help them as a production assistant. And they need this person ASAP. Since I talked to Tina just yesterday about such hopeful pursuits in the industry, she called me first. She says the position is full time, that it's temporary for the next week or two, but that it might lead to something permanent. A permanent position in the entertainment capital of the world. The *World*, mind you. She gives me the number of the assistant, someone named Monica Greeb or Gleed or something.

I call her up immediately, trying to keep my voice from shaking too noticeably. She tells me she'll call me back in a minute and can I please give her my number.

I give her what she wants and she hangs up in a hurry. A dubious beginning but I *am* dealing with big Hollywood people. They're making million dollar deals over lunch and I'm eating mac 'n' cheese out of a box with a plastic fork.

Okay. So by this time it's a quarter past ten and I've got to leave for work in a half hour. Now the gears in my head start spinning. Hollywood. That's easily thirty minutes away by car. And I don't have a car. But that's okay. I've got friends who do, don't I? And what about my other jobs? If Mr. Blakely really needs someone ASAP I'm going to have to do some quick

quitting. It might put some people in bad positions, but you gotta do what you gotta do. This could be my big chance and I can't afford to let it slip from my grasping claws.

Five minutes go by and the phone doesn't ring. Then another five minutes. Then another and another and another. If she doesn't call soon I'm going to end up being late for work.

Another ten or fifteen minutes go by without a peep from the phone. I decide to make a bold move. I call the café where I work and tell them I'm going to be late, that I have some important personal business to take care of.

No problem, they tell me. Good. Then I make an even bolder move. I call back Monica Gleed or Greeb or whoever.

She tells me she's sorry for not calling me back but that it's real hectic out there.

"Sure," I say to her, "I understand." Like I have any idea how hectic it actually is.

She tells me yet again how utterly desperate they are for help. Also, that the job isn't on a movie set or anything glamorous like that. It's just doing a lot of running around, typing, assorted errands. It's not high-profile, but there are a lot of people coming in and out and you never know, it could lead to other things.

Other things. Sure, I understand.

Then she asks me if I can come out for an interview. "You got it," I tell her confidently. "You name the time."

"Okay. How's four o'clock?"

Four's awful. It's right in the middle of my advertising gig.

"Four o'clock? I'll be there."

"Great. See you then, Daniel."

God, what have I done. How the hell am I going to 1) get out of work and 2) get a car?

Fortunately for me, all it takes is two little phone calls. The agency says it can live without me for the day, and an ex-girlfriend, Jessie, lets me borrow her car. Okay fine, she's not really an ex-girlfriend, more like someone I went out with a few times, hooked up with once or twice, and let crash at my place occasionally. But we're tight. Anyway, everything's going as smoothly as it can. I figure it must be fate telling me everything's A-okay.

I make haste riding my bent-framed dirt bike over to Aux Delices where I go in and set up for the incoming lunch crowd. On the outside I'm performing my usual role as cool, calm, and collected food server, but my insides are jumping around like mad. I can't concentrate on anything or anyone. I've still got so much to figure out. What to wear? What time to leave? What to bring?

I go to one of the managers and ask if I can leave early. I have a very important job interview, I tell her.

"Sure Daniel," she says, "I think we can manage without you."

Great. So I work two thirds of my shift. My mind is racing so fast and in so many directions I bring the wrong order to the wrong table twice. But who cares, right? I'll be a big star in no time and what'll all this waiter garbage matter?

Once work ends I ride back home, take off my black-and-whites, and find the most appropriate things to wear. A pair of khaki pants, some dressy black sneakers, a swampy green (though elegantly swampy) shirt, and a striped red tie (the only one I own).

By this time it's already a little after two. I figure I better give myself at least an hour to get there, seeing how it's Friday and traffic could be blocked up for miles.

I get back on my bike and cruise over to get the keys to Jessie's car. The unseasonable eighty-five degree heat coupled with my unbridled excitement cause sweat to soak the rear of my

shirt. “Just don’t let your back touch the seat of the car when you’re driving,” Jessie advises before handing me the keys to her cramped air-conditionerless import. She looks cuter than usual with her brown curly hair in pigtails and a bright white skirt on. I almost want to ask her if she has a date or something, but I don’t have the time.

By now it’s a little past two-thirty, the gas tank’s flirting with emptiness, and I still don’t know exactly where I’m going. I stop by the counseling center where Monica G. claims she sent specific directions.

It turns out that Mr. Blakely works out of his house. His house! His house in the Hollywood Hills! I imagine a big white mansion with thirty-foot high marble ceilings, maybe with a moat and a herd of killer dogs kept in a barbed wire cage, all slightly underfed.

By now it’s pushing three o’clock and I really oughtta be on the road. I walk to the bathroom, check my appearance, and grab a few paper towels to sponge off my damp back. Everything’s gotta be just right. Everything.

Finally, with my movie star shades placed properly over my eyeballs and my window cranked fully open, I begin the journey.

The traffic’s not too bad and I make good time. Fortunately, whatever gas is left in the car propels me the full distance. I do, however, hit an unforeseen problem. My bladder is ready to explode! I can’t just walk into Mr. Blakely’s house and ask right off the bat to use his restroom. How un-glamorous would that be. Instead, as I’m winding my way up the sloping streets to his hilltop home, I search desperately for a place at the side of the road where I can relieve myself. There are a few spots here and there which might do, but nothing that’s as ideally inconspicuous as I’d like.

I come to the end of a street, a cul-de-sac where he lives. There are no monstrous mansions, just pleasant little suburban homes with great views of distant downtown L.A. Not exactly what I imagined but not really anything to scoff at either. Besides, this is only Vincent Blakely we're talking about. It's not like it's his mother Laura, the sixty-five-year-old Legend of stage and screen. It's not even his older sister Cindy, the one who had the ten-page Playboy spread way back when and can be seen regularly on any number of daytime soaps. It's not even Greg, the "rebel" of the family who changed his last name to Ivanov and was voted one of People's ten sexiest men after seducing Brittany Doyle in one of last year's highest grossing and least-compelling films. That's right. This is only Vincent, the one who stars in occasional throwaway TV thrillers and struggles regularly as a stand-up comedian. Struggles not only for recognition in the field but also for good material and talent, something I noticed after seeing him on one of those late-night comedy showcases on an obscure cable channel several months ago.

So there it is. His modest-looking home sitting right at the edge of a sheer cliff. It can't possibly be worth more than five million and I've really got to go to the bathroom. Just then I hear the roar of an engine behind me. A sparkling Mercedes Benz tears down the road, swerves inches from careening into me, and pulls up to the driveway ahead. The driver, apparently curious as to who would dare be in his way, stops, glances in his rear-view mirror to check me out, then peels into his garage, the door closing automatically behind him.

My heart is pounding. In just those few moments I had a brush with fame. I saw whose eyes those were peering at me above his designer sunglasses. That was Vincent Blakely who almost rear-ended me.

But no time to dwell. I've really got to take care of my bladder. There are still ten minutes to spare so I turn the car back around and look for a pitstop. The best place to go happens to be at the side of a heavily sloping road about a quarter mile from Vincent's house. I pull over, undo my belt, my pants, and hike up my shirt to avoid any mess. There I am. Some of the classiest autos in the world whizzing by with who knows who inside, and I'm relieving myself into a baby pine with more than half my body exposed. What a rush!

So now I gotta get back up to the man's house. After checking my appearance in the tint of one of the side windows, I drive luxuriously up to his abode. It all seems so familiar the second time. It's now four o'clock, I've got my best duds on, and I'm about to come face to face with a real live Somebody.

I take in a deep breath of So Cal air, walk up to the door, and ring the bell. To my disappointment, no classical sonata or sixties pop tune blares out, just a simple ding-dong.

No answer. Maybe no one's home. Except I just saw the car drive in minutes ago. Then where is he? It's not *that* big a house... He *is* a star, though. I have to remember that. He's allowed to take his time.

Then, suddenly, the doorknob turns, the door opens and there he is. Vincent Blakely. Standing there face to face with me... Well, sort of. He's actually facing Jessie's subcompact, sizing it up, with one hand outstretched and the other holding a smoldering cigarette.

"Daniel," he says, his fierce blue eyes squinting in the afternoon sun.

"Yeah," I shake his hand, remembering to keep my grip firm like they taught me in mock-interviews... but not too firm.

"Thanks for coming. I'm going to ask you to wait out here a couple minutes."

"Okay. No prob-"



The door quickly closes.

Hmm. The guy doesn't even look at me and then he asks me to wait outside for him. That can't be good, can it? Maybe I'm being too sensitive. He's got to finish doing whatever he's doing first without the hindrance of some wide-eyed little brat. Fine. So I sit down on this little bench he's got conveniently placed out front. Just sitting there as the seconds tick by with nothing to do. Sitting right outside a celebrity's home. My heart starts to beat faster. I've seen this guy on TV, after all. But so what. A person's a person, right? But this guy's not just a person. He's *famous*. It's a different breed altogether. The ego, the mystique, the intrigue. I can barely breathe.

I try to calm myself back down. Think normal thoughts, Dan, normal thoughts... I go to the grocery store on a fairly regular basis to buy fruit. Oranges and apples mostly. I like to eat fruit for breakfast. That's why I get it. It's good, and good for me, too... I wish this guy would hurry up and open the door so I wouldn't have to keep on putting myself through this!

I look around. It's really a lovely day. The sun is shining and there's a great view of the surrounding hills and downtown L.A. The smog isn't too bad. The birds are singing. The flowers are pretty. Nice. Real nice...

I hear footsteps approaching the door and my heart skips around, bouncing off my rib cage till it hurts. The door opens again. This time he looks right at me. He's wearing a tight black golf shirt with the initials VB stitched on the chest.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Come on in."

"Okay," I say, forcefully shoving my nerves down my throat.

The living space is pleasant, roomy. He gestures for me to take a seat on the couch. "You want anything to drink?" he asks. "Juice? Water?"

What, no champagne?

“Water’d be great,” I tell him.

He goes to the kitchen to get me some. You get that? *He* went to the kitchen to get water for *me*.

The couch is very soft and while he’s gone I try sitting in as many positions as I can think of. Legs crossed. Legs sprawled. Back bent forward. Arms on knees. Arms spread out.

I finally go with one leg casually bent at a right angle so the foot rests on my left knee. It gives off the best vibes of comfortable hipness.

He puts the glass in front of me, pulls out another Camel, and lights it. Tiny beads of sweat line the top of his forehead where the ends of his highlighted hair meet his tanned skin.

“I gotta tell you, Daniel, I’m at a real bad emotional level right now.”

Tension pours from this guy like water from a cracked dam. At least he’s being honest.

An early-middle-aged woman walks in from the kitchen. She moves like a timid animal, her shoulders raised, her back slightly bent. She’s wearing brown corduroy pants and a checkered long-sleeve that covers half her hands. “Is everything okay?” she asks.

Vincent looks up at her like she walked in on him in the bathroom. “Yes, Sandy,” he seethes, “everything... is... okay.”

Sandy raises her bony hands and the sleeves fall back to reveal thin, pale wrists. “Just wanted to make sure everything was all right.”

“It follows that if everything is okay, everything is also all right, doesn’t it, Sandy?” he growls.

“You’re right, Vincent. You’re absolutely right.” She cowers back whence she came.

“Ditzbag,” Mr. Blakely scowls once she’s gone. He takes a long drag. “You see, Daniel. The problem is, my help’s no good. Nobody knows what they’re doing.”

“Uh-huh,” I try and nod sympathetically.

As we’re sitting there, just me and him, me and the semi-big star, he rambles about how nobody uses their head, how everybody is pretty much useless.

“Nobody knows anything about efficiency,” he tells me. “Take Monica, for example. She’s supposed to be here now interviewing you. But you know what she did? When she went out to lunch, she just went out and ate when what she should have been doing was picking up invitations to a party I’m throwing next week. So what does she do? She goes to lunch, comes back, and has to go back out again to get the invitations. Fuckin’ inefficient. Fuckin’ goddamn inefficient. You hear what I’m saying?”

Sort of.

“Uh-huh.”

“You got a resumé or something?”

I pull out my hastily prepared list of hyped-up jobs and inflated experiences, and he scans it quickly. Then grills me intensely.

Who’s your boss here? Why’d you stop doing this? What are the details? What’s his phone number? What’s her address? Did they like you at this one?

I answer each and every one of his questions with superficially relaxed ease. He’s so aggressive with his questions, so pushy that I have to really fight my body from shaking. I think I come off pretty well. He seems relatively satisfied, though when I can’t remember the address to one job off the top of my head, he criticizes my lack of organizational skills. He tells me he absolutely *does not stand* for mistakes. I guess I’ll try not to make any.

Eventually, as he's taking another of his constant drags, he says he's really strapped and that he'll give me a shot.

"When can you start?" he asks me.

"Whenever," I tell him.

"How about now?"

"Now?"

"You said whenever, Daniel. That includes now. You weren't lying to me, were you?"

"No. I guess I can start now."

"You *guess* or you *can*?"

"I can. I can."

Who would've thought it? Here it is, just another Friday evening, a Friday evening I thought I'd be spending at a party or seeing a movie, but no, instead I'm going to be working for a celebrity.

"I've got a guest bedroom here, Daniel. Things may get pretty hectic the next week or so. We'll be working late and you might want to spend the night here just to make things easier."

Wait a second now. I've heard rumors about Hollywood people and the kinky things that go on in that sleazy little town. Do I really want to sleep in the same house as some guy who has who-knows-what kinds of hobbies and psychotic tendencies?

He senses my trepidation and adds, "unless you have a problem with that. If you're uncomfortable or feel strange about it, I completely understand. Daniel, if this thing works out with you and me, you'll be involved at every level of my life except for sex. Sex and emotions."

Hmm.

"Okay," I tell him.

“Also,” he continues, “if I get mad or yell at you, it’s not you I’m yelling at. It’s just my anger speaking.”

Uh...

“Okay.”

“Unless, of course, you do something really stupid. Then it *will* be you I’m yelling at.”

Great.

“Okay.”

He inhales the remaining half of his cigarette, gets up, and leads me into his kitchen.

“Let’s go meet Sandy,” he says. “I’m gonna can her soon. She’s so fucking incompetent.”

He leads me outside and down a set of wooden steps to a small office that overlooks the giant cliff below his home. He opens the office door and I see Sandy jump a little bit.

“Hi, Vincent. Hi. Everything okay?”

He doesn’t look at her. “Sandy,” he says, “this is Daniel. He’ll be helping you for a while.”

“Great,” she smiles at me. “Glad to meet you.”

“Daniel,” he turns to me, “will you wait out here for a minute?”

“Sure thing,” I tell him.

For the second time in less than an hour I have to wait outside. Outside in the cold evening breeze atop a sheer cliff. My body is trembling a little. Probably a mixture of nerves and temperature. The view is tremendous. And relaxing. Nothing but green trees and an occasional brown shingled roof in the distance. It looks like some secluded spot in the Northwest.

I wonder what he’s talking to her about in there. Me, probably. Either that or he’s telling her what a ditzbag she is.

I feel like I'm in another world out here. I wonder if everyone else under those brown shingled roofs is a stressed out wanna-be star, too?

It suddenly strikes me that I've got to get the car back before too late and I'm supposed to meet a friend of mine by seven.

Vincent Blakely comes out of the office, his face tensed up probably from temporary nicotine withdrawal. "Daniel, you go in there and talk to Sandy. When you're done, come upstairs and we'll start."

"Okay. I, uh, I can only really stay for a couple hours. I've got another—"

"No problem. Just stay as long as you can." He turns and races back up the stairs.

I go into the office where Sandy is leafing through a couple of well-used folders.

"Hi," she says with mechanical sweetness. "I've just gotta get some information from you. You know, formalities. Then you can be on your way."

"Sure," I tell her.

"I'm sorry. Your name is what again?" She fumbles around clumsily for another file.

"It's Daniel. Daniel Auburn."

"Darn folders. This place is so disorganized. I don't know how he tracks things this way. It's like a doctor's office or something." She all of a sudden halts her frantic search, looks up at me, and smiles. "I am *so* glad you're here." She speaks with a fake tinge in her voice but her eyes exude a kind of sad sincerity.

"Glad to be here," I smile back.

"Okay," she continues her search, "I just need your social security number, that kind of thing... This place is so disorganized!"

The office *is* indeed disorganized. Folders and papers are scattered on the floor and desk, while little yellow Post-its stick out from the walls like peeling skin from a third-degree sunburn.

She eventually finds the folder she's been searching for. Or so it seems.

"Aha!" she cries out. "I've got it!" She turns and smiles weakly at me. "This place is some mess, huh?"

"It's not so bad," I tell her. "I've seen worse."

"Okay, John, what's your last name again?"

John?

"Oh shoot!" she cries before I can correct her mistake, "this is the wrong folder. If I can't find the right one, Vincent's gonna kill me. Oh shoot. Oh shoot. Oh shooooot."

I really want to help calm this woman down. "Hey, it's okay," I tell her, "I'm sure it's around here somewhere."

"Not with my luck." She bites her fingernails. "It probably ran away or something."

We look around the office and finally come up with the folder. It was wedged underneath the leg of her chair.

"Oh God," she says once it's found. "I am so stupid. I am so damn stupid. I just wasted a bunch of time looking for that. Talk about stupid."

"It's not a big deal."

"Thanks, Darryl."

This woman needs a vacation.

She gives me another forced smile and tells me I should go up to see Vincent.

"Should I call him Mr. Blakely or Vincent?" I ask.

“I call him Vincent,” she says. “But if I were you I’d call him Mr. Blakely. You’re male and you might threaten him otherwise.”

Um... Okay.

I go back upstairs and Mr. Blakely’s on the phone. So I just stand there waiting for him to get off. A couple times during his conversation he glances at me, then at the floor, then back to me.

Whoever’s on the other end of the phone is obviously important. Mr. Blakely keeps asking questions like *Why can’t we do that?* and *Who the fuck does she think she is?* and *What the hell gives him the right to do that to me?*

When he finally hangs the thing up he takes a few steps to his right and picks up a loose piece of paper that’s been on the ground. He crumples it up fast, the veins in his hand swelling in the act. “This,” he holds the thing up to my face. “This is garbage. It goes in the garbage can.” He slams it down into a nearby receptacle. “It’s your job to pick this up and throw it away. I don’t want trash on my floor. I don’t *need* trash on my floor. You got that? It’s part of your job.” He stares at me. “Am I talking too fast for you?”

“No.”

“Good. If you’re just going to stand around, well, then I don’t need you, either. You’re no better than that piece of garbage. That clear, Daniel? Is it?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good.”

The sound of a car pulling up the driveway makes its way inside.



“That must be Monica,” he says as he briskly walks toward the front door. “That *better* be Monica.” There’s something about the way he walks. He’s short and I think he has a complex about it. His shoes hit the ground harder than they need to.

I follow him to the front door and watch as an attractive woman emerges from a shiny blue station wagon. She’s casually dressed in an open-collared shirt that matches her car, but her cheeks are a rosy brown and her eyes glint somehow in the shade. Mr. Blakely sidles up to her and briefly berates her for being so late. She apologizes profusely and he eases up. “That’s okay,” he says. “That’s okay. By the way, Daniel’s here.”

It's Monica G. She comes in carrying a small bag and shakes my hand. “Hey Daniel,” she says with a trace of Georgia in her voice. “I am *so* sorry I’m late. I am so so sorry. I did the dumbest thing. I am so incredibly sorry. I really apologize.”

So much apologizing. What has Mr. Blakely done to these people?

“It’s fine,” I tell her. “It’s absolutely no problem.” Please relax, I’d like to say.

“Thanks for coming, Daniel,” she winks.

Mr. Blakely smiles. “He’s our new slave. I like having young people around. They can do more. They’re not so worn out yet. We’ll just have to see how much he can take.”

“Yep,” Monica concurs agreeably. “I hope you can take a lot.”

How much I can take? Is that supposed to be a joke?

It occurs to me that everyone in this house has some kind of insanity bug, and my gut feeling is that they all caught it from Mr. Blakely. I wonder, if I work here, how long it’ll be till I catch it.

“Do you have the invitations?” Mr. Blakely asks eagerly.

“Right here.” Monica opens the bag.

“Let me see them.”

She pulls out several small boxes full of stacks of light blue invitations. They all advertise a big party Mr. Blakely’s holding at his house next week.

Then she pulls out the accompanying envelopes, holds them up next to the invitations, and frowns. “Oh, they’re too big to fit. Guess we’ll have to fold ‘em.”

“That’s okay,” Mr. Blakely says supportively. “People can unfold them later.” He goes to a nearby coffee machine and pours himself the remainder of the pot. There’s only enough for half a cup. “Jesus,” he groans, “I don’t have time for this. I don’t have time.” He turns to me. “Here’s another one of your jobs, Dan. Making coffee. I want to see this pot full at all times. All times. You got that?”

I got it.

“Which way shall we fold them, Vince? With the words on the outside or inside?”

“Mmm. Show me,” he tells her.

Monica proceeds to fold an invitation one way and then another. “Hmm, I like them both,” she says.

“Which do you like, Daniel?” he asks.

“I, uh, they’re both nice.”

“Listen, Daniel, I want someone who’s going to be able to make decisions on his own. You got that?”

“All right,” I say. “I like the words on the outside, then.”

“Nice try, but I can tell you don’t mean it. Monica, we’re going with the words on the inside.”

“Sounds good.”

He tells me I'm going to be folding invitations for the next hour or so and then stuffing them into the envelopes. He asks me if I can handle that. I tell him that, though my education doesn't cover it, it is something I indeed can handle. He tells me he doesn't like smart asses. I tell him I'm sorry. But I only say it once.

I sit at a table at the edge of his kitchen. There's a large window right in front of me that looks over the green hills. I spend the next twenty minutes folding invitations and stuffing them into envelopes, just as he'd planned it. Not exactly glamorous, but I am here inside of Vincent Blakely's house at his kitchen table folding pieces of his paper.

A few minutes later, I hear his footsteps coming up the outside stairs. Mr. Blakely enters through a sliding glass door next to where I work. He takes a seat next to me and begins to leaf through a large notebook. He doesn't say a word, just lights up another cigarette.

"Does this bother you?" he eventually asks, referring to the smoke. "Because if it does, you let me know and I'll put it out in a second."

As a matter of fact it does bother me. It makes my throat itch.

"No. I don't mind at all."

What's a little second-hand smoke in the big scheme of things?

There's something intimidating about sitting next to this guy. Not because he's a household name but because he's got this weird kind of energy about him. Not a new-age positive kind of energy, but one that's sort of oppressive. It makes my back tense.

He continues to go through the notebook, every once in a while scribbling something on a little piece of paper nearby.

"Babes," he says out of the blue. "We need to get some babes at this party. Too many guys. Too many guys. We'll probably have to hire some models from an agency. Five or ten of

them. Good looking ones but not stupid. They've gotta be able to carry on a half decent conversation."

He runs his finger down one page and stops. "What do you say we get Kate Beckinsale? She still looks pretty good. You think we should invite Kate Beckinsale?"

"Kate Beckinsale sounds fine," I tell him. Like I ever thought I'd be uttering that sentence in my life.

He scribbles more on his paper.

It's an address book. He's got a gigantic address book full of famous people.

"Kristen Wiig and Leslie Jones," he suddenly bursts into laughter. "Wouldn't they just be a riot to have over here? Funny people. Need them, too. Gotta invite 'em."

It dawns on me as he scribbles some more, that the people he's talking about: the Kates, the Kristens, the Leslies, they're the ones who'll be opening up these invitations. The invitations that I myself am folding and stuffing. The thought of these big and important names going to their mailboxes to retrieve something I've worked on makes my menial job all of the sudden seem, well, sort of big and important. I start to get insecure about the way I'm folding and stuffing. I have to do it just right. The crease has to be right down the center, and the invitation has to slide smoothly inside the folds of the envelope. I've got to give them a good impression of the work I do. I'm a rookie in this town. I can't come off like some kind of half-brained slacker.

I imagine Scarlett Johansson opening one of my invitations. Naked. What if she's just coming out of the shower when she grabs her stack of mail. She wraps her fingers around my symmetrically folded invitation and slips it out, nice and slow, from the glistening envelope... What if she caresses it? What if she fondles it? What if she starts kissing it? Tongue kissing it? What if she...

I continue to fold and stuff at a slightly slower pace to help improve my concentration. I'm folding and stuffing better than I ever have before. Hell, I'm probably doing it better than anybody's ever folded and stuffed before. Meanwhile, Mr. Blakely continues to flip through his book. I'd like to glance over at some of the names he's got down there but I worry about pissing him off. He looks so on edge.

There are footsteps coming up the outside steps. It's Sandy. She enters through the glass door.

"Uh, Vincent?" she says tentatively.

"What."

"There's a James Purnell on the line for you."

"What does he want?"

"I, uh, I'm not exactly sure."

"Did you ask him?"

"Well, no."

Mr. Blakely inhales a good long breath. "That's your job, Sandy. I don't want you coming to me until you've got the details. Is that clear?"

"You're right, Vincent. You're right. I should have asked him. That's my fault. My mistake. I'll find out now."

"Thank you, Sandy," he says with eerie politeness as she quickly retreats.

He whips the next page over with a slapping sound and then strains out, "Stupid. Stupid people. There are too many goddamned stupid people in this world, you know that, Daniel?"

In a minute Sandy's soft steps come back up the stairs.

"Vincent, Mr. Purnell says he has some legal business to discuss with you."

“What kind of legal business, Sandy?”

“What kind? I, uh, I don’t know.”

He grinds his teeth as his hand balls into a tense fist. “What,” he starts, “did I just tell you about details. What did I—”

“I understand, Vincent, I understand. It’s just, he seemed like he was in a hurry, so—”

“I don’t care what he’s in. If he doesn’t have time to answer a simple question or two then I personally don’t need to talk to him. Is that clear?”

“Yes. I should have asked him. You’re right.”

“You’re doing a good job, Sandy. I want you to know that. I’m just trying to help you out, make your work ethic stronger.”

“I appreciate it, Vincent. I’ll go and ask him what kind of legal business it is.”

“Thank you.”

Once again she heads down the stairs, this time more quickly.

“You see what I was talking about earlier, Daniel? Efficiency. This is all taking a ridiculously long period of time. And it’s all being wasted because Sandy has to keep going up and down the stairs to find things out. What she should do, and what you should do when you start to answer phones, is get all the information right away. Bam Bam Bam. Don’t take any roundabout answers. Cut to the chase. Ask them exactly what it is they want. I don’t have time to deal with bullshit, you know? There are a mess of crackpots out there who want just about anything from me. I don’t have time to talk to them.”

Sandy comes running up the stairs.

“He said,” she starts breathlessly, “that it’s personal.”

“Great,” he says, his eyes shifting.

“I tried to get more out of him but he wouldn’t divulge any other information.”

“That’s okay, Sandy. You did good. I’ll take it in the other room.”

He gets up and heads toward the hall. Sandy continues to stand in the doorway. “How’re you doing?” she asks, smiling like somebody slapped a set of teeth onto her drooping face. She shoves a few strands of hair out of the way so I can see her eyes for a second, but then the hair falls back in front of them again.

“Pretty good,” I tell her. “How about you?”

“Oh, I’m hanging in there. Hanging in.” She looks off to where Mr. Blakely just walked, rolls her eyes, smiles back at me, then heads once again to the depths of the abode.

I glance at the notebook next to me. I wonder who else he’s got in there. What other big names. Looks like we’re right in the middle of the D’s. Let’s see. Tracy Delano, attorney at law. A nobody. Seems like a bunch of nobodies on this page. But wait. What’s this? Robert De Niro. Yes. I’m looking at the actual address of Robert De Niro! Granted, it’s only a P.O. Box, but still, it is the place (or one of them) he goes to receive mail. And what’s this? Eddie Murphy. The actual eight-digit code to his own personal receptacle in a downtown Westwood agency. Not bad.

I’d like to continue my Star Search, as it were, but the fear is still there. A fear of what this Blakely guy might do to me if he sees me doing something I shouldn’t be doing. Though he’s a good twenty feet away, the air is still heavy with his presence.

When he returns from the phone call, he’s stiffer than he’d been. He looks up and down the pages of his notebook a little more but seems distracted. I have an intense urge to push myself away to the other side of the table.

“Ever think about being a lawyer, Daniel?” he asks me.

“Not really.”

“That’s good. That’s very good. They’re fucking bloodsuckers, let me tell you.”

“I’ve heard that.”

He begins to flip to the next page, but in mid-turn he stops and looks at me thoughtfully.

“But you know. It’s not good to judge people so generally. I’m sure there are some good lawyers out there somewhere. Ones that aren’t bloodsuckers. I certainly haven’t met them but I’m sure they’re out there.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

“You see, Daniel. You always got to remember not to stereotype. The reason I’m so sensitive to it is because I’m a celebrity. People always think celebrities are egotistical and obnoxious. And it’s hard to prove to them that we’re not. That we’re just regular people, you know? Why, I bet that’s what you thought before you came here. But now you see the real me. The real me, Daniel. I’m not so bad, am I?”

It seems to me this is a dangerous question to ask, especially on our first day working together. It’s probably an even more dangerous one to answer. He seems to realize this.

“I won’t make you answer that, Daniel. But just remember that. Not to judge people.”

I nod. Noted.

He scribbles down a few more names as I continue to stuff invites. Then he stops. “I’m going to go make a few phone calls,” he says. “After that, I want to go over some lines with you. Shakespeare. It’s a monologue I’m doing for a benefit coming up. You can help me, give me some pointers.”

“Okey-doke, sounds good.”



He goes to the other room. Excellent. Reading over a little Shakespeare with a celebrity. My first day of work, too. I'm actually getting my foot in Hollywood's big, heavy-set door. I can feel it. Connections are starting to happen. It'll be no time till I'm writing big movies, acting in big TV shows, hiring underpaid production assistants.

I keep working on the invitations. They don't stop. He's going to saturate the post office with these things. Meanwhile, I can hear the man's phone voice cutting through the air. He laughs. He criticizes. He groans. He yells. The guy does it all.

It's getting later and later. I want to be out of here by six-thirty and it's already a little after six. He wanted to go over his lines for an hour. That ain't gonna happen.

Eventually he walks in. "All right, Danny boy, let's do this thing."

He leads me back into the living room where we'd conducted our original interview. "Here's the lines," he says, handing me a pad of paper with handwritten words on them. "I wrote them out to help me memorize." He grabs a thick book, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, and opens it up somewhere in the middle. "Or," he continues, "you can use this if my writing's illegible. But you'll notice I did change a few of the lines to suit me better."

Of course you did.

"All right," he says, reclining into a spongy easy chair. "You ready?"

As ready as I'll ever be.

The opening words on both the handwritten page and the book version are "Oh, God." It's a speech by Henry V extolling the virtues of being a shepherd, how the privileges of a simpleton can often be worth more than the materialistic wealth a king has at his fingertips.

"Oh, Daniel," he begins breathlessly. "Oh, Daniel!" he repeats like a sex-starved sailor on shore-leave. He extends his arms outward while staring at the high ceiling overhead. Weird.

He recites the rest of the lines, almost error-free, with the delivery of a cocky high school jock who decides to audition for the school play on a dare from one of his pals. Pretty pathetic but amusing to watch.

On the last words of the piece he sighs and stares out blankly, giving a good ten second pause for dramatic effect.

“So, what’d you think?” he asks me.

“Uh, good. It was good.”

“You see, Daniel. This is what I’m trying to do. This king here, he’s complaining that even though he’s got all the money and power in the world, he still missed out on some of the greatest things in life. The shepherd, for example, he’s got no worries. No money, but no worries. He can sit under a tree and watch the sun set in the summer evening. And the king, he wishes he had that opportunity. He’d trade mountains of treasure for it. You see, Daniel. That king, he’s me. What do you do when you’ve reached the top like I have? Where do you go? Sometimes, Daniel, sometimes I wish I were a nobody, a peasant. Sometimes I wish, I wish I were someone like you. No offense. But you know, a young guy with no responsibilities. You’ve got a lot of freedom. I envy that once in a while.”

“I can understand that,” I nod.

Okay. Sure I can understand it, but where's this guy's tact?

“What time is it?” he asks.

“Six-twenty.”

“And what time do you have to leave?”

“I’d like to be out of here by six-thirty.”

“Right. Got a date or something?”

“Or something,” I say.

“Ooh, secretive. Okay. Let’s read it over another time or two. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine,” I tell him.

He stands up, arches his neck, and takes in a deep breath just like a real actor might.

“You know,” he breaks out of character. “This is the kind of thing I like to do. This is the kind of thing I should be doing. I’m an actor. I should be rehearsing lines. All that other stuff, the phone calls, the invitations, the organization, the lawyer shit, I hate it. I wish I could be doing this all the time. I like it so much better.” He looks at me with genuine sincerity. “Do you know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah,” I agree, “I like doing this a lot better than stuffing envelopes, too.”

“I know. I know,” he says, verging on apologetic. “I’m sorry.” He reaches apologetic. “It’s just something that’s got to be done.”

Wow. He sounds unusually human. Or rather, how unusual, he sounds human.

“I know,” I tell him.

“Let’s go. Ready?” he asks.

All set.

We go over the monologue again. This time he embellishes the words with timely, well-placed strokes of his chin, scratches of his head, and clasps of his hands. Once he’s done, he turns to me. “What’d you think that time?”

“Do you want my honest opinion?” I ask, figuring that if I’m truthful, he’ll respect my integrity and treat me with more dignity than he does someone like Sandy.

“Of course.”

“Well, I -”

“What did you think of my body language? I was trying to add strength to some of the lines. When I did this,” he says, tensing up his fists, “I was really trying to emphasize the power of my feelings. Did you get that? Was that clear?”

“Yeah. I got that.”

“And when I did this,” he says, stretching his arms to the sky, “I was trying to stress the hopelessness of my situation. How was that?”

Forget integrity. Forget respect. He doesn't want to hear it.

“That was good,” I say. “The whole thing was... good.”

“Yeah. I liked it,” he says, excited. “Let's go over it one more time.”

“Uh, okay,” I say, glancing at my watch. It's almost six-forty.

“What,” he smiles. “Is this a hot date you got?”

“Just a punctual date,” I hint.

“Well, if she complains, tell her you were over at a big star's house. That'll impress her.”

I force a smile.

We go over the lines yet again. There's a mild improvement over the other times. “That was better,” I tell him positively.

“Yeah, I felt really good about that one. Thank you, Daniel. I appreciate it. I’ll let you get on to your date now.”

I smile pleasantly and rise. My bladder is calling again but I'm now comfortable enough to ask, “Can I use your bathroom?”

“No,” he says quickly, exercising his subtle wit, “I’m going to make you hold it in... Don’t be stupid. Of course you can use it.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure,” I smile. “This is a big star’s house, after all.”

He doesn't flinch. “It’s right in there,” he casually points down the hall. “You can let yourself out. I’ll see you tomorrow, say, nine o’clock?”

“Sounds good.”

When I’m finally out of the house and in the car, two things hit me. One is a feeling of relaxation. My shoulders sink slowly down. The other is, wow, I’m hired. I’ve been hired by a Hollywood persona. This could be the beginning of something good. All I have to do is make sure I don’t go crazy. Resist the insanity.

Once I’m back I meet my date and tell her about my day. She is somewhat impressed that I was at a Big Star’s house. At least it’s a good excuse for being late. My only dilemma is that as soon as I return the car to Jessie, I’m stuck with no convenient way to get to Mr. Blakely’s home on Saturday morning. Fortunately, my roommate Ben offers to give me a lift. So everything, it seems, is running smoothly. All I gotta do now is get a nice night’s sleep.

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**SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 13th**

My radio alarm clock goes off at six-thirty this morning to the tune of Lady Gaga's *Applause*. But I don't exactly need it. Every half hour since four a.m. I've been rolling over, opening my eyes, and making sure I haven't slept too long. I can't be late for my first full day of work. I can't.

Since I already wore my tie yesterday, I borrow one of Ben's starched collared shirts from his days as a junior salesman. It cuts the sides of my neck whenever I turn my head, but it projects a pretty believable facade of respectability.

In order to start my day off right with some essential vitamins I go to the fridge and pull out the staples of my morning diet: a tart granny smith apple followed by a ripe juicy orange. Bitter to sweet in a matter of seconds. Delicious.

It's now a few minutes after seven and I'm beginning to worry. What if Ben decides that he doesn't want to give me a ride? That it's too big of a favor. That it's too far out of his way. That he's too tired to drive. I'd be ruined.

Fortunately, as I barge in on him and his girlfriend Eva sleeping, he fumbles for his glasses and assures me that he has absolutely no intentions of backing out on our little agreement. I knew I could count on him.

We take off at about seven-thirty. The drive is an absolute piece of cake. We make it there with fifteen minutes to spare.

I go up to ring the bell. "Check this out," I tell Ben. "His doorbell is no better than ours."

"That's great, Daniel," he says with an I-can't-believe-I-got-up-at-seven-thirty-on-a-Saturday smirk. He zips his gray sweatshirt all the way to his goateed chin.

After the tone of the common-place ding-dong fades into nothingness I take a step back. When Mr. Blakely answers the door I want to give him plenty of celebrity breathing space.

But no one answers. I ring again... Then knock... Then knock again... Nothing.

“Where is he?” Ben yawns.

A good question, but we are early. “Let’s give him till nine,” I say.

“Okay.”

Ben and Eva, who are sitting on a short brick wall, let their bodies fall into each other for support. With their eyes half-closed and distant downtown L.A. as a backdrop they look like a promotional campaign for Hallmark.

Time rolls on. At nine I try the door again. No answer. Five after, ten after, a quarter past, still nothing.

“I know guys like this,” Ben says, “they’re so caught up in their own egotistical self-centered lives that they forget about expendable nobodies like you. They’re assholes.”

“Yeah,” I agree, but as I do I look cautiously around. Someone like Vincent Blakely, I wouldn’t be surprised if he had a camera hidden somewhere to survey all the action out here. I picture him sitting in his bedroom, in the dark, monitoring every word we say on custom-made, audio-enhancing headphones.

“Maybe he can hear us,” I say.

“Yeah sure, Dan.”

He and Eva don't look so photogenic anymore. Just bored. She chews an old piece of gum as he plucks a stray hair from her black turtleneck.

"Why don't you guys take off," I suggest.

"But what if he doesn't show?" Eva asks.

"Well, I should probably stay here till somebody shows up."

"That's true," Ben jingles his keys.

They get up and start heading for the car. Ben turns. "Hey, you aren't going to need us to come pick you up tonight, are you?"

"Uh, well," I start, "he said I could stay in his guest bedroom, so I'll see if I can do that."

"You sure?" Eva asks.

Not really.

"I think so," I say.

"Okay, Dan. Well, give me a call if you need me to come back. 'Cause I'll do it."

But you'd rather not. I get the picture. "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem."

They get in the car and take off. Once they're out of sight I can hear the hum of the engine cut through the silent morning air as they drive all the way down the hill.



When the sound disappears there is nothing. I sit alone in the crisp winter morning air, surrounded by indigenous flowers, singing birds, rolling hills, and quaint homes. The whole scene is so relaxing I lose any anxieties I had and start to fade against the curb.

Just as I'm dreaming of rainbows and waterfalls, I hear another car approaching somewhere down the hill. I quickly pull my head together and remind myself where I am. A glance at my watch tells me it's almost ten.

A shiny blue station wagon, the same one I saw yesterday, pulls up the drive. It's Monica. She gets out of the car. "Hey, sugar," she smiles, her soft brown eyes thoughtfully distant. "Been waitin' long?"

"About an hour."

"I'm sorry, but about eight o'clock I realized I had to mail some documents for Vince or else they'd be late, then my agent called to set up an audition time and well..."

"That's okay. It was no problem waiting."

"Great. Let's go. We got a big ol' load of work to get through today." She opens the front door with a key from her pocket. We head toward the kitchen. "Vince is at a meeting with his business manager all morning so it's just you and me for now."

I spot a fallen leaf from a dangling plant laying on the floor. Garbage. I pick it up and toss it into the trash can.

Monica moves with serious determination. Every step she takes is strong, focused, you can see it in her stride and in the contour of her fashionable-yet-practical boots. There is no hesitation. It's such a contrast from what I sensed with Sandy.

She goes to the fridge, opens it, and -

“Oh shit.”

“What?” I ask.

“I was supposed to get coffee for Vince from the store. I spaced. Blew it. Coffee and garbage bags. Shit. He’s gonna be pissed.”

There's something very unnerving about this man’s refrigerator. It’s too clean. Too efficient. On the top shelf sit a few bottles of Evian and orange juice. Below that, a jar of mayonnaise, mustard, and pickles. There’s pre-packaged, cut-up lettuce for salads, a tomato or two, a cucumber, half a carrot, a bottle of “all-natural” salad dressing, and several round styrofoam containers. That’s all there is. And it’s clean, almost too clean. It looks like it belongs somewhere in daytime TV. But despite, or perhaps because of, its healthiness, cleanliness, and well-managed space usage, there’s something very comforting about it... Is that normal? Can a refrigerator really be soothing?

“I might ask you to take my car and go shopping a little later. Would that be okay?” she asks as we head downstairs.

Of course.

Once inside the office, Monica goes immediately to work. She rolls out the chair, boots up the computer, and pulls out a couple files in one sweeping motion. Everything set, she looks around. Something isn’t right. “Look at this place,” she moans. “It’s a mess. Sandy’s supposed to organize things. This is organization? Jesus Almighty.”

Another ditzbag vote for Sandy?

Monica takes off her light cardigan and places it on the back of the chair. On each wrist she has a thin but strong-looking brace, the kind you might wear if you took a forward fall and landed with a hard smack on your hands.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Tendonitis.”

“Tendonitis?”

“From working too much,” she says, leafing through one file and beginning to transfer information from a page to the computer screen.

“Working too much as in typing too much?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then,” I start hesitantly, “isn’t it bad to be typing now?”

She turns to me. “Listen, Daniel,” her tone contains no mask of politeness, “I’ve got a job to finish and I don’t care what happens. I am not a quitter. This job will be done no matter what. I do not give up. I fucking will not give up. You got that?”

If you’re Harriet Tubman or Mahatma Gandhi, fine, but all we’re talking about is a stupid party, right?

“Got it,” I nod.

“I didn’t mean to snap at you, Daniel,” she says while simultaneously entering data, “but there is a lot to be done.”

Speaking of a lot to be done, what about me? “What should I do?”

She hands me a list of names and suggests I go address all those envelopes I so diligently stuffed the night before.

I go upstairs to the kitchen where all of said envelopes are and begin to address them. There's a much more relaxed feeling than there had been last night. Without Mr. Blakely projecting tension I can sit back, leisurely write away, and enjoy the nice view through the kitchen window.

I continue to go down the list of names, seeing a few I recognize. Once you've seen one star's name, though, you've pretty much seen 'em all.

After a while my hand starts to hurt a little. Without a celebrity around, this task actually feels like a dozen other jobs I've had. It's pretty dull. So I decide to get up and check the place out.

Aside from the squeaky-clean refrigerator and a few dangling plants here and there, the house is heavily decorated with framed newspaper and magazine articles. All about him, Vincent Blakely, the Big Star. Interestingly, almost all of these articles have titles like *Watch Out, Here Comes Another Blakely* or *Laura Blakely's Other Son Set to Make Move* or *Can Youngest Blakely Find Room in Over-Crowded Hollywood?* Also, many of these articles are from foreign publications, mostly French and Italian, and even a couple from Japan. But even those have pictures of Vincent juxtaposed with his mother, brother or sister. Or all three. It's like he's trapped. Trapped inside a familiar name. Even his brother, Gregory, changing his name to Ivanov, can't escape it. It's constantly there, hovering over their heads wherever they turn. Fame. Living life in the spotlight and having every movement gone over with a magnifying glass. The horror.

With all the celebrities in the family, there must be a lot of competition. A lot of pressure, too. Who can you possibly trust?

On one of the counters in the living room is a small but heavy-looking statuette. Actually, more of a trophy. The top half is a fancy bronze wreath of what seem to be flowers or leaves stretching upward toward the heavens in a parabolic curve. On the bottom is a base of thick well-polished marble. A piece of engraved metal is attached. It reads:

*Shining Star Talent Agency*

*Best New Face*

*Vincent Blakely*

Best new face? Hardly. The Blakely's have been famous for over forty years. There's probably not a billboard or magazine in the whole country - the whole world, for that matter - that hasn't had a Blakely plastered on it at one time or another. Cindy, Gregory, Vince and Laura are each different people, but they've all got the same nose, the same eyes, the same high cheek bones and dimpled chin. To call Vince a new face is like calling prostitution a new profession. Granted, it can't be too meaningful an award, but the agency people must have obligingly given him this honor out of respect for (or fear of) the Blakely legacy. If Vince doesn't get recognized for being the person he is, the Shining Stars could lose their most lucrative client to another agency that's more willing to stroke his sensitive ego.

I return to my addressing. Just before noon I hear a faint hum. My ears perk up and my back stiffens in premature anticipation. The sound of screeching rubber roars from the garage.

He has arrived. My shoulders slowly start to rise as my posture begins an uncomfortable transformation. I feel like I'm in one of those werewolf movies when the main character's body begins to contort and bulge at the emergence of a full moon. Vincent Blakely is my full moon.

I hear the thud of his approaching footsteps and I raise up my arm with the pen dangling just above a half-finished envelope so it'll look I'm smack dab in the middle of hard work. He reaches the kitchen and stands there.

"Daniel," he barks.

"Hi there," I say, letting the pen continue to write.

"What are you doing?"

"I, uh, I'm addressing envelopes."

"Who told you to do that?"

"Well, it was Monica's idea."

"Jesus," he says. "Let me see."

He marches toward me like a pissed-off sergeant giving a surprise inspection to an unsuspecting private.

He picks up one of the envelopes, then another one, then one more. His face shows absolutely nothing. What does he expect to see?

"Your penmanship's not bad," he says finally. "But when you're dotting your i's try to get the dot right above the line, okay? You messed up a few of these."

Sure thing.

He turns, heading back to his quarters. "I'm going to go change, Daniel-" He jerks back.

"Where's Monica?"

"Downstairs."

He relaxes. "Oh. I'm going to go change and when I'm done - Shit, did my lawyer call?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Okay, okay. When I'm done you and me are going to start - Did a package arrive?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay. We're going to be getting some papers together." He shakes his head. "So much to do. So much to fucking do."

He walks out of the room. Looks like vacation time's over.

When he comes back into the kitchen he's wearing dark gray sweatpants. I figure this is the perfect time to ask him something I've been wondering about. "Is there any kind of dress code here? Do I have to look a certain way?"

He reaches into the fridge, pulls out a piece of carrot, and bites off a hunk. "No way. I don't care what you wear. Look at me. I'm a slob. Wear whatever you want."

Thank God. The presentable portion of my wardrobe was starting to look a little thin.

"You had lunch yet, Daniel?" he asks jovially.

"Not really."

"Not really?"

“No. No, I haven’t.”

“Well come on. We can’t have you getting hungry on me. Your work’ll suffer if you have an empty stomach. You gotta remember that. Whenever you feel hungry, take a break and eat. Otherwise, you’ll get worn down. Eating is very important. Very important. Look at Sandy. I never see her eating and her work fuckin’ sucks. It’d probably suck anyway but I’m sure there’s a connection there.”

We decide to make salads (with the contents of the fridge what other options could there be?). He grabs three plates (one for Monica) and I get out that luxuriously pre-cut lettuce. I open the bag and start grabbing out handfuls to put in the plates.

“Daniel,” Mr. Blakely says curtly, “stop that.”

I put the lettuce down and look questioningly at him. He opens a drawer and hands me some plastic tongs. “We got enough of this fuckin’ plastic serving shit we may as well use it. There aren’t a lot of rules here but one thing I do not want to see is you touching other people’s food. Who knows what kind of germs you have. You didn’t even wash your hands for Christ’s sake. It’s something I notice. Is that clear?”

Absolutely.

The plates are full of salad. “Why don’t you see what we got in those containers and put some of that on there too.”

I grab all three out of the fridge and open them. Tuna fish in the first one.

“Make sure and put that on Monica’s. She likes it.”

And in container number two... fruit salad.



“Is that still fresh?” Mr. Blakely sticks a fork in and pulls out a chunk of watermelon.

“Mmm. Mouth-watering.”

And finally, in the third container...

“Put plenty of that chicken salad on my plate, Dan.”

I dump it on.

“Hope you don’t mind eating standing up,” he says to me.

Not at all.

“You’ll find we’ll be eating this way a lot. Cuts down on wasted time,” he says.

Yeah. Getting in and out of a chair just takes forever sometimes.

He goes to the fridge and pulls out some of that natural dressing, dripping a modest amount over the top of his lettuce. “Dressing?” he holds the bottle out to me.

“Yeah, okay,” I reach out for it.

He gives me a look, actually more of a glare. “Listen, Daniel, as long as you’re going to be in this house, I need you to have some manners, okay? You say ‘yes, please’ when I offer you something and you say ‘thank you’ when I give it to you. You got that? It’s not just for me, it’s for you. Training for when there are other important people here. You’ve got to have manners, Daniel. It’s very important. Not just here in Hollywood but anywhere. Anywhere you want to work and live. I won’t stand for this casual bullshit. That clear to you?”

I don't really like the way he talks to me with that air of condescension, but he is my boss and I, a mere laborer. It's something I have to get used to. I realize this is a good opportunity to find out something else I haven't felt comfortable asking about, the name issue.

"Yes. Thank you, Mr. Blakely," I say.

"Oh, you don't have to take it that far. Feel free to call me Vince."

No threatening masculinity issues there. "Thank you, Vince."

"You're very welcome, Daniel."

So we chow down on some of that vegetation and mayonnaise-drenched fish and chicken for a few minutes, putting Monica's salad in the fridge for when she gets hungry enough to come and get it, which, knowing her stubborn "nothing can stop me" attitude, won't be till sometime next week.

After lunch we go back to the kitchen table and he brings over several manilla envelopes and a box, all filled with paper products of varying sizes, from business cards to brochures to napkins. "Our job," he tells me, "is to get all this in some kind of order, and eventually get it into some kind of computer filing thing."

"You mean like a database?"

"A what? Yeah, I guess. Something like that. I don't really trust computers. They're unreliable. Speaking of which, where's your notebook?"

Which notebook would that be?

“You have got to have a notebook on you at all times. I’m going to be giving you orders, telling you to remember things, asking for phone numbers, a million things. And if you don’t have a notebook on you to write everything down you’re going to be fucked.”

He pulls out the first scrap and ponders over it. “Okay,” he says, handing it to me, “this is Marsha Thomas, she’s a friend of mine in New York. We’ll put her under the heading of New York. Got that?”

“Got it.” I take a page off a nearby stack of Post-its, write “N.Y.” on it and stick it to the scrap. Piece of cake.

“This,” he hands me another one, “is George Williams. He’s the manager of a New York comedy club. Put him under New York, too.”

No problem. I slide him right underneath Marsha.

“This,” the next one comes, “is the number of both Jack Peters, an agent I met, and the number for the Laugh Stop in Chicago. We’re going to have to cross reference that in Chicago, Agents, and Comedy. Clear?”

Not really. “Uh, sure.” I fumble around for a couple more Post-its.

“Come to think of it,” he continues, “that last one, George Williams, he should be in Comedy, too. Got it? Am I going to fast?”

“No. I got it.” Comedy what? George who?

“What are you doing?” he snaps. “Don’t use Post-its. Pretty soon you got ‘em all over the place and they don’t improve anything. They’re evil.”

So what do I use?

“Find some paper clips or something.”

I go over to a table in the living room where I’d seen some office supplies the day before and grab a handful of clips. When I return he’s already set to go with a dozen or so more scraps.

“File this under Los Angeles and Health, this under Colorado Film Festivals, this under Health and New York, this under Foreign Correspondence and Movie Deals, this under Tennis, no, Health and Business Opportunities, this under Acting Coaches, this under Management, this under Comedy and Writers and Los Angeles, this under - Are you getting all this? Are you keeping up?”

Are you kidding? “Well, just about.”

“You gotta work on your speed, Dan. I’m quick. You gotta be able to keep up with me. If I go too fast, though, tell me to slow down. Sometimes I go too fast for my own good. I’ve got a hundred-and-sixty-five I.Q. There aren’t many who can keep up with my speed. It’s a curse being this bright. It really is. My mind moves too fast. Ready?”

Sure I am, mister one-hundred-and-sixty-five. Sure I am.

Airlines, Theater, Meditation, Massage, Hair Stylists, Sex, they just keep coming and coming. I’ve got more stacks than Marshall's got amps. Some of these categories seem just plain silly. He’s got a special section just for Single Women from the Midwest. No wonder the office is so disorganized.

After a couple more hours of this, Monica comes up from below. Her eyes are glazed over and she’s holding a pile of papers. “I’ve typed up the rest of the addresses of people you want to invite, Vince.”

“Great,” he says, “That takes care of the industry people. We’ve still got comedy people and personal friends to invite. I’ll get you that information a little later.”

“Okay.”

Vincent looks around. “Here, Monica, take this stack of envelopes which Dan has so neatly addressed to the post office, get stamps, and mail them. I don’t want to see them. Out of sight out of mind.”

“Yeah, okay.” Monica’s eyes are searching. She looks like a lost infant.

“Are you okay, Monica?” Vince asks.

“Uh-huh. I just feel like I was going to do something but I can’t remember what. Oh shoot. I hate that.”

“Well,” Vince turns to her, “let’s pause and think about what it is you were going to do.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m sure It’ll come to me soon.”

“Listen, Monica, we’re going to concentrate and figure this thing out.”

“I’ll remember later. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t you tell me not to worry. You’re my employee. Of course I’m going to worry about you. Did it have to do with your agent?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did it have to do with the party?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well think, Monica, think. I can’t do it all myself.”

“Vince. Don’t worry about it. I’ve got to get to the post office.”

He rises, his face reddening. “You’re not going anywhere till we figure this out. Don’t move!”

Monica blinks, her eyes searching the floor in a slight panic. “I don’t know. I can’t remember. I can’t remember.”

Vince forcefully grabs her shoulders. “Well think. Will you fucking think?!”

“I am, Vince.”

“Think harder, damn it!”

Monica shifts back and forth on her feet. “Okay, okay. I remember. I do.”

“What was it?”

“I was just going to remind you that we need to call the caterers and set up an appointment with them. That’s all.”

“Okay,” Vince says, releasing his grip, and returning to his seat. “Now go to the post office before it closes.”

“I’m on my way.” Monica walks to the front door. Once it closes, Vince looks at me. “You know why she couldn’t remember that? Do you know why?”

Because you’re both crazy?

“Why?” I ask.

“I’ll tell you why, Daniel. Shit, I’ll even show you why.”

He stands up, walks up to the fridge, and opens it. “Here,” he says, pointing to the salad we made for her. “Here’s why. It’s just like I said. You gotta fucking eat. You gotta fucking eat or you’re going to fuck shit up. That’s the way it is. Always.”

The filing continues for a while. Then the phone rings. It’s been ringing off and on all day but it wasn’t something we were dealing with up here in the kitchen. Monica was picking it up downstairs with her tender wrists.

Now it's ringing again and Vincent turns to me. “Get it,” he orders.

I go to the phone and pick it up. Before I can say anything, Vincent reaches over and hits the mute button. “Say ‘Good afternoon, this is Vincent Blakely’s office.’ Got it?” His eyes stab into mine.

I nod. “Good, uh, good afternoon. This is Vincent Blakely’s office,” I fumble as he releases the mute.

It's a woman. She wants to speak to Vince.

“Just a second,” I say as Vince begins jumping around. He's pantomiming something. I have absolutely no idea what the gibberish of his body language means. Some actor. I stare at him blankly. He reaches over to the phone and hits the mute again.

“You find out who! You ask them what the hell they want! Got it! Don’t be timid, now, Dan. Fuckin’ get some answers!” He points a rock-hard finger at the phone.

Gulp.

“Can I ask who’s calling please?”

“Just get him,” the mystery voice says.

“Uh,” I hesitate.

“Answers, answers,” Vincent whispers under his breath.

“And can I ask what it’s concerning?”

“It’s personal.”

Now I depress the mute button. “She didn’t say who it was,” I tell him, “and it’s personal.”

“Tell them I’m not here and get a message.”

“He’s not here,” I say into the phone.

“Will you just get the little bastard for me,” she says. “It’s his mother.”

The mute once again depressed, I tell him smugly, “it’s your mother.”

He rolls his eyes and yanks the phone from my hand. “Hi, Mom,” he says with the pouty voice of a ten-year-old.

They converse for a few moments as any mother and son might. Only, they don’t talk about eating enough, about dirty laundry, about taking vitamins. They talk about charity balls, about getting an extra fifty grand for a movie deal, about visiting friends in drug clinics. Despite these weighty topics, their conversation lasts just a few minutes and ends in a string of *Yes*, *Mom’s*, *Okay Mom’s*, and just plain old *Mom!’s*. Once off the phone, Vincent gets shifty, his face a little red. He’s embarrassed. Embarrassed that he’s been talking to his mother. Just like a little schoolboy.



“I guess we’re about done for today,” he says, running a hand through his wavy hair. It’s the first time I’ve seen any trace of humility in him. It’s a little surprising.

Apparently aware of his sudden vulnerability, he turns the focus onto me. “So what do you want to do, Daniel?”

“Now?”

“No, don’t be stupid. I mean in life.”

I’ve got big plans, Vince. Big plans. “Something in entertainment.”

"Directing movies, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"Big ones? Blockbusters?"

"Probably not. Smaller ones. Successful but not overwhelming."

"I see. Ones with integrity, right?"

Bingo.

He shows a hint of a grin and I half resent him for it. But I’ll show him someday.

“Are your parents supportive?” he asks.

I tell him they’re artists so they sympathize. The conversation with his mother obviously left him with his guard down. He looks at me with a startling, almost pitiful look and says, “It’s so important for parents to be supportive. So important.”

I agree.

“I wish,” he starts, “I wish, I think, I wish all parents could be...” He’s actually getting a little choked up. I can hardly believe what I’m seeing. But before he gets too bogged down in sentiment, he looks at a clock on the wall. It’s about six-thirty. “Shit,” he bellows suddenly, “I gotta get back on schedule. I’ve got comedy material to study, contracts to read over... Shit.” He heads out quickly into the living room.

I’m left a little bewildered. He’s actually human. I know I’ve seen the evidence before but this was a real glimpse, albeit a rather short one, into his sensitive side. Perhaps there’s hope for celebrities yet. Maybe he’s not the jerk I’ve been thinking he was. Maybe he’s actually a nice guy who’s trying to fit a million zillion things into his schedule. I mean honestly, if I had to live up to all the hype that probably surrounds him, all the media, the crazy fans, the wheeling and dealing, I’d probably turn into an asshole, too. Either that or I’d go buy a secluded ranch in Wyoming. So maybe that’s it. I’ve got to give him a chance. He’s a genuine guy with some outside interference, that’s all. I have to remember he’s a human being, too, just as subject to pressure as the rest of us.

I haven’t yet brought up the subject of my spending the night here. I figure it’s probably a good idea to do it soon. So I go into the living room where he’s looking over some papers. He looks up. “Will you turn on the living room light, Daniel?”

I do as he asks.

“And while you’re at it, you should probably go around the rest of the house and look for dark rooms. Turn on the lights in there, too. I hate to be bothered with little things like that and you can really earn some points with me by doing that kind of thing.”

Points?

“If there’s anything out of place, any rugs that are wrinkled, any windows that need cleaning, any plants that need watering, if you can take care of that to ease up my mind, you’ll really make me proud of you. Earn enough points and I’ll really notice.”

And then can I trade them in for a stuffed giraffe?

“How are you getting home tonight?” he asks.

“Well,” I begin tentatively, “I was going to ask you that. You mentioned that I could stay here. Is that still an option?”

He raises his eyes from the papers, a little taken aback. I imagine he’s surprised that I trust him enough to sleep in the same house as him. Though in reality, it’s more desperation than trust. “Yeah, sure, Daniel,” he says positively. “That’d be fine.”

“Great. I really appreciate it.” I turn back to the kitchen to clean up the space we’d been using.

“Hey Daniel,” he starts before I can get too far.

“Yeah?”

He gets a concerned look on his face. “Listen, I don’t have a problem with you spending the night. It’s fine. I just, I’m just a little concerned. I’m trying to act like a brother to you. Well, actually more like a father. But I don’t want things to get too familiar, you understand?”

You don’t want me dancing around the house in my underwear?

“We can hang out,” he continues, “and maybe I’ll take you to a bar and buy you a beer or something. That’s fine. We can joke around, be friendly, but I don’t want you to think it’s going

to be like that all the time. When we have to go to work in the morning, we really have to go to work.”

Friend by night, dictator by day. No problem.

I go and sort out some things in the kitchen. In a couple more minutes he comes in. “You know what, Daniel. I think I may want some time to myself tonight.”

“I’ll be sure not to bother you.”

“No. I mean totally by myself. I hang out with people so much, have to deal with them so often that sometimes I just like to be alone or spend some time with my girlfriend. So I’m going to call up a friend of mine who works at the Sunset Grande downtown, get you a room.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it. I’ll pay for it and in the morning either Monica or me’ll pick you up there. That okay with you?”

“Sure.”

What a fantastic way to take care of things. You get sick of people, you ship ‘em off to a hotel.

“I’m going to go lie down,” he says. “When Monica gets back from whatever the hell she’s doing, she can take you down there, okay?”

Okay.

“You did okay for your first full day. You did okay.”

He goes off to his bedroom as I sit around pondering my soon-to-be stardom, wallowing in his brief but much-appreciated compliment.

When Monica finally returns from the post office and other assorted errands, Vince comes out of his room, grills her about her time usage, and then goes to a closet he's got in his den.

"Daniel," he says, "if you're going to work for me, you might as well know my work." He proceeds to pull out DVDs from a fairly extensive video library. "These," he hands some to me, "are film clips, TV clips, interviews, news stories, stuff like that. I want you to know this stuff so when you're schmoozing with the bigwigs you can tell them about my work. The hotel has a player you can use. You just have to ask for it."

After handing me a selection of four or five discs, Vincent shuffles back to his bedroom.

Then Monica drives me over to the Sunset Grande. In the car she still has that nervous edge to her, a sense of distance, her mind seems somewhere far away.

"There's so much to remember. So many things to be done," she mumbles.

As we head down the hilly road, she grabs a mini Milky Way bar from a half-empty economy-size sack. "I've had such a mad craving for sugar recently," she says.

We small-talk for a while about our goals in life. She's striving to be an actress, I'm striving to be a writer-director. Looking out onto the streets below where a giant centipede of bumper-to-bumper cars inches along, I wonder how many identical conversations are going on simultaneously.

There's something about Monica. She's decisive, strong, pretty, and a little off her rocker. And I can't resist that Southern twang.

"How long have you been working for Vincent?" I ask.

"Let's see, about a day or a day and a half longer than you have."

What? That's it? They seem like they've been working together for years.

"It was a very intense day and a half," she adds.

"How about Sandy? How long has she been working there?"

"About a week longer than you. She's from a temp agency."

No wonder Vincent's sick of her. She's been working there for over a week already, a virtual eternity.

Monica drops me off outside the hotel, right in the middle of Sunset boulevard on a Saturday night. There are homeless people, drugged up people, obnoxious people, beautiful people, pissed-off people, and those who seem to fall just short of the People category altogether.

As I take a step inside the place, three serious-looking men, all with slicked back hair and similarly dark suits glance at me. Each is at a different location in the lobby. One by the door, one by the elevator, one against a wall. It looks like they're waiting to make a hit. It's a nice-looking lobby, don't get me wrong - washed floor tiles, gold-painted columns, polished wood - but I feel like I've walked in on a scene from *The Godfather*; the elevator doors open up, a mob boss comes out, and - Blamo! Blood everywhere. I try not to look intimidated but I don't imagine I'm very good at it.

"You Daniel?" a gruff voice echoes out.

It's an almost-pleasant-looking man behind the counter.

“That’s right.”

“Vince took care of everything,” he says, his eyes coldly half-shut. “Here’s your keys. The room’s down two flights of stairs, the lock sticks so keep wiggling it, and there’s a continental breakfast from eight to ten if you’re interested.”

“Thank you.” I take the keys and head semi-nonchalantly toward the staircase, expecting gunfire to break out behind me any minute.

The farther down the stairs I get, the more dungeon-like the hotel becomes. Industrial hums and metallic creaks echo from the earth below. Lights blink from deserted hallways. How does Vincent know these people? This is the kind of place I'd go if I were running from the law. A decent exterior, a dingy subterranean hideaway. Complete with a set of goons in the lobby in case anything unsavory happens. My room overlooks a big barbed-wire-enclosed garbage-infested pit. I close the shades and try to pretend I'm on the tenth floor of a Holiday Inn somewhere nice.

Before I ask about borrowing a DVD player for my Vincent Blakely media fest, I decide to get some food to ease my complaining stomach.

On the directions of the man behind the desk, I head across the street past a tattoo parlor to the Hilton -- a much classier joint than the one I'm staying at -- and look for some kind of snack bar.

There's a closet-sized room crammed with all the neatly packaged junk of a mini-market twice its size off to the side of the place, just out of sight of the check-in area. The guy working the register is staring blankly at a TV screen which flashes images of CNN with no volume.

Most of the food - the pink sugarballs, the deep-fried pork skins - doesn't appeal to me. I'm looking for something to satisfy the healthy appetite I inherited from my liberal California upbringing. The best I can do is a box of six Fig Newtons, a pack of Care-Free gum, and a squat bottle of Martinelli's apple juice.

"That'll be nine dollars and twenty cents," the man says, grinning at footage of a burning building.

Nine-twenty? For this? "Wow, that's quite a bargain," I say, handing over my credit card.

"Oh," he replies, completing the transaction. "It's the big city. Big city, big money, right?"

I guess.

"I was watching the news earlier," he starts out of nowhere, "and there was a guy who couldn't stand to live in the city no more so he moved out to the woods. He thought he was gonna love it. No pressure, nothing to do. But he got bored. Bored and lazy. Tried to build things, come up with new hobbies. It didn't work. He shot himself in the mouth."

"Wow. Ouch. Ooh."

"And get this, he was rich. Filthy rich. He had six kids but he didn't leave them a cent. Willed it all to an animal shelter. You believe that? A fucking animal shelter. Fucking crazy. Fucking nuts, huh? Jesus Christ people are insane."



I politely agree and walk out, allowing him to enjoy the new images of Melania Trump shielding her face from the CNN news cam.

Back at the hotel, I ask for a DVD player. The clerk rolls his eyes and grabs a box from the back. I return to my room, unleash the fig newtons, set up the player, and push in the first disc, one entitled *Interviews*.

What I see is a string of local and late-night talk shows clips, all formatted similarly. Each is about five minutes long and begins with scenes from some of Vince's legendary mother's work, then his older brother's work, then, depending on the sleaziness of the show, either pictures from his sister's Playboy spread or scenes from one of her soap opera roles. He's asked questions about how it feels to be raised in the shadows of fame: "It's great," he smiles diplomatically; questions about in-family conflicts: "We all get along and there's no competition"; and questions about his own budding stardom: "Everything's going smoothly, and I'm doing it all on my own with no help from my mother."

Then, on Entertainment Tonight, I see something different. There's a mug shot, followed by a pissed-off looking Mr. Blakely in handcuffs being escorted to a cop car. Next, we cut to a close-up of Vincent sitting on a comfortable sofa.

"You were arrested for assaulting a police officer," the interviewer states.

"Big mistake, big mistake," Vince says, obviously a little bothered, but trying to cover it up with a pleasant smile.

"You were in prison for ten days."

"The whole thing, a big misunderstanding." He's talking like a politician.

“How’s that?”

“This cop was giving a friend of mine a hard time, so I asked him what the problem was. We were at a busy nightclub, a lot of noise and confusion. The officer fell down somehow, I don’t know, probably slipped, and as I was trying to help him up, some other cop thinks I’m kicking him when all I was trying to do was help him get off the floor. I don’t know why the other guy thought I was kicking him. It was a noisy place. So he arrested me. Really stupid. A stupid mistake.”

“I see.”

Jesus. I work with an ex-con. A cop-beater no less.

“RRRRIIINNNGGG!!” the phone screams suddenly.

It’s just the phone, Dan. Go answer it.

“Hello?”

“Daniel. Thank God you’re there. Where were you? I was so worried.”

“Who is this?”

“Fuck, Daniel, it’s Vincent.”

“Oh. Hi. I was out getting a snack.”

“Oh God, I thought something had happened to you. I was getting ready to come down there and search for your corpse. I was so worried.”

“I’m fine.”

“Great. Everything going okay? You got the room?”

“Yeah. No problem. Thanks for arranging it.”

“Thanks for thanking me. I appreciate it. You see, Daniel, I want you to know that I care about my employees. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have called to check up on you.”

“Right. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, give me a call at ten tomorrow and I’ll come pick you up.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Ten promptly. There’s lots to do.”

“Got it.”

“Have a good night’s sleep.”

“You too.”

I can't get a beat on this guy. He's too hard to figure out. Inconsistent.

I go back and watch the rest of the DVDs. There are clips from TV dramas, a couple of low-budget comedies I’ve never heard of, and his claim to fame, the feature film, *Crunch Team 4: The Jail Break*. Vincent Blakely and three other government “Crunch Team” soldiers make a desperate escape from an evil Middle Eastern jail where dark-skinned ruffians have been torturing innocent Americans and mistreating helpless yet beautiful babes. A classic confrontation between good and evil.

As an actor, Vincent is not the embarrassment I expected. He holds his own just as well as the other Crunch Teamers. There’s nothing special about him but there’s nothing

overwhelmingly terrible about him, either. If he didn't have that familiar Blakely face, he'd fit right in there with the rest of the Hollywood hordes. Fame is weird.

The clips watched, I decide to hit the hay. The outside Saturday night atmosphere is pretty loud and I listen to some of the shouting and laughing for a while but soon my eyes close and I'm out for the night.

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### **SUNDAY, VALENTINE'S DAY, THE DAY OF LOVE AND APPRECIATION**

Smack. Smack. Thud. Thud. The sound of a wheezing vacuum cleaner hitting my door over and over wakes me up. It's eight-fifteen and aside from an irritating crick in my neck I didn't sleep too badly. After running some water through my wrinkled hair I head over to the continental breakfast and pick up some coffee, donuts, and bagels.

At ten o'clock, after some showering and sitting around, I call Vince. Not a minute early, not a minute late. His voice mail picks up.

"Hi, Vincent, it's Dan, it's ten, and you're not picking up the phone so I'll just wait for you to call me or else I'll call you back a little later. Talk to you soon."

I wait a while - forty-five minutes to be precise - and call back.

Voice mail again. I tell him what time it is, remind him what my number is, and that I'll be waiting happily for his call at any time.

The phone rings thirty seconds later.

"Hello?"

“Who taught you how to leave a message, Daniel?”

“Uh, Vincent?”

“That’s right. Your first message was unbelievable. You didn’t leave your number, you didn’t say what time you were going to call back. You sounded so casual, like you didn’t care. It made me sick so I didn’t pick up the phone.”

Gulp. “Sorry.”

“I’ve been sitting by the phone waiting for your second call, just sitting, watching, listening for a ring. I could have been doing something else but I didn’t. Do you know why?”

No.

“Because I didn’t know *when* you were going to call back and I wanted to teach you a lesson by showing you how much wasted time was spent. Are you getting this?”

Yes.

“Write it down in your notebook. You act polite on the phone, you leave precise instructions and details, got it?”

Yes sir.

“Okay. I’ll be there in twenty minutes and we’ll go get something to eat. You hungry? I am. Meet me at the Hilton and get a table outside.” Click.

Yikes.

I gather up my things, check out of the Sunset Grande and hike over to the Hilton where I request a table outside. I'm told that the outside is not set up today. I tell them that Vincent Blakely requested it. They set it up.

"Outside is ready, sir," they tell me, leading me to a sun-drenched table.

The twenty minutes Mr. Blakely referred to goes by, then another twenty minutes, then another. I hope I didn't misunderstand him somehow and go to the wrong place. That'd really piss him off.

With the extra time I've got I take a minute to run to the Hilton's gift shop and purchase a notebook for a measly six-bucks-and-eighty-five-cents. Now I'm prepared. Or at least look like I am.

The sound of screeching rubber causes my head to turn once I'm again at the outside table. It's Vincent doing a one-eighty in the middle of Hollywood traffic. A few cars brake to avoid hitting him. Vincent pulls up by a red zone and gets out of his Benz. Gold-rimmed shades propped on his unshaven face, he glides over to the crosswalk. He's looking at everything in sight. His head's bopping around like an excited chicken's.

The light turns green and he makes his way toward me. From a hundred yards away he shouts out, "Daniel!! Daniel!!!"

I wave.

"What a great fucking morning this is! WHAT A GREAT FUCKING MORNING!!!"

I smile pleasantly.

“Hey, champ,” he says, opening up a gate that reads NO ENTRANCE to get to me. “How’s it going?” The guy is exuding some serious energy. He sits down but keeps moving his arms and legs like he’s got to go to the bathroom.

“You’re just Mister Hyper today,” I tell him, wondering whether it’s cocaine, speed, or some combination that’s got him so jittery.

“Hyper? Wha- What do you mean?” he lowers his glasses.

“Nothing. You just have a lot of energy.”

“Oh,” he says, pushing the shades back up. “Yeah, well, when you gotta do all that I gotta do, you have to be energetic. And plus, look at this day. It’s terrific. Absolutely terrific! Who wouldn’t have energy on a day like today?”

Yeah. Who wouldn’t.

We order from the breakfast menu: eggs, toast, sausage, coffee, juice, the works. And it’s good. Really good. So good I altogether forget about that earlier excuse for a breakfast I had at the “other” hotel.

“We’ve got a lot of shit to do today, Daniel,” he says. “A lot of shit. A fuckin’ shitload of shit.”

Throughout breakfast he keeps telling me things I’m supposed to remind him about later. I write it all down in my notebook. Every time I finish writing and put the thing down to take a bite to eat, he brings up something else. “That notebook has got to be attached to your hip!” he commands. “To your hip!”

Endless names, stupid reminders, they get jotted down on the paper. He offers advice, he gives me orders, he complains about his connections. The man does not shut up.

“This orange juice sucks,” he comments after taking a sip of the stuff.

I tell him I think it tastes pretty good. Which it does.

“Well that’s you, Dan. You’re used to fucking second class orange juice. I’m used to good shit.”

I fill up three pages with scribble during the course of our meal. I only get a chance to eat a fifth of the food on my plate before he asks, “You ready to go?”

“Well,” I say, slipping a forkful of mouth-watering omelet into my mouth. “Just about.”

“I don’t want to rush you,” he says, glancing at his watch.

Thirty seconds later: “I’ll go pay. Let’s get out of here,” he orders.

Okay.

He gets up to go as I collect my things, exhausted from our breakfast meeting.

“Hey,” a soft voice beckons from behind me.

I turn to see a man at the table behind ours. He’s alone and reading a newspaper. “You going to be okay?” he asks from behind his shades.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Well, good luck.”

“Thanks,” I smile.



God bless that man. A total stranger who goes out of his way to help me realize I'm not dealing with Mary Poppins.

I catch up with Mr. Blakely, who has struck up a conversation with a pretty woman in a form-fitting flower-print dress by the entrance.

"This is my intern, Daniel," he introduces.

"Intern? What do you have an intern for?" she asks.

"I'm an actor and a comedian. I have to hire people to help me deal with big studio assholes."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Hey, what's your name?"

"Gretchen."

"Gretchen," he sweetly echoes, "I've always loved that name. Believe it or not. It just speaks to me. Why don't you give me your phone number? I've got a party coming up. You'd look great there."

"Um. Okay." She writes her number down on a scrap of my notebook paper and we leave.

"God, I'd like to see her in a bikini," he says once we're outside. "Shit. I'd like to see her naked, huh, Dan?"

We go to his car and drive to a bank. He needs some cash. There's a deserted parking lot with a fence around it right next to the ATM. The fence is locked.

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” he lets out. “Somebody’s a goddamn moron! Why the fuck would you put a parking lot here and then fucking lock it up so people can’t use it?! What’s the fucking point?!”

It’s inefficient. I know.

Eventually, we find a fire hydrant to park next to and he gets out. “While I’m gone you can clean the car up a little,” he suggests before closing the door.

I organize the boxes of Altoids next to his seat so they’re all lined up in flavor order from lightest to darkest, refold the maps and receipts in his glove compartment, and collect various pieces of trash from the floor as he grabs money out of the machine. About twenty feet in front of the car there’s a scraggly looking man in ripped, dingy clothes washing somebody’s car windows.

Vincent returns and starts the car. “See, Dan? While I was retrieving my money you could have been soliciting that bum over there to wash our windows. That’s the kind of thing you always gotta be doing.”

We begin to drive away. The scraggly man is in an argument with the car’s owner. He wraps his hand in a towel and crashes it through the car’s front window.

“Or maybe not,” Vince laughs as we speed by.

Back at the “office” we continue to organize and prepare for the upcoming party. Sandy is there but Monica’s not. She’d called in and said she was too emotionally strung out to work. That does not make Mr. Blakely happy. “Fuckin’ unreliable, irresponsible... Jesus fuckin’ Christ.”

For the most part, Vince leaves Sandy and me alone to work. He has his own business to deal with upstairs. But every time a floorboard squeaks or a door closes, there's an overwhelming sense of impending doom. Is he going to come down? What'll piss him off this time?

At one point he does come downstairs to check up on things. Sandy reminds him that she's got to leave a little early, at five-thirty, to pick up her son from the airport.

"Is that still okay?" she asks defensively.

"Of course, Sandy. Of course. What time does his flight arrive?"

"Well, I'm not really sure."

"You're not sure? How the hell are you going to know when to be there?"

"Well, I've got it written down somewhere."

"Somewhere? Shit." He goes to the phone. "What's the airline?" he asks Sandy.

"United, I think."

"It better be." Then, into the phone, "Gimme the number for United Airlines."

He dials the airline number.

"Don't worry about it," Sandy tells him, "I'll take care of it myself."

"Yeah sure. Like I trust you to do it correctly... Hi, I want to check the time of a flight... Hold on. What's the flight number, Sandy?"

"The flight number?"

“Yes. The flight number.”

“I don’t know. It’s in my purse.”

“Well get it.”

Sandy hastily tears through her purse looking for the information.

“Hurry up, Sandy, I can’t keep this woman on the line forever.”

“I’m looking, I’m looking.”

“I know,” he says into the phone. “We’re looking for that now.”

Sandy continues to search frantically.

“Just a fucking minute,” he says back into the phone. “Can’t you wait a few seconds for Christ’s sake?” He glares at Sandy. “Where’s the flight coming from?” he asks her.

“Minnesota via Chicago,” Sandy says.

He repeats this to the phone, then says, “Yes, I’ll hold.”

As Sandy is looking down, her nose buried in her purse, Vince goes over to her, brings his arms to his side and opens his hand as if readying to slap her. He lets his right hand fly through the air, just brushing her chin, and then whacks it against his other hand making a loud cracking noise. Sandy jerks back. Vince stares at her. “Don’t fuck with me!!” he shouts. “Don’t FUCK with me!!”

I feel my necks and cheeks heat up, my pulse quickening, unsure what to do.

The woman on the phone is back. “You need the flight number?” Vince covers the phone with his hand. “Sandy, you better find the fucking number.”

“Okay,” Sandy says. “It’s flight seventeen.”

“Seventeen,” he says into the phone. “Yes, I’ll hold.” He turns to Sandy, a bit more relaxed. “You see, Sandy? I’m just trying to help you out, that’s all. Most employers wouldn’t do this for their employees.”

She smiles mechanically.

Back to the phone. “What do you mean, no flight seventeen? It’s seventeen. Check it again.” He turns to Sandy again. “If you can’t get your personal life organized, how can you expect to have your business life organized?”

She smiles again, the smallest hint of contempt seeping from her dark blue eyes.

The phone: “Listen, it’s seventeen,” he says, “don’t you know how to do your job?... No, you calm down. It’s seventeen... Let me talk to the manager... What’s that? Flight fifty-seven?”

“That’s the one,” Sandy says nervously.

“All right,” Vince says back to the phone while staring at Sandy, his eyes burning. “When does that come in?... Seven-thirty. Great. Thank you.” He hangs up the phone and walks stiffly to Sandy. “Are you fucking stupid?” he growls, pulling his arm back the same as before. He swings again, just missing her mouth as she jerks back. His two hands crack together in a frightening clap. “Don’t ever, EVER fuck with me like that again! You got that?!”

She nods, her head bowed.

Mr. Blakely exits the office as Sandy sits in a hunched ball, looking over a file.

“Sometimes,” she whispers, “sometimes...”

Later, as we're making up more invitations, we can't find one of Vince's hand-written phone lists. I go upstairs to ask our boss where it might be. The bedroom door is closed and as I approach it his voice rings out from behind. I can't make out what he's saying but he sounds annoyed. Not wanting to bother him I look around for the list myself. When I open one of the drawers in a living room desk, I see a dozen or so prescription bottles. A few have Vincent's name on them, most don't. Sitting next to them is a long box marked Lithium Carbonate. Behind that sits a crinkled and over-stuffed bag full of small plastic pouches. I pull the desk open farther to take a closer look.

Then the door opens and the man storms out. I shut the drawer quickly.

"I'm looking for your address list," I tell him.

"What?" he says, distracted. "Don't fuckin' bother me now."

He stomps into the kitchen and halts suddenly once he's out of sight.

"Daniel?!" he booms.

"Yeah," I try to respond casually.

"Come here!"

Help.

I head over to him. He stands by the sink, looking thoughtfully in the direction of the garbage disposal. My stomach churns.

“Daniel,” he starts, “I’m going to tell you something. I was just on the phone with my girlfriend.”

He turns, confronting me with his stare.

“She’s messed up. Psychologically. She’s one of those co-fucking-dependents. The only reason I -”

His eyes shift over my shoulder and he brushes by me, going to a cereal bowl that’s on the counter behind where I stand.

“See this? What is it? It’s a dish. Is it clean? No, it’s dirty. So where does it go? That’s right. In the dishwasher.”

He opens the Maytag and slides the bowl in next to a few other plates.

“This place should be spotless. That’s another one of your jobs. You gotta be on the ball, Dan. I can’t stand slow people. And when the dishwasher fills up you put soap in there and turn it on. You know how to turn on a dishwasher, don’t you?”

I nod.

“Good. Where was I? I hate the way my mind races sometimes.”

Your co-fucking-dependent girlfriend...

“Right. Trisha. She’s real jealous. Too fucking jealous. Now, the reason I’m telling you is this: Anything that you may hear, anything that I may say about her or anyone else, it stays between you and me. You got that? She’s so goddamn unstable. So suspicious of every fucking thing I do, I have no idea what she’ll do to find things out. I’ve had problems with other

girlfriends. The stories I could tell, Daniel. The stories I could tell... You got that? It stays between us.”

“Sure.”

“I mean it.” He holds a pointed finger inches away from my face for additional emphasis. “I’m not bullshittin’ about this. I don’t care what she does - if she tells you you’re good-looking, if she tells you you’re cute, if she tells you you’ve got a distinctive nose and surprisingly broad shoulders or whatever, if she promises to give you a blow job... and I don’t care how good that fucking blow job is, either. If you’re in her bed, fucking her goddamn BRAINS out I don’t want you to say a word. Understood?”

Sure, Vince, sure.

“Good. Because I’m not going to tell you again... Now, I’ve got a gig tonight at the Improv. You heard of the Improv?”

“Are you kidding? It’s famous.”

“Yeah it is. I’m a regular there.”

A regular what?

“I’ve got to remember to go over my comedy stuff,” he says. “A little later I wanna go over my routine with you. You can help me out with some of the new material. That is, if you don’t mind.”

Not at all.

“Why don’t you invite your roommate out to the show? He can bring his girlfriend. Then they can drive you home. What do you say?”



“Okay.”

He glares at me.

I add, “And yes, I mean thank you. Thank you for the offer, Vincent.”

“You’re welcome,” he states dubiously. “You’re learning. You’re learning. You’ll be all right, I think... I gotta call my lawyer. Some dick-for-brains is trying to sue me.”

He walks out of the kitchen, then comes back in with an afterthought. He leans thoughtfully against the door frame.

“Oh, Daniel. Daniel Daniel Daniel,” he sings. “You see the life I lead, the life of a celebrity. It’s a bitch. Doesn’t it make you sympathize a lot more with famous people? Doesn’t it?”

Um...

“I’ll call for you soon.”

He leaves.

Not finding the address list I was searching for, I return empty-handed to the office below. Fortunately, Sandy has already found it. It had been sitting on the desk the whole time, right under her coffee cup.

“Isn’t that funny how sometimes the last place you look is right in front of your face?” She smiles, embarrassed. “Anyway, it’s a good thing Vince wasn’t here, that’s all.” She looks up at me. “You’re not going to tell him how it was on my desk the whole time, are you?”

Of course not.

“Yeah. There’s no reason to, is there?” She blinks at me. “You’re a good guy. You are. I’m glad you’re here.”

I nod back at her and then look quickly away.

We continue to do more work. Sandy seems distracted. Or rather, Sandy seems especially distracted.

“How’s your son?” I ask.

“Oh God,” she beams. “He’s so wonderful. It’ll be so great to see him. You know, I keep telling my kids that they’re free to go off and live their own lives, do whatever they want, but they keep coming back to me. They keep coming back. I guess that means I’m doing something right, doesn’t it?”

She sits back in the chair. She looks more at ease than I’ve seen her, her shoulders dropping down and legs loosely crossed.

“Both my kids,” she starts again. “Both of them are around the house now. It’s the best. My kids are the best. My son’s a model. He’s great. He was in Minnesota meeting with Sophia Coppola about a new project.”

Really?

“He’s so good looking. So’s my daughter. Do you want to see pictures?”

Sure.

She fumbles through her purse a little bit. “Oh shoot. Where are they? What did I do with them?”

Vincent’s footsteps are heading down the wooden steps. Sandy continues to search. “I know they’re in here. I know it.”

I get nervous. “Maybe you should show me later,” I say.

“No. I can find them.”

She doesn’t hear the footsteps.

“Vince is coming, Sandy. You can show me later.”

Still fumbling, she absently lets out a faint “huh?”

The doorknob turns and Vince comes inside. Sandy stops, her hands still inside the purse, her face reddening like a child who’s been caught with her hands in someone else’s Easter basket.

“Sandy,” he says, “can you find me the number for... What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“What are you doing?”

“Me? I was just going to, uh, going to -”

“Going to what?”

“Going to show, uh, going to show Daniel some, uh, some -”

“For Christ’s sake. It doesn’t matter. I need you to find me the number for Jamie Miller. He’s a comedy writer. I need to get in touch with him as soon possible.”

“Okay, Vince. Okay. Now, is that going to be under ‘M’ for Miller, ‘C’ for Comedy, or ‘W’ for writer?”

“Sandy, whose job is it to figure that out, yours or mine?”

“Mine. That would be mine.”

“Very good, Sandy. You’re really using your brain today. I like to see that. It always makes me sad when you don’t put it to good use. Buzz me when you find the number.”

She smiles unconvincingly at him as he walks out of the office. Once he’s gone, she bows her head into her hands. “That man. Sometimes I just cannot STAND him.”

“He’s an asshole.”

She raises her head and shakes off her ill feelings. “And the world’s full of assholes. But the way he talks to me, the way he treats me...”

“I’d try not to take it personally if you can.”

“I know, Dan. I know,” she whines. “But... Does he ever talk about me when I’m not around? Does he ever say anything about me?”

Uh...

“I bet he calls me stupid a lot, doesn’t he?” She looks at me weakly, like she might collapse any second. I feel an urge to hold her up straight. “I bet he says I’m incompetent. Does he say that? Or that I’m a moron?”

“No,” I tell her hesitantly, “I mean I’ve never heard him say anything negative about you. At least nothing that he hasn’t also said about everyone else.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I guess I’m just being a bit sensitive. I have a tendency to do that. My kids tell me so, anyway. I worry that he’s going to fire me.”

“So what if he does? I don’t imagine you like working for him.”

“If I could quit, Daniel, I’d do it in a second. But Vince pays well and I really need the money.”

Right. I have to remember that not everyone is a nineteen-year-old with no ties looking for fame and adventure.

“Besides,” she continues, “he’s really not all that bad.”

Excuse me?

“I think,” she says, “that Vince is actually a good-hearted man, a very good-hearted man who just doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

Tell me more.

“I mean that he goes after things so aggressively, not realizing how aggressive he is, that he ends up hurting himself more because of it.”

Hmm. Maybe there’s some truth in this. He does end up hurting himself and he certainly doesn’t seem to know what he’s doing. Maybe it’s the celebrity pressure rearing its head again.

Are all celebrities assholes once you see them in their everyday routines? Maybe it's a job requirement. I don't know. Why worry about it, though? It's something I've got to deal with for now, not analyze. This is my In, after all, my best shot at the big time. So just deal, Daniel, deal.

BZZZ! The intercom howls. It's Vince. He wants to see me. I say goodbye to Sandy and go upstairs. I hear a TV going in the bedroom.

"Daniel! Come here!" His voice rings with excitement, not anger.

I go into his room where Vince is sitting up against the headboard. The lights are dimmed, and the flickering of the television set causes a disorienting effect on the walls.

"Watch this," he commands, pointing to the screen.

We're watching a video of past comedy performances by Mr. Blakely. He stands in the center of the picture, holding notes, and rattling off joke after joke with a delivery similar to our Shakespeare rehearsal the first night.

Occasional mild laughter from a small audience follows some of his punch lines.

"Is that normal to be holding note cards while doing standup?" I ask, a little confused at what I'm seeing.

"Oh sure," he responds. "A lot of times on off nights, comedians go into clubs and test their new material out when the crowds aren't too big."

His telling of the jokes is fairly clumsy. This, added to the awkwardness of the actual jokes themselves, doesn't bring off a very successful act.

"Here comes a funny one," he prepares me. "Listen to this one."

I do. It's something about finding his girlfriend naked in a hot tub with a neighbor's dog. One of those jokes where the comedian has to wink at the audience to let them know it's supposed to be funny. "Get the picture? Naked girlfriend? Dog? Hot tub?"

There's a touch of laughter from the audience, mostly from two drunk guys in the front row.

Vincent is watching me, looking for a reaction. I don't give him one.

"What, don't you get it?" he asks irritably.

"Yeah yeah, I get it," I say softly.

"Not your kind of joke, huh?" he says. "Well here, the next couple are good."

He spews out a couple more mediocrities. One about getting a parking ticket while stalled in an L.A. traffic jam, and another about a fire department he read about in the Midwest that accidentally hooked a fire hose up to a sewage line.

It's pretty bottom-of-the-barrel material, but he continues to watch my reaction. I can tell he's becoming more and more incensed. I can't hold onto my dignity much longer. Then Bam. It slips away. I'm afraid he might whack me out of spite for not finding him funny enough. So out of fear I smile and even chuckle a little when he delivers his punch lines. If he can't amuse the laughter out of me, he'll intimidate it out.

"Oh, you liked that one, huh?" he says. "I knew they were funny."

"Uh-huh," I agree unenthusiastically.

The jokes keep rolling. The subject material ranges from Disney characters in bondage to sexual harassment lawsuits to marathon bowel movements.

I continue to force out a sort of subdued laughter.

“You’re tough on me,” he quips light-heartedly. “Here,” he flicks off the TV and pulls out a legal pad of paper with more funny business scrawled all over it. “This is some of the newer stuff I’m going to be doing tonight. Tell me what you think.”

He reads.

The jokes come in different groups. There’s a series about the president and his wife, a series about driving in Southern California, a series about meeting people at bars, and a series about the differences between married men and single men. All of them sound like mid-season sitcom-replacement throwaway lines.

“Do you write these yourself?” I ask in the middle of the joke-a-thon.

“Some come from me, some come from writers. I’d like to write them all myself but I don’t have enough time. You’ve seen how busy I am.”

I have.

“It’s better to write them yourself. That way you can deliver them the way they were meant to be delivered. A lot of the ones I write will make fun of who I am. I think that’s good, to be able to laugh at yourself, to have a sense of humor about your own life. It keeps you humble and the audience enjoys you more.”

“These jokes you just read. Who wrote them?”

“Well, let’s see,” he reads them over. “Somebody else wrote these.”

I see.



“What did you think?” he asks anxiously once the reading is complete. “I heard you laughing sometimes.”

He sits cross-legged on the bed and looks at me with wide eyes as I dangle my legs over the side. It feels like we’re two pre-pubescent pals gossiping in a summer camp bunk bed. It’s an eerie feeling and it makes me uncomfortable. Especially the fact that he keeps asking me what I think. It is the first time I’ve felt like he cared about my opinion. It’s almost touching. Almost.

“Some of them were okay,” I tell him.

“Yeah,” he bites his fingernails insecurely. “What was good and what was bad?”

Okay. This is freaking me out. The power has shifted dramatically in the last few minutes. He’s sitting there hanging on my every word. Unlike the Shakespeare reading, he’s actually quiet, waiting intensely for me to speak.

“For example,” I begin, “the joke about Carl’s Junior...”

“Uh-huh,” he scans the page for it.

“You order a shake. What kind of shake do you order?”

“Uh,” he reads, “I say, ‘I’d like a Biggie chocolate shake please.’”

“See,” I explain, “they don’t have Biggie shakes at Carl’s Junior.”

“They don’t?”

“No. They have Biggie shakes at Wendy’s. But those aren’t even called shakes, they’re frosties. And they only come in chocolate, so all you’d need to say is ‘I’d like a Biggie frosty

please.’ Since I know that, it makes the joke seem awkward. I can’t escape the fact that Biggies don’t exist at Carl’s. It’s an entirely different marketing campaign.”

“What size do they have, then? Like grandé?”

“No, just large.”

“Large?” he says. “That’s not funny. I can’t use that. I want to say Biggie.”

“Then you have to say Wendy’s.”

“Okay okay. I can do that.” He writes it in. “What else?”

“Well, the joke about the single guy going to the bathroom...”

“Right,” he finds it. “The way the shit stinks up the whole place because the single guy never flushes the toilet?”

“Uh-huh. Now for me,” I say, “that’s a little bit gross.”

“But it’s funny.”

“It’s sort of funny,” I say diplomatically, “but the grossness turns me off. Granted, as I just said, this is me talking, but I would either skip that joke or else make it more subtle.”

“Should I take out the word ‘shit’?” he asks. “I really try not to swear in my routines. I think it’s unnecessary. It’s just a cheap way to get laughs.”

“Yeah. Take out the shit and maybe, if you want to keep the joke in, just say the guy never flushes the toilet, without bringing up the part about the stink or anything. I think the audience’ll know what you’re talking about. And it’ll still be funny in the same way it was funny before.”

“Okay,” he obligingly writes in the changes. “Hey,” he says, “how about the potpourri joke? Do people know what potpourri is? You know, the good-smelling stuff that looks like leaves? Do people know what that is?”

“Yeah. People know what that is.”

I make a few more suggestions and he genuinely seems to appreciate them. He even ends up changing a few of the jokes completely, telling me that he pays writers forty-five dollars for each one and that if these go over well, he’ll pay me, too. But immediately after he says this, his face turns serious and he seems to regret it. I’ll probably never see any forty-five dollars but I feel like I’m getting a shot at comedy writing. It’s a step. An important step.

So we finish up the comedy makeover and Vince looks at his watch.

“Shit,” he says, “I’m going to be late to my workout.” He picks up his phone and dials. “Stefo?” he says. “I’m going to be a few minutes late to the gym.”

He hangs up, gets out of bed, and turns on the overhead light. Suddenly, our boyish rapport is over, and as soon as he starts to speak I have to wonder if it was all a dream.

“Fuck. Daniel, help me find my shorts.”

We look around and find his pair of workout shorts.

“I’m late,” he mumbles. “Daniel, I’m gonna work out for an hour or so, then go to the club. Why don’t you meet me there a few minutes early. Get a ride from your roommate. Bring this,” he hands me a thumb drive, “so we can record the show. And if Trisha shows up here, tell her I went straight to the club. We were going to meet here but I don’t have time... Where are my cigarettes? Dan, you gotta know where my cigarettes are at all times.”

I remember seeing them in the living room so I run and get them.

“The lighter. Where’s that?”

I grab it from the kitchen cabinet.

“My car clean?” he asks.

“Pretty much.”

“Clean it better later. You don’t have time now... Phone charged?”

“Uh-huh.”

“All right. I’m off.” He heads to the garage. “If you get a chance, Dan, make my bed, okay?”

Whatever you say.

“If you don’t have time, don’t worry about it... Do I have everything?”

How am I supposed to know?

“See you in a couple hours.” He starts the engine and speeds away.

Sudden silence. I let out a deep breath I feel like I’ve been holding for fifteen minutes.

HONNNNK!!! HONNNNNK!!! HONNNNNK!!! The car horn screams out from down the road and I hear the wheels screech back toward me in reverse.

“Daniel!” he yells through a rolled down window.

“Yeah?”

“Get over here!!”

I go to him.

“Here,” he hands me a sheet of paper. “I was supposed to send this to my lawyer. I don’t know why you didn’t take it out. When you clean the car, you really gotta clean the car totally. So scan it and send it. Sandy has the contact info. Also, tell her to pick up some more coffee in the morning before she comes to work. And see this box?” He holds up a small box. “It’s for Advil. It’s always got to be full. Remember that. There’s only a few left. But this is all stuff to be worried about later. Write it in your book. Where is your notebook? Attached to your hip, Dan, attached to your hip. Shit,” he looks at his watch. “I gotta go.” He rolls up the window. In mid roll he calls out, “Keep an eye on Sandy. Make sure she doesn’t fuck anything up. And don’t...” The window is all the way up. He rolls it down a crack. “Don’t forget to shut the garage door when I leave. My remote is on the fritz. Make a note to fix that too.”

I nod and he careens back down the hill, leaving a thin trail of exhaust behind.

This time I can’t find the strength to exhale. I feel like I’m being sucked into this guy’s psyche. Like I’m handcuffed to his brain. His one-hundred-and-sixty-five I.Q. brain. But there’s no time to think about that. I’ve got contracts to scan, doors to close, shit to shovel...

After I’ve written down all the assigned tasks in my book, I call my roommate. He says he’d be glad to come see the show and drive me home. Good. For the next forty-five minutes I do as many of the tasks as I can, hoping to finish enough of the important ones to tide me over till tomorrow.

At one point the office telephone rings. Sandy is supposed to pick it up but she doesn’t. Apparently, she slipped out the back sometime while I wasn’t looking. Or maybe she told me she

was leaving and I was so caught up in whatever I was doing that I forgot. Either way, I take it upon myself to answer the thing.

It's a man with a southern accent who says he's a movie director named B.J. Chaplin. "No relation to Chuckie," he quips with a hearty guffaw. He claims to have a movie that's "on the verge" of being made. "It just *aches* to have Vince in there as the lead." It's a western. A "hip" re-telling of the Jesse James story. Zac Efron and Amy Adams are set to co-star.

"I'll tell him you called," I tell B.J. before hanging up.

"Preciate it."

A few minutes later the phone rings again. It's Vincent.

"Everything going okay?" he asks.

"Fine."

"You doing all right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Anything important come up?"

"Well," I start.

"Now listen, Daniel," he interrupts, "Only tell me if it's *really* important. I'm in a big fucking rush and don't have time to waste listening to trivial things. Unless it's an emergency, I don't want to hear about it."

"Okay. It can wait," I tell him.

"You sure?" he asks.

“Yes.”

“So nobody called?”

“Well,” I start again, “a guy called about a possible movie role for you.”

“What?! Daniel, THAT’S fucking important! Who is he?”

“Someone named B.J. Chaplin.”

“And?”

“And it’s a western. He has you pegged for the lead. Zac Efron and Amy Adams are supposed to be in it.”

“Oh yeah?” he sounds impressed. “When does filming begin?”

Oops. Details, details...

“I, uh, I don’t know,” I tell him.

“Shit, Daniel. You gotta find this shit out, you got that? How many times do I have to tell you over and over again?”

“Sorry,” I let slip out without realizing it.

“Call him back and ask him when filming is. I can’t do it if I’m busy. And ask him if it’s financed.”

“Okay,” I tell him.

“Daniel,” he says irritably, “I’d tell you to write this shit down in your notebook but I can tell you don’t have it in front of you. Don’t tell me you do because I know you don’t.”

He's right. Must be those hidden cameras.

"And invite this Chaplin guy to my show tonight. The Improv. Eight o'clock"

Okay.

"And Daniel. Staple that goddamn notebook to your fucking dick if you have to. Staple it twice. Got it?"

Two staples. Got it.

He hangs up.

I call B.J. back and find out that filming is tentatively scheduled for next month. When asked whether or not the picture is financed, he hesitates and replies, "It's just about financed. Almost all the way. Just about."

I invite him to the comedy show.

"I don't know," he says, "I'm pretty darn busy. But I'll try... If I can find the time."

I hang up and go back to my duties after writing some of this info down in my notebook.

Then the doorbell rings.

I open the door. Standing there is a woman in jet-black sunglasses. Her shirt's a little too tight and her skirt is slit to the thigh. She looks pissed but I can't really tell with those sunglasses blocking any trace of pupil.

I greet her and she tells me she's looking for Vince. She's one of the women Mr. Blakely has photographs of in his bedroom.

"Are you Trisha?" I ask.



“That’s right.”

I tell her who I am and she steps inside. With the draft from the door blowing gently through her hair she has a real starlet quality to her. But when she takes off the glasses I see that she has tired eyes, and when she walks she lacks self-assurance and strength. In the light of the living room she reminds me of an exhausted fighter at the end of a marathon bout.

“Is he going to be back soon?” she asks anxiously.

“You know what? He said he’s going straight to the club after the gym and that you should meet him there.”

“That’s not what he told me.”

“I think,” I tell her, “that he was running behind schedule and that’s why he couldn’t come back here.”

“Well, I just talked to him and he said he was coming back here.”

“When did you talk to him?” I ask.

“A minute ago in the car.”

“Huh,” I say. “Then I’m not sure. All I know is he told me he wasn’t coming back.”

“Okay.” She looks a little worried. “I’ll just sit on the couch and wait.”

She does and I go back to the tasks.

A few minutes later the doorbell rings again. It’s Ben and Eva.

“Hey, Dan,” they spout cheerfully from smiling faces.

“Hi,” I greet back.

I just saw the two of them yesterday but now I’m taken aback by their presence. I barely recognize them; they’re like visitors from a dream.

“It’s good to see you,” I tell them. “Ready to go?” I turn to Trisha, who still sits on the couch, staring blankly forward. “Trisha, this is Ben and Eva.”

“Hi,” she waves pleasantly.

“See you down there,” I tell her. “Let’s go,” I say to my friends as I step between them and pull the front door shut. I’m already out to the car before they’ve even turned around.

“Are you okay?” Eva asks slowly.

“Yeah. Let’s go.” My foot taps nervously.

Ben inches over to the car and we all get inside. Why are these people moving so slowly? Don’t they realize we have to *be* somewhere?

“How is every-”

“How is everything going?” I quickly finish Eva’s question. “How is everything going,” I reiterate mechanically. “How is everything...”

Shit. How *is* everything going? Why am I balled up in the back seat, leaning forward with my fists clenched? Why am I so determined? Why do I have this totally focused energy?

I force myself to lean back in the seat. I unclench my fists. “Everything,” I start with deliberate slowness, “is hectic. So fucking hectic. It’s insane. Oh my God!”

It strikes me, as I sit with my two long-time friends, that I've changed. In only two days I've really changed. I'm wound up and tied in knots. My stomach aches. My back aches. I'm not aware of the world around me. I care only about one thing. Getting things done. Getting things fucking done.

I tell Ben and Eva all that has gone on in the past forty-eight hours. All the yelling, the insanity, the surreality.

"Shit," says Ben, "the only thing we've done all weekend is go out to lunch."

It feels good to touch base with reality.