

The Last to Know

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. OUTSIDE BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - NIGHT

A small MARQUE reads:

Mitzi Alvarez, Tim Vorpel, Tommy Wisnowski and

FLORENCE ABBINGTON, TONIGHT!

Show starts at 7:30 PM, main act at 8:30!

A couple enters the club.

INT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - NIGHT

A young Hispanic woman performs a comedy set on a small stage in the rear of the club.

The place is only half-full. Bored, casually dressed students and a few other patrons sit somberly around two dozen small tables.

In the front of the room is a bar near the entrance, where DARWIN HOWLETT, a long-haired, bearded man around 30 slumps on a bar stool, talking to

CLARA WATTS, a bespectacled bartender in her 20s as she wipes down glasses in front of him.

ON STAGE

MITZI ALVEREZ, mid-30s delivers her last joke.

MITZI

I guess I lied to him when I told
him he gave me butterflies in the
stomach...it was gastritis!

A few patrons LAUGH.

Mitzi knows when it is time to call it quits for the night.

MITZI (CONT'D)

That's all for tonight, folks. But
what a crowd!

Mitzi scans the sparse audience with a sarcastic smirk as a few people CLAP unenthusiastically.

MITZI (CONT'D)
If three's a crowd, that is. Well,
hopefully our next threesome will
wake you guys up a bit.

Mitzi motions to the short stairway to one side of the stage.

MITZI (CONT'D)
Let's welcome Tim Vorpel, the
Voice, and his friends.

Another SMATTERING of applause as Mitzi sidles off the stage to pass

TIM VORPEL, early 30's, as he trudges up the stairway up onto the stage toting two suitcases.

Both are marked with large stenciled lettering which reads:

VORPEL the VOICE, VENTRILOQUIST EXTRA-ORDINAIRE.

Tim is slight, a bit unkempt and nerdy-looking. His shirt is untucked and soiled, one shoelace is untied.

Mitzi rolls her eyes at Tim as goes by her.

MITZI (CONT'D)
(whispers to Tim)
Good luck with these corpses.

Tim takes center stage, drops his suitcases, and drags a chair out from behind the stage curtains.

AT THE BAR

Clara squints over her eye-glasses at Tim preparing for his gig.

CLARA
Are you actually representing this
guy now, Darwin?

Darwin turns his head to sadly regard Tim, then swivels back.

DARWIN
Yeah, I let my ex talk me into it.
But man, I hope he's got some
decent material tonight. If not,
this joint could empty out in a
hurry.

ON STAGE

Tim moves the chair over between the two suitcases and sits down facing the audience.

He reaches to one side to POP open the smaller of the two cases.

He pulls out a FEMALE DUMMY, resembling a wide-eyed, innocent-looking young woman, then plops her down on his knee.

He runs his hand up behind her to in order to manipulate her facial features.

TIM
Hello, Belinda.

BELINDA
(falsetto voice)
Hi, Tim.

Belinda bats her eyes, then looks down at Tim's arm where it enters her dress.

BELINDA (CONT'D)
That feels kinda good! And you look
so handsome tonight.

Tim manifests a blush as one person in the audience TITTERS almost imperceptibly.

BELINDA (CONT'D)
It must be the cologne, or maybe
that new shirt.

Tim looks sheepishly down at a stain on his shirt pocket. Belinda ogles Tim from head to toe, then turns to the audience.

BELINDA (CONT'D)
(sexy tone)
Mmmm...MMMM!

Tim shakes his head as if he's used to her forwardness and doesn't much care for it.

No one laughs.

TIM
Well, uh, thanks for the
compliments, Belinda. So...why
don't we get Mr. Vetch out here to
join us?

Belinda rocks back on Tim's knee, in protest.

BELINDA

Oh, Tim, do we have to? He's such a cranky old bas...butthole.

Slight CHORTLE from the audience.

TIM

Language, language, Belinda. What would your mother say?

BELINDA

She'd wash out my mouth with turpentine, that's for sure.

No laughter.

Belinda stares blankly at the audience. Tim follows her gaze.

A couple chats with each other at a table in the back of the room, totally oblivious to the show. A man in the front row YAWNS loudly.

Tim swallows hard. He's drowning up here.

AT THE BAR,

Club owner BUSTER TIBBS, (aka Buster Gutts), obese, mixed race, early 40s, noisily deposits his girth onto the bar stool next to Darwin.

In the background, Tim reassures Belinda her mother knows she's a good girl.

DARWIN

Buster. Slow night.

Buster first gives Tim, then Darwin the hard eye.

BUSTER

Slow ain't the word. Cadaver-esk is more like it. I'm beginning to think we might need some fresh meat up there.

BACK ON STAGE

Tim leans down to snap open the larger suitcase. He struggles with its contents for a few seconds before hoisting out

MR. VETCH, a creepy-looking dummy built to resemble a dirty old man.

Mr. Vetch's eyes are shut.

Tim places Mr. Vetch on his other knee, runs his hand up the dummy's back to manipulate its controls.

Suddenly, Mr. Vetch's eyes spring wide open! They glitter nastily. He turns to lock eyes with Tim.

MR. VETCH
(snarls loudly)
Hiya, Kid!

TIM
Good evening, Mr. Vetch.

Vetch bats his eyes, turns to frown at Belinda.

VETCH
This slutty little ding-bat, again?

Belinda drops her eyes down, then up at Tim, beseeching.

BELINDA
Do we have to have him out here?

TIM
Now, Belinda, the three of us are a team -

VETCH
She ain't part of my team!

TIM
You're certainly a bit up-tight tonight, Mr. Vetch.

Vetch leers out into the audience. He leans forward on stage to fully engage them.

VETCH
Up-tight? You gotta be kidding, boss. I'm so old and loose, my farts don't reverberate.

A MOAN from someone in the audience. One TINY LAUGH.

VETCH (CONT'D)
(leers)
Permanently silent but still deadly.

Vetch looks innocently at Tim and Belinda.

VETCH (CONT'D)
In fact, did you catch a whiff of that one?

Several GROANS from the audience. Tim's eyes shift to Buster at the bar in the distance. Buster has his head in his hand, looking ill.

AT THE BAR

Buster lifts his head to stare at Darwin, who tries not to meet his eyes.

In the background, Tim, Belinda and Vetch's voices drone on in an argument, with Tim trying to control his two charges.

BUSTER

Darwin. "The Voice" had better come up with something new and funnier, or should I say just funny. And soon. His contract runs out Sunday. If tomorrow's show isn't a whole lot better, he's done here.

DARWIN

OK. OK, man. I'll get him to work on it. Tomorrow is Saturday. He should have all day to develop some good material.

Buster starts to slide off of his chair. He looks out at Tim bombing with yet another stale joke.

BUSTER

I mean it, man. It's tomorrow or never again.

Darwin grimaces unhappily as Buster waddles off.

BACK ON STAGE,

Vetch delivers the end of another punch-line.

VETCH

(to Belinda, while looking
at his own crotch)
Honey, what I've got is contagious!

Shuffling of chairs. No laughter. One COUPLE makes to leave.

VETCH (CONT'D)

(to the couple leaving)
What's wrong with you two?

The couple turn to the stage, mouths open in surprise.

VETCH (CONT'D)
You got sticks so far up your
butts, you two could be the dummies
up here.

A number of people LAUGH, one woman hard.

The man shoots Tim the bird as he and his wife grab their
coats.

AT THE BAR

Darwin and Clara are stunned by Tim's attack on audience
members.

ON STAGE

Tim leans in close to Vetch's face.

TIM
Mr. Vetch, that behavior is way out
of line. And won't be tolerated.

Vetch pouts.

TIM (CONT'D)
(to the audience)
I...I apologize for Mr. Vetch's
remarks. It won't happen again.

Time smiles insincerely at the audience, sharing the inside
joke.

A WOMAN sitting close to the stage LAUGHS again.

WOMAN
Why not? At least, that part of
your act was marginally funny.

EXT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Tim slouches into the room with his suitcases, drops them on
the floor to collect his coat from a chair in the corner.

TIM
(to the suitcases, in a
hushed tone)
We've got to be careful with our
audiences. We don't want to be too
offensive, or they'll just walk
out. Like tonight.

Silence. Tim looks around as if to make sure no one is listening. He gives one of the cases a light kick.

TIM (CONT'D)
Do you hear me, Mr. Vetch? I mean it!

Tim reaches down to retrieve the cases and heads out.

EXT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - BAR - NIGHT

Tim slogs up to the bar, suitcases in hand. Darwin stops him as he's about to pass on his way out.

DARWIN
You aren't speaking?

Tim grimaces.

TIM
Not much to say. My throat is sore from throwing my voice.

DARWIN.
Yeah. Well, I think you know I've got some not so good news.

Tim drops the heavy suitcases with a THUD.

TIM
What is it?

DARWIN
Buster says you either get the crowd laughing tomorrow night or he's done with us.

TIM
Us?

DARWIN
Come on, man. Don't forget it was me that got you this gig. As a favor to Melissa, I might add. And ventriloquist acts haven't exactly been popular in recent years.

TIM
Yeah, I know. Your taking a big bite out of what little I make here.

DARWIN

More like a nip, considering how well you are doing. And both of us come up empty Monday if you don't come through tomorrow.

TIM

Christ. I have to work in the morning.

Darwin looks at his watch with faux sympathy.

DARWIN

It's not that late. Looks like you'll be burning some midnight oil.

Tim GRUMBLES under his breath, reaches down for his suitcases to leave.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

Hey, but say high to Melissa for me. Or should I say, give her my sympathies. You won't be much company tonight.

Tim shakes his head in disgust, trails out.

Darwin SIGHS, turns back to the bar, looks down the bar counter at Clara who has been listening.

She takes a few steps to stand across from Darwin.

CLARA

You're still carrying a torch for Melissa, aren't you?

Darwin's face clenches, bitter.

DARWIN

What she sees in that weirdo, I'll never know.

CLARA

And you're not a little strange?

Darwin scowls down at his empty glass. He taps it with his finger.

DARWIN

Another.

(beat)

Please.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Tim's girlfriend MELISSA HAYS, late-20s, petite, mousy-looking, sits on a sectional couch reading a People magazine. On a wide screen television, a sitcom plays at low volume.

The front door to the apartment opens and Tim slouches in with his two suitcases in tow. He sweats heavily.

MELISSA

Hi, babe.

Melissa drinks in Tim's appearance.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Are you OK?

Tim dumps the cases on the floor and shuts the front door. He tosses his coat onto a rack nearby.

TIM

When did the elevator go out?

MELISSA

Geez, you're kidding. You hauled that stuff up four flights of stairs?

TIM

What choice did I have. Man, this building has seen better days.

Melissa folds her magazine closed.

MELISSA

You have to like it more than your parent's basement.

Tim LAUGHS and joins her on the couch.

TIM

I guess. How are you?

MELISSA

Tired. Sheila was out sick, so I had to split her patients with Marsha. It was non-stop work. That Mrs. House, I told you about, she was really being difficult -

Melissa watches Tim's eyes bounce around the room. He's not really tuned in.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
You don't look like your day went too well either.

TIM
Yeah. Sorry. Preoccupied. Buster's gonna shit-can me if I don't bring down the house tomorrow. Maybe I ought to just let this go for awhile.

Melissa nods, concerned, but still loving.

MELISSA
Well...you did say you were going to give your act six months. It's November already. Are you still planning on going back to school in January?

Tim SIGHS with disappointment.

TIM
Yeah, I guess. I was hoping this would work out. But I'm just not getting good feedback from audiences.

MELISSA
But Tim, you've got good options. You were really interested in the police academy. You'd have your Criminal Justice degree by May. You can quit the evidence room job and go to the academy next summer.

Melissa points to the sitcom playing on television.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
It's almost impossible to make it as an actor. Or a comedian.

TIM
I'm a ventriloquist! There aren't so many of those.

MELISSA
A lot of people find dummies creepy.

Melissa suppresses a shudder. She's one of them.

TIM
(states as a fact)
You don't believe I can do it.

Melissa leans forward to gently take Tim's hand.

MELISSA
I do, Tim. Don't you remember? It
was me who set you up with Darwin,
when he started to represent
comedians locally.

Melissa hesitates, not sure if she should continue, but she
plunges ahead.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
But do you really think you should?
You're spending hours back there
with those puppets, talking to
them, role playing. Is that good
for you?

Tim frowns.

TIM
What are you implying?

Melissa raises her hands defensively.

MELISSA
Nothing. Nothing. But it's time we
could be spending together,
talking, making plans, having
fun...

TIM
We'll have a lot more fun once I
make it, I promise.

MELISSA
Tim, you said it yourself, maybe
it's time for a break. And don't
make promises you can't -

TIM
(shouts)
You don't believe I can do it! Just
like my parents and that asshole
Buster. Well, I still believe I
can.

Tim jumps up, grabs his suitcases and heads for a back room.

TIM (CONT'D)
I'll be in the office, practicing.
It may take me half the night, but
I'll put something really good
together.

MELISSA
Tim. I -

TIM
(interrupts)
You'll see. You will all see.

Tim stalks out of the room. Melissa watches him go, her face full of worry.

INT. APARTMENT - OFFICE - NIGHT

Tim hip-bumps the door open. He has converted the second bedroom into an office, which is a mess: snack wrappers, writing notes, books everywhere.

An old desk with desktop and printer resides underneath the room's sole window. An armchair and two smaller chairs face each other in the room's center.

Tim perches in the arm chair, then POPS open the larger suitcase. He stares down into it, his eyes wide.

INT. APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Melissa stands in front of a chest of drawers, wearing a nightgown. She walks to the bed, picks up another magazine on the bedside table and pulls back the covers to get in.

Still standing, she turns a few pages, then she hears MUFFLED VOICES coming from the office.

She walks closer to the bedroom door to listen. Is that Tim's VOICE interchanging with the much GRUFFER TONE of Mr. Vetch's?

She can't quite make out what they are saying, but it sounds like an angry argument.

She gets into bed, concerned. She listens a bit longer, shakes her head and shrugs it off as part of Tim's new act.

INT. POLICE STATION - EVIDENCE ROOM - DAY

Sergeant NICK DALE sits at the evidence room window. Nick is overweight, balding, mid-50s, riding out the time to his pending retirement.

IN BACK OF HIM

Stretches a small room, with three aisles of shelves stacked with boxes, criminal artifacts, photos and other items connected to old crime scenes and locations of the past.

Tim stands in the center aisle, puts new boxes and articles on to the appropriate shelves. He sees a fancy set of Burglar lock picks on the shelf below. He picks them up, examines them curiously, then places them back where they were.

He returns to shelving and organizing boxes, then COUGHS when a cloud of dust erupts from the top of a box as he moves it.

TIM

Sergeant Dale, some of this stuff must have been here forever.

Nick LAUGHS.

NICK

You know it, Tim. I don't think anything's been thrown out of here in forty-five years.

TIM

What's the point of keeping junk that long?

NICK

Probably somethin' to do with cold cases. Residual DNA possibilities.

Nick LAUGHS again.

NICK (CONT'D)

Hell, I don't really know the "why" with most of it. In fact, we are gonna get rid of a lot of it when we move to the bigger facility next Spring. Hey, the boss already let you have that old dummy we found under all that junk last year, right? Couldn't find no paper work with it, and no DNA traces. And when he knew you were interested in it, well...

Nick smiles.

NICK (CONT'D)
The captain always liked you. Says
you're a good kid.

TIM
(deadpans)
I'm thirty-two.

NICK
You know what I mean. And hey, you
made that old dummy work! How long
you had that gig now, a month?

TIM
Two months, come Monday. But it
could be over. I'll probably have
to go back and finish up my degree
in January.

NICK
Hey! That's great. Then the academy
in June?

Tim shrugs out an "I guess".

Nick mulls over an idea.

NICK (CONT'D)
Tell you what. My nephew Joey is a
junior in High School this year.

TIM
Yeah, you told me before.

NICK
He loves comedy, you know. They got
a school talent show next March.
Maybe you two could meet up and you
could give him some pointers?

Tim struggles to hide his indifference to the idea.

TIM
Sure, man. What's he -

O.C., a hand BANGS against the mesh window in front of Nick.
Nick jerks around to see

CAPTAIN WALTER ROGERS standing there grinning. Walter is
tall, robust, black, and dressed sharply in his Captain's
uniform.

WALTER
You boys in here bustin' your
asses, as usual.

Nick and Tim grin. They both like and admire the Captain.

NICK
Nah, we ain't sweatin', that's for
sure, boss. Just shooting the shit
about that old dummy you let Tim
here commandeer last summer.

Walter nods.

WALTER
I understand you've gotten pretty
good with throwing your voice, Tim.
Could come in handy in police work.

TIM
I don't know, Captain. I guess I'm
a pretty fair ventriloquist now,
but I have to work on my comedy
skills.

WALTER
You're still performing at Buster
Gutt's, right?

NICK
He says this might be his last
weekend.

WALTER
Really?

Tim shakes his head "yes" sadly, then brightens up.

TIM
But I got a new routine worked up,
Captain. I'm going to run it
tonight, and if it works, they may
keep me on.

WALTER
What about the police academy, Tim?
We've been holding you that spot
for over a year.

Tim ignores this remark.

TIM
Captain, listen. You haven't seen
my routine yet, but you keep
promising you will. This could be
your last chance. Why don't you
come see me tonight?

An afterthought. Tim glances at Nick.

TIM (CONT'D)
And you too, Nick.

NICK
Sorry, Tim. It's our anniversary.
Gonna take the wife out somewhere
expensive tonight.

WALTER
(laughs)
That'll be something new.

They all CHUCKLE.

WALTER (CONT'D)
Tell you what, Tim. What time do
you start?

TIM
I do a thirty minute set, scheduled
at 8:45 but usually doesn't start
'til 9:00 PM. Can you make it?
Buster lets cops in for free!

WALTER
You know my old man was a wannabe
comedian for years.

FLASHBACK - ANOTHER COMEDY CLUB - 20 YEARS EARLIER - NIGHT

A portly black comedian winds up a joke on small stage. He
grabs his crotch with both hands.

BLACK COMEDIAN
...got your coconuts right here,
honey!

A collective GROAN and one TITTER from a very small audience.

Close up, Walter, in his early 20s, sags in his seat,
embarrassed for his old man.

BACK IN THE PRESENT

Walter looks sad with the memory.

WALTER

It was hard enough watching him
bomb on stage.

Time is crestfallen. Walter reconsiders.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Well...I am on duty, but I don't
know why I couldn't swing by there
to make sure they aren't in
violation of any ordinances.

Tim lights up.

TIM

Wow, that would be great, Captain!
But you can't be too late. Buster
keeps us on a pretty tight
schedule, won't let anyone run over
much.

WALTER

I'll do my best, lad.

Walter salutes the pair.

WALTER (CONT'D)

I'll let you two get back to your
important work.

Walter leaves as Nick grins and rolls his eyes at Tim.

INT. TIM'S CAR - NIGHT

Tim drives his beat-up old Mustang down a city street.

His smaller suitcase is in the back, his larger one on the
shotgun seat. Tim looks down at the case beside him. Taps it
lightly with one hand.

TIM

Are you ready?

Tim slows for a traffic light, stops. He licks his lips, his
eyes wide with anticipation. He SLAPS both hands down on the
wheel, hard, then stares at the suitcase.

TIM (CONT'D)
(almost shouting)
I said, are you ready?

EXT. CITY STREET - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Tim's guns his car, PEELING TIRES through the intersection when the light changes.

INT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - NIGHT

Tim is on stage in his usual seat, suitcases to his side. He takes Belinda out first, smooths down her dress, pats her hair in place and puts her on his knee.

AT THE BAR

Darwin and Clara watch glumly. Buster leans on a stool next to Darwin, looking resigned to another bad outing.

Mitzi pulls up a bar stool, clearly exasperated with the crowd.

MITZI
Poor Tim. I could fart louder than
the laughs coming tonight.

IN FRONT OF THEM ON STAGE

Vetch squats on Tim's other knee. His eyes POP open!

VETCH
(snarls loudly)
Hiya, Kid!

Buster rolls his eyes, it's samo, samo.

ON STAGE

TIM
How are you tonight, Mr. Vetch?

VETCH
Still dodging the graveyard.
(beat)
Speaking of graveyards, did you
shower today?

Tim SPUTTERS in protest, then Belinda MOANS.

BELINDA

Eew! Do you always have to be so gross and nasty? I'm fed up hearing your insults.

Belinda casts sympathetic eyes on Tim, leans into him slightly.

BELINDA (CONT'D)

I know poor Tim is.

Vetch rocks forward on Tim's knee, his face only a foot from Belinda's.

VETCH

You little bitch. You need to mind your own bee's wax. And let this wimp here grow up! If he doesn't like what I have to say, he should do something about it.

Tim is literally caught in the middle.

TIM

Come on, Mr. Vetch, there's no need for -

VETCH

You idiot. Can't you see she's got the hots for you? She thinks you need protecting.

BELINDA

I do not have the "hots" for anyone, you dirty old...dummy!
(to Tim)

Tim, can we please put him away tonight? Please?

TIM

Well, I -

VETCH

Put me away? I'll be goddammed if you are gonna do that.

No laughter from the audience, but they are mesmerized by the scene playing out in front of them.

Darwin and Buster gape at the act, stunned.

BUSTER

What the fuck is he doing?

ON STAGE

Vetch points a hand at Belinda.

VETCH

You either shut that worthless
bitch up or I won't speak another
word.

TIM

Come on, Mr. Vetch. You can't be
serious.

Vetch glares at Tim, his mouth clamped shut, then turns to
look out over the heads of the audience.

TIM (CONT'D)

Please, be reasonable.

Vetch twitches his head slightly, says nothing.

Tim turns to Belinda.

TIM (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry, sweetie. I'm gonna
put you away for a little while.

Belinda rocks back and forth violently on Tim's knee, in deep
distress.

BELINDA

No!

Tim starts to lift her gently out of his lap.

BELINDA (CONT'D)

(shrieks)

No. No please! Noooo-

Belinda's voice cuts off suddenly when Tim removes his hand
from her back.

Tim plops her into her case and snaps it shut, while Vetch
grins gleefully.

AT THE BAR,

Clara leans over the bar counter between Buster and Darwin as
Vetch CACKLES wildly in the background.

MITZI

Wow. That's quite an act.

Darwin scans what there is of an audience.

DARWIN

Yeah. Not exactly comedy, but it's got everyone's attention.

At that moment, Walter Rogers strides into the bar area. He still has police uniform on.

Buster becomes immediately defensive.

BUSTER

I don't care what the landlord said, I never threatened her about the mice.

WALTER

That so?

Buster squirms. Walter LAUGHS and points to the stage.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Relax. I'm only here to see my young friend Tim Vorpel perform.

BUSTER

Well, he's doing that, for sure.

ON STAGE

Its just Tim and Vetch.

VETCH

It's about time you started listening to me.

TIM

Obviously, you've got something in mind for the act.

VETCH

Indeed I do. How about a volley of fat jokes.

TIM

Ah...I'm not so sure...

Vetch points to a PORTLY WOMAN in her 50s sitting with her balding HUSBAND near the stage.

VETCH

In fact, I see our first fat joke spread out on a seat right there!

Tim raises his free hand in protest.

The woman puckers up, hurt. He husband's mouth drops open in shocked surprise.

VETCH (CONT'D)
(to the audience)
Now, tell me that isn't a fat joke,
ladies and gentlemen.

The portly woman grabs her purse, SPUTTERS angrily.

Her husband lurches up from his chair, his eyes glitter with anger.

HUSBAND
(to Tim)
What the hell do you think you are
doing?

Vetch leans forward on Tim's leg.

VETCH
Your beef's with me, baldy.

The fuming husband swings around the side of his table and takes several threatening steps toward the edge of the stage.

AT THE BAR,

Darwin is flabbergasted. Buster shakes his head, eyes on the floor. Walter looks real worried. He rises to stand.

OUT IN FRONT OF THEM,

Tim tries to cover Mr. Vetch's mouth with his free hand.

TIM
I'm so sorry, sir. And madam. I can
assure you these aren't my
sentiments.

The husband watches his wife trot for the front exit in tears. He turns back to Tim, his face crimson red. He SLAMS his hands down hard on the edge of the stage!

HUSBAND
Cut the act, you cruel bastard.

VETCH
Oooo...temper, temper!

HUSBAND
One more nasty word out of that
dummy's mouth and I'm gonna tear
both your heads off!

Vetch bats his eyes innocently. Tim motions desperately for Vetch to keep quiet.

In the background, Walter has walked half-way up the aisle toward the stage, concerned.

VETCH

(to the husband)

Well, sir. Let me try something nice. That certainly is a lovely scalp shine you've got going on there. Bet it gets the fat girls quivering. I'll bet that jelly -

Tim CLAMPS his hand over Mr. Vetch's mouth as the Husband HOWLS in rage! He struggles to clamber up over the edge of the stage to get at Tim.

Walter grabs him from behind, pulling him back down.

WALTER

Sir! Calm down. It's just an act.

The husband is ready to fight, but when he spins around to see Walter in uniform, he drops his fists. But he's still plenty pissed.

HUSBAND

You call this an act, officer? It's abusive! He humiliated my wife! If he was on the street -

WALTER

Well, he's not. He's on the stage. And as long as he's restricting his comments to times when he is, you really have no recourse. Except to leave, of course.

Vetch squirms in Tim's hands, tries to hurl muffled invectives through his covered mouth.

WALTER (CONT'D)

(to Tim)

Cool it for a minute, Tim.

Vetch slumps. Tim uncovers Vetch's maw, nods an "OK" to Walter.

The husband stares daggers at Tim and Vetch.

HUSBAND

I'm leaving, all right.

Husband points a menacing finger at Tim.

HUSBAND (CONT'D)
But if I see you around town...

WALTER
Careful, sir. Issuing a physical
threat could get you arrested.

HUSBAND
Oh, he'll get what he's got coming.
It may not be me, but if that's his
act, someone's gonna rain hard on
him pretty damn soon.

Husband turns back to glare at Tim.

HUSBAND (CONT'D)
Mark my words, freak.

The husband shoves his way around Walter and stalks out.
Walter looks hard at Tim, then returns to the Bar. MUTTERING
and WHISPERING emanate from the stunned crowd.

Suddenly, Vetch CLEARS HIS THROAT!

VETCH
How about the rest of you
snowflakes. Can you take it? Or
have you had enough?

For a second, you could hear a pin drop. Then, a young
JAPANESE MAN in a group near the back LAUGHS.

JAPANESE MAN
No. Pretty funny!

After a few more seconds of silence, a slowly building chorus
of agreement from the rest of the patrons! Then applause!

Vetch grins up at Tim, who shrugs his shoulders in amazement.

The act continues as Walter walks to the entrance, turns to
look back at Tim on stage. He frowns, then exits.

LATER AT THE BAR,

Buster sits with Tim and Darwin at the bar's corner. He
shuffles some paperwork into a neat pile.

BUSTER
OK, fellahs. We're good to go for
another month.

Buster squints his eyes at Tim.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
I'd say good job, but that wouldn't quite capture it. Strange job with good results.

Buster claps a hand down on Tim's shoulder.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Let's keep it up.

Buster struggles off of his stool.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Catch you boys tomorrow.

Darwin watches Buster waddle away.

DARWIN
There's the real fat joke. But I wouldn't aim Mr. Vetch at him. For a guy that owns a comedy club, he's got no sense of humor.

TIM
But the show was a success, wasn't it, Darwin? No one else left, and even a few hoots and hollars at the end.

DARWIN
People love to see other people getting roasted. Human nature, I guess. Or we've got more Nazi in us than we'd like to admit.

TIM
That's not a bad line. Mind if Mr. Vetch borrows it?

Darwin regards Tim skeptically.

DARWIN
You're ready to take some chances, aren't you? Just be careful up there. It's a PC time. Lot's of pent up rage about what's right and wrong.

Tim looks away.

TIM
We'll do what it takes to succeed.

DARWIN

We?

Tim hesitates, not catching Darwin's drift for a second.

TIM

Oh. I meant me, of course.

DARWIN

You sure you're OK? Not falling too far into your characters? I mean, its happened to some of the best...

Tim rises to go.

TIM

I'm fine.

Tim hoists up his suitcases.

DARWIN

And Melissa's fine with it?

Tim scowls.

TIM

We are both fine...thanks.

Tim spins toward the exit. Darwin watches him go, shakes his head slightly in disagreement.

INT. TIM'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Tim grins like the cat that swallowed the canary as he walks down the hall toward his apartment.

He lifts one of his suitcases up near his face, winks at it..

TIM

You did a great job tonight, Mr. Vetch! I think we've found our niche.

Ahead, in the hallway, his elderly neighbor MR. JULIAN has his keys out to enter his own apartment. He watches Tim with some amazement.

Tim WHISTLES cheerfully as he nears Mr. Julian.

MR. JULIAN

You OK, fella? What ya talkin' to in there?

TIM
Not to worry sir! It's my wee, wee
buddy, Mr. Vetch. He's gonna make
me very famous.

Tim strides on by towards his own apartment door down the
hall.

MR. JULIAN
(mutters to himself)
Your wee-wee buddy? Gloria will
love this.

He shakes his head in wonderment as Tim strolls happily away.

EXT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Melissa perches on the couch, facing a small fire in the
fireplace. It's a cold night out there.

To one side, The TV plays softly.

O.C., a key scrapes into a lock at the front door.

Tim enters energetically, toting his suitcases. He's all
smiles. He dumps the suitcases down, holds out his arms for a
hug.

TIM
Congratulations are in order!

Melissa stands, Tim strides to her, scoops her up in his
arms.

Melissa's LAUGH is a question.

TIM (CONT'D)
Mr. Vetch was a big hit!

Melissa holds his eyes a minute.

MELISSA
You mean, YOU were a big hit?

Tim drops his embrace, turns to flop on the couch.

TIM
Sure. I was a big hit. The new
routine had them begging for more.

Melissa sits down next to him.

MELISSA

You never told me what it was about.

TIM

Ha! Not much to tell, really. Mr. Vetch just picks out someone in the audience and goes Don Rickles on them.

MELISSA

Don Rickles?

TIM

An old-time comedian. His schtick was insulting members of the audience.

Melissa is concerned.

MELISSA

You're sure that's a good idea? Won't people get mad at you?

TIM

If I do it right, people blame Mr. Vetch, not me.

Melissa isn't sold yet.

MELISSA

What about your Belinda puppet?

Tim folds his arms across his chest, defensive.

TIM

I put her away tonight. It was just me and Mr. Vetch.

MELISSA

Tim, the way you talk worries me. It's always only just you.

TIM

(sharply)

I know that.

(beat)

Can't you just be happy for me? For us?

Melissa relents.

MELISSA

Sure. Great! So, you are still
going to be working at Buster's?

Tim rubs his hands together gleefully.

TIM

Another month! Minimum! And I gotta
feeling we are going to stay hot
with this act.

Melissa winces when Tim says "we" again, but says nothing.

Tim SLAPS his hands down on his knees.

TIM (CONT'D)

Well. Let me put my gear away, then
we can celebrate. Meet you in the
boudoir.

Tim rises to gather his suitcases, picks them up.

TIM (CONT'D)

Back in a flash, babe.

Melissa watches Tim stride out of the room. As he exits, her
smile freezes into a grimace.

INT. APARTMENT - OFFICE - NIGHT

Tim places Mr. Vetch and Belinda in chairs across from him.
He looks them both over carefully.

Very deliberately, he rises, first takes Belinda and slips
his hand up her back, and then does the same with Mr. Vetch.

He sits down in the center chair with them on his lap. He
looks back and forth between them, and their heads and eyes
follow his movements.

TIM

So. Do the two of you think we can
work this act out together?

INT. APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Melissa is dressed in a sexy nighty. She sits on the back on
the bed, leans against a large pillow, a book open in front
of her. Suddenly, her head and eyes snap up. What's that she
hears?

O.C. Tim's muffled VOICE, alternating with Mr. Vetch's and Belinda's can barely be heard, as they talk in relative whispers.

She GASPS when she hears Mr. Vetch say "bitch" in a loud, angry tone.

MELISSA
(shouts)
Tim!

Silence.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
(shouts louder)
Tim!

TIM (O.C.)
What?

MELISSA
Please put those damn puppets away
and come to bed!

The murmur of voices continues. Melissa is getting pissed. She kicks off her covers and tiptoes out of the room.

OUTSIDE THE STUDY DOOR,

The voices get louder, and Melissa can almost make them out. She puts her head against the study door and the words become clear.

TIM (O.C.)
Alright, alright, Mr. Vetch. Let's
hear from Belinda.

BELINDA (O.C.)
I think she has a point. You maybe
are spending too much time with us.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Tim has Vetch and Belinda on his arms.

VETCH
Nonsense. We'll never get this act
perfected without lots of practice.
(to Tim)
Practice makes perfect, right kid?

TIM
Well, I -

BELINDA
(interrupts)
Is it worth your relationship?

Vetch leans forward, menacing Belinda while Tim looks lost.

VETCH
(to Belinda)
That depends on which bitch we are
talking about.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - HALLWAY -
CONTINUOUS

Melissa can't believe her ears. She throws open the office
door to confront Tim.

MELISSA
How dare you talk about me that
way? I'm a bitch now, am I?

Tim has both dummies look at Melissa with blank faces.

TIM
No! No, I didn't mean it like that.
It's just keeping Mr. Vetch in
character, for the act.

MELISSA
You are hone now. You've got to
separate this act from the rest of
your life, Tim. You are losing it!

Melissa spins out, SLAMMING the door shut behind her. Tim
looks sadly at Mr. Vetch, SIGHS, and begins removing the
puppets from his arms.

INT. HOSPITAL LUNCH ROOM - DAY

MELISSA

Melissa sits with another nurse, MAUDE MORGAN, black,
matronly, in her 40s. Both are in uniform. They converse
across from each other at a lunch table.

Cafeteria trays sit in front of them. Maude's is nearly empty
but Melissa has hardly touched her lunch.

MAUDE
I don't know, sweetie. It sure
doesn't sound good.
(MORE)

MAUDE (CONT'D)

Have you tried to get him to, you know, see someone?

MELISSA

Whenever I bring up his mental health, he accuses me of not wanting him to be successful. To the point of paranoia. I think he has forgotten those puppets aren't real.

MAUDE

Is there anyone else he might listen to? A parent, a sibling?

MELISSA

I guess I could talk to his parents. I know his dad thinks he's wasted years of his life trying to make it as an entertainer.

(beat)

And he might be right. But Tim almost automatically rejects anything he has to say...

Melissa thinks deeply, then raises her head.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

There just might be someone.

Melissa digs for her cell phone, starts to rise.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

I'll see you back on the unit, Maude. I'm going to make a quick call outside.

MAUDE

Sure.

Maude watches Melissa's retreating back with real concern.

EXT. HOSPITAL - OUTSIDE BREAK AREA - DAY

A few smokers huff down vapes in the cold afternoon. Melissa, with cell phone to ear, moves away from them into an isolated corner.

MELISSA

Hello, Darwin. It's me.

INT. WAREHOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Darwin sits at a small desk at his day job as a warehouse manager, holding a cell phone. He wears a hard hat. A large open warehouse looms behind him. A forklift RUMBLES by in the background.

DARWIN

Melissa! Wow. Nice to hear from you. You haven't called me in like four months. Not since you asked me to help Tim out, for old times sake.

INTERCUT MELISSA/DARWIN

Melissa shivers in the cold, stands apart from the others taking smoke breaks.

MELISSA

In know, I'm sorry. I just didn't feel, you know -

Darwin cups his phone to hear her better.

DARWIN

No. Hey, don't apologize. It's just good to hear your voice.

ON THE PHONE, Melissa starts to weep softly.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

Damn. What's wrong?

A tear runs down her cheek.

MELISSA

Darwin, I think I made a mistake encouraging Tim and his act. He's gone like way overboard. I mean, you surely notice how wrapped up he's gotten in those puppets?

DARWIN

Really. I thought he was doing great with his act's new found success.

MELISSA (O.C.)

He's not doing great.
Not great at all.

Melissa cries harder.

DARWIN
Yeah, OK. Sure! Meet me at
Starbucks at 5:30. Will that work?

Melissa wipes her eyes with a sleeve.

MELISSA
Thanks, Darwin. But can you just
stop by my place for a few minutes?
I want to meet early before Tim
gets back. I need some help
figuring out what to say to him.

DARWIN (O.C.)
Our old place, you mean?

MELISSA
I'm still there.

DARWIN
You got it. See you at 5:30.

Darwin listens to Melissa hang up. He regards his phone
thoughtfully, then grins, clenches his fist and executes a
victory salute.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - DAY

Melissa paces the living room, wringing her hands.

The DOORBELL RINGS. She rushes to open it. Darwin fills the
frame. He holds a University of North Carolina ball cap in
his hand.

DARWIN
Hi.

Melissa looks behind him to make sure no one is watching,
waves him inside, shuts the door.

Once fully inside, Melissa smiles at Darwin, nostalgic about
their past.

MELISSA
Dar, thanks for coming.

Melissa indicates the couch.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
Sit down. Do you want something to
drink?

DARWIN
You got beer?

MELISSA
I almost forgot. You're a beer
lover. We might have some in the
back of the fridge.

DARWIN
From a year ago?

Melissa shrugs an "I don't know", then leaves for the kitchen.

Darwin scans the room, scowls at a picture on a side table of Melissa and Tim embracing. Melissa returns, offers Darwin his beer, sits down next to him on the couch.

Darwin drops his cap on a side table. After a moment's uncomfortable silence...

DARWIN (CONT'D)
So. About Tim.

MELISSA
I'm really worried, Dar. He's
gotten so wrapped up in those
damned...dummies. He spends more
time talking to them in that back
room than he does with me.

DARWIN
It's part of the life, Mel. If
you're gonna make it in show biz,
you have to give it your all. He's
doing what he has to do to make it.

MELISSA
This is a whole lot more than his
all. He's impossible to talk to!
Even being around him is beginning
to scare me.

As they continue to talk, the view leaves them, circles down the hall and into the

OFFICE

Where dummies Vetch and Belinda are perched in chairs. Belinda has her eyes closed but Vetch's head is turned in the direction of the door and his eyes are wide open!

Otherwise, the dummies are completely still.

BACK IN THE LIVING ROOM

Darwin slugs down the rest of his beer. He's inched a bit closer to Melissa, who is softly weeping. He puts a tentative arm around her shoulder to comfort her, and she leans her head down onto his shoulder.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Oh, Dar. I don't know how I got into such a mess. I really wanted the best for him, but maybe I've just made it worse by encouraging him for so long.

DARWIN

You can get out of it, you know.

Darwin swallows back emotions.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

I'm still here for you, if you need me.

Melissa looks deeply in Darwin's eyes.

MELISSA

That's good to know. But I don't want to kick Tim when he's down. He thinks his act is just getting off the ground. Is it, Dar?

DARWIN

He's concentrating on the dummy he calls Mr. Vetch. The act is getting pretty foul, believe me. He's insulted audience members with Vetch, and wants to make it a regular part of his routine. In fact, I think he plans to step it up even more.

MELISSA

Won't he alienate everyone?

DARWIN

I don't know. Last night, it seemed like everyone that wasn't in Vetch's line of fire loved the routine!

Melissa clenches her teeth.

MELISSA

I hate that damn puppet. He was fine just working with the other one. But when he found that Vetch ...thing last summer, he got consumed by the act.

BACK IN THE OFFICE

CLOSE UP on Vetch's face! Is it set at a slightly different angle?

CLOSER STILL his eyes glitter with what might be reflected sunlight through the office window.

BACK IN THE LIVING ROOM

Darwin and Melissa embrace. At first the hug is comforting, but Darwin begins gently caressing Melissa's back.

She pulls away slightly, looks up into his eyes. After a second, they lean into each other.

Will they kiss?

INT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - NIGHT

ON STAGE

Vetch harangues another audience member, AUGUSTUS BILLUPS, a slightly built, bespectacled black dude in his 30s, who sits with a younger, MIXED-RACE WOMAN who appears way out of his league.

VETCH

So, I figure you must have a really well paying job, right, dude?

Vetch ogles Augustus's date.

VETCH (CONT'D)

I mean, hey, I don't often see something as fine as that squeeze with a four-eyed, stick-figure nerd!

Augustus tries to go along with the joke.

AUGUSTUS

Yeah, you're right. And that's no squeeze, as you so crudely put it. She's my fiancée.

Vetch recoils in faux disbelief.

VETCH
(to the woman)
Honey, you have to be catching some
side-beef.

Augustus's fiancée is aghast. His smile evaporates into a disapproving scowl.

AT THE BAR

Darwin and Buster watch, stunned.

OUT FRONT

Augustus stands next to his table, finger pointing at Tim.

AUGUSTUS
You know, that's crossing the line.
It isn't funny. Just disrespectful.

Vetch turns to face Tim.

VETCH
Oooo, I think I've hit this nerd's
sore spot!

Vetch turns back to lustily scan Augustus's fiancée's body.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Hey, I can relate, nerd.
(to Augustus)
I'd be running scared too.
Especially with all those big randy
bucks out there.

I few SNICKERS from the mesmerized audience. Augustus takes his fiancée by the arm.

AUGUSTUS
We're leaving. She doesn't need to
hear this sexist, racist bullshit
you call humor.

Augustus points a threatening finger at Tim.

AUGUSTUS (CONT'D)
But I'll be back! Let's see how
well your audience reacts to me
calling you out every night. And my
names not nerd. It's Augustus
Billups.

(MORE)

AUGUSTUS (CONT'D)
 You're gonna remember that. I'll be
 the nerd that killed your act.

Vetch grins at the couple's backs as they leave.

VETCH
 Augustus, the injured wuss. See ya,
 sweethearts.

Vetch scans the crowd.

VETCH (CONT'D)
 Now, who else wants to banter?

AT THE BAR

Buster looks worried.

OUT FRONT

Vetch looks back at Tim.

VETCH (CONT'D)
 I don't really blame him.
 Infidelity is a painful
 subject...right, kid? I mean, YOU
 know what I mean...

Tim looks at Vetch, baffled.

Vetch leers out at the audience.

VETCH (CONT'D)
 They say you're the last to know.

The audience LAUGHS as Tim stares at Vetch, as if in
 disbelief.

AT THE BAR

Darwin can't believe his ears. How could Tim know anything
 about him and Melissa?

BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Belinda lies in her case at Tim's feet. Vetch is still
 attached to Tim's arm.

VETCH
 You think that idiot will come
 back? He threatened to ruin us.

TIM

No, I don't think so. He'll get over it.

VETCH

Yeah. But what if he doesn't? I mean, we gotta great thing going here, kid. He could fuck it all up.

Tim starts to remove Vetch from his arm. As he's about to pull Vetch free...

VETCH (CONT'D)

We might have to do something. I think -

Vetch stops speaking abruptly when Tim's arm pops out of his torso. Tim looks long and hard at his puppet, thinking.

BUSTER GUTTS COMEDY ZONE - BAR

Darwin stops Buster as he walks past his bar stool.

DARWIN

Buster, don't you think Tim is getting a bit out of control? I mean, he's really starting to piss people off. I'm worried. Maybe, maybe you should tell him to tone it down?

Buster chuffs.

BUSTER

Man. Don't believe so. This stuff is saving what was a very sorry act. You trying to talk yourself out of an agent's cut?

Buster takes a step away.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

I'm not stifling him now, man. He's filling the house up every night.

Buster claps an arm down on Darwin's shoulder.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

Relax. It's just an act.

Buster walks off grinning, shaking his head, while Darwin mulls over his options.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Tim walks into the living room, hears sounds from the kitchen. He heads to his office, dumps his dummy cases on the floor. He unsnaps Vetch's case, opens it.

FROM THE KITCHEN

Melissa hollers.

MELISSA (O.C.)
Tim, you home? You want a beer?

TIM
(loudly)
Sure!

Tim strolls into the living room, but freezes when he spots Darwin's cap on the table. He scowls deeply, sits down in a chair next to the couch, stares at the cap.

MELISSA (O.C.)
Tim, are you out there now?

Tim hesitates, still glaring at the cap.

TIM.
Yeah. Sure am.

Melissa enters the room with two beers in hand. She passes one to Tim, and sits down on the couch kitty-corner to him. She follows his eyes to the cap, swallows hard.

MELISSA
Darwin dropped by earlier. He forgot his cap.

TIM
Dropped by? What was the occasion?

Melissa clenches her beer can, afraid to go on. She forces herself to meet Tim's eyes.

MELISSA
I'm sorry, Tim. I just needed someone to talk to.

TIM
About me, you mean.

Melissa hates where this is going.

MELISSA

Tim...I'm worried. Worried to death actually.

TIM

Worried about me?

MELISSA

You and those...

(she nods in the direction
of the office)

Damn puppets! I mean, they are taking over your life, Tim. Our lives. You spend more time talking to that old one than you do to me.

TIM

I've told you. It's just practice! Do you have any idea how difficult it is to do what I do? To get the act perfect?

MELISSA

I think, I think I do, actually. So difficult it is really wearing you down. And getting in the way.

Tim starts to really heat up.

TIM

Get in the way of what, exactly?

Melissa's eyes fill with tears.

MELISSA

In every way, Tim. We aren't talking, we aren't doing anything together, we aren't...

TIM

So that's why Darwin was here? To fill in that last blank?

MELISSA

No! Nothing like that happened.

Tim looks away, disbelieving.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Please, Tim. Let's get some counseling. We can go together. Not just for you. Both of us.

TIM

I need counseling now that my act is working? You didn't think I needed any when I was floundering, when I was down.

Tim tosses down the rest of his beer, angrily crumples the can in his hand.

TIM (CONT'D)

I think you like me better when I'm weak. I think you want me to fail.

Melissa rages through the tears.

MELISSA

That's not true! You, you are losing your damn reality contact and don't realize it.

Tim goes dead cold. He rises from his chair slowly, stalks to the door, grabs his coat from the rack and stomps out.

Melissa SOBS into her hands.

In the back office, Vetch lies face up in his open case, a smile on his face.

EXT. STREETS OUTSIDE TIM'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Tim strides through the parking lot, mumbling to himself.

A WOMAN getting off of work observes him through her windshield. He's lost to the world. She shakes her head in amazement.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - AN HOUR LATER - NIGHT

Tim comes back inside, slips off his coat, hangs it up.

All is quiet. Tim starts for the bedroom, but changes course to head toward the office.

INSIDE THE OFFICE

Tim stands over Vetch's open case, watching him. He starts to close the case, hesitates.

He looks in the direction of the bedroom, then back at Vetch. After a second, he takes Vetch out, sits down and places Vetch on his knee. He removes Belinda from her case, and places her to his other side.

Tim looks sadly at Vetch.

TIM
Mr. Vetch. What should we do?

BELINDA
We need to change the act. Bring me
into it more. Less of his
nastiness.

VETCH
He was asking me, bitch.

BELINDA
(to Tim)
If you keep listening to him, he's
gonna ruin you.

VETCH
Ruin you, you mean, you selfish
slut.

Vetch's head swivels to face Tim squarely, his grin gone.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Put her away. You and I can figure
this out without her interference.

Vetch leans across Tim's lap to snarl in Belinda's face.

VETCH (CONT'D)
And I'll take care of this whining
whelp myself.

Tim regards Belinda sadly.

BELINDA
No, Tim! Please listen to -

Tim suddenly rips Belinda off of his arm, tosses her into a
corner. He sits, shaking and sweating. Vetch smiles.

VETCH
OK. Good show, kid. Now, let's
talk.

EXT. OUTSIDE BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - ONE MONTH LATER -
NIGHT

The Marque now lists VORPEL the VOICE as the main act!

INT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - NIGHT

Tim and Vetch are holding forth before a generally well-dressed, upscale, full-house crowd. Belinda is not with them. Buster, Mitzi and Darwin watch from the bar.

The crowd LAUGHS LOUDLY in response to an insult hurled by Vetch.

MITZI

The dummy insults the audience and he's hilarious. I do it, and I'm a bitch. What a game.

At a table near the back, TWO COUPLES sit, three of them LAUGHING hard, but one YOUNG WOMAN, late 20's, wearing a nose ring, frowns. She turns to her three companions.

YOUNG WOMAN

Do you guys really think that's funny? I find it kind of disrespectful.

Her FEMALE TABLE MATE, around the same age, sneers in her direction.

FEMALE TABLE MATE

Come on, toughen up. Nothing should be sacred when it comes to humor.

YOUNG WOMAN

I'm not sure I'd call this -

The front door to the club BANGS OPEN and Augustus Billups marches in! He strides up the center aisle toward the stage as the crowd hushes around him. Augustus squares off ten feet from Tim with his arms folded defiantly.

AUGUSTUS

(to the crowd)

This man thinks hurling racial and sexist insults at people is funny.

Vetch checks his own torso, then looks up and down Augustus's body.

VETCH

I'm not sure either of us is fully a man, dude.

Murmuring and a few CHUCKLES from the crowd. Augustus's face clinches with rage as he glares up at Tim.

AUGUSTUS
 (over his shoulder to the
 audience)
 I'm sure you've heard him do it
 tonight, and he just did it again.
 Yet here you all still sit.

Augustine turns around to sweep the crowd with accusing eyes,

AUGUSTUS (CONT'D)
 Do you really feel it's right to be
 supporting him? Laughing at his put-
 downs? Encouraging even more people
 to support this bullshit?

Tim looks worried. Vetch scowls deeply. He looks back and
 forth between Tim and Augustus.

AT THE BAR

BUSTER
 (to Darwin and himself)
 Oh, shit, man. This idiot shows
 back up after a month. What do I
 do? This is my headline act now!

BACK OUT FRONT

PEOPLE shuffle nervously in their seats. A few make to leave.

AUGUSTUS
 Show us who you really are, people.

VETCH
 (to Tim)
 Are you gonna let this clown fuck
 up our act? Do something!

Tim sweats bullets.

TIM
 I...I...,

VETCH
 Good God, boy, show some balls!

Tim swallows hard.

TIM
 (calls out to Buster)
 Buster? I think we need security up
 here.

AT THE BAR

Buster puts his head in his hand.

BUSTER

Fuck.

Buster raises a hand to placate the situation as he takes a few steps into the audience area.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

(to Augustus)

Sir. Please, don't make me call security. You didn't pay to get in here and you are disrupting our program. You have to leave.

AUGUSTUS

And if I don't?

BUSTER

I'll call the cops. At the very least, you'll be arrested for trespassing.

Augustus scratches his chin, in faux consideration.

AUGUSTUS

Tell you what.

Augustus glares malevolently up at Tim.

AUGUSTUS (CONT'D)

I'm gonna leave tonight. But, I'll be back real soon with a bunch of my friends, and we will pay to get in. Then, we are gonna close this bitch down.

Augustus strides past Buster, but spins to throw Tim the bird.

AUGUSTUS (CONT'D)

We'll see you two racist dummies real soon.

LATER, AT THE BAR,

Buster is huddled with Tim at one corner. He is dead serious. Darwin sits nearby, tuned in.

BUSTER

Listen, brother, I know it is just your act, like you say, but this turkey is gonna try and close me down.

(MORE)

BUSTER (CONT'D)
And if I close, of course you
close. You gotta find a way to make
this right with him.

TIM
(perfectly mimics Buster's
voice)
Make it right with him.
(with his own voice)
How do you propose I do that, boss?

Buster recoils, shocked at Tim's ability to sound just like
him.

BUSTER
Christ, man!

Buster takes a swig of his drink.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
There's no denying you've got some
weird talents, man. But it won't
matter if you don't fix this.

TIM
OK, OK. But seriously, how do I do
that?

BUSTER
I remember his name from the first
time he was here. Augustus fucking
Billups. There can't be too many
Augustus Billups in this town.
Check the phone book, Facebook,
Twitter, see if you can find him.
Leave him an apology. Better yet,
apologize to him in person.

TIM
(to himself)
Mr. Vetch won't like that.

Neither Darwin nor Buster can believe their ears.

BUSTER
What? You're fucking kidding me,
right?

TIM
Oh. Sorry. It's hard for me to
switch off the act sometimes.

Buster shakes his head in disgust.

BUSTER

Dude, get yourself together. This is something you have to do. We're closed tomorrow so that gives you two days to find him, make it right. If he shows back up here again with a crowd, we are screwed. That kind of conflict is likely to bring the cops. Even worse, the press.

TIM

I thought all press was good press.

BUSTER

Not in this hyper-PC environment. Find him. Talk to him. Make it right.

(looks over at Darwin)

You tell him.

DARWIN

He's right, Tim. Negative attention could screw up a great thing.

TIM

Okay, okay. I'll try and track him down. Crap, I'm on for a shift at the evidence room tomorrow.

Buster heaves his bulky butt off the bar stool.

BUSTER

You'd better find the time to do more than try, for all our sakes.

Buster shakes his head in exasperation as he passes Tim on his way out. As Tim watches Buster's retreating form, his face fills with anxiety. He swallows his fear, heads back toward the dressing room.

INT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - DRESSING ROOM

Tim sits at a make-up table, Vetch on his arm. He uses his free hand to key to execute searches on his laptop.

A Facebook page appears. It is Augustus's.

VETCH

You found the bastard!

TIM

Yeah, but if I write him, how will I know if he accepts my apology? Buster wants me to talk to him personally.

VETCH

Check this fool's personal information.

Tim scrolls down the Facebook page. Augustus has listed his workplace! He works as a disc jockey for WOKE radio.

TIM

Oh, no! He's a DJ at a radio station. That could be really bad if he starts trashing me and the club on air.

VETCH

He won't. Not yet, at least. It would be slander. But after he's had half dozen witnesses with him at the club, he might take that chance.

TIM

It says here he spins discs through the swing shift, from 11AM to 7PM. The station's not far from here. He must be coming to Buster's straight from work.

Tim and Vetch exchange a long look.

VETCH

We wait for him at the station. Talk to him after work.

TIM

He'll probably just walk away.

Vetch reconsiders.

VETCH

OK, then. We go to his home. Talk to him there.

TIM

He probably won't answer his door when he sees us coming.

Vetch's eyes appear to glitter in the light.

VETCH

Tomorrow, we follow him home, see where he lives. The next day, we wait for him there.

TIM

At the front door?

Vetch leans in close to Tim's face.

VETCH

Inside. We give him no choice but to listen.

TIM

Jesus, Vetch. That'll freak him out! Make him even madder at us. Maybe I should just forget this, tone down the act...

VETCH

Forget the act? You're kidding, right? We are packing them in, kid. We're on our way to the big time.

Vetch leans in close to Tim.

VETCH (CONT'D)

And if he's pissed, well, that's his problem. We give him a choice. If he gets home by 7:30 we can make our 8:45 time at the club easy. Tell him he shuts up or else.

Tim startles.

TIM

Else? Else what?

VETCH

This is our career here, you idiot. Our one shot at fame. We do what we have to do, that's what else.

From above, Tim rocks with worry as Vetch glares at him.

EXT. BUSTER GUTT'S - OUTSIDE OF FRONT ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Darwin huddles just outside the door of Buster's on a drizzly night as a few of the last customers trickle out. He has his cell phone cupped in his hand to muffle the sound.

As he talks, he attempts to disguise the glee he feels.

DARWIN

No, Mel, really. It was bad! A black guy got so mad he threatened to come back and close down the whole club. Tim is totally out of control.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Melissa is curled up on the couch, cell in hand, freaked out.

MELISSA

What am I going to do? He's totally losing it, but doesn't think he has a problem. He thinks I'm jealous of his success.

INTERCUT MELISSA/DARWIN

Darwin smiles slyly to himself, then adopts a serious demeanor.

DARWIN

Mel, I mean this. Not just for me. But you have to put some distance between you and him. Who knows how unhinged he could get.

MELISSA

Do you really think so? There's a risk? But this is my place. I'd have to kick him out!

DARWIN

He can always go back to living in his parents basement.

MELISSA

Come on, Dar, that's a bit harsh.

DARWIN

That's where he was when you two got together, right?

Melissa starts to SOB.

MELISSA

Dar, I'm so sorry. I think I'm sorry we broke up. I made a mistake.

Darwin smiles to himself again, liking what he hears.

DARWIN

Listen, talk to him, get the process started. I can come over there night after tomorrow. He'll be at the club. We can figure out how to go forward.

Melissa bites her nails, worried.

MELISSA

I'm just not sure how he'll take it.

(pause)

But OK, come over Friday night and we'll talk. He usually heads straight to the club from his work. And he's off tomorrow night. I'll have time to talk to him.

DARWIN

Great. Stay strong. Call me if there's a problem. I'll see you Friday.

Darwin ends the call, looks around to make sure no one has heard.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - DAY

Tim and Melissa are at a stand-off conversationally. They glare at each other over a small kitchen table, sipping coffee, not talking.

Melissa has on her nurse's uniform, ready for work. She finally breaks the silence.

MELISSA

I can't help it. That's the way I feel.

She rises from her chair.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

We have to have a heart to heart tonight after work. I don't care if we do it here, or go out to eat somewhere, but we have to talk. Away from those damn dummies.

TIM

I told you. I might have an offer from The Pit over in Chapel Hill.

(MORE)

TIM (CONT'D)

They had a couple of reps come see my act last week and they really dug it. So, I gotta meet with the manager tonight.

Melissa folds her arms, ice cold.

MELISSA

OK. If you aren't back here by eight tonight, don't bother trying to come in. I've had it. You either talk to me, or...

TIM

Come on, Mel. You can't be serious.

Melissa jumps up from her seat and strides out.

MELISSA

(over her shoulder)

Try me.

INT. POLICE STATION - EVIDENCE ROOM - DAY

Tim roams an evidence room aisle, glances back at Nick while he looks for something.

ON A SHELF

at his waist level, Tim spots the set of burglar picks. He checks to see that Nick is occupied, quickly slips the pick set down his trouser pocket.

LATER

Coat in hand, Tim readies to leave work. He passes by Nick sitting at the evidence room window, working a Sudoku puzzle.

TIM

See ya tomorrow, Nick.

As Tim puts his hand on the doorknob, Nick CLEARS HIS THROAT.

NICK

Ah, Tim.

Tim looks back, guilty.

NICK (CONT'D)

I gotta ask ya.

Nick's eyes drop down to Tim's hand in his pocket. Tim gulps down his fear. Was he spotted?

NICK (CONT'D)

Would you mind awfully talking to my nephew Joey soon? He's dead set on becoming a ventriloquist like you. The Captain was over for dinner a few nights ago, and kept talking about how good you were at it. I think Joey got sold.

Tim is relieved, but tries not to show it.

NICK (CONT'D)

So, maybe if you've got a little time over the weekend? He lives just down the street from me. Maybe bring the puppet and show him how it works? He's got a birthday coming up. I'm even thinking about getting him his own doll.

TIM

Sure, man. I could do that. But ventriloquist dummies aren't cheap, you know.

Nick is disappointed. Tim bounces on his heels, ready to go.

TIM (CONT'D)

(speaks in a rush)

No worries. We'll figure out a time that I could come by tomorrow. Show him how it works. But, I gotta run to meet someone. Like now.

NICK

Sure! That's great, Tim. It'll mean a lot to him. And me.

Tim exits in a rush. Nick watches him leave, puzzled a bit by Tim's antsy behavior.

INT. TIM'S CAR - NIGHT

Tim hunkers down in the drivers seat in a dark parking lot, facing the WOKE radio station. He has Vetch placed in the shotgun seat next to him.

Tim nervously checks his watch. It's already 7:15 PM and Augustus still hasn't left the studio.

TIM

(to Vetch)

Shit. He's working late.

(MORE)

TIM (CONT'D)
Melissa's gonna kill me if I'm not
there soon.

Vetch stares straight ahead at the WOKE sign.

LATER

Tim is sweating. It's 7:45PM and no Augustus. He yanks out his cell phone, fumbles with it, searches for something in his anxious state.

He punches in a phone number, then taps his fingers on the dash impatiently while waiting for an answer. He snaps forward when someone speaks over the phone.

TIM (CONT'D)
Is this WOKE radio?

Tim nods at an apparent affirmative response.

TIM (CONT'D)
I'm a friend of Augustus Billups.
He was supposed to meet me for a
drink tonight. Is he still at work?

Tim rocks nervously in his seat, glancing at Vetch.

TIM (CONT'D)
Oh, he's working late. I see. Nine
PM? OK, thanks.
(pause)
No don't bother to mention my
calling. It's no problem.

Tim clicks off the phone.

TIM (CONT'D)
(to Vetch)
He's covering for another DJ until
Nine. I gotta call Melissa.

Tim punches in Melissa's number. But he gets a BUSY SIGNAL.

LATER

Tim calls Melissa while looking at his watch, which reads just after 9PM. No answer.

TIM (CONT'D)
Christ! I gotta go, I -

At that moment, the front door of WOKE radio station swings open and Augustus strides out. He approaches a car at the curb out front, unlocks it, hops in.

TIM (CONT'D)
(whispers harshly)
There he is.

Augustus pulls away. Tim eases out of the parking lot to follow him from a distance.

EXT. RALEIGH STREETS, DOWNTOWN - NIGHT

Augustus's vehicle crosses a small bridge. A few seconds later, Tim's car follows.

EXT. RALEIGH STREETS, SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

Augustus drives slowly down a sleepy street, houses on each side. He pulls his car into the driveway of an older home.

Tim passes him, and pulls over to the curb two houses down. He looks back over his shoulder to see Augustus at the front door of his home. Augustus inserts a key into the door lock.

VETCH (V.O.)
That door lock looks old. Doable.

BACK IN THE CAR

Tim nods at Vetch, who now has his head turned to face Tim.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Melissa is making herself some cocoa in the kitchen. She looks up at a wall clock that reads 9:55PM.

MELISSA
(to herself)
You're a selfish bastard, Tim.

Her face hardens as she makes a decision.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
Those damn dummies can wait outside
for you tonight. They can keep you
company.

Resolved, Melissa heads out of the kitchen into the apartment

HALLWAY leading to the back rooms. At Tim's office, she opens the door. It's creepy dark inside. From the entrance way, Melissa flips on the light and walks into the

OFFICE, which is in significant disarray, as if a struggle took place. There are items strewn all around the room and one of the practice chairs is tipped over.

There are two dummy cases on the floor in front of the middle chair. Melissa cautiously approaches the larger one, unsnaps its latch and pops it open.

EMPTY!

Tim has taken Vetch with him.

Melissa turns to the smaller case, bends down to examine it. The latch on this one is broken.

Melissa slowly lifts the case's lid.

From the P.O.V. of the case, Melissa jerks back in shock at the scene before her! Belinda has been crushed and torn to pieces! One eye hangs out of its socket and one foot has been torn off and stuffed in Belinda's gaping mouth!

MELISSA (CONT'D)
God, no, Tim! What have you done?

Melissa rushes out of the office, up the

HALLWAY, out to the

FRONT DOOR.

In haste, she locks the door, throws shut the dead bolt, and attaches the chain bolt as well.

Shaking, she returns to the couch and snatches her cell phone up off the coffee table. She frantically dials in a number.

Someone answers.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
Darwin. Thank god you answered. Tim has totally lost it! He's destroyed one of his dummies and hasn't come home tonight. I'm damn scared.

INT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - BAR - CONTINUOUS

Darwin sits at the counter, nursing a drink while holding his cell phone to his ear. Clara wipes down glasses in the background.

A large banner on the wall behind her reads:

OPEN MIKE NIGHT TONIGHT! Give us your best shot!

DARWIN

Jesus. He destroyed a dummy? Which one?

INTERCUT MELISSA/DARWIN

MELISSA

The one that supposed to be a teenage girl. He ripped it to pieces! I know he used some of his college fund to get it made. Two thousand dollars. Why would he do that?

Melissa takes a deep breath.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

I think he believes that other puppet is real. The old man one. He believes its telling him to do things. Dar, he's really, really sick.

Darwin slugs down the rest of his drink, excited. He motions down the bar to Clara for his tab.

DARWIN

Listen, Melissa. You need to break it off with him immediately. He's totally lost it. There's no telling what he might do.

MELISSA

What can I do? This is my place. He moved in here but the lease is in my name. I can't just leave.

Darwin digs out his wallet while talking. Pulls out bills and slaps them down on the bar.

DARWIN

I'm coming over there.

Melissa doesn't like this idea.

MELISSA

No, Darwin. No. He said he was coming back here later tonight. He's already late. He might show up any minute.

DARWIN

You need to lock him out. Don't let him back in there.

Melissa glances over at her securely locked door.

MELISSA

I have already.

DARWIN

Good. Don't let him in no matter what. And I'm coming over tomorrow after work. Tim is still on at Buster's tomorrow, isn't he?

Darwin nods an affirmative response.

DARWIN (CONT'D)

And promise me you'll call the cops if he gets violent or threatening.

(pause)

Promise me, Melissa.

Melissa bites her nails, frightened.

MELISSA

OK. OK, I will. Come over tomorrow. I'm afraid for him.

Melissa gulps at the response she hears over the phone.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

And me.

Melissa hangs up and slowly lowers the phone to her side. She watches the front door fearfully.

EXT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Tim whips into a parking spot, glances up to his fourth floor window. He checks his watch. It's after 10PM. He frowns, grabs up Vetch, hops out of the car and heads inside.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - LOBBY - NIGHT

Tim trots to the elevator, punches the up button, rocks impatiently on his heels until the elevator door BINGS.

As the door slides open, Tim jumps inside.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Tim strides out of the elevator down the hallway toward his apartment door. He stops at his entrance, looks hard at the door, then inserts his key.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Melissa hears the key in the lock, wrings her hands, tense.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - APARTMENT FRONT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

The door won't open. Tim twists his key while CURSING under his breath.

He yanks the key out, frustrated.

TIM
(shouts)
Melissa! You've got the dead bolt
on. Open up, please.

Silence.

Tim KNOCKS LOUDLY on the door with his fist, with Vetch locked under his other arm.

TIM (CONT'D)
(pleads)
Mel. Come on. Let's talk this out.

More silence.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Melissa bites her nails, fixated on the door.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - APARTMENT FRONT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

Tim shakes his head in frustration. POUNDS on the door with one fist, then both.

TIM
(sounding like Vetch)
Goddamit! Let us in! This is
bullshit!

He hammers the door again, then puts both palms on the door, leaning in. Vetch falls to the ground beside him.

Tim lowers his head to the door frame.

TIM (CONT'D)
Melissa. Please. Don't do this.

Nothing.

TIM (CONT'D)
(louder)
Come on, Melissa. You have to talk
to me!

Tim belts the door methodically until his neighbor, Mr. Julian, swings open an apartment door one down from Tim's place.

Tim looks at him, abashed.

MR. JULIAN
Can you please keep it down, pal?
My wife has to work in the morning.

Tim slowly pushes himself away from the door, takes a few hesitant steps backwards, looks at Mr. Julian.

TIM
Sorry, Mr. Julian. Just a little
disagreement.

He stares at the door for a long moment, then scoops up Vetch and spins away toward the elevator. As he walks past Mr. Julian -

TIM (CONT'D)
We'll patch things up tomorrow.

Mr. Julian watches Tim's back as he heads to the elevator, more than a little puzzled by Tim's behavior.

EXT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - PARKING LOT -
NIGHT

Tim strides to his car, angry as hell. He tosses Vetch on to the shotgun seat and SLAMS the car door shut after he gets inside.

INT. TIM'S CAR - NIGHT

From a back seat view, Tim faces the shotgun seat, breathes hard. His face is in the shadows. After a few seconds, he calms down, faces back out the front window.

VETCH (O.C.)
That bitch locked you out, didn't she.

Tim shakes his head no, then cups his head in his hands.

TIM
She's not a bitch.

VETCH (O.C.)
She sure is doing a good imitation of one.

Tim SLAMS his hands down on the steering while, ventilating heavily again. He inserts his keys in the ignition, starts his vehicle. Turns to the shotgun seat.

TIM
We will work it out.

As Tim PEELS out of the parking space,

VETCH (O.C.)
(sarcastically)
Sure ya will, kid.

EXT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - PARKING LOT

Tim pulls into the empty lot next to Buster's, parks, turns off his engine.

INT. TIM'S CAR - NIGHT

Tim looks over at Vetch, who faces him from the shotgun seat. Tim lowers his own seat back, squirms to get comfortable. It's going to be a long night.

INT. POLICE STATION - EVIDENCE ROOM - DAY

Nick is playing solitaire on his computer in back of the evidence room window. In the background, Tim toils among the shelves.

Walter approaches from the hallway, and Nick quickly exits his game. Walter stops in front of the window to grin at Nick's guilty face.

NICK
Hey, bossman, what's up.

WALTER
Ha. If you aren't too tied up, I need the evidence box from the Riley case. We got a new lead.

Nick looks back at Tim, who is in another world.

NICK
Tim, you hear that? The boss needs the Riley stuff. Bring it on up here, will you?

Nick and Walter watch Tim slowly shuffle around the evidence room shelves, trying to locate the Riley file while half asleep.

NICK (CONT'D)
(to Tim)
Rough night?

Tim only GRUNTS in acknowledgement. He finds the box of files, trudges it over to the window, plops it down on the desk in front of Nick.

NICK (CONT'D)
You sure look like an unhappy camper. Want to talk about it?

TIM
Nah. I'm fine. Just insomnia.

WALTER
That's what comes with spreading yourself a bit thin. Comedy and studying for the academy.

Tim can't meet his eyes. He's done no studying lately.

TIM
Yeah, well...I guess.

Tim turns away to walk back toward the shelving area. Nick and Walter trade a concerned look.

EXT. AUGUSTUS'S NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

It's getting dark. Tim's car pulls around a corner, then parks a few doors down from Augustus's house.

INT. TIM'S CAR - NIGHT

From a back seat view, Tim looks at his watch. It's 7PM. He turns to his shotgun seat.

TIM

I think this is a bad idea. Are we really going to be able to talk him out of it?

VETCH (V.O.)

Listen, kid. You gotta grow a pair. I mean, like now. This is your professional career at stake. Our career. Are you ready to do whatever it takes to shut this fucker up?

Tim gapes at the seat next to him, slowly getting the import of Vetch's message.

VETCH (V.O.)

Let's go. He could be here soon.

EXT. AUGUSTUS'S HOUSE - FRONT DOOR - NIGHT

Tim walks up the porch steps with Vetch tucked up under one arm. At the door, he scans the homes near him, making sure he's unobserved.

He tugs the burglar picks out of his pocket, glances around again, then starts jimmying the lock on Augustus's door. After a few seconds, the door mechanism CLICKS, and Tim carefully pushes the door open.

TIM

We're in.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Darwin and Melissa huddle close together on the couch, facing each other, holding hands.

Melissa cries, Darwin pulls her forward into his chest. Her arms encircle him. She pulls back slightly, looks up into his eyes. They kiss, lightly at first, and then with passion.

EXT. AUGUSTUS'S NEIGHBORHOOD- NIGHT

Augustus pulls into his driveway. It's now fully dark. His porch and front door are in the shadows. He gets out of his car and grimaces up at his porch light, which isn't working.

He strolls toward the front door, keys in hand.

INT. AUGUSTUS'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

O.C., Augustus unlocks his front door and walks into his living room. He switches on the overhead light.

Nothing happens.

He snaps the switch back and forth impatiently.

Still nothing.

GROANING, Augustus makes his way into the living room, lit only by the street light outside his living room window. A large couch sits to one side of the room. Unseen by Augustus, a small SHADOWY FIGURE perches at the far end of it!

Augustus makes his way down a small hallway into his

KITCHEN, also dimly lit by his neighbor's houselights shining through a window.

Augustus rummages around in a drawer, and after a few seconds, comes up with a book of matches. He takes a small candle from a kitchen table, then struggles to light it.

As the match ignites and sputters out, a LARGE SHADOW of someone appears behind Augustus on the wall!

Augustus tries to light the candle again. This time he succeeds.

AUGUSTUS

Finally!

Augustus walks back down the hall with the small candle, which only lights up the area about five feet around him.

The floor SQUEAKS behind him!

He GASPS, spins around, but sees nothing there. He shakes off his fear, CHUCKLES at his own foolishness and treads carefully over to the couch.

On the coffee table in front of him is a television remote control. Augustus reaches for it. He clicks the control to no avail.

AUGUSTUS (CONT'D)

Crap.

SIGHING, he slings the control back on the coffee table, puts the candle down next to it and digs out his cell phone.

He turns sideways to catch as much illumination from the front window as he can. As he is about to dial, he sees a vague reflection of the couch behind him.

A HAZY IMAGE of Vetch seated there reflects on his screen!

Augustus jerks back in shock!

VETCH (O.C.)

Hiya, nerd.

Augustus whips around to face Vetch, who sits grinning at the end of the sofa. He has a huge kitchen knife tucked up under one arm!

Augustus's face is a rictus of terror.

AUGUSTUS

What the fuck!

The candle light is suddenly snuffed out!

In the almost total darkness, AUGUSTUS SCREAMS SHRILLY, then emits a harsh GURGLING NOISE.

The SOUNDS of multiple vicious STABBINGS follow.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Darwin and Melissa are half-clothed, groping each other passionately on the couch.

INT. AUGUSTUS'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Tim carefully wipes the blood from Mr. Vetch's face and torso. He has a streak of blood running down his shirt, which Tim tries to scrub clean with cold water and soap.

TIM

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He keeps scrubbing.

VETCH (O.C.)
Calm down, you idiot. Those fools
at the club won't even notice. You
can find me another shirt tomorrow.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

As the sounds of love making are heard, Melissa and Darwin's feet thrash at the end of the couch. Below them on the floor, their clothing is strewn everywhere.

INT. BUSTER GUTT'S COMEDY ZONE - NIGHT

ON STAGE

Tim opens his act.

FROM THE BAR

Buster's eyes anxiously shift between Tim's act and the front door of the club. Are Augustus and his friends coming?

VETCH (O.C.)
Hiya, Kid!

The audience SNIGGERS. Buster looks down the bar to where Clara mixes a drink.

BUSTER
Clara, you seen Darwin?

CLARA
Nope.

Clara strolls down to stand across from Buster.

CLARA (CONT'D)
But I know where he might be...

Buster raises an eyebrow.

BUSTER
Yeah?

Clara leans in close, conspiratorially.

CLARA
Over the last couple nights, he's
been talking a lot about getting
back with Melissa.

BUSTER
You are shitting me.

Buster looks back at Tim.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Do you think Tim knows what is
going on?

CLARA
Doubt it. His whole world is those
puppets. Probably the reason why
Darwin was able to get back in the
game.

Buster leans back, stares at Tim, quite concerned.

ON STAGE

Vetch has singled out a BALD MAN to victimize.

VETCH
So, tell me sir, is a chrome dome
really the chick magnet they say it
is? Or at least the one most
baldie's would have you believe it
is?

A few laugh as the bald man turns beet red. He SPUTTERS, but
can't find any words of retort.

Vetch turns to Tim.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Wow. Add on his gift for gab and
I'll bet he's irresistible to hot
chicks.

TIM
Oh, come on, Mr. Vetch. The poor
soul can't help his appearance. And
not everyone has great success with
women.

Vetch grins evilly.

VETCH
Well...you ought to know, kid.

AT THE BAR

Buster and Clara are all ears now.

ON STAGE

TIM
(laughs)
Come on, Mr. Vetch. Quit with the
bad jokes.

Vetch bats his eyes innocently.

VETCH
Oh? You think I'm only joking?

Tim grins out to the audience, shakes his head in mock
dismay.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Let me ask you then, pally, where
is your good buddy Darwin tonight?
He ain't at the bar now, is he.

His mouth hanging open in disbelief, Tim scans the bar area.

VETCH (CONT'D)
And he sure has been talking a lot
to your little girlfriend lately.

TIM
He what?

VETCH
(to the audience)
They're always the last to know.

The audience LAUGHS.

TIM
I don't find that a bit funny.

VETCH
Yeah? What's funny is Darwin ain't
here tonight. He's always here when
you are on, right? Like a good
agent?

Vetch mimics deep thought.

VETCH (CONT'D)
And...she locked you out last
night, no? On top of that,
tomorrow's her day off. They can
party hardy...

The audience TITTERS as Tim stares at Vetch incredulously.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Hey, but enough of that. Let's get
on with the act, eh?

Tim sweats, starts to shake.

TIM
It...it isn't true...

VETCH
Sure, just keep telling yourself
that, kid.

Vetch turns back to the bald man.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Now, where were we. I -

Tim yanks Vetch off his arm with his free hand. Glares over the heads of the audience, then strides off stage, down the center aisle and straight out the front door.

Buster is aghast.

BUSTER
(to Clara)
Christ. He's totally lost it! And
if he's that paranoid, Melissa
could be in some trouble.

Clara nods in agreement.

CLARA
We got his cop friend's number
right here. He left his card the
other night.

Buster reaches out a hand for the card, pulls his cellphone out of his pants with the other.

BUSTER
Let me have it. I'll call him right
now.

Clara hands Buster Walter's card. He rushes to punch in his number.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Is this detective Rogers?

Buster nods vigorously to an affirmative answer.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Great. I mean, not so great. Your friend Tim Vorpel just lost it on stage. He thinks his girlfriend is cheating on him and he rushed out of here to confront her. In the middle of his damn act!

Buster nods again.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Yeah, he was upset. Real upset. And not too rational. He acts like he thinks his dummy is really talking to him.

A pause as Buster listens to Walter's response.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
OK, good, you got his address. Let me -

Buster looks at his phone. He's been cut off.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
(to Clara)
He's heading over there.

Buster watches a few customers leaving.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Let me get the next act going before the place empties. And that damn Tim.

Buster frowns at Clara.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
That crazy sum-bitch is done here.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Melissa and Darwin lie entwined in each others arms, mostly nude. Darwin strokes her hair tenderly.

MELISSA
I can't believe we did that again.

DARWIN
I'm glad we did. Tim's no good for you and you know it.

Lights flicker through the window as a car outside tears into the parking lot. Tires SCREECH as it whips into a parking place.

A car door SLAMS in the distance. Melissa and Darwin lock eyes, faces etched with fear!

MELISSA

Tim is on tonight, right?

Darwin grabs his cell phone off the coffee table, checks the time.

DARWIN

It's only 8:45 PM. His act usually lasts until 9:15. He couldn't be here for another hour, if he was coming...

MELISSA

(unconvinced)

Yeah, OK.

Darwin hugs her tenderly. As he starts to kiss her again, the elevator door BINGS in the hallway outside.

Darwin and Melissa spring apart.

DARWIN

Shit! Get dressed quick.

They scurry to find their cloths, rush to put them back on.

The sound of an elevator door opening. Then footsteps become more distinct as someone approaches the door.

Melissa has her shift on, and slips her feet into her sandals. Darwin is mostly dressed, but missing a sock. He searches for it frantically.

EXT. RALEIGH STREETS - DOWNTOWN - NIGHT

Walter speeds through the city streets in an unmarked vehicle, but his SIREN is on.

THROUGH the FRONT WINDSHIELD, Walter bites his lip, real worried about Tim.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The sound of a key enters the front door lock.

Sweating, Darwin jams on his loafers with a sock missing.

DARWIN
(whispers harshly)
You didn't bolt the door?

Melissa grabs a magazine off the coffee table, moves quickly to the far side of the couch while shaking her head "no".

The doorknob turns. Darwin lounges back on the couch, tries to look casual. He puts his hands behind his head.

Tim barges in. He holds Vetch under one arm. He stops eight feet from the couch, breathing hard.

MELISSA
Tim! I, uh, Darwin just stopped by
to see how I was doing.

Tim's eyes glitter with rage.

TIM
Isn't that nice.

Darwin looks around frantically, trying to locate his missing sock while holding off Tim.

DARWIN
Come on, man. You know Melissa and
I go way back. I haven't seen her
for quite a while.

Tim looks down at Vetch's face, then back up at Darwin, a nasty, knowing grin on his face.

TIM
Is that so? You left your damn hat
here two days ago.

DARWIN
I was only here for a minute. We
needed to have a real talk.

Tim takes Vetch from under his arm, slips his hand inside Vetch to operate him.

Melissa GASPS, freaked out.

MELISSA
Tim! What in the name of God are
you doing?

Tim and Vetch regard each other, then both turn back, their heads moving from Melissa to Darwin.

TIM

Mr. Vetch tells me a different story. He says you aren't just talking.

DARWIN

Mr. Vetch?

MELISSA

Mr. Vetch is a damn puppet, Tim. He didn't tell you anything. You're paranoid.

TIM

You don't say. Well. Mr. Vetch, what do you think?

Vetch bats his eyes, grins.

VETCH

I think they're feeding you a bullshit dinner.

EXT. RALEIGH STREETS - NIGHT

Walter's car comes to a screeching halt behind another vehicle at a stop sign.

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD, Walter bangs on the steering wheel in frustration.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

DARWIN

Tim, take that puppet off your arm. Let's talk about what's going on like three adults.

TIM

Mr. Vetch, might he be right?

VETCH

No! These turds will only try to con you. You need me to see things straight.

MELISSA

Please, Tim. For the sake of our relationship, please take that damn thing off. Sit down and talk.

Darwin jerks slightly as he spots his missing sock peeking out between two couch cushions. A bead of sweat pops out of his brow.

DARWIN
(stutters anxiously)
Ye...Yeah, man. We can work this
out. Like, be mature about it.

VETCH
(mocks Darwin's voice)
Be mature about it.

Vetch eyeballs Darwin, drops his gaze to Darwin's bare ankle.

VETCH (CONT'D)
(to Tim)
Do you see what I see, kid?

Tim looks at Vetch, then down at Darwin's ankle. Then, Tim focuses on the tip of Darwin's missing sock between the middle sections of the couch seats.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Looks like these two have been
behaving in a pretty "mature" way
already tonight.

Melissa notices the sock also. Freaked out, she jumps up and runs out of the room down the hallway. Tim watches her go, bitterly. Darwin is terrified.

O.C., the bedroom door slams shut.

TIM
I guess it's just us mature guys
doing the talking, eh, Dar?

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Melissa ventilates, leans against her bedroom door, tries to catch her breath, regain composure. What to do?

She pushes the door button to lock it, then checks out the bedroom window which faces the parking lot. She looks down the four stories. No way out there.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Tim continues to stare at Darwin's missing sock.

Darwin follows his stare to see it himself. He swallows hard; the gig is up.

DARWIN

Listen, man, I can explain. Really,
it's not what it looks like. I mean

-

Tim raises a placating hand.

TIM

Calm down, man. Calm down.

Darwin breaths heavily.

TIM (CONT'D)

We can talk it out like big boys.
Tell you what I'm gonna do...

Tim reaches for Vetch's head with his free hand.

VETCH

No, you idiot, I -

Tim snatches Vetch off his arm violently, his face clenched in a rictus of rage. He struggles to calm down, strokes Vetch's face tenderly.

He takes two steps toward Darwin, who draws back in fear. Then he veers to one side, bends down to carefully arrange Vetch on the couch section previously occupied by Melissa.

He tilts Vetch's head in Darwin's direction.

TIM

OK. There.

Tim faces Darwin.

TIM (CONT'D)

Let's do this right. Over a beer.

DARWIN

I don't want a drink, man.

TIM

Well, I do. I think I deserve one,
don't you?

Darwin can't make eye contact.

TIM (CONT'D)

Hey, I'll get us both one, just in
case you change your mind.

Tim heads into the

KITCHEN behind them. Darwin gapes over at Vetch with fear and disgust.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Tim gets beers out of the refrigerator, then eyeballs the large knives in a knife rack on the counter. His gaze shifts to a large meat cleaver hanging from a hook above the rack.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Melissa paces fearfully, chews her lips. She looks out the window, considering.

No, it's too far to jump. She creeps back to the door, pastes her ear against it. She hears vague shuffling sounds, GRUNTS, Vetch LAUGHING, and then a long SIGH, followed by several seconds of tense silence.

Then, she hears the front door open.

TIM (O.C.)

Fuck both of you damn cheaters! Who needs you.

The front door SLAMS shut!

EXT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Walter swings into Tim's parking lot, siren WAILING. He whips into a space next to Tim's car, cuts the siren, and hops out of his vehicle and trots to the apartment complex entrance.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM

FROM THE BEDROOM WINDOW,

Melissa sees Walter run to the complex entrance from his vehicle.

MELISSA

Thank god.

Melissa runs to the door, thinks about opening it, hesitates.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
(yells)
Darwin? Are you out there?

She puts her ear back up against the door. She pulls back slightly, cringes with fear as FOOTSTEPS slowly approach.

They stop just outside.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
Darwin?

A few long seconds pass.

TIM
(perfectly impersonates
Darwin's voice)
Yes, it's me, baby. That madman and
his damn dummy are gone. Open the
door.

Melissa sags in relief, then whips open the door to see Tim, standing there, wearing Vetch on one arm and holding the large meat cleaver in the other!

Melissa GASPS in shock!

VETCH
Surprise, surprise.

Tim pushes Melissa back into the bedroom, closes the door behind himself.

She stumbles backwards, but glances out the window. Tim notices, follows her gaze. He sees the cop car.

TIM
Thought we heard sirens. We'd best
talk somewhere else. Hey, like the
song says, maybe "up on the roof"?

Tim motions Melissa ahead of him with the cleaver. Melissa edges toward the living room.

VETCH
Pick up the pace, honey. We might
have company coming.

IN THE LIVING ROOM, the lights are out.

In the shadows, Darwin sits, eyes staring wide open, at one end of the couch. A trickle of blood leaks out of his mouth.

Melissa and Tim enter the room.

MELISSA

Darwin?

VETCH

Keep moving.

As they pass Darwin on the way to the front door, a big carving knife sticking out the back of his lower neck comes into view.

Melissa SCREAMS!

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - ELEVATOR ENTRANCE -
CONTINUOUS

Walter swings his head up in the direction of the scream, pounds on the elevator up button.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

MELISSA

No, God, noooo!

Tim pushes her onward with the blunt end of the cleaver.

VETCH

Dar, Vetch and I had our little chat. Now, move!

Melissa SOBS as she's herded out the apartment door.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - HALLWAY

Tim propels Melissa ahead of him toward the elevator.

MELISSA

Tim, how could you? How could you kill Darwin? He was your manager. Your friend.

VETCH

Friends don't fuck a friend's girlfriend, now do they.

TIM

It wasn't me, Melissa. It was Mr. Vetch.

Melissa can't believe her ears.

MELISSA

Please, Tim! Please, just stop,
turn yourself in. You need
treatment. They'll see you weren't
responsible.

Tim opens his mouth to speak, but hears the elevator
whirling up. He looks warily at the stairwell entrance to the
side of the elevator.

TIM

We'll walk up.

He prods Melissa again.

TIM (CONT'D)

Let's go.

Tim shoves Melissa through the stairwell door, then, looking
back at the elevator, he follows.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - ELEVATOR - CONTINUOUS

Walter rocks anxiously on his heels in the slow-moving
elevator.

WALTER

Come on, come on!

PING, as the elevator halts at the fourth floor. The doors
slide open and Walter charges out. He sees no one in the
hallway, but down the hall, Tim's apartment door is ajar.

He unholsters his pistol, and, looking left and right, he
carefully sidles up to Tim's door. Listening, he hears no
noise coming from inside.

He pushes the door open slowly with his foot, sees a
silhouette of someone on the couch. He aims his gun at the
figure.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Tim?

No answer.

Walter finds the living room overhead light switch, snaps it
on to see Darwin, staring out into space, stone dead!

WALTER (CONT'D)

(mumbles)

Oh, shit.

Walter carefully searches the apartment, gun drawn and ready, finds no-one. Where are they? Walter heads back out into the

HALLWAY, where he sees Mr. Julian standing in the entrance to his own doorway. He looks frightened.

MR. JULIAN

Me and my Gloria heard someone
screamin'! I think it come from up
there.

Mr. Julian points at a door marked STAIRWAY to one side of the elevator, motions "up" with his finger.

Walter sidesteps over to that door, slowly pushes it open. He can hear the sound of distant FOOTSTEPS.

WALTER

(yells up the stairwell)
Melissa! Tim! Are you up there?

MELISSA (O.C.)

(from four floors above)
Help! Help me -

From far above him, Walter hears the stairway door to the roof SLAM SHUT, cutting her off.

INT. TIM AND MELISSA'S APARTMENT - STAIRWELL - NIGHT

Walter charges up the stairs, two at a time. Panting and sweating, he arrives at the rooftop entrance. He swallows hard, checks his weapon.

It's loaded, safety off.

WALTER

(to himself)
Jesus, Tim.

Walter very carefully eases open the door to the roof. It's dark out there.

EXT. ROOFTOP - NIGHT

Walter edges away from the entrance to give himself a panoramic view of the roof. Heat pumps, air conditioning equipment, ventilator shafts break the horizon.

He sees nothing until he edges around a large, NOISY heat pump. Ahead of Walter in the distance, Tim holds Melissa in front of him. The roof's edge is only three feet behind them.

He still wears Vetch on one arm, but has the other wrapped around Melissa's waist from behind. He holds the big cleaver in that hand, just under her chin.

WALTER

Tim.

Tim pulls Melissa back another two feet. They are now just a foot from the edge.

Walter inches closer, weapon drawn.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Tim. Listen to me, man. You're ill.
I know you didn't mean for this to happen.

Walter is ten feet from Tim.

TIM

Stop. Don't come closer.

Tim hikes the cleaver up tighter on Melissa's chin. She trembles in fear.

Tim looks over his shoulder. It's an eight story drop down to the parking lot below. SEVERAL PEOPLE look up at Tim from the lot, aghast.

VETCH

That's a long way to Tip-a-raree.
Hey, and we've got an audience forming.

MELISSA

Please don't hurt me!

WALTER

Tim. Come on. Calm down. You don't want to hurt her. She's your girlfriend. She's on your side.

Tim's face softens a bit, then hardens up.

TIM

She cheated on me, Captain. And with my best friend. She isn't on my side.

WALTER

How do you know that, Tim?

Tim is teary-eyed.

TIM
Mr....Vetch. Vetch told me.

Walter is flabbergasted, but recovers quickly, restores his calm.

WALTER
That puppet can't talk, Tim. It's your own mind talking. Telling you bad things that maybe aren't true.

VETCH
What do you know, piggie? Sure, I can talk. Do more than talk. Just ask Darwin down there.

Melissa SOBS loudly.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Oh, that's right. Darwin's done talking, ain't he. But you know that already, don't you, piggie?

WALTER
Listen. Tim. We all make mistakes. None of us are perfect. Even if she did something wrong, you can forgive her.

VETCH
This wimp might forgive her, but I won't. She's a damn whore!

TIM
Mr. Vetch, please don't -

Vetch cranes his head to look up into Tim's face.

VETCH
You know what? I'm getting sick of your weak sister act, kid.

TIM
I...I -

VETCH
You...you...you are nothing without me! I had to give you a spine. I had to give you the guts to beef up our act, make it work, make it a success.

WALTER

Tim, you have to let her go. Don't listen to that other voice. You can find your own again. Let her go. She doesn't deserve this.

Two more cop cars spin into the lot below.

VETCH

Piggie called for back-up. We aren't walking out of this one, kid.

Tim backs up another half-step. He bumps into an Air Conditioning Unit, sidles around it until his heels are at the roof's edge. He turns his head to see half dozen COPS swarm out of there cars.

Another half dozen apartment RESIDENTS look up at him. Several are filming the incident with cell phones.

Tim looks down at his heels, teeters at the edge.

VETCH (CONT'D)

You gonna jump? She might survive it.

Melissa WHIMPERS.

VETCH (CONT'D)

(hisses)

Cut her damn throat first.

Tim raises the cleaver to crease Melissa's chin. She WAILS in distress.

Walter points his pistol directly at Tim's head, assumes a shooter's stance.

WALTER

Please to god, Tim, don't make me do this! Give her a break, man. She's got her whole life ahead.

VETCH

What a race. Bunch of weaklings. Excuse makers. Dishonest, deluded bags of meat.

Vetch leans into Melissa's face.

VETCH (CONT'D)

Kill this bitch! Throw her over the edge!

(MORE)

VETCH (CONT'D)
You can claim insanity at trial.
You'll probably get a hospital
instead of jail, and you'll
eventually walk.

Tim looks back and forth between the hysterical Melissa and Vetch, struggles to make a decision.

WALTER
Don't do it, Tim. Please listen to
me.

VETCH
Do it, you wimp. Do it, do it, do
it!

Walter's finger tightens on the trigger, his face a grimace of regret.

Tim pours buckets of sweat, shakes like a leaf, his eyes wide with despair.

VETCH (CONT'D)
(screams)
Dooooo it!

Tim clamps the cleaver up close under Melissa's chin, cuts the skin. She clenches her eyes close, expecting the worst.

Suddenly, Tim sags! He looks down at Melissa, then shoves her violently forward, toward Walter.

Melissa stumbles into Walter's arms. He wraps his free one around her, but keeps his weapon trained on Tim.

Vetch looks up into Tim's tear-stained, tortured face.

VETCH (CONT'D)
Well, that does it, doesn't it? You
just gave up all our leverage.

Tim stares at Vetch, his lips moving slightly.

VETCH (CONT'D)
You aren't worthy. Worthy to be my
partner. On stage or anywhere else.

Tim looks beseechingly at Walter, eyes pleading for understanding.

TIM
Captain, it wasn't me. It was all
him. His idea to kill them. He did
it.

VETCH

You really think anyone is going to believe that, you moron? You did it, not me. I'm just a damn puppet.

Vetch looks out at Walter and Melissa.

VETCH (CONT'D)

They know that.

He looks back up at Tim.

VETCH (CONT'D)

Everyone knows that. You're the only one that doesn't have a clue.

Vetch begins to CHORTLE evilly.

VETCH (CONT'D)

Now, you've got a choice, dummy. You can take a step backwards or you can spend the rest of your life in jail.

WALTER

That's not true, Tim. My dad lost it once trying to make his act work and he's all right now. We'll get you help too, I promise.

VETCH

Oh, yeah. And once they're sure your not crazy, then you'll spend the rest of your life in jail. You know how it works, Timmy. I mean you learned that from studying criminal justice for the piggy exams, no?

Tim's face hardens with resolve. He edges another few inches out over the edge. From the lot, one of the people filming him motions for him to jump.

Vetch's grin drops.

VETCH (CONT'D)

Hey, now. Hey.

Vetch adopts a wheedling tone.

VETCH (CONT'D)

If you are gonna jump for the fans, why mess me up? I'm just a dummy. A piece of wood.

(MORE)

VETCH (CONT'D)
 Beautifully carved, exquisitely
 detailed, I might add. So why
 destroy me? I can still entertain
 the world.

Walter edges a bit closer to Tim.

WALTER
 Tim, don't. There's no need...

VETCH
 Come on, kid. Give old Vetch a
 break here.

Tim stares at Vetch, looks out over the edge, blinks, comes
 to a decision.

TIM
 (to Walter)
 He ruined my life.

VETCH
 I'm just a damned pup-

Tim SLAMS Vetch down on top of the Air Condition Unit to his
 side. Vetch's face is turned up toward Tim.

VETCH (CONT'D)
 Hey! What the hell are you doing?
 You crazy fool -

Tim raises the huge cleaver high over his head, glares madly
 down at Vetch!

MELISSA (O.C.)
 Tim, for god's sake, no, please no -

Vetch's mouth SNAPS open and shut twice.

VETCH
 What, what the hell are you doing?

Tim stares into Vetch's eyes, then back at Melissa. The
 raised cleaver shakes in his outstretched arm.

MELISSA
 I'm begging you, Tim!

Tim's face is a rictus of crazed resolve. Suddenly, he
 violently swings the cleaver down, with a horrible CRUNCH,
 into the arm that holds Vetch, just below his elbow!

Melissa SCREAMS and Walter GASPS in the background.

VETCH
(shrieks)
No! Noooo -

Tim SLAMS the cleaver down into his arm a second time; severs it and Vetch from his body!

Close up, Vetch tumbles to the ground, his face covered with sprinkles of Tim's blood. He is lifeless.

In a hazy background, Walter rushes over to Tim, who slumps to his knees.

EXT. PARKING LOT BELOW ROOFTOP - NIGHT

From a rooftop view, several attendants rush to load a Tim, on a stretcher, into an ambulance, as Walter stands with his arm around a shaken Melissa, watching them.

ONE MONTH LATER

EXT. RALEIGH NEIGHBORHOOD - HOUSE DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

A car pulls into the drive. Nick heaves his bulk out, then reaches back in to the shotgun seat to retrieve a large gift package.

Nick walks to the door and rings the bell.

INT. NORA DENTON'S HOUSE - FOYER - NIGHT

Nick's sister NORA DENTON, plain but pleasant-looking, late 40s, greets her brother at the door.

NORA
Come in, come in, brother.

Nora checks out the large gift.

NORA (CONT'D)
Joey's gonna be pretty excited when he sees that big birthday package. What's in there, a beachball?

Nick grins.

NICK
Nah. It'll make his summer though, believe me.

Nora guides Nick into the

DINING ROOM which is already set for dinner.

NORA
Park yourself.

Nick sits down and places the gift in front of himself. Nora looks up to her second story.

NORA (CONT'D)
(yells)
Joey! Nick's here!

As Nora heads into the kitchen, FOOTSTEPS run down the stairs.

JOEY DENTON, a gangly, just turned 16 year-old, swings around the corner into the dining room.

JOEY
Hey, Uncle Nick.

NICK
Hey, pal. Happy Birthday!

As they hug, Nick cants his head in the direction of the large gift box on the dining room table.

NICK (CONT'D)
Got ya a little something.

Joey rubs his hands together in excitement.

JOEY
Can I open it now?

Nora appears in the dining room doorway.

NORA
Sure, why not. I'm still cooking.

Joey WHOOPS with joy, starts tearing off the gift wrapping.

NORA (CONT'D)
Slow down. Save the paper.

Joey forces himself to carefully unwrap his package. He removes a large box, then uses a kitchen knife from the table to slit open the tape holding the box lid in place.

He pulls off the lid, and there, fully decked out in brand new cloths lies a refurbished MR. VETCH!

Joey is ecstatic!

JOEY
Oh, wow, Uncle Nick! This is so cool.

Nick smiles broadly, happy with himself and Joey's glee. Nora isn't quite so sure.

NORA
Isn't that -

NICK
No worries, no worries! It's just a fancy piece of wood, Nora. All new clothes, paint job, the works. Should operate just fine, Joey.

Joey tenderly pulls Mr. Vetch out of the box, cradles him in his arms.

JOEY
Can I take him up to my room and play with him awhile? Just a few minutes?

Nora glances at her wrist-watch.

NORA
Welllll...OK. Fifteen minutes, tops. Then dinner is served.

Joey jumps up from the table with Vetch in hand.

NICK
Thanks, Mom. And thanks a truckload, Unk! This is gonna be a blast.

Joey rushes around the corner toward his room upstairs. Nora looks at Nick, a big question in her eyes.

NICK (CONT'D)
Listen. It was Tim Vorpel's puppet. But I had it completely refurbished. The captain said take it if I wanted it, it reminds him too much of Tim. But I never saw it before. Doesn't bother me any. It's just a super-sophisticated toy.

NORA
I don't think I want Joey knowing where it came from.

NICK

OK, Sis. That'll be our secret only. Buster's is closed down now, and Tim's girlfriend left town. Nobody in Joey's world will recognize that dummy.

Nora is skeptical, starts to speak.

NICK (CONT'D)

What's that smell?

Nora flinches, swivels her head back toward her kitchen.

NORA

Oh, no! My Artichokes!

Nora rushes out to turn down the stove. Nick CHUCKLES fondly at her retreating form.

INT. NORA BENTON'S HOUSE - JOEY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Joey's room is a hodgepodge of teenage boy artifacts. Baseball and football posters on the wall, shelves of paperbacks and graphic novels, a guitar on a stand in one corner and a few items of clothing strewn around on the floor.

Joey sits on his bed examining Mr. Vetch. He straightens Vetch's shirt, brushes down his scraggly hair.

JOEY

This is so cool.

Joey picks up Vetch, turns him around and sees the opening in his back.

JOEY (CONT'D)

I guess I put my hand in here?

Joey watches Vetch's blank face as he gradually slides his arm and hand into the dummy. He moves the hand inside Vetch, and Vetch's eyes swing back and forth.

Joey LAUGHS with glee. He tries again. This time, Vetch's mouth opens slowly, the CLAPS shut.

JOEY (CONT'D)

(to himself)

I think that's how you do it.

Vetch sits on Joey's knee, his wooden face expressionless.

From downstairs,

NORA (O.C.)
(yells up)
Joey, dinner's ready!

Joey SIGHS, looks longingly at Vetch. He reaches over to remove the dummy with his free hand.

Close in, Joey is just about to touch Vetch's form when Vetch's head SNAPS around to face Joey squarely!

Vetch's lips curl up in a terrifying grin!

VETCH
(in the voice he has
always had)
Hiya, kid!

THE CREDITS BEGIN TO ROLL OVER A BLACK SCREEN FOR SEVERAL SECONDS.

INT. JAILHOUSE HALLWAY - NIGHT

Cells line a long corridor. Our view glides down the hallway to stop before a cell.

INSIDE THE CELL, through the bars, is Tim. He wears a prison suit and sits on a small cot. He MUMBLES to himself.

Closer in, Tim raises his stump to sadly regard the open space that Vetch would normally occupy.

Tim's eyes widen as he trembles and sweats.

TIM
...Mr. Vetch?

Tim licks his lips, clearly madder than a hatter.

TIM (CONT'D)
Mr. Vetch, please, I'm sorry -

Tim's opposite hand comes into view. His fingers are cupped to effect the look of a puppet. The hand mouth moves.

BELINDA
He's gone, honey. It's just you and me now. For the long haul...

Tim's eyes jump from his Belinda hand to his stump. He BANGS his head against the wall behind him, stares out into space, his arms still raised.

FADE OUT.