

THE HARD PLACE

Written by
Martin Gradek

v.02/29/2020

801 Gramercy Dr., Apt 303
Los Angeles, CA 90005
(323) 202-9106

This script is the confidential and proprietary property of Martin Gradek and has been copyrighted and registered with the WGA West as such. No portion of it may be performed, distributed, reproduced, used, quoted, or published without prior written permission.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Sitting on a park bench are two men.

GRACE is a brick house of a man in his 40s, and if he looks like a boxer it's because he is one. He has his head down, looking at the space between his knees.

BENJI looks like a relatively well-kept street rat in his 60s. He is holding a piece of stale bread in his hands. He looks like he just saw a ghost.

Benji turns away from GRACE slightly - the result of an interaction we weren't privy to.

The silence continues for a moment.

BENJI
Don't do it.

GRACE shifts a little against the awkwardness, but remains quiet.

BENJI (CONT'D)
Don't do it.

PAUSE. Still, nothing from GRACE.

BENJI (CONT'D)
What about the people, huh? The people in this city who look up to you, who love you--

Finally GRACE breaks into a rye grin.

GRACE
Love. Come on, Benji...
(beat)
All this love you always talk about... it never turned into something I was able to ride. I've got love coming out my ass but it don't pay for shit, you know what I'm saying? So this is about business. And I need to handle mine on my way out.
(beat)
People don't look up to me. They look up to winners. With me they just look--'cause I'm showing them what shades of red I've got in me. It's entertainment, you understand?

PAUSE

BENJI
Yeah, I understand.
(beat)
But you couldn't be more wrong...

FADE TO BLACK:

We CUT between CREDITS and SOUNDLESS FOUND FOOTAGE shot on a cheap CAMCORDER - vignettes into GRACE's life as a boxer.

INT. STRONG CITY BOXING GYM - DAY

GRACE is interacting with whoever is holding the camcorder, a boyish grin on his face as he engages in soundless banter.

Suddenly a TONE - that of an antiquated answering machine - breaks through the silence. The tinny, ersatz voice of a man follows, set to the montage between CREDITS and FOUND FOOTAGE:

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)
Susie, pick up the phone, will you?
I know you're there...
Listen, I really need to talk to
you. It ain't about us - I ain't
gonna do that no more. I mean, kids
should know who their parents are
and all that - but that's all I got
to say about that...

FOUND FOOTAGE features GRACE walking around the gym after a workout and playfully introducing some people to the camcorder - still soundless.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)
Look, the fight's in a few days and
I wanna do something different this
time. For you... and the kid, OK?
I'm tired.

FOUND FOOTAGE finds GRACE sparring with someone in the gym's boxing ring: a pedestal displaying our protagonist being knocked around by the another fighter.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)
I wake up these days feeling fights
I did months ago. Sleep doesn't
wash'em away anymore...

FOUND FOOTAGE of GRACE shadow boxing into the camera. He accidentally punches it, making the footage jolt.

The camera flips 180 degrees and reveals the OPERATOR: it's BENJI (from the bench) - he shakes his head at the camcorder in disbelief.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)

And as fun as it is to watch'em try to knock me down, it ain't as fun when you're thinking about tomorrow's hangover in the middle of it. Maybe that's how you know you've lost it...

FOUND FOOTAGE of GRACE intently observing a couple of young fighters in the gym's ring as he cools down from a workout.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)

I'm ashamed. I never told you. There were kids out there who deserved to be in my place. Talented kids. All I ever did was stay up. And maybe I was built for this somehow. I just wish I had some talent to be proud of it...

FOUND FOOTAGE of GRACE getting his hands wrapped in preparation for a fight. He looks down at his hands calmly.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)

What the fuck's the point of staying straight if you don't get anything out of it, huh? Look at me...

FOUND FOOTAGE following GRACE down a street - his arm around a woman. As he realizes he's being filmed, he turns around and flips off the camera.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)

Forty two and I got nothing to show for it. No money...
No...

FOUND FOOTAGE of GRACE, all cleaned up after a shower, jokingly flirting with the camera.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)

Anyway, I've been talkin' for a while so this thing's probably gonna cut me off any minute. I miss you. I'm gonna mix things up for this last fight, for shits and giggles - 'cause why the fuck not...

The FOUND FOOTAGE now features GRACE working his way around a heavy bag, punching it lightly while his heavy footwork tries to keep up.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)
 You were always good at beating bad ideas out of my head. But you never pick up the phone. So maybe it's a sign.

WE CUT from FOUND FOOTAGE to REGULAR FOOTAGE of GRACE working the heavy bag, CAMERA PUSHING IN. BENJI is filming him with his cheap camcorder.

VOICE MESSAGE (V.O.)
 Just, if you get a chance, just get back to me, OK? You can call the gym, or Ben--

The voice message cuts out. As it does, we CUT BACK TO:

EXT. PARK - DAY

GRACE and BENJI still sitting on the park bench, in the same positions as before.

BENJI
 Don't do it.

WIDE SHOT. There are no birds around, but BENJI reflexively throws crumbs of stale bread to the ground.

CUT TO BLACK

FADE IN:

EXT. HENRIETTA JAZZ CLUB - DAY

WIDE SHOT of an unassuming one-storey building with signage on it's facade. We cut to a CU of signage: Henrietta Jazz Club.

CUT TO:

INT. HENRIETTA JAZZ CLUB - DAY

SHOT of an empty bar.

SHOT of detail. There's no one to be seen...

JP (O.S.)
He'll be with you in a minute.

WIDE SHOT of bar AND CLUB, which is dense with a diffused amber daylight. Now we see two figures: one man (JP) is half-sitting on a leather couch on one side of the club, observing the other figure, GRACE, who is standing on the other side, at a brick wall looking at a mural - graffiti decor in the style of renowned graffiti artist Retna.

We CUT to a close-up of GRACE. He continues to observe the mural for a moment.

GRACE
Is this real?

JP says nothing. He ignores GRACE. Except he lets out a small grin.

GRACE doesn't make much of this and turns his attention back to the mural.

After a moment he backs away and turns to face the rest of the club. He walks slowly, easing into these surroundings.

In the middle of the club's wooden panel floor is a small, white-tiled, square dance floor.

GRACE approaches it. After a moment of apparent hesitation he steps onto the dance floor. GRACE is looking for something familiar...

He begins to walk in a circle.

WIDE SHOT of GRACE using the dance floor as an analogous boxing ring, as he fakes some conservative, mostly imaginary half-jabs with his shoulders, loosening himself up, almost breaking into shadow boxing but not quite.

He stops himself. He looks up.

There are large bird cages suspended from the club's ceiling.

GRACE's attention becomes fixated on a cage. But the sound of someone entering the large club space snaps GRACE out of it...

HOLBROOK (O.S.)
Well I'll be! Look at this, JP!
Look who's here, huh?

The bodyguard observes as SAM HOLBROOK chuckles and goes in for a handshake. He is carrying a laptop in his other hand.

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)
 Grace. In the flesh! Did you ever
 think you'd see the day? Look at
 this.

After shaking GRACE's hand, HOLBROOK swiftly walks over to a
 seating area with two leather couches facing each other.

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)
 Here, have a seat.

GRACE has no other recourse; he soon follows.

As Holbrook reaches his couch:

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)
 Danny 'Grace' Gibbons. This is JP,
 by the way.

Holbrook gestures at the apparently good-humored fellow who's
 no longer half-sitting but standing.

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)
 He runs the place for me when I'm
 out. And to be brutally honest, I'm
 more out than in these days, so I
 guess this is more his place than
 it is mine.
 (he sits, sets the laptop
 down next to him)
 But I'd feel a little - I don't
 know - displaced, if I just gave it
 to him. The illusion of possession.
 It's very real.
 (beats)
 Drink?

As GRACE sits down himself - across from HOLBROOK - he
 betrays an ounce of amusement at the offer.

GRACE
 Nah, thanks.

HOLBROOK
 Good man.
 So. How can I help you?

A PAUSE.

GRACE
 You help me? How can I help you?
 I wanna take you up on... the, you
 know...

GRACE is uncomfortable. He glances at JP behind him, standing, listening...

GRACE (CONT'D)
Listen, can we talk in private or something?

HOLBROOK
Don't worry about him. He's kinda like a second me: he'll hear this one way or another. This way just saves me the hassle of relay. He can keep a secret.
So what is the big secret, huh?

Holbrook smiles.

GRACE
What is this, some kind of joke?

There's a heavy pause. Holbrook doesn't respond.

GRACE (CONT'D)
The fight's tomorrow, right? So I wanna do it. I mean, I'll go down - for the money. Like you asked.

HOLBROOK
Danny, I don't know what you're talking about.

GRACE's smile fades.

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)
What do you mean *go down*? What money?

GRACE
Look, I know I took a minute to get back to you. But I'm here, you know? So... we gonna do this or what? Are we gonna work together or what?..

Pause.

HOLBROOK
I'm still not following. Do what?

GRACE
You playing with me, right?
You asked me to throw the fight. So I'm here...

HOLBROOK leans back in his armchair.

HOLBROOK
 Danny, I never asked you to throw
 anything, much less a fight.

Another pause as GRACE tries to figure out what's going on.
 He leans back himself.

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)
 That's a serious misunderstanding.
 I'm sorry if you took anything the
 wrong way, but...

GRACE
 What the fuck is this?
 You used the words "retirement
 fund". In fact I'm pretty fucking
 sure you used the words "take a
 dive"... But I'm making this up, is
 that right?

HOLBROOK
 (chuckles)
 I don't know what to tell you. I
 did call, to say I was looking
 forward to the fight and to wish
 you luck one way or another, but
 anything else...
 Is there any chance you
 misunderstood?

There's a heavy pause. GRACE is at a loss for words - almost
 doubting himself now...

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)
 Unless you talked to him and not
 me.
 (looks at JP)
 JP? You got something to do with
 this?

JP shakes his head nonchalantly.

A pause.

GRACE
 What are you doing?

HOLBROOK
 Look, I'm just trying to figure out
 where you're coming from, OK? Help
 a brother out...
 (MORE)

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)

I mean, let's say for a second that I did ask you to do something like that. For the sake of argument... You come in here to shake my hand on a deal the day before the fight - out of the blue - without giving me any prior indication of a willingness collaborate? That, to me, just doesn't add up. I mean, hypothetically speaking, what would you expect me to say to you, huh? Thank you? And thank our lucky stars too, 'cause all we've been doing is sit here, waiting for you to get back to us. 'Cause God knows we can't do this without you. Is that what you'd like me to say?...

GRACE's smile returns, but it's no longer a nervous one. It's a knowing smile. He knows he's screwed.

GRACE

If that's how you feel.

HOLBROOK smiles too.

HOLBROOK

Not even hypothetically.

A heavy pause. HOLBROOK gets ready to get up.

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)

Is that it?

GRACE

You couldn't just do this over the phone? You gotta waste my time like this?

GRACE stands up and turns away, ready to walk out.

HOLBROOK

I always wanted to meet you.
Properly this time.

GRACE takes a few steps towards the door, but then stops in his tracks. He turns back around to face HOLBROOK.

GRACE

What if I tell everyone? That you asked me to take a dive for money.

HOLBROOK

You got any proof?

'Cause otherwise it's your word against mine. And who do you think this city's going to believe? A desperate, washed-up fighter they used to root for, or a well-connected entrepreneur who's bringing this city back from the dead?

(turns to JP)

Who's your money on, JP?

JP

(with a wry grin)

Me.

HOLBROOK

He means me.

GRACE

Are you sure you wanna do this? You came to me for a reason. You don't tell someone to throw a fight unless you really need the win so I know this has gotta mean something to you. And if you don't put a leash on me, I'm gonna beat the living shit out of your kid.

A pause.

HOLBROOK

Between you and me, the kid can lick just about anyone. On paper he beats you nine times out of ten.

That's good enough for me.

Now, you're unpredictable. I'll give you that. And you want to know a little secret? That's why I never wanted you or this fight in the first place. Some important friends of mine twisted my arm. That's the nature of business. Compromise. And that's what you are: one big compromise.

So a few sleepless weeks go by and then you know what I realize? No amount of money was going make you predictable anyway. This whole time it was that simple. See, you can't put a leash on chaos. You just wait for it to get old and slow.

(MORE)

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)

That's what makes the unpredictable
a little more predictable again.

HOLBROOK reaches for his laptop and flips it open. He moves the mouse around to find something we can't see yet. HOLBROOK then punctuates with the space bar and rotates the laptop atop the leather of a couch so that GRACE can see.

It's FOUND FOOTAGE shot by a CAMCORDER of GRACE training at STRONG CITY GYM. It shows GRACE sparring in the gym's ring with a partner - being dominated by his sparring partner.

HOLBROOK (CONT'D)

This one's from a few days ago.
Remember?

GRACE is frozen. Heartbroken. But he then forces a smile through it.

GRACE

(smirking)

I was having a bad day.

HOLBROOK

More like a bad month, from the
stuff I've been getting.

GRACE

Yeah, well yesterday was a real
breakthrough for me, so...

HOLBROOK

I'll take my chances.

GRACE just stares at him with a resigned smile. He then turns slowly and walks towards the club's exit.

But after passing JP he stops to say one last thing - only half turning:

GRACE

You know what's funny? I really
didn't feel like fighting this kid.
I do now.

With that, GRACE leaves, turning a corner and out of sight. But we stay with HOLBROOK. There's a heavy moment of silence.

HOLBROOK

(to JP)

Keep an eye on him, will you?

CUT TO:

INT. HENRIETTA JAZZ CLUB - BAR - DAY

GRACE is standing just around the corner, listening. Eavesdropping. Slowly, he backs away and walks to the exit.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BOXING VENUE - DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

CAMERA ZOOMS OUT of GRACE's head as he sits on a prep table in his dressing room, his body swaying left and right slightly. He is looking down at nothing in particular. He is stoic.

As we get WIDER, we see he is ready for the fight: wearing gloves and his robe--though the robe's shoulders are off to facilitate petroleum jelly application. His trainer drags some Vaseline down Grace's neck onto his torso. Finally, GRACE looks up at something else in the room.

It's BENJI, who is sitting on a chair and also apparently lost in thought, though his gaze seems to exude an undercurrent of concern.

GRACE's stoicism gives way to something like disappointment in his eyes.

BENJI snaps out of it and glances back at GRACE. He gives an awkward smile.

The trainer is applying a thin layer of petroleum jelly to Grace's torso and abdomen.

GRACE
We greasing?

Trainer reacts to Grace's wry grin and remark:

TRAINER
It'll be like a slip 'n slide for him if you get in there. Might be fun...
(smiles)
Come on, this is barely anything. Remember, stay inside. And the sooner you get in, the better...

There's a knock and the door to the dressing room opens, and an official peaks in.

OFFICIAL
You're up, Danny.

The official leaves and closes the door behind him.

TRAINER
(as he packs up)
OK. And come on, Danny, stay warm,
stay loose, will ya? Come on, shake
it up for crying out loud! Acting
like it's not the last one. I mean,
being cool is cool and all, but
give it a little urgency too, you
know what I mean?

GRACE doesn't - he remains sitting, his legs dangling off the
table.

Instead BENJI stands up and walks over to the door in
anticipation.

That's when Grace slides off the table.

GRACE
You should stay.

BENJI
What are you talking about?

GRACE
Hang back.

BENJI
Why?

A heavy pause as the TRAINER gathers his things and opens the
door for GRACE, leading the way.

TRAINER
Hey ladies, shall we or what?

GRACE
Wait outside, OK?

The TRAINER is incredulous. He exits but leaves the door
open.

GRACE turns back to BENJI. After a moment, GRACE jumps off
the table. He puts his gloves on BENJI's shoulders.

GRACE (CONT'D)
If you've got any regrets, you'll
stay here. You understand?
You understand?
(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

But if you've got no regrets - if
your conscience is clean - you can
walk out there with me.
And watch...
You understand?

BENJI is paralyzed.

GRACE turns away, forcing himself to switch into fight mode as he bobs up and down on the balls of his feet and goes into a vicious flurry of warm-up shadow punches to force himself into fight mode. Tears have built up slightly in his eyes. As he moves to exit the room.

BENJI stays behind.

CUT TO:

INT. BOXING VENUE - HALLWAY - NIGHT

The trainer is leaning against the wall, waiting.

TRAINER

Let's do it your way. Come on, you
big tree.

The trainer smiles and leads the way, and GRACE follows.

And CAMERA follows GRACE. As we do, the sounds of a crowd begin to resonate in the hallways.

GRACE bobs up and down a few more times along the way.

We turn a corner. The crowd gets louder.

And louder. And louder. And just as it gets deafening, the music kicks in.

And the footage ramps into slo-mo.

And we CUT TO BLACK.

Title card: **THE HARD PLACE**