

SMILE RELAX ATTACK

Screenplay

by

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SMILE RELAX ATTACK

FADE IN:

INT. A NON-DESCRIPT ROOM - DAY

CLOSE on a wriggling, slithering, dirt-encrusted EARTHWORM, crawling along a clean white surface. The worm's pulsing, some might say phallic, as captivating as it is stomach-turning. We hear the propulsive sound of Chuck Berry's "You Can't Catch Me," and it's almost as if the worm's shimmying to Chuck's guitar work, when a HAND reaches into frame and SNATCHES it away. Then--

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INT. THE SAME NON-DESCRIPT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

We've PULLED BACK just far enough to see an actual CAN OF WORMS, lid bent back perfectly, packed to overflowing, its occupants writhing and bubbling to the surface. The can's on a white tablecloth; the HAND is grabbing clumps of stray worms from the table, cramming them into the can. Not a job you'd want after lunch. Or before it. Then--

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INT. THE SAME NON-DESCRIPT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

From a different angle, we're looking into the LENS of a DIGITAL CAMCORDER, a MALE TORSO looming behind it, the HAND snapping its fingers to the music. The can of worms is reflected in the lens, but just as a FINGER's about to push "record," a clump of worms SPILLS messily out of the can. As the torso leaves frame to intervene--

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INT. THE SAME NON-DESCRIPT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

We're now looking into the camcorder's VIEWFINDER; the shot's picture-perfect, not a stray worm to be found. As the FINGER pushes "record," and as we PUSH IN closer and closer on the PIXELATED image, a VOICE speaks in a plain monotone:

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V.O.

Bill Frazier. Forced his wife to
attend wife-swapping sex parties,
in New York City--

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*
*

The ORGY OF WORMS undulates and squirms, as if it's a courtroom reenactment--

*
*

V.O.

Till she filed charges and started
divorce proceedings.

*
*

PULL BACK to reveal that we're now watching a TV; it's
 playing a cheap but brutal NEGATIVE AD. Its target, BILL
 FRAZIER, is now superimposed on the WORMS--mouth agape, in a
 sleazy-looking half-smirk, not the most flattering shot he's
 taken--as LEGAL DOCUMENTS also appear on the screen: *

V.O. (ON TV)
 Sex parties; open marriage; liberal
 New York City values. Is Virginia
 ready for Bill Frazier's can of
 worms? *

The TV goes black. The music's gone. And we see a MAN'S
 REFLECTION glaring at us: the real Frazier. 50-something,
 commanding-looking, pricey suit and tie, and more than a
 little stunned by what he's seen. *

FRAZIER (REFLECTED ON SCREEN)
 The hell did this come from?

We're in--

INT. FRAZIER'S LAW OFFICE - DAY

Modern, well-appointed. And seated behind Frazier is our
 hero, CARTER HOOD--though maybe hero's the wrong word. You
 can decide later. For now, suffice to say Carter's early
 30's, rakishly handsome, jeans, dress shirt, sneakers. Not at
 all sloppy, but casual, maybe too much so for this meeting.

CARTER
 May I ask a question?

FRAZIER
 Try answering mine--who made this,
 State G.O.P., Fairfax County
 Republicans--

CARTER
 I made it.

FRAZIER
 (beat)
 Everyone knows those charges are a
 bunch of blog-driven bullshit. My
 wife and I resolved all our--the
 records are sealed. *

No response from Carter. Frazier's shock is turning to anger.

FRAZIER

You want to be my political consultant, and this is your audition tape? A piece of trumped-up tabloid trash?

CARTER

This is what campaigns are, you need to be ready. I don't make the rules.

Who does Carter think he is? There's a tray of whiskey bottles and glasses on the table. Frazier pours a little bourbon, slides a glass across the table to Carter, leans in, this is deadly serious.

FRAZIER

If you work for me, I make the rules. You've done how many of these now--

CARTER

Eight City Council races, six State Legislature, five School Board.

FRAZIER

Well this one won't be fought in the gutter. I can take Fuller's Assembly seat next fall, get Virginians working again, bring the kind of hope Obama's brought to the country--business community's practically clamoring for me to run.

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CARTER

As a jobs candidate.

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FRAZIER

As a good jobs candidate; shouldn't take three of 'em to meet a mortgage. And I may want someone like you, a street fighter, willing to break a few eggs. But breaking eggs doesn't mean trashing the goddamn supermarket. I have a name to protect, and I--

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CARTER

Two names.

FRAZIER
 (beat)
 Come again?

CARTER
 You don't have to like my ad, but
 it's what any half-decent
 consultant does. Complete
 vulnerability assessment on my own
 client--or prospective client--
 anticipate the roughest possible
 attacks--

Carter pulls a thick packet from a briefcase and drops it on
 the coffee table with a "thunk." Frazier takes it.

CARTER
 Then see if there's a way to beat
 'em.
 (then)
 The records may be sealed. But I've
 got 'em.

Frazier's flipping through the packet, dumbfounded.

CARTER
 Which brings us to my question: how
 much do you like your life right
 now?

FRAZIER
 (thrown)
 I'm running on issues.

CARTER
 Name one modern campaign that's
 turned on issues.
 (beat)
 You can't. Any more than you can
 "bring the Obama" when you
 laundered 15,000 dollars to stop
 him in the Virginia primary. Or run
 as a jobs candidate with a mistress
 on your own payroll.
 (then)
 Two names to protect. Unless your
 wife's come around to the idea of
 other women blowing you.

FRAZIER
 (beat, the TV)
 Who else has seen this--your--

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Carter ejects a DVD, hands it to Frazier.

CARTER

Only copy, yours to destroy. But unless I'm Albert Einstein, someone'll make one just as powerful, maybe more so. You give 'em a lot to work with. There might be a way to win, but an ugly, negative way, one that drags you, your family, through the muck; one that changes your life forever, and wastes a year of mine if you're not up to it. So I need to know: how much do you like it, right now?

Frazier's reeling, his political life's flashing before his eyes. As Carter slides him the untouched glass of bourbon, and watches him choke down a sizeable, much-needed gulp-- *

EXT. BUSY VIRGINIA STREETCORNER - DAY

Carter's moving almost rhythmically down a long row of NEWSPAPER MACHINES, pumping change into them and grabbing a series of Virginia and Washington papers. There's a coiled, predatory energy about him; he's perpetually looking for something, or someone, to sink his teeth into. As Carter drops coins into his fifth newspaper machine, he runs out of change--just as a BUSINESSMAN's pulling a Richmond Times out of a machine two down from Carter's. So Carter grabs two copies of the Washington Post from his still-open machine, holds one out to the businessman: *

CARTER

Trade you.

INT. STARBUCKS - DAY

Carter got his Richmond Times, and he's half-flipping through it as he sits with a nervous 50ish man we'll call BOB, who's wearing a suit. Carter still isn't. Carter's entire pile of newspapers is on the table between them.

BOB

Know how much trouble I could be in for leaking closed-door testimony?

CARTER

If I'm wrong, you've got an extra five hundred bucks and no one's the wiser.

(MORE)

CARTER(cont'd)

If I'm right and a sitting
Councilman's banging 16-year-olds
by the half-dozen... speaking of
which, how's Elsie's lacrosse game
this year?

Bob resents this tactic but falls for it anyway, reluctantly
hands over a thick envelope. Carter hands over a thicker one.

BOB

Emily. J.V. soccer. Here's hoping
she never brings home a political
consultant.

CARTER

Or a sitting Councilman.

Bob leaves, clearing Carter's eyeline to reveal a cute, late
20's WOMAN at the counter. She's buying two lattes with a
beefy-looking guy who's obviously her BOYFRIEND. Carter
scribbles something on his newspaper as the boyfriend heads
to the bathroom. The woman pays, heads toward Carter's table,
looking for one of her own.

CARTER

Don't jostle my papers.

WOMAN

(taken aback)

I wasn't anywhere near your--

CARTER

I can tell you have lousy
coordination, just be careful.

WOMAN

You always insult people you don't
know?

CARTER

When I need their attention, yeah.

(then)

How long have you two been dating?

Who is this guy? She takes a beat.

WOMAN

Couple months.

CARTER

And he goes to the bathroom right
before it's time to pay for two
coffees.

(MORE)

CARTER(cont'd)

And he wears a dirty sweatshirt,
doesn't even shave, like you've
been married forty years. Looks
promising.

The woman looks down, sees that Carter's written on the upper corner of his Richmond Times, facing her, his name and number. The boyfriend emerges from the bathroom; she looks at him, can see Carter's point... and surreptitiously rips off the corner and heads to an empty table.

She keeps looking back at Carter, but he's done with this transaction; his attention's drawn to an overhead TV. It's the tail-end of a political ad, and as we move in toward the pixelated image of a salt-and-pepper-haired, 60-something, weathercaster-almost-handsome MAN on the screen--

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INT. PRODUCTION FACILITY - DAY

*

Meet Virginia's Senior Senator, IRVING GRAY. Not especially comfortable in his own skin. Or as he is now, in a straight-backed chair, against a blinding white photographic backdrop. Thick wires, big lights, far better production values than Carter's mock ad--and a behind-the-camera coach we'll come to know as HENDRY.

*

GRAY

I'm Irving Gray. Because Virginia
needs a leader, and not a--
(lengthy throat-clearing)
Because Virginia needs a leader.
Not a follower in the United States
Senate.

*

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HENDRY (O.S.)

From the top. Little less starch on
the collar.

*

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GRAY

(almost lethargic)

I'm Irving Gray, because Virginia
needs a leader, not--

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HENDRY (O.S.)

But happy it up, Senator; remember,
we're the optimist.

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GRAY

(sing-songy)

I'm Irving Gray, 'cause Virginia
needs a leader not a follower, in--

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HENDRY (O.S.)
'Kay now you're forcing it--

GRAY
You try repeating the same
horseshit sentence like a wind-up
fucking kewpie doll--

HENDRY (O.S.)
Well now you're not gonna sound
happy about it--

GRAY
(incredibly fake cheer)
I'm happy about it, I'm goddamn
fucking delirious, I'm Irving Gray
'cause it takes a leader not a
follower to read this idiotic
bullshit cue card.

Gray rips off his lavalier mic, storms off the set, knocking
over his small wooden chair. After a beat--

HENDRY (O.S.)
Great work, everybody; let's take
five.

INT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - DAY

Gray's ad is now on a muted TV in the large apartment that
doubles as Carter's workplace--desks, boxes of documents,
campaign memorabilia, a bedroom way in the back.

Carter's half-glancing at the ad, half-playing a cherry-red
electric guitar--a vintage Chuck Berry-style Gibson ES-335,
to be exact--as "You Can't Catch Me" blares from a boombox,
an anthem of sorts. Carter's two hired OPERATIVES--the 20-
something MONICA, small but serious-looking for her age, and
the rumpled, chunky, 30-something RON--the astute may
recognize him as the voice in Carter's sex-party ad--are
sifting through documents as Carter tries to copy Berry's
riff. He's not quite getting it right.

MONICA
(a document)
You spent eighteen hundred dollars
on web design?

RON
I was posing as an on-line
reporter, to dig into Carney's pill
problem, it had to look real.

MONICA

Well now we look broke.

RON

New York Times is losing money too,
things are tough all over.

*

CARTER

Here it comes, listen, the part
John Lennon ripped off for "Come
Together"--

Carter mouths along, "here come old flat-top, he come moving
up..." he's transported.

MONICA

And he just talked Bill Frazier out
of running at all.

RON

Course he did. He's waiting for the
perfect candidate.

CARTER

Lennon had to settle out of court.
They say the mobbed-up music
publishers forced him into early
retirement--

MONICA

We need the rent, Carter, not
another Chuck Berry tutorial.

*

Carter's suddenly standing--

CARTER

Need's a relative term. How 'bout
we start with some pancakes.

EXT. ANOTHER VIRGINIA STREET - DAY

Carter, Ron, and Monica, moving briskly; they'd like a paying *
client, he'd really like his pancakes.

MONICA

I'm not saying it'd be an easy
race.

CARTER

It'd be a losing race, Frazier's
nowhere near ready for the race
we'd have to run.

RON

We'd still get our commission. And
since we're in debt, and never
gonna find your fantasy candidate--

*

CARTER

My fantasy candidate grew up in a
hermetically-sealed bag, never
kissed a girl he didn't marry,
never had a thought that polled
under 70 percent, and he can play a
guitar just like a-ringin' a bell--
believe me, Ron, I'm not aiming for
perfection. But if we wanna climb
into the big leagues--if we wanna
stop digging through dog catchers'
trash cans--we've gotta find
winners, every step of the ladder.

They stop in front of an ELECTRONICS STORE; Gray's ad is on a
two flat-screen TV's, nestled between an Obama press
conference and an infomercial for an ab machine. Clearly,
it's airing a helluva lot.

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GRAY (MUTED, ON TV)

...Irving Gray, because Virginia
needs a...

*

Carter keeps moving.

MONICA

If Frazier can't get to the State
Assembly, how does someone as
pathetic as Gray stay a Senator?

INT. INTERNATIONAL HOUSE OF PANCAKES - DAY

Carter likes his short stack with a lot of syrup. As he
finishes pouring, he practically inhales his food--cleanly,
but ravenously, without a break in conversation. Ron and
Monica just nurse coffees and watch.

CARTER

He wasn't always pathetic. Guy was
one of the lions of the Senate--

MONICA

(Carter's latest mouthful)
And since I feel like I'm watching
the Nature Channel--

*

CARTER

They talked about him running for President.

RON

Then ol' Swerving Irving ran into some traffic.

MONICA

Swerving Irving?

CARTER

(matter-of-fact)

Twelve years ago, right after he was elected to his second term--

RON

Third--

CARTER

Whatever, he was driving on MacArthur Boulevard when a drunk driver nearly kissed his tailpipe. Gray steered out of the way--right into an oncoming car. He cracked some ribs, his wife and kid were dead on arrival.

MONICA

(beat)

That's... tragic.

CARTER

More ways than one. Gray lost his mojo then and there. The sympathy vote's about all he's got left.

MONICA

Good thing he's running against an empty ballot line this time--the strongest Republicans decided not to take him on.

RON

Well Steve McGann just signed on to advise that empty ballot line.

Big news. Carter stops eating, looks up.

CARTER

Steve McGann.

RON

Yeah, last week.

CARTER

Killer McGann, working for what's-his-name, Grant--

MONICA

Brandt--

CARTER

The idiot baseball player.

RON

(what's the big deal)

It was on Politico.

CARTER

C'mon guys, why does a blue-chip Republican consultant sign on to work for a complete nobody?

(then)

'Cause he thinks he's found a winner.

And before Ron and Monica can react, Carter's tossed too much money on the table and headed for the door.

INT. WASHINGTON, DC BAR - NIGHT

CRACK. A cueball smashes into another ball--and we WIDEN to reveal that it's a decisive combo-shot by Carter. He's with DOUG MASON, 60-something, suit and loosened tie, but with a benevolent, highly accessible demeanor. He's like an uncle to Carter, who takes a nephew's liberties.

MASON

That was my ball you just--

CARTER

Never thought I'd get the combo off the two-ball, did you.

MASON

Never thought it, 'cause it was my ball.

CRACK--Carter sinks an impressive bank shot.

MASON

That was also my--

CARTER
I need a favor.

MASON
You want my cue-stick.

CARTER
I want Senator Gray's re-election
campaign.

Mason thinks he's joking; he's not.

MASON
You've done, what, ten local races--

CARTER
I've won nineteen local races, and
that plus two dollars gets me on
the Metro--

MASON
Buck thirty-five--

CARTER
Fine, Washington politics is a
closed shop, how many two-bit races
do I have to win to-- *

MASON
Waltz into a major Senate race?
Their dance card's full, I can't
get you a--

CARTER
You're one of the biggest lobbyists
in town, you can get me any dance
you want.

MASON
No one hires a political consultant
two weeks from election day,
they've got a team in place, they
don't need you.

Mason's about to take a shot, but Carter grabs his cue-stick,
forces him to engage--

CARTER
Yeah they do, they just don't know
it yet. Gray's gone soft, and his
opponent's hired Steve McGann,
roughest knife fighter in the
G.O.P.

MASON
(what does it matter?)
Probably just a favor to his party--

CARTER
McGann doesn't do favors. He's in this to catch Gray with his pants down. Have you seen Gray's ads? He's snoring his way through the race.

MASON
Voters like him fine.

CARTER
Voters pity him, he's a has-been. And when McGann starts slamming him... he needs a counter-puncher, a damage controller; I'm the guy.

Mason pries the cue stick away, makes his shot, thinks this is absolute foolishness--

MASON
You're not ready for a United States Senate race yet.

CARTER
I'm not in the club yet. This is the one that gets me in.

MASON
You're talking about a guy who moves billions of dollars around with his pinkie. Has-been, wannabe, doesn't matter, this is the big game.

CARTER
Gray's running against a bench-warming fifth baseman, tell me he's not riddled with steroids and scandal and illegality, this is kids' stuff for me.

In fact, Mason knows exactly why McGann matters.

MASON
You think Washington's the same as anyplace else, don't you? The scandal here is what's legal. Your fifth baseman's had a surge in donations since McGann signed on.
(MORE)

MASON(cont'd)

McGann brings money, credibility, a
rolodex the size of Rock Creek
Park. And he doesn't just aim for
the candidate.

CARTER

You think he'd slime me.

MASON

I think he'd bury you. And bill you
for the shovel.

(then)

Why are you in such a hurry,
Carter? What prize are you so eager
to claim?

Carter doesn't want to get into that.

MASON

I know who this is really about.

CARTER

Me and my career.

MASON

No it isn't. And this is no way to
mend that fence.

CARTER

(deflecting)

You gonna help me or what?

MASON

(no)

Try sinking your own balls, there's
plenty of 'em.

Carter doesn't like hearing this. He takes the cue-stick and
steadies it. On an overhead TV he hears Gray's insipid ad:

GRAY (ON TV)

I'm Irving Gray, because Virginia
needs a leader, not a...

And nearly rips the felt with his cue-stick.

INT. A NON-DESCRIPT ROOM - NIGHT

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CLOSE on Ron, BOUND and GAGGED and BLINDFOLDED and trying to
speak. PULL BACK to reveal Carter standing in front of him,
holding an electric SHOCK BATON. The camcorder's rolling and
pointed squarely at Ron. Carter lowers Ron's gag--

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RON

Gimme a signal, a grunt or
 something; I can't see the damn
 thing, you expect me to act like
 I'm being electrocuted?

CARTER

Tie you to a chair, you think it's
 Shakespeare in the goddamn Park.

But before an unamused Ron can reply, Carter raises the gag,
 touches Ron with the shock baton--

CARTER

Go--

Ron jerks back his body, faux-electrocution-style. So-so.

CARTER

More pain, make it look like a
 religious conversion. Go--

Carter touches Ron again, Ron jerks back his body again.
 Better, but Carter's still not satisfied. As Ron mumbles
 something like "try again," Carter quietly SWITCHES ON the
 baton and touches it to Ron, whose body SPAMS VIOLENTLY with
 excruciating pain. A long beat... then--

CARTER

Yeah that'll do.

And the image of a still-quivering Ron dissolves into--

INT. A DARKENED OFFICE - NIGHT

We're CLOSE on grainy, pixelated, black-and-white, Al-Qaeda-like footage of Ron being SHOCKED with the baton. As his body jerks backward, and as the frame FREEZES, we pull back to reveal we're watching a large desktop computer. Carter's HANDS are editing the footage. But the image is frozen past the moment of pain. No good.

INT. THE SAME DARKENED OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

The same footage, the same remorseless JOLT, but a slightly different freeze-frame--this one somehow comic, almost slapstick. No dice.

INT. THE SAME DARKENED OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Again, same footage, same JOLT--but this time the frame freezes on a picture of total contortion and agony. Hard to watch, impossible to forget.

RON (V.O.)
2,300 dollars?

INT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - DAY

Carter's standing over Monica and Ron, who are reluctantly fishing checkbooks out of their desks. An impatient Carter's holding up his own filled-out check as an example--

CARTER
2,300 apiece, made payable to "Gray
for Senate;" that's "Senate" with
nine dollar signs--

RON
You check the Dow lately? My 401K
just shrunk to a 201K.

*
*

CARTER
I'll give you raises to cover it.

MONICA
From federal prison? We'd be
breaking about five election laws.

CARTER
Yeah better wait on the raises for
now.

RON
We're political professionals,
since when do we start donating to--

CARTER
I need a meeting with a U.S.
Senator. This is America. One sure-
fire way to get it.

Monica and Ron have finished writing their checks. Carter
grabs them, one and then the other--

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INT. BIG, FANCY MANSION - NIGHT

A fundraiser at an impossibly large, plantation-ready home; dark suits, a few "Leadership, Achievement, Gray" signs stuck on the wood-panelled walls. Gray's in the background, ringed by influence-seekers, but amid the clinking of glasses and the white noise of conversation we're with SUSIE CROSS, Gray's late-20-something issues director, and a middle-aged male DONOR. She'd kill to be crunching numbers right now.

DONOR #1

People like a happy warrior--you've
gotta tell the Senator.

Susie nods, her mouth full of hors d'oeuvre--

DONOR #1

None of this "midnight in America"
claptrap--when I ran in the
Virginia 3rd, I ran as a happy
warrior.

SUSIE

(swallowing, politely)
And you lost that race by... how
many points?

INT. ACROSS THE ROOM - SAME TIME

BERT HICKMAN, Gray's earnest, 40-something campaign manager, is with another paunchy, middle-aged male DONOR, trying to look interested while trying to make eye contact with a nearby HORS D'OEUVRE GIRL.

DONOR #2

Just when he gets tired of saying
it, that's when the voters start
hearing it, I'm right about this.

HICKMAN

Well, I do think the Senator's been
quite effective in his--

DONOR #2

First he's gotta tell 'em what he's
gonna say, then he's gotta say it,
then he's gotta tell 'em he said
it, and he's gotta keep saying it,
over and over and over--

And as Hickman watches the hors d'oeuvres drift farther and farther and farther away...

EXT. BIG, FANCY MANSION - NIGHT

Carter pulls up in a well-maintained 80's Saab convertible, driven by Monica.

MONICA

Have fun at the Flock of Seagulls concert.

CARTER

Lay off my car, okay?

MONICA

It's a nice one. Oughta try driving it sometime.

Carter gets out carrying a small lap-top, walks to the door as Monica drives off. He pauses in front of a "Leadership, Achievement, Gray" sign on the door, pops an aspirin, steadies himself. All that swagger has to be summoned from somewhere. He enters--

INT. BIG, FANCY MANSION/HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

This is clearly a world to which Carter--in jeans, a nice shirt, a blazer that's really a suit jacket--doesn't belong. A middle-aged female VOLUNTEER with a clipboard stops him--

GRAY CAMPAIGN VOLUNTEER

May I help you?

CARTER

Carter Hood, I'm supposed to be meeting the Senator.

She just stands there with a huge, fake smile until Carter gets it, fishes out the checks, hands them over.

GRAY CAMPAIGN VOLUNTEER

The Senator's excited to meet you.
Right this way.

As one or two donors stare at Carter, presumably because of the jeans, Carter's led through the crowd and into--

INT. CHILDREN'S PLAYROOM - CONTINUOUS

Filled with beautiful antique toys--an old rocking horse, huge stuffed animals, antique wooden blocks--a pre-teen paradise circa 1898. Hickman and Susie come in; Hickman has Carter's checks in his hand.

HICKMAN

Carter Hood? Bert Hickman,
Senator's campaign manager; he'd
love to join us, we'll get you a
pull-aside before you leave.

CARTER

A pull-aside.

HICKMAN

It's where we... pull him aside.

But Carter's focus is on Susie. She's attractive but masks it --glasses, hair up--to look like the policy wonk she is.

CARTER

Hi.

She's already wary of his turned-on charm. And he likes a hard target.

SUSIE

Susie Cross, issues director.

HICKMAN

Why don't we have a seat.

They almost sit on some tiny little kids' chairs, but think better of it and remain standing.

HICKMAN

The Senator appreciates your support; he believes you're what this campaign's all about.

CARTER

Money?

Susie's amused; Hickman isn't. Point scored.

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HICKMAN

You want to share some thoughts on the campaign's strategic--

CARTER

I want to replace your political consultant.

Now Hickman and Susie both start laughing. Carter doesn't even smile. He directs the following toward Susie--call it seduction by strategic planning.

CARTER

Gray's about to be humiliated by an empty baseball suit.

HICKMAN

The Senator believes he has a smooth road to re-election; so did several potential opponents who chose to sit out the race. You may know he chairs the Rules and Administration Committee, a highly important and--

CARTER

How important will he look when he trades his do-nothing committee for a shuffleboard court?

(then)

Your opponent hired Steve McGann, king of political hit men, who'll do what he always does: dirty tricks, brutal negative ads, to chip Gray's lead down to nothing. Unless you've got someone who knows how to hit back.

SUSIE

Brandt insists he's running a positive campaign.

CARTER

Then he must be a genius. 'Cause there's no such thing. Plus Gray's message is a joke.

HICKMAN

Susie runs the message.

So much for the seduction. Susie was right to be wary.

SUSIE

Gray's got a 24-year track record on every issue in existence.

(MORE)

SUSIE(cont'd)

His message is fine, we gave a big economic recovery speech last week, health care the week before--

*

CARTER

Summarize them in seven seconds. Which is how long a soundbite you get on TV.

She can't. Carter kneels on the floor, and as he talks, he arranges the blocks to form a hollow rectangle, building it higher and higher by stacking on layer after layer--

CARTER

The only thing coming through your blizzard of 19-point plans and 24-year-old Senate votes is Gray himself--what a leader *he* is, how much *he*'s achieved, how *his* face should be on a four-dollar bill. That's not a message, it's a dartboard. Any charge that comes up, any scandal, any flaw--that dime-store toupee on his head--

HICKMAN

That's the Senator's real hair--

CARTER

(yeah, right)

Undermines your whole case--

Carter removes one bottom block, and the whole structure he's been building collapses--

CARTER

Like a building without a foundation.

(then)

A good campaign is a war, not a vanity exercise. Gray needs to pick fights. Shift the focus to his opponent. To the special interests. Keep it on him, he'll be lucky to squeak out the narrowest victory of his career.

*

HICKMAN

The Senator doesn't need to go to... war. He's assembled a strong media team, Mark Hendry's been--

CARTER

Keep paying him, I'll work for free.

SUSIE

And what would your portfolio be?

CARTER

Same as any consultant. No portfolio, no responsibilities. I inflict damage, I control it, I make TV ads.

HICKMAN

Wait here.

Hickman slips out, while Carter straddles the rocking horse.

SUSIE

You want a smear campaign.

CARTER

I want a winning campaign.

SUSIE

By spreading slander and lies.

CARTER

"Man From Hope," "Uniter Not A Divider," "Straight Talk Express"-- you and I both know, the biggest lies in politics are in the positive ads.

*

Gray enters, followed by Hickman; Carter abruptly gets off the horse.

CARTER

Senator, a pleasure to--

GRAY

Pleasure's all yours, I have to raise \$5,000 every day for six years to run for re-election, and that's after hundreds of thousands of my own money--this is a business, I don't turn it over to kids who walk in off the street.

HICKMAN

(sotto)

With 6,900 dollars--

GRAY

Read the Field Poll, I'm up nine points.

CARTER

Down two from last week.

Carter opens his lap-top--

CARTER

Now read my poll.

Carter presses "play," and we see the grainy, black-and-white footage of Ron being SHOCKED with the torture wand, the image freezing with pain and horror. Ron's own monotonous voice: *

RON'S VOICE (ON LAP-TOP)

We gave Irving Gray decades to make the laws. Instead he broke them, investing in a company that sold shock batons illegally, in Indonesia. Torture, for profit. That's why Senator Gray's in for a shock this November.

An awkward silence in the room. Then--

CARTER

Subsidiary of a company you invested in. Traded goods as well as cash, in violation of--

A highly irritated Gray starts out the door. Carter calls after him--

CARTER

Steve McGann's in this for a reason; I can knock him back. You don't think I'm the killer you need, watch my ad again.

SUSIE

You made that ad?

Gray stops at this. Carter ejects the DVD, hands it to Hickman.

CARTER

Only copy, yours to destroy. I'm making a point.

Gray takes a beat... is Carter making the sale?

GRAY

Then I'll make one too: I was
writing Medicare laws while you
were dirtying diapers. I'm not
playing in your latest pile of
filth.

*
*
*

Gray exits. Hickman's apologetic.

HICKMAN

The Senator's had a long and
difficult--

CARTER

Life?

HICKMAN

Thanks for the donation.

Hickman and Susie lead Carter into--

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Where a DONOR who'd noticed Carter on his way in is waiting.

DONOR #4

Carter Hood?

Carter starts to extend a hand, but the donor DECKS Carter,
knocks him into a bookshelf, books TUMBLE to the ground. A
small crowd gathers from the main room.

*
*
*

DONOR #4

You ran Ford's race against my
brother-in-law; one donation from a
petty drug dealer he never even
heard of, you made him out to be a
cokehead himself, ended his career.
How's he supposed to know who
writes his fucking checks?

Carter, touching his bloody lip--

CARTER

The internet?

Carter stands, would like to take the guy apart, but knows
that's poor job-interview decorum. So he dusts himself off,
gives the guy a steely look as he walks within inches of him
and exits. Susie's disgusted, but Hickman's quietly impressed
as he eyes Carter, looks down at the DVD in his hand. And
off in the distance, we see that Gray's noticed too.

*
*
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*

INT. REDNECK VIRGINIA BAR - NIGHT

Carter sits alone at the bar, dejected, his lip bruised, drinking a glass of whiskey as bad country music plays on a jukebox. A decent-enough-looking woman's sitting a few seats away, at the edge of a group of female friends. She smiles, a touch flirtatiously. He looks, but doesn't smile back.

CARTER
 (to bartender, re: music)
 All this country shit's just the
 white backlash against rap music,
 you know that, right?

The bartender shrugs, pours Carter another drink.

BARTENDER
 I get it. More Chuck Berry.

WOMAN AT BAR
 (to Carter)
 You drink a lot.

No answer.

WOMAN AT BAR
 What else do you do?

CARTER
 (leave me alone)
 Look for work.

She turns back to her friends, insulted. Carter catches the rear view and starts to reconsider. He takes a few bills out of his wallet, brandishes them for the bartender, nodding in the direction of the woman, who hears this too--

CARTER
 A fancier version of whatever she's
 having.

INT. CARTER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Carter's in bed with the woman from the bar. She's in a dead sleep, clearly post-coital; he lies awake, inspecting a pair of panties that say "Open for Business" on them. The phone rings, stirring her awake too. Carter has to search beneath strewn clothes on a side table to find the receiver.

*
 *

CARTER
(into phone)
Yeah.

HICKMAN (ON PHONE)
Bert Hickman. How fast can you be
in the parking lot of Victory Lanes
in Falls Church?

Carter looks at a clock; it's 1:12 a.m. He looks at the
groggy, disoriented woman he barely knows, and doesn't really
want to know better, then--

CARTER
Fast.

EXT. PARKING LOT, BOWLING ALLEY - NIGHT

A huge neon "Victory Lanes" sign looms behind them. Carter
stands with Hickman and a still-wary Susie.

HICKMAN
One of the Senator's biggest
fundraisers, Charles Thornburgh.
About to be slapped with
molestation charges--

SUSIE
(to Hickman)
You didn't have to tell him the
name--

HICKMAN
(to Carter)
A boy.
(to Susie)
Maybe it's relevant, is it a such
crime to--

CARTER
Grab junior by the gemstones? Yes
it is.
(to Susie)
I didn't drag myself here at two in
the morning to screw with yours.
(to Hickman)
Go on.

HICKMAN
Thornburgh swears the charges are
false. But WJLA out of Arlington
has the story, and this photograph.

He hands Carter an envelope, which he opens. Can it be...? *

CARTER
Is he... holding Gray's hand? On a
beach? *

Hard to tell. The blurry work of a telephoto lens. *

HICKMAN
We think it's from the Senator's
fundraising retreat on the Outer
Banks. *

SUSIE
It could be photo-shopped. *

HICKMAN
The Senator swings his arms when he
walks, might just look like he's-- *

CARTER
That's your defense? Gray swings
his arms so it just looks like he's
having Hallmark moments with a gay
pederast?
(then)
McGann's pushing this. *

HICKMAN
How bad?

CARTER
For Irving Gray, a sexless widower
who hasn't had a date since the
Harding administration? Bad. *

Susie doesn't like the attitude. *

SUSIE
No one's gonna think the Senator's
gay, let alone-- *

CARTER
In one of L.B.J.'s early House
races, in rural Texas, he asked his
aides to spread rumors his opponent
was sleeping with his own
livestock. They said, no one'll
ever believe that. L.B.J. said, I
don't care if they believe it, I
wanna see the sonofabitch stand up
and deny it.

(then)
(MORE)

CARTER(cont'd)

The charge is what hurts. This
one'll be on every web site from
Manassas to Malaysia before people
get a chance to "think."

*
*
*
*

SUSIE

(to Hickman)

We have to give back every penny
he's raised.

*
*

CARTER

(dumb idea)

How 'bout just taking out a
billboard that says, I'm guilty?

*
*
*
*

HICKMAN

We should talk to Gray and
Thornburgh, get the facts so we--

*
*
*

CARTER

Know them and can't spin our own
version?

*
*
*

They both look helplessly to Carter--

*

CARTER

Is this a second interview?

HICKMAN

Your Senator's asking you to
perform a service.

Yeah, right. Carter thinks for a beat, dials his cell phone-- *

*
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*

CARTER

(into phone)

I need you to find four or five
kiddie rapists. Booked, sentenced,
we're talking NAMBLA recording
secretaries here. I need each one
to write a 250-dollar check to
Brandt, tonight. Back-dated's even
better.

Carter hangs up.

*

SUSIE

You want child molesters to donate
to--

*
*

CARTER

Enough to show up on a public
disclosure form, not enough for
their lawyers to notice.

(MORE)

CARTER(cont'd)

Leak it to a few blogs, so when
 Thornburgh's playdates break, pox
 on everyone's houses. McGann'll
 bury this photo in his own
 backyard.

*
 *
 *
 *

Hickman would like to high-five Susie. Susie would like to
 take a shower.

*
 *

SUSIE
 We'll call you.

CARTER
 For 6,900 dollars, a house call'd
 be nice.

Carter turns a corner, walks toward the Saab. We might see a *
 half-asleep Ron in the driver's seat. After a moment,
 Carter's cell phone rings. Before he can even say hello--

*

GRAY (ON PHONE)
 This is Irving Gray.

CARTER
 (into phone, startled)
 Senator, I--

GRAY
 You start tomorrow, you report to
 Hickman. I want to see as little of
 you as possible.

Gray's off the line. And Carter starts to actually leap up in
 the air with excitement... until he sees Ron, catches
 himself, and hops into the car.

EXT. BUCOLIC VIRGINIA COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

CLOSE on a disk of clay, high in the air, exploding violently
 with the BANG of a shotgun. Perfect shot.

EXT. BUCOLIC VIRGINIA COUNTRYSIDE - MOMENTS LATER

From another angle, CLOSE on another disk, exploding just as
 violently from just as perfect a shot.

EXT. BUCOLIC VIRGINIA COUNTRYSIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Again, BANG, the clay shatters, and we PULL BACK to see we're
 at a photo-opportunity;

a gaggle of reporters and cameramen are watching CHRIS BRANDT shoot skeet with a few supporters, his very BLONDE WIFE, and his young son, CHRIS JR., who's about eight. Brandt's handsome, athletic, early 30's--as whitebread as they come, at ease before the cameras, a crack shot. Signs, placed in camera range, read "Brandt: For A Change." Chris Jr.'s holding a toy shotgun.

BRANDT

What're you shooting at, Chris?

CHRIS JR.

Democrats.

Supporters chuckle; Brandt doesn't. To Chris Jr. as well as the cameras--

BRANDT

Irving Gray's a good man,
Virginians just need a change.
That's something we could talk
about if he'd agree to debate me.

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN - DAY

We start on an overhead TV, airing that very footage on C-SPAN. Pulling back, we see Carter, clutching his guitar case, under-dressed as usual and a bit awe-struck in this football-field-sized working space. Rows and rows of cubicles, buzzing blackberries, humming cell phones... a far cry from City Council races. Carter EXHALES, this is his shot at the big leagues, he'd better not blow it. Then--

SUSIE (O.S.)

Where the hell have you been?

Carter spins around, the blush of insecurity's gone--

CARTER

Home in my pillow-top bed. If you
want to arrange a site inspection--

SUSIE

(drop the sass)

It's 10:46, our daily message
meeting starts at 7 a.m. sharp.

CARTER

I don't do meetings; I inflict
damage, I control it, and I--

SUSIE

Make TV ads, let's see if you can
make good on one out of three.
Come with me.

CARTER

I'm warning you, I only do pillow-
tops. Like sleeping on a cloud--

SUSIE

(all business)

I hired you an assistant.

Carter's looking around at the sea of bored-looking young
staffers. What do all these people do?

CARTER

Fire them. I only use my people.

SUSIE

How many of "your people" do we
have to add to the payroll?

CARTER

None, whatever law firm you use,
pay them; they'll pay my people.
Attorney-client privilege, no
fingerprints.

SUSIE

Are we bumping someone off?

CARTER

In a manner of speaking, yes.

Carter follows her into--

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Where a large meeting's in progress, easily a dozen buttoned-down 20- and 30-somethings. LAEL, the campaign's young and very blonde press secretary, is taking notes.

POLICY STAFFER #1

There was no evidence in the spring
sampling--none, nada, zippo--

POLICY STAFFER #2

Little Falls is their best spawning
ground, it's like a sturgeon Club
Med out there.

CARTER
(to Susie)
And this meeting's about...?

POLICY STAFFER #3
Look, NMFS has sole jurisdiction
for SNS under the ESA--

POLICY STAFFER #1
Show me the evidence, one puny
shortnose, I'll take half a nose--

LAEL
(explaining)
The, uh, shortnose sturgeon.
There's fisheries legislation to...
protect it from the, uh, discharge
in the... yeah I kinda lost track.

POLICY STAFFER #1
Because there were *no* sturgeon in
the spring sampling.

Carter's had enough, abruptly leaves, followed by Susie into--

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN - CONTINUOUS

CARTER
Are you gonna disband the aquatic
idiocy task force, or should I?

SUSIE
I run the message, not you. This is
about endangered species, the
Senator's very involved in the--

CARTER
The great sturgeon orgy of 2010,
I'll go get my camcorder.

SUSIE
How can you make our TV ads if you
don't know what policy we're--

CARTER
My ads are gonna be about Brandt,
about why he's worse than Senator
Sturgeon, that's how we win.

SUSIE
Voters are sick of the mud-
slinging, they want hope, change--

*
*
*

CARTER

So they're gonna vote for the guy
who looks like he was born in a
subcommittee hearing? No more
issues, no more Gray.

*
*
*
*

SUSIE

Right, and we won't have campaigned
on anything, so any hope of an
agenda can go out the window.

CARTER

(gimme a break)

Gray's been a seat-filler for ten
years. His agenda's a combover and
a comfy chair.

SUSIE

He may not be the leader he once
was, but he's still a senior
Senator, he still writes the
federal budget, on a good day he
still does more to save people's
pensions, fund child care, and yes,
protect endangered species than
most people do in a lifetime.

*
*

CARTER

He does? Or you do if he keeps you
after the election?

SUSIE

How dare you accuse me of--

CARTER

You want to have a drink with me
later.

What? Susie's thrown--

SUSIE

Don't interrupt me when I'm--why
would I possibly want that?

CARTER

'Cause the world's a lonely place,
'cause everyone else here's 16
years old and irons their blue
jeans, 'cause you left an extra
button undone on your blouse and
made no effort to cover it, your
subconscious has been flirting with
me since I walked in here.

She buttons her shirt all the way up, like an Amish woman.

SUSIE

I don't drink. Neither does my subconscious. If we did, it wouldn't be with you. I'm here to do issues, not to gorge myself on comfort sex and--wrinkled denim. Not to mention you're everything wrong with politics and quite possibly democracy itself.

She walks off, calls back--

SUSIE

Becca. Any meetings I have with idiot-boy here, cancel them.

They were standing near the cubicle of Susie's young and cute assistant BECCA, who heard everything, and was a lot more seduced by Carter's rap than Susie. They make eye contact, smile, Carter moves on.

INT. ROOF OF GRAY CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - NIGHT

Late at night. Carter and Becca are in the throes of passion, thrashing around, panting heavily. After a couple beats, and without disengaging at all--

BECCA

Carter--

CARTER

What--

BECCA

What're you gonna do... to Brandt.

Carter draws back a little, confused, still mid-thrust--

CARTER

Huh?

BECCA

Brandt, how're you gonna crush him--

CARTER

(beat)

How am I--

BECCA
 Plan of attack, details,
 methodology--now--

CARTER
 (tentatively)
 I-- uh... First I slam him--

BECCA
 Slam him how--

CARTER
 With--two thousand points of...
 negatives; cable, affiliates,
 direct mail--

BECCA
 Yes, get his negatives up, do it--

Carter's getting into this, gaining momentum; so is she--

CARTER
 Then I lit-drop his ass back to
 Little League--

BECCA
 Hit me; spank me--make me feel the
 lit-drop--

No time for questions; Carter gives her a couple good WHACKS
 on the rear--

CARTER
 Then I drown him in free media,
 till his whole family drops in the
 polls--

As they're both whipped into an orgasmic froth, we--

EXT. TEXTILE MILL - DAY

Morning at the mill, and Gray's pressing the flesh, shaking hand after hand. It's awkward, mechanical; Gray's masking too much anger and ambivalence to be the backslapping type. As he moves from arriving worker to arriving worker, grabbing hand after reluctant hand--

GRAY
 Irving Gray; like that shirt you're
 wearing.
 (next hand)
 (MORE)

GRAY(cont'd)

Irving Gray, I'd sure appreciate
your vote.

(next hand)

Hey, Irving Gray; cold out here,
isn't it?

(next hand)

Irving Gray; I just love that
brooch.

(next hand)

Morning, Irving Gray. Can I count
on your support?

(next hand)

Irving Gray. Really like that shirt
you've got on--

INT. CARTER'S CAR - DAY

It's early. Monica's driving Carter as they pull up outside
the mill; we see Gray pressing yet more flesh in the
background. Monica has a tall cup of coffee, a tired-looking *
Carter has a towering one. Carter notices a message from an *
UNKNOWN CALLER on his cell phone. He plays it on speaker, *
it's an elderly woman we'll come to know as DORIS--

ELDERLY WOMAN (ON PHONE)

Mr. Hood. You won't return my
calls, it's been two years and it'd
mean the world if you'd just--

Carter deletes the message.

MONICA

Forgive me for thinking you're
hiding something.

CARTER

I'm not allowed to have a life?

MONICA

Allowed to. But you don't.

Carter and Monica exit to--

EXT. TEXTILE MILL - CONTINUOUS

Where Ron is waiting and walks with them.

CARTER

What do we have on Brandt?

RON

Working on it, but--

*

CARTER

Work faster, I want to hit him
before he hits us. What.

*
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*

RON

Call from the field. The other
side's been sending a dozen huge
black guys--in hoodies and baggy
jeans--to hand out our campaign
literature in white Evangelical
churches.

*
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*

Carter actually respects this play--

*

CARTER

Gotta admire a party that doesn't
just play the race card, they slap
down the whole deck.

*
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*

(then)

Homeless guys, smelly ones, ripped
clothes, testicles hanging out--I
want 'em leafleting for Brandt. In
funeral homes. What else.

*
*
*
*
*
*
*
*

RON

Thornburgh, the beach-walker;
slapped with two charges of child
molestation today.

*
*
*

CARTER

Did the Brandt campaign comment?

RON

They're sorry for his family.

CARTER

And I'm sorry for Brandt's. I like
the big leagues, Ron.

Carter's feeling some wind at his back as he leaves them and
enters--

INT. TEXTILE MILL - CONTINUOUS

Where Hickman, Susie, and Lael are waiting in the massive,
industrial-age space. Hickman holds a manila envelope, big
enough to have a thick binder in it. They'd like to talk
quietly, but have to use some volume to rise above the
WHIRRING of the huge MACHINES.

SUSIE
(to Hickman)
You called him out here?

HICKMAN
(to Susie)
This is what we hired him for.

SUSIE
It's a legal matter, miles outside
his expertise.

CARTER
Don't see why, I break laws all the
time.

HICKMAN
(the envelope)
Arrived this morning at
headquarters. Postmarked Tuesday.

CARTER
Let me guess, she wants to give a
major policy address on postal
delivery.

HICKMAN
It's a briefing book. For a debate
against Chris Brandt.

CARTER
(beat)
Okay, whoever thinks we should
debate Chris Brandt, it's a very
bad idea--

SUSIE
It's not our briefing book, it's
the Brandt campaign's--their own
confidential, internal debate
strategy. Someone mailed it to us.

CARTER
Someone.

HICKMAN
No return address. One of our
supporters must have infiltrated
Brandt's campaign, to try to--

CARTER

(this is obvious)

C'mon, this is from McGann, I'm
amazed he didn't send it C.O.D.

SUSIE

He's not about to send us his own
briefing book, his own strategic
blueprint for a debate.

CARTER

First of all, we're never debating
Brandt, McGann knows that.

LAEL

The commentariat's giving us hell
for not even agreeing to one
debate.

CARTER

Fuck the commentariat, incumbents
don't debate pipsqueak challengers;
gives Brandt the chance to prove
he's Gray's equal, to go from also-
ran to also-running; don't even
schedule a prep session.

HICKMAN

Well we should call the FBI, if
this comes out, that we've got
their secret debate materials--

CARTER

That's their wet dream, call the
FBI and it does come out. You don't
think there are partisan
Republicans working in the Hoover
Building? Then everyone in this
room would have to recuse
themselves.

LAEL

From debate prep?

CARTER

From the entire campaign.

This lands on all of them; now they're listening to Carter.

SUSIE

We give it back to them, swear we
haven't read it.

CARTER

Please, then it's their word
against ours, they can say we stole
it and copied it.

HICKMAN

We can't exactly keep the thing--

CARTER

Damn right we can, and we keep it
among the people here. McGann's
trying to bait us again; we can't
bite.

*

SUSIE

You're sure we shouldn't come clean
about this?

CARTER

Politics 101, my dear, dirt can't
be cleaned.

Carter takes the envelope and heads off. Susie doesn't like
this, doesn't like being called "dear" either.

EXT. BURGER JOINT - NIGHT

Despite a chill, Carter's at an outdoor table, devouring a
double-cheeseburger as he quickly skims the DEBATE BRIEFING
BOOK. The envelope it came in is on the table too. Carter's
suddenly troubled by what he's seeing, starts reading more
carefully, eating more slowly... until he loses his appetite
altogether. He sees a few pigeons on the ground, pecking at
crumbs near his feet, and TOSSES them his entire burger. As
they approach and start pecking like vultures, and as Carter
gets lost in the briefing book, feeling pecked-at himself--

*

*

*

*

*

INT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - DAY

Early morning. Carter, Ron, Monica, big cups of coffee.
Berry's "Sweet Little Sixteen" is playing, Carter's cradling
his guitar, half-playing along, more distracted than usual;
documents are scattered around them.

CARTER

This is the song the Beach Boys
ripped off for "Surfing U.S.A."
Chuck sued, they had to--

MONICA
Give him credit on the label, can
we--

CARTER
There's a lesson in it.

Becca emerges with embarrassment from the bedroom, carrying
her shoes and a BIG PILE of RED-WHITE-AND-BLUE CAMPAIGN
BUNTING; she rushes out the front door. Carter avoids eye
contact with Ron and Monica. *

MONICA
But maybe not the one you were
thinking. Get this one's name? Or
just her voting record?

CARTER
It's biology, okay, no one asked
for a ring; give me the
vulnerability assessment on Brandt.

RON
We oughta start with Senator Gray,
he's got a lotta investments that-- *

CARTER
Start with Brandt.

RON
We oughta start with Gray--forget
low-hanging fruit, it's like a
fruit salad out there--

Carter takes out the briefing book, slams it down in front of
them.

CARTER
Gray's a money-grubber, takes every
sweetheart deal that comes his way,
it's how burned-out Senators build
a war chest and scare off
challengers, and at a time when
voters want to replace Wall Street
with a dirt fucking road... It's
all in the briefing book McGann
mailed me, what's the assessment on
Brandt. *

MONICA
(beat)
Why would McGann want us to know
his line of attack?

CARTER

Maybe to psych us out, maybe he
thinks we're dumb enough to give it
to the Feds--let's focus on hitting
back, what about Brandt.

RON

Nothing.

CARTER

Wait-till-we-get-creative-with-it
nothing?

RON

I'd-hire-him-to-sponge-bathe-my-own-
grandmother nothing.

MONICA

'Kay that was an image I didn't
need.

RON

Richmond Braves to Atlanta Braves,
seven years on the bench chewing
sunflower seeds, that's it.

*

They give some documents to Carter.

CARTER

Look harder.

*

RON

And no strange donor patterns.

A phone rings; Monica goes to answer it in the background.

CARTER

(scanning documents)

Wait, there is one. I thought
McGann and his oversized rolodex
were Brandt's big fundraising draw.
Look at this--

(spreading out papers)

Brandt had a surge in donations
weeks before McGann signed on.
Dozens and dozens of 2,300-dollar
checks for a complete nobody.

RON

That is strange.

Monica returns.

CARTER

I need a breakdown of these eleventh-hour donors--by profession, by donation history--the works. McGann may be making mischief, but he's not the only one.

RON

Why now? Why so late in a campaign?

MONICA

(to Carter)

You can ask McGann.

(then)

That was his office, he wants to have lunch with you today.

Carter smiles at this.

RON

You're gonna sit down with him?

CARTER

I got his attention, you want me to turn down an engraved invitation to the winner's circle?

RON

Could be a set-up, you don't break bread with the opposition.

CARTER

Tried to rattle me twice, what makes you think it'll work a third time?

EXT. DINER - DAY

Monica's driving Carter in his Saab; he's wound up, trying to tie a necktie--not something he does very often--and it looks like he's lacing up his neck like a Nike sneaker.

MONICA

Clever. If the lunch goes badly you can hang yourself.

Carter pulls off the necktie, tosses it out the window, exits the car and enters--

INT. DINER - CONTINUOUS

Where the killer himself, STEVE MCGANN, is in the middle of the room, drawing on a napkin as he waits. McGann's 40-something, has long hair for a Republican; we know he's wearing cowboy boots even if we never see them. He's self-satisfied, even giddy, the kind of guy who has fun all day and is about to have some more.

CARTER

I thought I was early.

MCGANN

(still drawing)

Lesson number one, not early enough.

Carter takes a seat.

CARTER

I've been following your work.

MCGANN

So you're a follower not a leader then.

CARTER

I can follow money. And I want to know why you and dozens of donors are trying to save loser-boy Brandt.

MCGANN

I want to know why you stepped in front of Swerving Irving Gray.

(then)

Tougher question, so I'll help you out. We're in business, right? Like criminal defense. Only question you have to ask your clients is: check, cash, or money order.

CARTER

I don't compare my clients to criminals.

MCGANN

Only proves you're new in town.

*

CARTER
(pointedly)
Funny, 'cause I'm already getting
mail here.

MCGANN
(even more pointedly)
I'm gonna beat you, Carter Hood.
Badly.

Carter's confidence is wavering, though he won't quite show it.

CARTER
I've never lost a race.

MCGANN
Neither have I. And I'm talking real races, not the Kiwanis Club dinner committee. But we'll keep this civil. Campaign'll be over in less than two weeks, it's a small town, who knows--you and I could be taking corporate clients together.

CARTER
I don't take corporate clients, I don't lobby, and I don't work with Republicans.

McGann slides Carter an envelope anyway.

MCGANN
S.J. Stevens. Heard of 'em?

CARTER
The tobacco giant. Love that other product of theirs, cancer.

MCGANN
Guess that's why they want an image enhancement campaign, together with a legislative strategy, and your name came up. Half-mill retainer, could take up a lot of your time.

CARTER
Or none.

MCGANN
 So I'll understand if you want to
 stop holding hands with Gray
 altogether. Why put a loss on your
 scorecard?

McGann stands, throws down a crumpled fifty-dollar bill.

MCGANN
 Already ate. That'll teach you to
 keep me waiting so long.

Carter takes the fifty, shoves it back into McGann's jacket pocket, but McGann simply hands it to the waitress, drops his napkin-sketch in front of Carter, leaves. On the napkin is a goofy-looking CARTOON of Carter, surrounded by BAGS OF MONEY.

INT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Carter's alone, thinking, listening to Chuck Berry's "Back In The U.S.A.," clutching his guitar but mostly staring at the ENVELOPE McGann gave him, which is on a coffee table across the room.

INT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Now Carter's sitting in a chair by the coffee table, the envelope right in front of him. It's bothering him. A lot. He grabs a phone, dials.

HENDRY (ON PHONE)
 This is Mark.

CARTER
 (into phone)
 Mark Hendry.

HENDRY (ON PHONE)
 Yes.

CARTER
 Carter Hood.
 (beat)
 The guy who convinced Gray to fire
 you on Tuesday, to hire me in your
 place.

(beat)
 I know this is awkward. But one
 good Democrat to another, I met
 Steve McGann today.

(then)
 (MORE)

CARTER(cont'd)

He offered me a huge corporate account to drop off Gray's campaign. I'm wondering if you can think of any reason, any basis for--

HENDRY (ON PHONE)

They told you they fired me to hire you.

CARTER

They didn't have to tell me, I'm the one who talked them into--

HENDRY (ON PHONE)

I left the Gray campaign over a week ago.

CARTER

Over a week.

HENDRY (ON PHONE)

Want a future in Washington? One good Democrat to another? Take McGann's offer, get the hell off that campaign. Don't call this number again.

Hendry's off the line. Carter jumps out of his chair.

INT. A VEHICLE - NIGHT

CLOSE on a hand jamming a KEY into the IGNITION as the vehicle loudly starts and SCREECHES off. PULL BACK to reveal that it's a TAXI-CAB; a fuming, impatient Carter sits in the back. He drops a twenty onto the front seat, on top of one's that's already there, and gestures for the driver to go even faster, which he does with a big ROAR of the engine.

INT. LOBBY, GRAY CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - NIGHT

Carter's waiting as the elevator door opens. A small crowd streams out; Hickman's in the back. Before he can exit for the night, Carter pushes him back into--

INT. ELEVATOR - CONTINUOUS

A half-dozen people enter as well. Carter's still fuming.

CARTER

(not quietly enough)

You lied about Hendry.

Carter pushes the second-floor button. Hickman doesn't want to talk about this in a half-crowded elevator.

HICKMAN
Campaign's on three.

Which Carter knows. The elevator door opens on two--

CARTER
Everybody out, elevator's out of service. C'mon, out.

The confused passengers all exit. The door shuts, the elevator restarts; Carter stops it between floors.

CARTER
He claims my career's at risk if I stay on this campaign--the fuck's going on, Hickman?

HICKMAN
You report to me, not the other way around, remember?

But something about Carter's look says: out with it, now.

HICKMAN
Richmond Times had a story, Hendry shared confidential campaign memoranda with... a young volunteer he fancied.

CARTER
Okay, so how's that a--

HICKMAN
Who happened to be a prostitute.
Who happened to offer those memoranda for sale to--

CARTER
The Richmond Times.

Right the first time.

CARTER
As Strom Thurmond said to about fifteen generations of federal prosecutors, set a pussy trap, we fall for it every time. Which is why you *screen out the hookers in* own your--

HICKMAN

We fucked up, okay? Hendry left as part of a deal to get the story killed.

*

*

CARTER

A deal with who?

HICKMAN

I don't even know, big donor of the Senator's worked it out--

CARTER

So now another one of your sleazoid donors knows we--

*

*

HICKMAN

You'd rather we admitted we had a call girl in the mailroom?

*

*

CARTER

And you're telling me a major Senate campaign had no consultant for a whole week?

*

HICKMAN

No one would do it, I can't say why. We needed help on the molestation thing, but that's the real reason the Senator considered you.

*

CARTER

I can say why, McGann engineered it. He doesn't want anyone here who's capable of responding to his tricks: the Thornburgh mess, the briefing book, this... hooker-gate thing--and now he's trying to buy me off.

*

*

(then)

I get carte blanche to do whatever it takes to win this, or I walk right now.

Hickman restarts the elevator.

HICKMAN

Try coming to the 7 a.m. message meeting, maybe you'll know what to write on your "carte."

The door opens in the lobby, Hickman exits.

INT. HICKMAN'S OFFICE - DAY

It's 7 a.m. sharp. Hickman, Susie, Lael, a few others are gathered as Carter enters--not wanting to be here, in fact not really familiar with this time of day, but needing to assert himself. Susie's not happy to see him.

SUSIE

I thought you didn't do meetings.

CARTER

I control damage; from what I can tell, this is where you people manufacture it.

SUSIE

(to Hickman)

You're gonna let him walk into my message meeting and--

HICKMAN

(avoiding Susie's look)

Can we start? Lael? *

LAEL

Down two more points in the latest Field poll. Statistically insignificant.

CARTER

Down is never insignificant.

SUSIE

Thank god tomorrow's our weekly policy address; immigration reform, a comprehensive plan to expand-- *

A STAFFER's been handing around the back-up paper. Carter grabs it, immediately starts shaking his head--

CARTER

Bad idea.

SUSIE

For a United States Senator to expand paths to citizenship. *

CARTER

For Gray to keep babbling platitudes, to keep the spotlight on himself when he needs a fight. *

(MORE) *

CARTER(cont'd)

Hit Big Oil, Big Tobacco--at least
till I find stuff on Brandt; he
used to whack 'em all the time--

*
*

HICKMAN

They're donors this year.

SUSIE

And I run the message.

CARTER

Run it into the ground--and if we
don't find an enemy before our lead
drains away, someone to--

*
*

Carter's noticed something in the policy paper: bingo.

CARTER

Illegal immigrants. That's the
enemy.

*

SUSIE

No.

*

CARTER

It's right here in your 9,000-point
plan: tougher enforcement of
immigration laws.

*
*

SUSIE

We strengthen border patrols, yes,
but as part of a comprehensive--

*
*

CARTER

(to Hickman)

Cancel the speech, have Gray meet
with a bunch of unemployed bubbas,
tell 'em he'll cut all handouts to
illegals. No welfare, no food
stamps, no Medicaid--

*
*
*
*
*
*
*
*

SUSIE

That's pure demagoguery. They don't
get those benefits now.

*
*
*

CARTER

For once it's a promise Gray can
keep. And it doesn't hurt anybody.

*
*
*

SUSIE

Like hell it doesn't; it's race-
baiting--perhaps you've heard of
the leader of our party, Barack
Obama?

*
*
*
*
*
*

CARTER

Perhaps you've heard of the loser
of every party: a defeated Senator.

*
*
*

SUSIE

You want to beat up on some poor,
defenseless, scraping-to-get-by--

*
*
*

Carter nods enthusiastically, Susie shakes her head just as
enthusiastically.

SUSIE

Pro-immigrant groups are a core
Democratic constituency.

*
*

CARTER

Which is why no Democrat takes 'em
on, why Gray'll look gutsy if he
does. What're they gonna do, vote
Republican?

*

SUSIE

(to Hickman, back me up)
It's craven. The Senator won't do
it. And I'm in charge of the
message, not him.

A tough call for Hickman, but--

HICKMAN

Down is never insignificant. I'm
taking it to the Senator.

Susie storms out, slams the door. Carter may have won again,
but the effort's wearing on him.

*

CARTER

Just what I need on a campaign, a
fucking idealist.

*

Carter exits into--

*

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN - CONTINUOUS

*

Where he sees Becca walking by; she smirks conspiratorially
and gives him Nixon-style victory V's with both hands... but
Carter's not in the mood, storms off.

*
*
*

INT. ALLEYWAY BEHIND HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Carter's on his cell phone, in front of some garbage cans and noisy air vents.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. SANDLER'S CUBICLE, RICHMOND TIMES - SAME TIME

TOM SANDLER, a scraggly, 30-something veteran reporter, is at a cubicle piled with more paper and clutter and greasy fast-food wrappers than you'd think it could possibly support.

SANDLER
(into phone)
You got Sandler.

CARTER
(into phone)
I need information.

SANDLER
Tried a newsstand?

CARTER
What does your soiled rag of a newspaper care about Mark Hendry and his overactive pecker? *

SANDLER
If you're saying I'm not the caring kind, well gee, Carter, that hurts--

CARTER
C'mon, I'm asking for help here.

SANDLER
That's not how this relationship works. You feed me dirt, I print it, doesn't mean I owe you.

CARTER
Did McGann drum that up for you?

SANDLER
Got a lot of column inches to fill.
I follow all sorts of drumbeats.

CARTER

Off the record? How 'bout filling 'em with McGann himself--why he dropped onto Brandt's campaign, who's making all these late-breaking donations to Brandt, and why political consultants are avoiding Gray like the bubonic plague. That's the story.

SANDLER

Is it? Or do you just want me to think it is?

Huh?

CARTER

What's your point.

SANDLER

No point. I'm just an observer. But by all means, call me when you've got a point of your own.

Sandler's off the line. So much for that lifeline. Carter kicks a garbage can but just hurts his foot in the process.

EXT. NATIONAL MALL - NIGHT

The Capitol looms in the background. Carter can't help glancing at it, as if it's taunting him, as he walks with Mason.

CARTER

My predecessor was caught in a cat trap, McGann wants to buy me off, Richmond Times seems to think I'm up to something--and I wish I was--

*
*

MASON

If only somebody'd warned you.

CARTER

Why would McGann even care about Gray? Why would all those donors?

MASON

Let's see, Gray's a Democrat, McGann's a Republican... did we cover the part where there are three branches of government?

CARTER

Why now? When they didn't try to touch him two months ago, two years ago, when they could have found a serious opponent?

MASON

Gray's been in office for years. May have enemies you don't know about.

CARTER

Gray's been playing it safe for years. Used to champion health care, the environment, take on all the entrenched interests--now he chairs the Rules and Administration Committee, the guys who brought us 975-page Paperwork Reduction Act.

MASON

Take my original advice, get off this race.

CARTER

(not interested in that)
Something funny's going on, here I am, right in the fucking middle of it, and I have no clue what it is.

MASON

That's Washington, I told you; city on a swamp.

A long pause as they walk.

CARTER

It's gotten worse since you worked for my dad, hasn't it? All the games and the money.

MASON

Nah. It was always like this. Your dad just thought he could float above it. Which is why he ran the most expensive campaign of all: a losing one.

INT. TV STUDIO - DAY

We're watching Brandt do a live remote interview. We can't hear the questions, we can only see him with an earpiece and a clip-on mic, in front of a fake bookcase and fake plants.

BRANDT

(beat)

No, my opponent's a good man, I just think Virginia needs a change.

(beat)

We need to change direction. That's the kind of change I'm offering.

(beat)

I'd say this is a change election. It's about change versus more of the same.

(beat)

I honor his decades of service. But elections aren't about past performance. If we want a real change...

INT. CARTER'S CAMPAIGN OFFICE - SAME TIME

Carter's watching cheap-looking, third-generation footage of the same interview on a computer, trying to freeze the image on an unflattering frame as Ron and Monica enter.

*
*
*

MONICA

If you're using that for an ad, I can find better-quality footage of--

*
*
*

CARTER

Who cares.

*
*

RON

Madison Avenue this ain't.

*
*

CARTER

Someone should teach Madison Avenue that million-dollar budgets and cinematic shots of the Everglades don't drive a message. Why Coke doesn't just run ads saying "Pepsi causes cancer" is beyond me.

*
*
*
*
*
*
*
*

(then)

Tell me you've got copy for the ad I can't seem to make.

*
*

MONICA

Still nothing. Tax returns,
flawless; no liens, no lawsuits, no
fuzzy drug tests...

RON

Looks like you found your fantasy
candidate.

CARTER

I've got a back-up plan. When
Brandt attacks Gray--inevitably,
for all his dicey donor pals--we
attack Brandt for attacking us.

RON

Politics as usual.

CARTER

For a fresh face running on change,
it might be enough.

MONICA

Gray's immigration speech is on C-
SPAN.

*

CARTER

No immigration speech, I spiked it.

*

MONICA

Then why's it on C-SPAN?

Carter changes the channel, and sure enough--

GRAY (ON TV)

...it's time to expand pathways to
citizenship, and today I'm
presenting a ten-point plan...

*

*

EXT. STODGY-LOOKING COURTHOUSE STEPS - THE SAME TIME

*

Where Gray is giving his speech to a half-sized crowd. The
banality and lethargy are contagious.

GRAY

...to build on my record of
leadership and achievement of these
past 24 years. For I believe
immigration renews the very
lifeblood of the American...

*

*

We see a few bored REPORTERS in a half-filled press section with notepads and lap-tops; one's playing a video game, another's reading "Jane's Defence Weekly."

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN - THE SAME TIME

Carter approaches Hickman, who's in a huddle with a few young STAFFERS, yanks him away--

CARTER

This is how he shows his balls? By pandering to the one constituency that can't even vote? For Susie and her Saint Obama bullshit?

*
*
*
*

HICKMAN

La Raza made an 11-hour donation. A big one. Fundraising's slowing, he's already given 500 grand from his own bank account. Money talks, Carter, it's how you got in the door.

*

Carter sees Susie across the bullpen; she's got that extra button unbuttoned plus one more, and a slightly tighter skirt, and as their eyes meet, she yanks her hair down and gives him a look that says, "don't fuck with me." As he watches her suddenly-sexier frame walk away, Carter sees she gives as good as she gets.

INT. CARTER'S CAMPAIGN OFFICE - DAY

Chuck Berry's "Too Much Monkey Business" is blaring as Carter wolfs down a bag of french fries and slow-scans yet more video of Brandt, comparing two unflattering frames of Brandt, spastic, on a baseball diamond. Monica enters, hands Carter a thick packet.

*
*
*
*

MONICA

That surge in donations to Brandt. At least half of it falls under three categories: people associated with pro-gun groups, people associated with energy companies, and DC-area law firms.

CARTER

(reading)

Guns for Justice, Coal Policy Forum, Oil Discovery Council...

MONICA

But we can't find any overlap, any connections between them.

CARTER

Gun nuts, polluters, and lawyers. Talk about a Halloween coalition.

As Carter starts leafing through the packet, a breathless and somewhat pale Ron rushes in.

RON

Big fucking problem. Out here.

Carter hurries into--

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN -- CONTINUOUS

Carter sees on a staffer's computer--on youtube, essentially-- his own shock baton ad. The bound-and-gagged body in black and white, jerking violently as the baton makes contact--

RON'S VOICE (ON COMPUTER)

...why Senator Gray's in for a shock this November...

CARTER

Hey, how'd that--turn that off--

But then, like some kind of sci-fi nightmare, Carter sees that it's on almost every staffer's computer, down rows and rows of cubicles.

RON'S VOICE (ON COMPUTER)

...selling torture, illegally, in Indonesia...

RON'S VOICE (ON COMPUTER)

...that's why Senator Gray's in for a...

RON'S VOICE (ON COMPUTER)

...in for a shock this November...

CARTER

(louder)

Turn off the--how'd that get out on the--

(to Ron)

I told you to scrub the hard drive, destroy every existing trace of--

RON

I did.

Carter runs down the aisles, shutting off and even unplugging a few computers along the way, as STAFFERS react with "hey," or "what're you doing," till he sees Susie, staring with concern at an overhead TV; the ad's on CNN.

CNN ANCHOR (ON TV)

...Irving Gray's business dealings-- attempts to cash in on his influence, perhaps finance his own campaigns--have been a poorly-kept secret in Washington, and this homemade--

Susie changes the channel, gives Carter an angry look--

FOX NEWS ANCHOR (ON TV)

...so-called "viral videos" that have been reshaping modern campaigns, in this case to the detriment of Senator Irving--

Carter's head's spinning. To Monica, who's been following--

CARTER

Where's Gray.

MONICA

Pulling up to the building.

Carter runs into--

INT. STAIRWELL/LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Where he bolts down two flights of stairs, and out to--

EXT. GRAY CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

Carter sees Gray's limousine idling on the street outside; through tinted windows, we barely see Gray and Hickman in the back seat. Carter looks around, sees a few REPORTERS coming toward him and the limo, notepads at the ready. He quickly hops into the front passenger seat of--

INT. GRAY'S LIMOUSINE - CONTINUOUS

Gray's on the phone. Hickman wonders what the hell Carter's doing in the limo.

GRAY
 (into phone)
 ...our fundraiser's on the 23rd.
 (beat)
 Uh-huh. Well is your checkbook
 going to be out of town too? *

HICKMAN
 (annoyed, sotto)
 Could you give the Senator a
 moment?

CARTER
 (to the driver)
 Circle the block, I'll tell you
 when to stop--

Gray hangs up the phone, with some irritation.

GRAY
 I'm late for a press conference,
 this'll have to wait until--

Carter speaks calmly, unwaveringly, bracing himself for the
 panic that will greet him--

CARTER
 The negative ad I made about you,
 about shock batons, it's leaked
 onto the internet, on CNN, youtube,
 everywhere. *

HICKMAN/GRAY
 It leaked on the--/How could it--

CARTER
 Maybe McGann somehow, maybe one of
 my people screwed up; whoever did
 it, I'm responsible and I'm
 resigning right now.

GRAY
 You're goddamned right you're
 resigning right--

HICKMAN
 Whoa whoa whoa, let's not be hasty,
 Carter didn't do this on purpose,
 and someone has to figure out how
 we handle it.

Carter's surprised by the sudden defense; Gray's just plain
 surprised. Then--

GRAY

I'm calling law enforcement.

CARTER

Do that and every scrap of paper,
every hard drive, every test ad and
real ad we're working on goes to a
pack of bloodthirsty Republican
prosecutors and explodes all over
the internet too.

*
*
*

HICKMAN

Then we'll find who did it and
string him up by his hairy little--

CARTER

Could've been a pizza delivery guy,
and outing him just spreads our own
dirt further; whoever did this did
it right.

As they pass headquarters, they see a group of reporters
waiting eagerly for the limo to stop. A confused Lael runs up
to the moving limo, knocks on a window as it passes--

GRAY

I'll say I didn't know a goddamn
thing about it.

CARTER

You just profited from it?

HICKMAN

Then we're canceling his press
conference.

CARTER

Can't do that either, this is gonna
be huge, you have to take some air
out of the balloon.

GRAY

(panicking)

How am I supposed to--

CARTER

(thinking fast)

Be non-defensive. All you know is
what's been on TV, your campaign'll
get into it, then pivot to your own
message--immigration reform,
sturgeon relief, whatever--

*

GRAY

*How can I be non-defensive when
there's a goddamned torture ad all
over the goddamned--*

CARTER

(calm, demonstrating)

All I know is what's been on TV, my
campaign's getting into it. This
race isn't about me, it's about the
fight to get illegal aliens out of
Uncle Sam's wallet. Break our laws,
we don't pay your way.

*
*
*
*

Gray's in a lather, but Carter's calm certitude tells him
he'd better listen to this guy.

GRAY

(almost hyperventilating)

I only know what's been on TV, my
campaign's gonna get into it--

CARTER

Deep breaths, relax your shoulders,
this is all body language--

(to Hickman)

Your necktie, give it to him--

HICKMAN

What're you talking about?

CARTER

His is sleazy politician-red, yours
is blue, the color of honesty, give
it to him now.

He does; Gray switches neckties--

GRAY

(rehearsing, relaxing)

All I know is what's on TV... I
really just know what's been on the
TV... hey, what would I know beyond
what's on the--

CARTER

(to the driver)

Stop the car.

(to Gray)

You have nothing to hide. Go.

The limo's stopped, they exit to--

EXT. GRAY CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

Where Lael's waiting to whisk Gray past the small gaggle of REPORTERS.

REPORTERS

Senator--/Can you comment on the video that's--/Senator--/Can you--

LAEL

Sorry, guys, we're late for a press conference--

Gray and Lael enter the building, the reporters all follow. Hickman looks nauseous. Carter knows why.

CARTER

You defended me. For something indefensible.

(beat)

You didn't destroy that DVD.

HICKMAN

Not exactly.

CARTER

What did you do, exactly.

HICKMAN

I tested it in front of focus groups. I think the polling company still has it.

Carter can't believe what he just heard. A beat.

CARTER

So a dozen focus group technicians, people who work on a hundred different campaigns, could have posted the fucking thing, let alone a mole on your own campaign staff.

*
*

HICKMAN

You piqued the Senator's interest. No one knew who you were. We had to see if you were any good.

CARTER

Was I?

HICKMAN

Your ad destroyed us in the focus groups.

Bad news. Now Carter's panicking slightly.

CARTER

Okay. Okay. McGann would've gotten this out anyway, it was all in his briefing book. And this is what you hired me for, right? To control the damage and lob it right back. Which is what I'm gonna do.

*

But Carter has no idea how, as--

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BRIEFING ROOM - DAY

Gray's at a podium with a small "Leadership, Achievement, Gray" sign as Lael and Susie stand off to the side. The room's packed with REPORTERS, a much more energized crowd now that they've got something to write about--

GRAY

(relaxed)

All I know about these charges is what's been on TV, my campaign's getting into it.

REPORTER #1

Senator, KausFiles and Talking Points Memo already got into it, you had 500 shares of RenCorp, does this mean you're endorsing torture, contradicting President Obama's directives, which you've said you--

*

*

*

*

GRAY

(less relaxed)

I'm focused on immigration, and this election's about leadership, about my 24-year record of--

*

REPORTER #2

What kind of leader makes money zapping Indonesian dissidents, when so many Virginians are playing by the rules and losing their savings?

*

*

*

GRAY
 (not relaxed)
 I'm trying to be non-defensive
 here, you want to dig into my
 investment portfolio, do your
 worst, I've got nothing to hide...

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN - DAY

Carter and Hickman have just entered to see the press conference on an overhead TV. Carter's about to swallow his hand.

REPORTERS (ON TV)
 Senator--/So you're challenging us
 to dig into--/Senator Gray--

CARTER
 (to himself)
 No no no no no...

Carter takes a look down the bullpen, at the vast sea of maybe-not-so-loyal-to-Gray staffers, watching their candidate blankly and unenthusiastically on overhead TV's.

GRAY (ON TV)
 ...I'm relaxed about this, so I'm
 gonna be non-defensive about it...

CARTER
 Fine.

Carter walks calmly, stoically, into--

INT. CARTER'S CAMPAIGN OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Where he closes the door behind him, and finds a SHOCK BATON, with a red ribbon and a small card attached. In engraved letters, it reads, "With condolences, Steven McGann." Below that is yet another goofy-looking CARTOON--of McGann himself, with a GIGANTIC ERECT PENIS, and of Carter, with a MINUSCULE, FLACCID one. In an explosion of RAGE, Carter smashes the baton, starts tearing the office apart. Books come off bookshelves with a CRASH, maps and photos TUMBLE off walls, drawers are YANKED out and emptied upside down, a phone's thrown at the wall... *

INT. CARTER'S CAMPAIGN OFFICE - NIGHT

It's much later. The office is still in total disarray. Carter's hunched over a pile of documents, scrutinizing and comparing them, thinking deeply but not productively, flush, perspiring, wondering what the fuck just happened...

INT. CARTER'S CAMPAIGN OFFICE - NIGHT

Still later. Carter's kneeling on the floor, many more documents spread out before him, looking for order in the chaos of data, as a seething Susie enters.

CARTER

(not looking up)

What's Irving Gray done to piss off polluters and gun nuts? Why would they be in cahoots against him? You know the issues, I don't.

Susie's incredulous.

SUSIE

Do I look like a copy of the Congressional Quarterly?

CARTER

Nah, you're right, C.Q. I can take with me to bed, so--

SUSIE

What the fuck are you doing to this campaign?

CARTER

Controlling the damage.

SUSIE

Oh, right, that explains why your slimeball ad's all over the internet.

*
*

CARTER

Since I gave Hickman the only copy--

SUSIE

You hand him a ticking time bomb and it's his fault it blows off our fingers?

Carter approaches Susie, grabs her arm; she shakes it loose--

CARTER

Listen to me, there are mountains
of dirt on Gray--sloppy
investments, insider stock tips--
everything from shock batons to
sales of underwater real estate--

SUSIE

Underwater real estate?

CARTER

And Gray just challenged the entire
press corps to find it. If they do,
he's dead--and so is child care,
endangered sturgeon, whatever it is
you're in this for.

SUSIE

You're saying Gray's that dirty?

CARTER

Anyone with a Schwab account's that
dirty if you know how to look--and
now everyone's looking.

Carter tosses the now-cracked shock baton to Susie, she reads
the card, the name that's on it, the penis artwork-- *

*

CARTER

Don't act like you haven't got five
of those in a bedroom drawer.

SUSIE

Steve McGann did this?

CARTER

Probably. He has all the dirt on
Gray in that briefing book, but by
leaking my ad, he gets it out, the
only fingerprints on it are mine--
no need to bother with hookers or
pederasts--and Brandt's still
running his clean campaign so I
can't hit back.

*

*

*

SUSIE

We're screwed.

CARTER

Maybe. But McGann's not in this
alone.

(MORE)

CARTER(cont'd)

And it's just gone from a garden-variety dirty tricks campaign to full-scale illegality--conspiracy, bribery, maybe even moles and wiretaps.

(then)

If we expose who's behind this and why, if we figure out why a bunch of gun nuts, polluters, and lawyers started donating to Brandt, we might have a way out.

(then)

You know the issues, I don't.

Susie surveys the wreckage.

CARTER

I checked the room for wires.

Susie notices Carter's guitar, grabs it--

CARTER

No, wait, that's an--

SUSIE

Wires--

Carter hurls himself between his beloved Gibson and the wall *
 Susie's about to smash it against; we hear the small CLUNK of *
 its body striking Carter's. He inspects it for the smallest *
 scratch-- *

CARTER

Electric guitar--same model Chuck *
 Berry used when he-- *

SUSIE

(unapologetic)

When you're done sullying Gray's *
 name, maybe you'll show me your *
 model train set. *

Carter's recovering from this near-musical-death experience, *
 cradling the guitar like a pet, as Susie drifts over to the *
 desk, looks at Carter's documents. *

SUSIE

Gun groups and polluters have no
 quarrel with Gray, he hasn't lifted
 a finger against them in years. I
 don't know why they'd help Brandt.
 Lawyers, I can't imagine why--

CARTER

Lawyers are just a way to launder
donations, to hide whoever's behind
them.

SUSIE

(getting it)

Attorney-client privilege, no
fingerprints.

CARTER

(an idea)

We're gonna visit some of these law
firms, find out what's fueling this
gun-toting, soot-spewing cabal.

Carter grabs Susie's hand to lead her out of the room; she
shakes it free again.

SUSIE

Wait, we're visiting--at eleven
o'clock at night?

INT. CARTER'S CAR - NIGHT

Susie's driving Carter's old Saab. Chuck Berry's "I'm Talking *
About You" is playing on the cassette deck. *

SUSIE

I can't believe I'm driving you
around.

CARTER

Hickman says you're new to
politics, worked for labor unions.

SUSIE

Is this an inquisition?

CARTER

Wondering why you give a damn about
immigrants. *

SUSIE

(beat)

I have my dad's coloring. But mom
was Costa Rican. Raised three kids
scrubbing floors. That plus Social
Security disability insurance.
Progressive issues aren't a game to
me.

CARTER

I can see why. Except your father's a hedge fund manager in Short Hills, New Jersey, your mother's a housewife, both registered Republicans; Lawrenceville Prep to Princeton, two years on Wall Street: you're a Democrat out of class guilt. Stop the car.

She does; Carter leads them out into--

EXT. DANK WASHINGTON BACK ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

SUSIE

What gives you the right to psychoanalyze me?

CARTER

Your last lie. I dig up dirt to get to the truth.

They're behind a big office building. Carter opens the lid of a big dumpster, begins pulling out garbage bags; the first one's dripping with something vile.

SUSIE

We're looking through garbage?

CARTER

Unless you've got a better way to find out what's in it. Why'd you leave the unions?

SUSIE

(beat, relenting)

I got tired of being a whiny advocate, getting kicked out of the room before the deals were actually made.

Carter smiles at this, keeps digging. He's checking out bag after bag, tearing small holes to see what's in them. Everything from last Tuesday's lunch to packing material to old newspapers.

SUSIE

Why are you smiling?

CARTER

You're more like me than you want to admit.

SUSIE

Don't flatter yourself, I was wrong. Once you're in that room, it's all about kissing up, kicking down--doing anything and everything to stay in that room. Till you forget why you're there in the first place.

CARTER

Like Swerving Irving Gray.

SUSIE

He's a good man. Trying to hang onto what he has after a wrenching tragedy. Once he gets past this election--

CARTER

That's what they said before the last one.

SUSIE

And you hate politicians because your father was a Congressman?

CARTER

Hey, congrats, you know how to use Google too.

SUSIE

You don't use his last name, is that another one of your--

CARTER

(enough already)

My mom was the third of four wives, changed our names after the old man left her. I went to boarding school at twelve, she drank her way into a pine box, I barely knew either of them. Sorry if that's not on Lexis-Nexis.

SUSIE

Where's your father now?

CARTER

Five miles from here.

(wishing he could retract that)

Not far enough.

Susie's struck by this, and by the coldness of Carter's recitation of it, when Carter rips open another bag, finds it's stuffed with thinly-shredded paper. *

CARTER
Bullseye. *

SUSIE
What good is that, it's been shredded.

CARTER
But not diagonally, a common mistake; my guys can reassemble it, find out who some of these lawyer-donors are working for. And why they've suddenly got a hard-on for Gray.

SUSIE
Finally, your real area of expertise.

As a pleased Carter tosses an especially messy, dripping bag to a none-too-pleased Susie--

EXT. SUBURBAN VIRGINIA SUPERMARKET - DAY

We're in the front parking lot. Easily two-dozen reporters and several satellite trucks. We can see how Gray's press corps has grown and become reenergized, and it's far from a good thing for Gray. *

INT. BACK STOREROOM OF SUPERMARKET - DAY

Hickman, Lael, Susie, a couple young staffers amid huge cardboard boxes and hand trucks. Carter enters.

HICKMAN
Since when do you come to grip-and-grins?

CARTER
Since I lost faith in the candidate's ability to survive them.

LAEL
That's not all we're losing; The White House canceled our "unity rally" for the final weekend.

(MORE)

*

*

*

*

*

*

*

LAEEL (cont'd)

And we're down three more points in
the tracking. Three points in one
night.

*
*
*

HICKMAN

(newspaper headlines)

"Gray To Reporters: Find My Shady
Investments;" "Torture Okay With
Gray"...

*
*
*

LAEEL

The shock baton ad's gotten half a
million hits on youtube alone.

SUSIE

(now less-certain)

So we talk about issues.

CARTER

You think 19-point plans'll bump
shock batons off the news?

She doesn't. She's also slowly warming up to Carter and his
point of view.

LAEEL

It's not just shock batons, they're
digging into his whole investment
history--preferential loans,
insider--

CARTER

No more "24 years of leadership,"
no more issues.

And just then, Gray comes in, in a dark and impatient mood.

CARTER

(curtly, definitively)

Where's the press, I don't need a
briefing.

No one wants to take him on.... except Carter, who's
determined to, and blocks him. Gray doesn't like it.

CARTER

You're gonna get one.

GRAY

(get out of my way)

I'm going to apologize publicly.
(MORE)

GRAY(cont'd)

Donors, lobbyists come at you with all kinds of deals, I was trying to save the voters money, finance my own campaigns, especially at a time of hardship for--

*
*

CARTER

(I'm not moving)
This isn't about absolving yourself. It won't work.

GRAY

I have 24 years of public service to defend, 24 years of--

CARTER

Should've thought of that before you took the deals. You have to go out there, *smile, relax*, say this was a long time ago, it's old news, then change the subject. Attack illegals again.

*

Susie's about to interject, when--

GRAY

You expect forty reporters to let me change the--

CARTER

You're in this to stop floating a bunch of law-breaking, fence-jumping, job-stealing--

*
*
*

HICKMAN

Whose advocates just gave the Senator 11,000 dollars--

*

CARTER

And the check's cleared, you need a fight, Senator, you've gotta feed the press something--anything--or they'll feed on you.

*
*
*

(to Susie)

Still worried about President No-Show Obama?

Gray looks to Susie; she shakes her head unhappily. So Gray walks off, down a storage aisle that feels like death row. Carter pulls Susie aside, hands her a couple of taped-together, formerly-shredded documents--

*

CARTER

(this is weird)

Those donors, the lawyers. They're all over the map, but easily a third of 'em are working for anti-gun groups and environmental groups.

SUSIE

(beat, scanning documents)

Brandt's getting support from anti-gun groups and pro-gun groups, from polluters and enviros?

CARTER

Far left and far right, bitter adversaries who're never on the same side. Somehow they've found common ground in dim-bulb Brandt.

SUSIE

Those groups can't be working together.

CARTER

Well they are, as of three or four weeks ago.

SUSIE

A year ago, no serious Republican even wanted to run against him.

This gives Carter an idea.

CARTER

Tell me about the serious Republicans.

SUSIE

Our most credible challengers were Ed Ackerson, the 3rd District Congressman--

CARTER

Beat his wife with a lawn jockey, I had the hospital records, he was never gonna run--

*
*
*

SUSIE

And Gene Roker, the retired Marine lieutenant.

CARTER
Clean Gene Roker, the reformer guy.

SUSIE
Ultimate outsider, the anti-Gray;
I'm surprised he didn't run.

Carter starts off.

SUSIE
Where are you--

CARTER
I'm gonna see if Roker can shed
some light on this left-right
coalition.

SUSIE
Roker's for campaign reform,
lobbying reform, reform reform--he
only toyed with running to push his
issues, no way he was in bed with
some conspiracy of donors.

CARTER
Or they're the reason he didn't
run.

Good point. Carter's gone.

INT. SUPERMARKET FLOOR - DAY

A ravenous pack of reporters surround Gray. Cameras FLASH--

REPORTERS
Senator--/Senator Gray--/Can you
speak to these latest--/Senator--

GRAY
This is old news, I'm out here to
stop supporting a bunch of job-
stealing, fence-climbing--

REPORTER #3
SEC filings show you invested in a
company that sold land underwater--

*

*

*

GRAY

This is a fight to help Virginians
who're struggling, instead of those
who'd steal their--

*
*
*

INTERCUT WITH:

EXT. PUBLIC PARK - DAY

Brandt taking questions from a similar crush of reporters in this open, bucolic setting, a stark contrast to Gray's cramped and antiseptic backdrop. As Gray gets more hunched and clipped, Brandt gets more open and loose--

BRANDT

My opponent's a good man--

GRAY

It's old news--long time ago now--

BRANDT

Virginia needs a change is all--

GRAY

You're not gonna get me to be
defensive about this, no way--

BRANDT

I wish he'd join me for a real
debate--

GRAY

I'm telling the truth--

BRANDT

It's time to turn the page--

GRAY

24 years of achievement, if that
means a damn to some blogger in his
underpants--

*
*
*

BRANDT

I honor his decades of service--

GRAY

(defensively, angrily)
Of course I'm having fun; doesn't
it look like I'm having fun?

EXT. RURAL VIRGINIA ESTATE - DAY

Carter's on a horse, and doesn't look happy about it as he rides alongside the strong-jawed, 40ish GENE ROKER, who might as well have been born on his saddle. Roker holds the reins of both, not amused by Carter's lack-of-balancing act.

ROKER

Been on a horse before?

CARTER

Sort of. A wooden one.

ROKER

I wasn't about to meet Gray's henchman at the house.

CARTER

I would've used a coaster.

ROKER

Get to the punchline, I know what this is about.

CARTER

(beat)

You do?

Roker's poker-faced. A beat.

CARTER

Lieutenant, I think you could've beaten Irving Gray.

ROKER

You came all the way to Upperville to tell me that?

CARTER

My candidate's not a young man, might not even win, maybe I need a horse for next time.

Maybe Roker was wrong about this meeting.

ROKER

Stick to the wooden ones, Gray's gonna win.

CARTER

You would've been his worst
nightmare--bad-ass Marine
lieutenant, action-hero looks,
fresh-faced reformer--you're
everything Gray's not.

Roker pulls the reins, speeds up both horses, he's had enough
of this conversation.

ROKER

Thought you were here for something
different.

Huh?

CARTER

Different how.

Roker doesn't answer this.

CARTER

(pressing on)

I'll bet lots of different groups
wanted you to run, lots of opposing
interests, even. Monied interests.

ROKER

I'm not running, and I'm through
with this conversation.

CARTER

Why aren't you running? You'd've
run if you'd known about Gray's
money scandals, how vulnerable he
is, how--

ROKER

Just changed my mind is all.

Roker drops Carter's reins and gallops past him. Carter's
left in the dust, barely able to stay on his own horse, and
totally flummoxed by Roker--

EXT. GRAY CAMPAIGN RALLY - DAY

CLOSE on Gray, on an outdoor platform, giving a desultory
speech at this GRAY RALLY. PULL BACK to reveal an anemic and
unenthusiastic crowd.

GRAY

...it's a time for leadership, it's
a time for achievement, and yes...

Carter enters a roped-off area with Ron.

RON

That old woman called for you again
at the office, Mrs. Doris--

CARTER

You can stop giving me her
messages.

RON

She sounded very--

CARTER

(firmly)

No more messages, okay?

(then)

Any connection, anything at all
between Roker and these left-right
donors?

*

RON

Nope. None of Brandt's donors gave
Roker one thin dime. Plus...

*

Clearly some bad news is coming; Carter nods for it--

*

RON

The "Right-to-Toke" candidate, that
personal accountant out of Norfolk.
Just legally changed his name to
Irving Gray.

*

*

*

*

*

CARTER

(fuck me)

So thousands of our voters won't
know which Gray to--

(then)

Someone paid him. Which means he
can be bought. Which means we--

*

*

*

*

*

*

RON

I used your credit cards. And mine.
Looks like our taxes are covered
for the next few years.

*

*

*

*

A frustrated Carter leaves Ron, walks over to Hickman, Susie, Lael, and a couple AIDES who are half-watching Gray.

CARTER

We're on the ropes, only three points up--if you can't build a crowd, do we really have to do crowd events?

HICKMAN

Let's talk about getting off the ropes. The Senator thinks debating Brandt on the issues could stop the slide.

CARTER

Never, I'm close to unraveling this whole jihad against Gray.

HICKMAN

I'm all ears.

CARTER

(beat)

I said close--it's all loose threads, I need time.

HICKMAN

And I said the Senator wants a debate.

CARTER

That's a one-way ticket to oblivion.

HICKMAN

The Senator's perfectly capable of debating a nobody.

CARTER

Any doubts we sow about Brandt, a debate'll remove them--Gray'll look worn and old by comparison, like the washed-up hack that he--

HICKMAN

How 'bout showing faith in your own candidate for once in your--

CARTER

Faith in the candidate's not in my portfolio.

HICKMAN

What is? You're not controlling
damage or inflicting it or making
TV ads, it was your ad that started
this entire--

CARTER

'Cause you showed it to fifty
people; it was your boss who sold
out in the first place, though not
by enough to buy a decent
hairpiece--

*

*

HICKMAN

That's his real hair, and I'm--

SUSIE

(quietly)

Carter's right.

Two words no one expected to hear from Susie.

SUSIE

No one cares about issues now; he's
close, give him time.

HICKMAN

Now you're Carter's water-girl?

We follow Carter as he walks off, past the throng of
REPORTERS--

REPORTERS

Carter--/Mr. Hood--/Can you--

Until he's out of earshot, dials his phone.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. SANDLER'S CUBICLE, RICHMOND TIMES - SAME TIME

Where Sandler answers, his mouth full of some kind of snack
chip. He rustles loudly with the bag.

CARTER

(into phone)

My back's against the wall and I
think you know why. Fortunately,
I've got something for you.

SANDLER

(into phone)

Tell me it's chartreuse, brings out
my eyes.

CARTER

(half-vamping)

Off the record. That surge of
donations to Brandt. It's from
opposing interest groups, far left
and far right. They're why Clean
Gene Roker didn't run. And McGann's
involved, and if you confront him
with this, if you--

SANDLER

Crumbs.

Which is what Sandler starts pouring into his mouth from his
bag of chips.

SANDLER

But I'll take 'em if you'll put Ron
on the phone.

CARTER

Ron.

SANDLER

Your employee. Oh, forgot, he works
at a law firm. Still, love his
voiceover work in your shock baton
ad.

CARTER

(beat)

Don't tell me you're writing that.

(beat)

Jesus, how many stories have I fed
you over the years?

*

SANDLER

Plenty. And you can always feed me
more, I believe in printing facts.
I also believe in fair play. You've
ruined enough people to deserve a
turn of your own.

Carter could sure use a friend right now. But it ain't gonna
be Sandler.

CARTER

Off the record, it was a test ad,
what any half-decent--it's not a
big thing--

SANDLER

That you're the reason Gray's
sinking?

CARTER

I didn't leak my own ad.

(then)

Who's after me, who wants you to
write my obituary.

*
*

SANDLER

Got a mirror? Best clue you're
gonna get.

Sandler's off the line. Carter stands for a moment as--

GRAY (O.S.)

...and I say: 24 more years of
Irving Gray...

INT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Susie and Carter, a late-night working session; big mugs of coffee, papers all around them. She takes a sip as Chuck Berry's swing ballad "We Two" plays. Carter's cradling his guitar, playing along, trying to get it exactly right--

CARTER

These groups can't be conspiring to
block a process issue--like
campaign reform, or ending the
filibuster--

SUSIE

'Cause Gray's against 'em all.
(the guitar)
Ever play anything original?

CARTER

There is nothing original. Chuck
stole it all too.

Carter takes a beat, looks at Susie, sincerely--

CARTER

Thank you. For buying me time with
Hickman. When I know you don't love
this.

SUSIE

Why's Chuck Berry your hero if he's
nothing but a thief?

His favorite subject, but no one's ever asked. A beat.

CARTER

Whole history of popular music--
from Elvis to the Beatles right
down to Justin Timberlake--it's
white people stealing black music.
Taking it, for nothing. Chuck
played hillbilly, swing, white
music. First black musician to say:
fuck you, I'm stealing it back.

(then)

What?

SUSIE

I'm wondering if your father's the
reason you don't have a sentimental
bone in your body.

*

CARTER

Told you, I barely knew him.

SUSIE

According to Google, you campaigned
with him.

Something about Susie, about her earnestness and sincerity,
makes Carter want to tell the story. Still, he tells it
impassively, as if it happened to someone else:

CARTER

He held his Congressional seat for
28 years. He was from the old
school--never took campaign
contributions, never had a press
secretary, put out one press
release a year, listing all his
votes in the Congress. He thought
that should be enough. And it was.
Till that last campaign. All his
marriages, all his extra-marriages
caught up with him. Republicans
started attacking him on family
values. Like every campaign today.

*

(MORE)

CARTER(cont'd)

So he hired consultants--which he'd sworn he'd never do. One of those geniuses decided to put me in a TV ad, skipping stones with the old man. I was eleven. Press figured out it was the only time I'd seen him that year. Game over.

SUSIE

You talk about it like it's just another campaign.

CARTER

Another hypocritical one.

*

SUSIE

That can't be. Don't you remember how you felt, filming that ad?

CARTER

(clinically)

I remember feeling like he kept fucking up the takes.

*

*

SUSIE

You're talking about your own flesh-and-blood father.

*

*

*

Carter's reaction to this is visceral, almost angry, surprises Susie--

*

*

CARTER

You'll never hear me use that word. Not ever. There wasn't a soccer game or a graduation ceremony or a single birthday he took five seconds to--

*

*

*

*

*

*

(containing his anger)

I was a prop. If that. He cared more about the balloons at his campaign events. Apparently I found a way to fuck up even those. Been four, five years since I even--

*

*

*

*

*

(then)

I don't have a father.

*

*

*

SUSIE

(pause)

It's not Gray you're trying to save, is it.

*

CARTER
 (mocking, deflecting)
 What gives you the right to
 psychoanalyze...

Suddenly, Carter leans in to kiss Susie. And we can sense
 that it's more than his usual conquest, that it's the first
 person in a long time who's made any attempt to penetrate his
 shell, to understand him, to care. But it's not entirely
 mutual. Yet. Susie blocks Carter, locks eyes with him for a
 moment, stands.

SUSIE
 It's late. And I still don't trust
 you. But you're getting there. Bit
 by bit.

And with that, Susie walks back into Carter's bedroom, closes
 the door behind her. Carter walks toward it, and to his
 pleasant surprise, as he's about to turn the knob, the door
 suddenly opens... but just wide enough for Susie to quickly
 toss a blanket and a pillow on the floor. After which the
 door SLAMS and locks in Carter's face. Which only attracts
 him more.

INT. FANCY WASHINGTON HOTEL RESTAURANT - DAY

Early morning. An in-a-hurry Carter's with Mason. The Capitol
 gleaming in the distance, joggers passing behind them as the
 sun rises. Carter eats ravenously, Mason barely touches his
 food. The day's newspapers are spread out on the table.

CARTER
 Help me figure out what gun groups
 and anti-gun groups have in common.

MASON
 I don't know, Carter, they're both
 groups--Brandt's dead even, Gray's
 sinking like a rock--

CARTER
 And why Roker blew me off--you know
 how Washington works, I'm running
 out of time.

MASON
 (beat, fishing)
 Sometimes opposing interests share
 a stake in some status quo, who
 knows.

CARTER

Gray is the status quo.

MASON

Gray's become erratic, clinging to power for its own sake--if you ask me, he's finished--read the blogs, read the news, it's as if he personally conducts torture, sells condos along with scuba diving equipment--

*
*

CARTER

You can twist anything, it's a bunch of bullshit--

MASON

Not what you say when you're dishing it out.

CARTER

McGann leaked my ad and told the Richmond Times, that's my fault?

*

MASON

It's on your watch--you should leave while you still can.

CARTER

I can take care of myself.

MASON

But I can't take care of you after you blow a nine-point lead, after you fumble a major Senate race, your first and only.

CARTER

I'm not much for caretakers.

MASON

Don't lump me in with your dad, just 'cause I have gray hair and a necktie and worked for the guy for--

*
*
*
*

Carter's done eating, doesn't want the lecture, stands--

*
*
*
*

CARTER

I'm sure he was an asshole to you too.

MASON

You're making a mistake, if you
step aside--there's still time to
scrub this one off your--

CARTER

Too late. This one already counts.

Mason's got a thick billfold out, but Carter, not wanting the hand-out, throws down a couple crumpled bills. He starts walking out when he notices, several tables away, the DONOR (#4) who decked him at Gray's fundraiser, dining and chatting animatedly with three other men in suits. Carter walks over to the table, with a murderous look that halts all conversation at that table and others. The donor starts to stand--

CARTER

Allow me.

Carter PULLS the donor out of his chair and THROWS him several feet into a small decorative fountain. To everyone's shocked silence, including Mason's. Carter tosses a few bills on the donor's body, and exits.

EXT. WILDLIFE PRESERVE - DAY

Carter arrives at this bucolic setting; in the distance we see a large crowd of REPORTERS and a lectern ready for some kind of speech. Lael approaches.

LAEL

The Senator's waiting for you. Not in a good mood.

And clearly they aren't either. Carter's surveying the physical set-up for the speech.

CARTER

Make the press move their cameras
20 feet to the right.

LAEL

What does it matter if--

CARTER

Look at your cutaway shot; from that angle any moron can see there are more reporters here than voters, if they move the cameras at least it'll look like he's here for something other than his own lynching.

As Carter heads toward a nearby holding tent, Lael shouts to some young STAFFERS who heard this--

LAEL

You heard him, move those cameras, now--

*

Carter enters--

INT. HOLDING TENT - CONTINUOUS

Where Gray and Hickman are waiting with agitation.

HICKMAN

We need a new strategy. You don't want us talking issues, you don't want us trumpeting the Senator's achievements--

CARTER

Because it wouldn't work--

HICKMAN

How 'bout a strategy that would?

CARTER

(to Gray)

The strategy's to find out why interest groups are teaming up against you--

*

GRAY

(impatient)

Brandt and steroids, drugs--

*

*

*

CARTER

I practically tested his urine myself--

(back to you)

Some status quo you're... upending, something about Roker--

*

*

*

*

*

GRAY

Send a hooker to seduce the rat-
bastard--

*
*
*

CARTER

I don't think Brandt's wife could
seduce him one week out--
(back to you)
Could someone have talked Roker out
of the race so Brandt could--

*
*
*
*
*

GRAY

I'm not here to play twenty
questions; Roker's said he lost
interest in running, for his own
reasons; we're even in the polls
and nearly broke and I'm wondering
if you're up to this.

For the first time, so is Carter. Nonetheless--

CARTER

I am. But I don't have time for a--

GRAY

*You think I do? Your only job's to
drop Brandt off a tall building
till his head splits open and blood
spills all over the pavement.*

Gray's beet red, veins bulging; Carter and Hickman might be
forgiven for thinking he's about to have an aneurysm. Gray
HURLS some papers across the tent and exits. A beat, then--

HICKMAN

He wanted me to tell you, you're on
probation.

CARTER

Note to self.

Carter walks out.

INT. CARTER'S CAMPAIGN OFFICE - NIGHT

*
*
*
*
*
*
*
*

Carter's listening to Chuck Berry's "Don't Lie To Me,"
staring at the computer screen--a frozen, suitably
embarrassing-looking frame of a baseball-playing Brandt--as
he cradles his Gibson for inspiration. No luck. He's got a
yellow legal pad in front of him, on which he's written,
"Chris Brandt: _____. No tag line, no incriminating facts,
no biting ad copy to be written.

Carter rips off the page, balls it up and throws it across the room, narrowly missing the empty trash can... and we see a dozen more littering the floor as well.

*
*
***INT. CARTER'S CAMPAIGN OFFICE - DAY**

Carter, Susie, Monica, Ron. Carter's pacing. A TV's on.

PUNDIT (ON TV)
...Gray has an obligation to debate Brandt; the gap's closing, and there are questions--serious matters of judgement, such as profit-taking in this abysmal economy--which ought to be--

*
*
*

Carter slams off the TV. Becca enters with some muffins on a plate. Susie shakes her head. Carter takes one, but doesn't acknowledge Becca, nor does she acknowledge him. Odd. Susie notices, but the moment passes.

SUSIE
We need a hint. From a donor, from someone who knows--

CARTER
Anyone who knows won't tell.
(an idea)
McGann knows; I'll ask McGann.

MONICA
I thought you just said--

CARTER
He was feeling me out, trying to buy me... maybe I name a price.
(to Monica)
Set up a lunch for tomorrow.

Monica exits. Carter grabs the manila envelope that McGann had given him, tosses it to Susie--

CARTER
What do you know about S.J. Stevens, the tobacco giant?

SUSIE
Nothing good. Why?

CARTER

If I needed a big strategy memo for them, ASAP--how they can avoid regulation, improve their lobbying, one of your 19-point plans. We'll write it together.

SUSIE

We want to help big tobacco?

CARTER

McGann does, wanted me and him to be the Rogers and Hammerstein of lung disease.

RON

(getting it)

So if you earn his trust--

CARTER

It has to look real. At least on first glance.

SUSIE

If Hickman asked me to write a strategy memo for the tobacco industry, I'd tell him to screw himself.

But he's not the one asking. Reluctantly--

SUSIE

I'll get my briefing books.

She rushes out as Monica returns.

MONICA

McGann won't do lunch.

CARTER

Course not. Why break bread with me when Gray's already been sliced and toasted.

(beat)

I'll figure something out. Keep digging into... everything.

And as Carter rushes out too--

INT. SQUASH COURT - DAY

CLOSE on McGann, in some version of tennis whites, on a blindingly white squash court, looking at the ground. PULL BACK to see a big MANILA ENVELOPE slide into his feet. PULL BACK further to reveal a tired-looking, unshaven Carter approaching, in street clothes.

MCGANN

I have a game with Senator Besser.

CARTER

Actually, you don't. But you'll like this game even more.

MCGANN

Impersonating a Senator. That's a federal offense.

CARTER

Good thing I'm not easily offensive. That legislative strategy for S.J. Stevens--

MCGANN

That offer expired when it turned out you weren't as audacious as you'd hoped.

*
*

CARTER

It's done.

McGann picks up the envelope, opens it, eyes the thick, bound and indexed memo.

CARTER

You know how much this'll cost me. Losing my first statewide race.

Carter's far out on a limb, and he can't quite measure McGann's reaction. McGann's flipping through the memo; it looks real, and it looks impressive.

CARTER

I want a career in this town. I can use that half-mill retainer to kick it off.

Carter has no idea if any of this is working, comes closer--

CARTER

Swerving fuckin' Irving, huh?

McGann's reconsidering Carter, may have been wrong about him all along...

MCGANN

Mr. Chairman's got his finger in the dam, doesn't he.

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN CONFERENCE ROOM - NIGHT

Carter, Susie, several POLICY STAFFERS.

CARTER

Campaign finance reform.

SUSIE

That's a ridiculous--

CARTER

It's the one thing his committee does that's worthy of conspiracy, explains why interest groups would gang up to bang him--it'd dry up all the political money, on both sides of the aisle--

STAFFER #2

He's the one who blocks it, never lets it through the committee.

CARTER

Someone thinks he's about to stop.

Carter rushes out into--

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN - CONTINUOUS

Where he finds a quiet spot and dials his cell phone.

SANDLER (ON PHONE)

You got Sandler--

CARTER

(into phone)

I've almost cracked it, why all these groups are teaming up to defeat Gray, why McGann's a part of it, who dozens of unseen--

*

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. SANDLER'S CUBICLE, RICHMOND TIMES - THE SAME TIME

Sandler's licking a big, fast-melting ice cream cone.

SANDLER

(into phone)

Don't sell yourself short, you're
playing a big part in that too--

CARTER

Campaign finance reform. Gray's the poster child for the old money system. If he were for cleaning it up, it'd be unstoppable, every Senator'd be shamed into it too.

*

SANDLER

Neat theory, but Gray's against it.

CARTER

He's for it, I don't know why or how but--listen, if Gray flipped and let it pass his stupid Rules Committee, the whole Washington money racket'd be in jeopardy--

SANDLER

Everyone knows he--

CARTER

Somebody's realized, *the only way to stop campaign reform is to unseat Irving Gray.*

SANDLER

(beat)

Your problem's not what happened to Gray. It's what happened to Hendry. And the sand's almost out of the glass.

*
*
*
*
*
*

Sandler's off the line. Carter sees Ron heading into the conference room. He starts to follow him when he sees Becca, coming from a different direction with two CUPS of COFFEE. Without a word, he GRABS her somewhat violently by the arm--

*
*
*
*
*

BECCA

What're you--you're hurting me--

*

CARTER

Thought you were into that--

*

Carter YANKS her into-- *

INT. STAIRWELL - CONTINUOUS *

Where he drags her against a wall, spilling some of the coffee-- *

CARTER
Why were you so easy, huh? Why were you such a little slut? *

Becca's confused and more than a little upset by this-- *

BECCA
I don't... *

CARTER
Someone pay you to fuck me? Are you a goddamned mole? Who got to you, why were you so goddamned easy? *

And Becca starts crying. *

BECCA
I just... I thought we-- *

And Carter can see Becca doesn't know a thing. He'd feel like a complete heel if he had a little more time. *

CARTER
Okay... never mind. *

Carter exits and leaves her there, a blubbering wreck. *

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN CONFERENCE ROOM - NIGHT *

Carter enters. Susie and the others are still poring over documents. *

CARTER
I need you propeller-heads to comb through every statement, every article, every message board post about campaign reform in the past year. *

POLICY STAFFER #3
That'd take days. *

CARTER
Take-out's on me. *

SUSIE

No, it'd waste days, we know where
Gray stands.

*
*

CARTER

Then he tripped, he fell, something
changed, and I need to know before
McGann realizes our tobacco plan's
a sham.

*
*

No one moves an inch.

*

CARTER

All right then.
(to Ron)
Come with me.

*
*
*
*

RON

Where are we going?

*

CARTER

Home office, to make the mother of
all attack ads against Brandt.

*

RON

We don't have anything on him.

*
*

CARTER

We're gonna make something up.

*
*

SUSIE

What about your hatchet-man code--
getting to the truth?

*
*
*

CARTER

The charge is what hurts.

*
*

SUSIE

Have you completely lost your--

*
*

But Carter and Ron are gone. A half-beat, and Susie follows
into--

*
*

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN - CONTINUOUS

*

Where she sees Becca, emerging from the stairwell with her
two coffees--trembling, clearly having cried her eyes out. As
Becca extends a coffee to a highly concerned Susie--

*
*
*

INT. PARKING LOT BEHIND GRAY CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - NIGHT

Ron and Carter are getting ready to start his Saab as Susie rushes up with Carter's coffee, extremely pissed off. Carter rolls down the passenger seat window.

SUSIE
(to Ron)
Out of the car.

CARTER
I'll call you when I've got a-- *

SUSIE
(to Ron)
Out, now.

RON
We're running out of time for a
negative hit on Brandt, and
anything Carter does, I do too--so
no, I'm not getting out of the-- *

SUSIE
(still to Ron)
You're fucking my assistant too?

Uh-oh.

CARTER
(to Ron)
Out.

Ron gets out, and fortunately for him, because Susie's been waiting to remove the lid and THROW the scalding hot coffee on Carter's lap. He squirms in the car, in horrific pain but knowing he deserves it. Susie gets in the driver's seat, and off she and Carter go, quite a bit too fast. *

INT. CARTER'S SAAB - NIGHT

CARTER
Look, it didn't mean anything, can
I please go to the-- *

SUSIE
You and your faux-swashbuckling,
gather-no-moss, ends-justify-the-
means bullshit-- *

Carter's burned, uncomfortable with the speed of her driving, *
trying to soak up some coffee with an old newspaper--

CARTER
I've gotta get to my editing bay,
please-- *

Susie makes a swift turn--

SUSIE
Sex is just another tactic to you,
another campaign you can dominate
and win----

CARTER
That's not how it is, and--it's a
left here-- *

Susie SWERVES into a left, Carter hangs on for dear life--

SUSIE
Mommy and daddy didn't love you?
Get over it, don't vent your
hostility on every campaign staffer
with a pair of tits and a low
enough I.Q. to--

CARTER
I can explain everything, but we
have nothing to hit Brandt with,
which means we're conceding the
race, so this one's for all the
marbles, whether that Senate seat
goes Republican--what'll that do to
your beloved border-crossers? I'm
begging you. *

Susie SWERVES into the nearest alleyway, SCREECHES to a halt. *

SUSIE
And to think. I came this close to
screwing your brains out. *

Susie opens the door, SLAMS it, and exits. *

INT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - DAY

It's morning. But we almost wouldn't know it because all the
shades are drawn, all the lights are out, and Carter's been
up all night, fabricating an anti-Brandt advertisement. On
the screen is the frozen image of Brandt in his manic-looking
baseball pose. *

On a nearby table is a pile of WHITE POWDER and a few EMPTY BOXES OF SUGAR. The camcorder's pointed at it. Carter speaks into a microphone--

CARTER
Rumors of steroid abuse.
Allegations of hard...

Even a desperate Carter doesn't have the heart for this. He's interrupted by a RINGING at his front door. It takes Carter a moment to stop what he's doing, walk to the door, open it--

REPORTERS
Carter--/Can we--/Did you really--

And Carter slams it quickly; why are three REPORTERS standing on his doorstep? This can't be good. Carter thinks for a moment, then goes to his computer, calls up a few web sites. As Carter's phone starts RINGING, and the doorbell rings again too, Carter sees the Richmond Times online: "Gray Consultant Made Attack Ad on Gray." And the Drudge Report: "Benedict Arnold Consultant Betrays Gray." He grabs the ringing phone--

REPORTER (ON PHONE)
Ken Layne, from Wonkette; is it true what Sandler just posted, that you met regularly with Steve McGann after joining the--

Carter hangs up, turns on the TV--

REPORTER (ON TV)
...the shock baton ad was made by Gray's own consultant Carter Hood; sources within Gray's campaign say he obtained a Republican briefing book full of charges against Gray--

Carter goes to the front door, opens it and runs out to--

EXT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Carter PUSHES past the three reporters, knocking one down.

REPORTERS
Hey--/Is it true you made the--/How do you respond to--

Carter hops into the driver's seat of his Saab, shuts the door, dials his phone. The reporters rush up to the car--

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. REC ROOM OF SENIOR CENTER - THE SAME TIME

SUSIE
(into phone)
Don't even call me.

*

Carter's smiling falsely, waving at the reporters--

CARTER
(into phone)
You told the press I kept that
briefing book.

SUSIE
They knew we had it, I was supposed
to lie for you?

*

**

CARTER
Yes, you were supposed--look, I
messed up, McGann played me, but
you know I'm not a mole, and I
can't drive, don't even have a
license. I need to see Gray, he can
still make this worse.

SUSIE
Lay off Gray.

Gray walks over to Susie and, guessing who she's talking to,
takes her phone from her.

CARTER
Gray chose to become a hack,
probably on his wife and kid's
deathbed, but I never wanted to
hurt you, you're the first person
in a long time I... if you'll come
get me, send an intern even--

GRAY
(faux-cheery)
Carter?

*

CARTER
(beat)
Senator?

GRAY
Go fuck yourself.

Gray's off the line. Carter takes a breath, turns the key,
speeds onto a small--

EXT. FREEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Where we witness a near-catastrophe--Carter's steering is wobbly; he accelerates then slows down; a car starts honking behind him; he SWERVES and GRAZES another car, which starts honking wildly, signalling him to pull over. But Carter's on a mission, speeds up and SMACKS into a car in front of him, badly denting the front of the already-dented Saab... it's a real, live bumper-car ride. If Carter weren't so desperate to get to Gray and Susie, he'd pull over and pass out.

EXT. SENIOR CENTER - DAY

Carter almost drives onto a curb as he pulls up. A few REPORTERS and STAFFERS practically have to jump out of the way. Carter hops out of the car. Reporters approach--

REPORTERS
Carter--/Were you working against--
/What's your--

CARTER
(realizing)
Why aren't you inside with the
Senator?

REPORTER #5
All his events have been canceled.

Carter sees one of the policy staffers carrying a big easel, runs over--

CARTER
Why's everything canceled?

POLICY STAFFER #2
Prep for tomorrow's debate, senior
center's letting us use the rec
room.

Carter heads toward the door of the senior center--

INT. REC ROOM OF SENIOR CENTER - DAY

Gray's behind a podium, as Susie and Lael watch and a few policy staffers pore over briefing materials and two large CAPITOL POLICE OFFICERS stand at the side of the room.

GRAY

...his tax cut would give 69 cents to an average family. That's not the kind of change I'm fighting for.

*
*
*

SUSIE

He'll disagree with that number, but you should pivot to your support for the Obama economic--

*
*
*

Carter bursts in. Everybody looks at him. An awkward beat.

CARTER

Senator, you're right to be mad at me, but I can't be the reason you lose this. Help me unravel this, 'cause it's *insane* to debate Brandt, when we know he's got a briefing book full of charges against you--it's politics 101.

And Gray's been waiting to say this for a long time, says it with more authority than he's mustered in a while:

GRAY

Politics 101? That I should "pick fights" with every "special interest" that'd claw my eyes out? Or that I'm taking body blow after body blow, because you fumbled the ball while drawing a paycheck?

CARTER

(quietly)

I'm working for free.

GRAY

And god bless your fucking charity work.

(then)

Know what I think? You are the reason I'm losing this. Not a savior, but a curse, most expensive 6,900 bucks I ever took. Look me in the eye, tell me that's not the truth. And maybe I won't fire you.

But Carter can't say that. A pause; everyone else is frozen. Carter notices the Capitol Police step forward just a bit.

CARTER

I'm sorry.
 (beat)
 I'm... sorry is all.

Carter backs out and exits.

INT. CARTER'S APARTMENT - DAY

Carter's sitting amid packed boxes, in his makeshift home office, Gibson in his lap like cross between a security blanket and a semi-automatic weapon, scouring news reports on a lap-top. The TV's on, it's footage of Brandt, on C-SPAN, doing a grip-and-grin in a semi-crowded town square, shaking hand after hand. Brandt is wearing a clip-on mic, but we can't hear the voters; it's oddly disembodied.

BRANDT (ON TV)
 ...thanks, ma'am. Sure love your
 vote.
 (next hand)
 Why yes, sir, I think Virginia does
 need a change.
 (next hand)
 I'm asking for your vote next week,
 ma'am, for a change--

And suddenly Carter finds something; he's so floored by it, he even lets the Gibson slide gently to the ground. He presses PRINT, and we see it glide out of the printer: it's from a political news site, and the headline reads, "Reform Candidate Declines To File Against Gray." But it's the photo Carter's staring at: Roker at some county parade, and, leaning in to talk to him, a barely detectable, virtually cropped-out Irving Gray...

INT. DOUG MASON'S OFFICE - DAY

A plush lobbyist's office--fine art on the walls, very little clutter. Mason's in a meeting with another LOBBYIST.

MASON
 But NASA's cutting their budget to
 the bone. No such thing as a free
 launch, is there.

A breathless Carter opens the door and stands there, a stack of papers in his hand.

MASON

If you bang a fist on the other side, I can usually hear the...
 (to the lobbyist)
 Can you please?

The lobbyist exits. Then--

CARTER

I figured out who's at the heart of the whole conspiracy, who's torpedoing Gray's career.

*
 *

Mason would like to hear this. Carter's talking a mile a minute:

CARTER

Irving Gray himself.
 (then)
 He told me Roker lost interest in running, when Roker never said so publicly. And Roker's sole issue is reform, cares a lot more about that than running for office. They've been meeting, talking.

*
 *

Mason has no reaction to this, certainly not the astonishment Carter would expect. Doesn't he get it yet? Carter shoves the photo at Mason--

*
 *

CARTER

Gray cut a deal with Roker, to push campaign finance reform through his committee if Roker didn't run, and now he's working his committee--two of 'em have publicly changed their stance in the last few weeks.
 Gray's agreed to blow up his life, everything he's become, for one last victory. Must've figured, no one'll find out till after the election. But the money-ocracy read the tea leaves and they're out to stop him.

*
 *
 *
 *
 *
 *

*

Still nothing from Mason, and Carter doesn't know why.

CARTER

Obama-McCain alone cost 2.4 billion dollars, you realize how big this is? We have to out them, Gray's staff won't even take my calls, it's an outrage, it's--

*
 *
 *

MASON
(calmly)
Because you're the victim?

CARTER
(beat)
You knew about this?

MASON
Interest groups defending their
interests? What do you think I do
all day?

Carter's surprised, and quickly becoming enraged--

CARTER
And you kept telling me to drop off
Gray's team, why--because McGann
paid you?

MASON
I've never met McGann--

CARTER
Don't lie to me--

MASON
Gray's got hundreds of enemies now,
lobbyists, consultants--we don't
have to have met, we read the same
tea leaves--

CARTER
What is this, some kind of black-
hat secret society?

MASON
It's a business, Carter, your
business, as well as mine; I begged
you not to do that campaign, gave
you every road out--

CARTER
I'll expose you, Gray'll hold
hearings on--

MASON
On what? Legal campaign
contributions?
(then)
You are your father, you know that?
You both think the rules don't
apply.

(MORE)

MASON(cont'd)

After decades as a paragon of
authenticity and truth, he shoots a
craven TV ad with a son he can't
stand--

*

CARTER

You take that back--

Carter grabs Mason by the lapels, wants to throw him out the window, but Mason doesn't flinch.

MASON

And after years of annihilating
anything in your path, when you're
the one in the crosshairs--

*

*

Hurt and disgusted, mostly with himself, Carter drops Mason and heads for the door--

MASON

Go ahead, be a loser, rail against
a town you could've led. Like your
dad, like Gray, like everyone who
thinks they can play the system
when they *can't*, when *no one* can,
when it *always* ends up playing you.

Confused, surprised, in a fury, Carter storms out the door.

EXT. WASHINGTON, DC STREET - NIGHT

Carter walks, almost in a haze, as various STAFFERS and POWER-BROKERS and LOBBYISTS in nice suits spill out of restaurants, walk the streets, chat animatedly with each other... all part of the grand conspiracy. Or might as well be.

INT. LOBBY, STATELY VIRGINIA MANSION - NIGHT

We're with the elderly woman, DORIS, as she heads down a huge staircase toward large, wooden front doors. The doorbell RINGS, clearly not for the first time, as she approaches--

DORIS

Coming--

She opens the door, and to her great surprise--

CARTER

Sorry I never called you back.

(beat)

I'm his son. I need to talk to him.

INT. CARTER'S DAD'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

To Carter's astonishment, he's led into a room that's filled with ventilators and an IV; as Doris enters and checks them, we begin to realize she's his nurse.

DORIS

The third stroke was... the most severe. We do everything for him now.

(beat)

We thought you'd want to see him before he...

She can't quite get this thought out as Carter eyes all the equipment that's keeping his father going. CARTER'S DAD, 90-something, gray complexion, gaunt with hollow cheeks, eyes open but empty, is quite clearly a complete vegetable.

Carter studies him, numbly. Doris backs out of the room to give him a moment.

Carter moves in closer, catches a glimpse of a bedside photo of the once-powerful CONGRESSMAN CARRICK presiding over some hearing or other. And then another, with JIMMY CARTER. And then another, arms aloft at a campaign victory celebration. It's as if Carter's looking for a specific photo... then:

CARTER

No family photos, I can see how that'd get confusing for you.

(pause)

This is where I'm supposed to rend my garments and rub gravel in my hair, right? For what? We both know you never wanted me, never wanted the wives either, for all I know you're gay or just have ice water coursing through those varicose veins. Your business was putting up a front. Maybe that's why mine is tearing 'em down.

(beat)

I don't do it to spite you. I know you think that. It's just that... I don't care what you think. That's the point. You're always angry at me anyway.

(beat)

As if it was my fucking idea. I was eleven. Even then, could've told you it'd blow up in your face.

Carter gets all of this out with almost no real emotional reaction. He takes what he knows is his last look at the old man, starts adjusting his bedsheets till he realizes it makes no difference, then walks into-- *

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Where Carter starts down the stairs, and suddenly BREAKS DOWN completely. Tears, brokenness, emptiness. A rush of every emotion he's never felt. A mourning for the father, the childhood he never had. As Carter sits on the steps, momentarily leveled, as incapacitated as the old man-- *

INT. CARTER'S TAXI - NIGHT

Carter's in the back as the taxi pulls up to a large house with a larger front lawn. He takes out some cash--

TAXI DRIVER

This is the Senator's house,
Senator Gray.

CARTER

I know.

TAXI DRIVER

It's the middle of the night, is he
expecting you?

CARTER

Not exactly, no.

TAXI DRIVER

There's security, I can see 'em
from here--

CARTER

Keep the change.

The DRIVER takes a wad of Carter's money; Carter exits onto--

EXT. SENATOR GRAY'S FRONT LAWN - CONTINUOUS

The taxi drives off. Carter can see two CAPITOL POLICE OFFICERS near the front door, at the end of the large, lush lawn. He steels himself, RUNS toward the door like a running back going for a touchdown, triggering SCREAMING ALARMS; LIGHTS shine on Carter, the officers JUMP him, pin him painfully to the ground--

CARTER
 (panting, struggling)
 I'm Gray's political consultant--

CAPITOL POLICE OFFICER
 And we're his manicurists--

They're twisting his arms, hurting him--

CARTER
 (in pain but bearing it)
 I need to see him; beat me up,
 throw me in jail, he'll have one of
 the worst press days of his life,
 day of his big debate--that's gonna
 keep you on this cushy detail?

Suddenly, the front door opens, and a very unhappy Gray appears in a bathrobe and a baseball cap.

GRAY
 Book him. Make it hurt.

Gray starts to close the door, until--

CARTER
 I know about you and Roker.
 (beat)
 Five minutes, Senator, then I'm out
 of your life forever.

GRAY
 (pause, to the officers)
 Give me two to get changed, then
 bring him upstairs and start a
 fucking stopwatch.

INT. GRAY'S UPSTAIRS DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Carter's with the two stone-faced officers, waiting in a room that has a wall of blue and grey suits, and a dressing table. On it are nine STYROFOAM HEADS, each holding a slightly longer toupee than the previous one; a middle head's empty.

CARTER
 I get it, he goes longer and
 longer, then back to the first one
 as if he got a haircut.

No reaction from the officers. Gray opens the adjoining bedroom door, more put-together in pajamas and a toupee. Carter follows Gray back into--

INT. GRAY'S UPSTAIRS BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Where an impatient Gray shuts the door. An awkward beat.

GRAY

Lemme guess, you have another
brilliant plan to save me.

CARTER

I want to talk about your family.

Gray moves toward the door, to show Carter back out--

CARTER

(not diverted)

'Cause I remember when they died. I
remember thinking, no way is this
guy gonna keep serving in the
Senate. Why did you?

GRAY

(beat)

Difference between you and me is, I
don't get to move on to the next
campaign; no hobbies, no...
anything, the job's all I have.

CARTER

If that were true, you wouldn't
have made that deal with Roker. You
had to know it was gonna cost you
the job; even if you'd kept it
hidden till after this campaign,
the whole town would've ganged up
on you for the next one.

Gray's not about to open up to Carter any more than he has,
so Carter tries opening up to Gray.

CARTER

The job's all I have too. Real
difference between you and me?
You know what it's like to have
something better.

(beat)

Maybe you can show me. I could use
it right now.

Gray's struck by this. Carter, the kid with all the answers, *
is appealing to him for help? But Gray focuses himself--

GRAY

I have a debate tomorrow. If you'll excuse me, I'd like a few more hours' sleep so I can--

CARTER

Get clobbered for every stain on your investment portfolio?

Gray's suddenly mournful, defeated, this isn't how it was supposed to happen--

GRAY

If I'd known, after 24 years of service, I'd still spend every day scraping for cash...

CARTER

Listen to me, you were terrific in that senior center. When you fired me, kicked my ass--that's the real Irving Gray; you just haven't had the guts to be that, to take on the glorified pimps you thought were your friends, to stop hanging on so tightly to what none of us gets to keep anyway. Tomorrow's your chance.

GRAY

You want me to fire you again from that debate stage?

Carter takes a sheaf of hastily-scribbled pages out of his pocket, unfolds it and hands it to Gray.

CARTER

In a manner of speaking, yes.

Gray scans the papers, a bit stunned by what they say.

GRAY

What do you get out of this?

CARTER

Call it a mulligan.

GRAY

What happens if it doesn't work?

Carter smiles a big smile; his response is almost giddy--a revelation, a liberating truth:

CARTER

We lose.

INT. AUDITORIUM HALLWAY - DAY

Susie and Hickman are standing worriedly in this bustling hallway--STAFFERS scurrying, REPORTERS talking on cell phones. We hear a DEBATE MODERATOR laying out the rules.

DEBATE MODERATOR (O.S.)

...and every 90-second response
will be followed by a 60-second
rebuttal, after which...

*

SUSIE

I have his briefing books. He never
cracked them.

Suddenly, a door opens; Gray enters and heads right through a curtain and onto the debate stage. To their amazement, Carter, wearing a suit for once, follows from the same door.

HICKMAN

What are you doing here?

CARTER

Showing a little faith in the
candidate is all.

Hickman and Susie follow Carter through a small doorway into--

INT. AUDITORIUM - CONTINUOUS

Where the packed hall quiets down, and Brandt and Gray shake hands on-stage--Brandt graciously and confidently, Gray nervously and awkwardly. They step behind their respective podiums. A panel of four REPORTERS is seated at a table on the side of the stage. Right away, we can see how the young, athletic, Kennedy-esque Brandt benefits by merely sharing the stage with the hunched and nervous incumbent.

DEBATE MODERATOR

Welcome to this first and only
debate in Virginia's contest for
the United States Senate. By a coin
toss, the first opening statement
goes to Virginia's senior Senator,
Irving Bayard Gray.

Long pause. Murmurs from the audience. Gray fumbles with papers, looks uncertain. Are we about to see a train wreck?

HICKMAN
(to himself)
Jesus H. Christ--

Gray looks out, sees Carter, who nods as if to say, "go ahead, do it." Gray mutters stiffly--

GRAY
Lotta charges swirling around about
me recently. Here are the ones
that aren't yet.

What? Hickman and Susie both look to Carter, who won't be diverted, as if he himself is on that stage. Gray speaks haltingly at first:

GRAY
A big donor who bundled a hundred grand for me, right before I voted not to regulate his power company to death. Holdings in an aluminum siding business with three illegal tax shelters. Deals with four potential opponents to keep them from running and cleaning my clock, which they would have... I've prepared a list. Whether I knew about this stuff or not... I should've known, I'm a U.S. Senator for god's sake.

The panel of reporters is stunned as Gray walks over and drops a thick packet in front of each of them. Gray heads back to his podium. Susie's covering her mouth in sheer astonishment. Hickman's sweating, loosening his collar. Now Gray's off-text, on a roll:

GRAY
I figured it out this morning, a million dollars in political contributions gets you about a billion in benefits, that tends to be the ratio. Here's what's pathetic: they make us so desperate for that million, we beg to be bought off, like ten-dollar whores. To keep a job we barely recognize after a while. That's why my health care plan's a joke, I copped out on universal coverage long ago, never mind having the guts to eliminate the insurance industry altogether, buncha money-grubbing middle-men;
(MORE)

GRAY(cont'd)

they're what drives up the cost of health care. My economic plan: I said it'd put Virginians back to work, when really I was talking about the bill-stuffers and pork-guzzlers who make up half my fundraising committee.

*
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*

Susie's jaw's hitting the floor.

GRAY

After nationalized health care and a real jobs plan, we need to nationalize our schools, take 'em over like a military occupation. You think some part-time School Board in Martinsville knows what kids need to compete globally? We can find the money by closing some of the corporate loopholes I voted for till I was green in the wallet. And it was wrong of me to beat up on immigrants. They're here to do the worst jobs, the ones we won't touch. I'm surprised we haven't forced 'em into political office.

*
*
*
*

Susie meets Carter's eye; that one was for her. She's overwhelmed--

GRAY

If I am re-elected, I'm done playing this ponzi scheme, that's for sure. And I'll start at home, by shutting down my entire campaign operation and firing my entire staff, effective this second. We're out of business; I'm sorry it ever was one. You don't agree with me? Do me a favor, vote me out of office. I won't be a Senator, but I'll know what it feels like to be me again. I can think of a couple people who might've liked that.

Gray starts to walk off the stage, to the confusion and amazement of the crowd, the reporters, Susie and Hickman... when all of a sudden, in a final, shocking gesture, he turns back, rips the TOUPEE off his head, and TOSSES it into the slack-jawed crowd. Gasps fill the hall, no one can believe their eyes, some start to applaud--

INT. GRAY CAMPAIGN BULLPEN - THE SAME TIME

Where all the young staffers are watching on overhead TV's and CHEERING boisterously, the first genuine excitement we've seen from them, 'cause this is what it's like when you actually believe in your boss, when you're stirred by him--

INT. DOUG MASON'S OFFICE - THE SAME TIME

Where Mason is watching, riveted and ashamed, with a couple associates--

ASSOCIATE
What a crock of--

MASON
(shut up)
No it isn't.

INT. ROADSIDE VIRGINIA BAR - THE SAME TIME

McGann's cracking and eating shelled peanuts from a big bowl, drinking a beer while watching the debate. He can only shake his head and almost smile, in professional admiration. Looks like Carter played him after all.

INT. AUDITORIUM - THE SAME TIME

Back on stage, Brandt is alone and completely dazed as the audience murmurs rise.

DEBATE MODERATOR
If you could please--hold your reactions until... well, I guess Mr. Brandt can have the rest of the 90 minutes, beginning with his... well, his opening statement.

Brandt looks as if something heavy's just fallen on his head, which it sorta has.

BRANDT
(pause)
Uh... my, uh, opponent... he's a--
good man, but, uh, Virginia
needs... a change...

INT. DEBATE SPIN ROOM - DAY

A large room across from the auditorium itself, where total chaos is reigning--rows and rows of REPORTERS sitting at folding tables, barking into phones and tapping furiously at their lap-tops. We FLOAT PAST a man in a Marine uniform, ringed by reporters: it's Roker. A little sign held by an AIDE says his name:

ROKER

I wanted to reform Washington,
more than I wanted to be there, so
I made a secret deal. It was wrong.
And I free Senator Gray from that
deal, even as I wholeheartedly
endorse him for--

And we float past another validator, aging but distinguished
CONGRESSMAN ED ACKERSON, and a sign says that too. The woman
standing next to him, MRS. ACKERSON, wears a plastic smile
and a good-sized BANDAGE on her face:

ACKERSON

I agreed not to run if he'd help me
get on the Budget Committee. I'm
ashamed of that, but I'll be voting
for Gray after today's courageous--

We move over to Ron and Monica, handing reporters thick
packets from huge cardboard boxes, as Carter surveys the
chaos and Hickman and Susie watch in amazement. Sandler
approaches and takes a packet, flips through it--

REPORTER #6

A list of all his Senate votes?

MONICA

24 years' worth, Senator's entire
voting record. Last press release
of the campaign.

SANDLER

What are you talking about?

CARTER

You heard him, he's shutting it
down, no speeches, no TV ads,
nothing. Everything's out there--
positives, negatives--what more is
there to say?

(then, to Sandler)

(MORE)

CARTER(cont'd)

But I've got an exclusive for you,
'cause I believe in fair play too.
You're the only reporter who gets
to follow the candidate.

Ron holds out a set of press credentials--

RON
Van's leaving in two minutes.

Sandler's wary of this... but grabs them, rushes off.

HICKMAN
Where's the Senator going?

CARTER
Honolulu. Till after election day.

EXT. OUTDOOR RALLY - DAY

Carter, Hickman, Susie, and a few young STAFFERS pile out of van at this post-debate rally. For the first time, it's an energized mass of people chanting "Irving... Irving... Irving..." some are tossing cheap wigs/toupees in the air.

HICKMAN
Do they know the Senator's not coming?

POLICY STAFFER #1
We made an announcement. Nobody left.

HICKMAN
We've gotta get him back here, this is his moment, he's not even here to enjoy it.

CARTER
You'll tell him all about it.

And for the first time, we see Hickman start to enjoy himself, rocking with the crowd, thrusting his arms upward, and chanting "Irving... Irving... Irving" with a huge beaming smile on his face. Faith in the candidate indeed. Susie approaches Carter-- *

CARTER
Who knew vulnerability was the good part.

SUSIE
That's your version of an apology?

CARTER

(no)

Nothing excuses what I did... what
I've been doing.

SUSIE

How 'bout doing it differently.

And Carter would truly like to, but--

CARTER

This is all I know.

SUSIE

But it's not all I know.

As they keep each other's gaze, and as the chanting of the
growing crowd continues, and grows, to a deafening ROAR-- *

INT. A NON-DESCRIPT ROOM - DAY

CLOSE on a pixelated image of three HEARTBREAKINGLY BEAUTIFUL
YOUNG CHILDREN sitting in a bathtub: blonde boy, African-
American girl, Asian girl, wide-eyed and innocent... as
THICK, BLACK, CRUDE OIL starts to POUR on their heads. We
slowly PULL BACK to reveal that we're looking through the
viewfinder of Carter's camcorder; Ron's doing the pouring.
The kids look mournful, sad, in every way sullied and
victimized as the cascade of oil envelops them-- *

INT. A VERY FANCY, ULTRA-MODERN OFFICE - DAY

Perfect view of the Capitol. A Washington power office if
ever there was one. Carter sits in a big leather swivel chair
behind a sleek wooden desk, back in jeans and a dress shirt.
A 50-something man, DAVE MCKENNA, is in front of him, in a
pricey suit and sporting a thick southern drawl. We might
notice Carter's Gibson, leaning against a wall. *

MCKENNA

...so yeah, I'm serious about that
open Senate seat. Harper's like
that guy Brandt you whupped across
the river--sock puppet with a bunch
of handlers up his ass. I've done
some polling. He's too close to the
unions, too close to Saddam Hussein
Obama--that's what they call him in
the Redneck Riviera. Harper's
vulnerable as hell in a statewide. *

CARTER

(beat)

Vulnerable as hell.

*

MCKENNA

Numbers don't lie.

Carter opens a desk drawer, takes out a thick packet of paper and slides it across the desk to McKenna. A beat.

CARTER

Your law firm billed eight million dollars defending oil companies 'cause of those spills off the coast of Ecuador.

*

*

*

*

MCKENNA

(beat)

I don't see how that's relevant to a campaign.

CARTER

Then who helped you "do some polling?" Since numbers don't lie.

McKenna starts flipping through the packet--

*

MCKENNA

Those cases are covered by attorney-client privilege. Under lock and key.

CARTER

But I've got 'em.

(then)

Harper's vulnerable alright. But if you run against him... oil might not be the only thing spilling out.

*

*

McKenna's rattled by this, by what he's reading. A beat.

*

CARTER

If you're still not seeing what I see...

Carter's brandishing a DVD. He waits for an answer.

MCKENNA

Guess I am. Thanks for your time.

McKenna stands, wants to say something more... but simply leaves.

Carter breaks the DVD in half, throws it in the trash, stands... as a sexier-than-ever Susie walks in the door. Hair down, blouse unbuttoned that extra button.

CARTER
Who's next? *

SUSIE
Congressman Segal, gearing up to
run for the Maryland statehouse.
Took 2.2 million from drug
companies last year, and-- *

CARTER
Single-handedly tore down four FDA
safety rules. *

She drops a big packet and a DVD on the desk.

CARTER
Show him in.

But before she heads out--

CARTER
Drink with me later?

Susie moves in closer. A long beat, a moment between them, as
if maybe they're going to kiss... then-- *

SUSIE
Keep trying, Carter. One of these
days, you might get there. *

As Carter watches her leave, he grabs the Gibson, drops down
in the big leather swivel chair, presses play on a boombox
behind his desk. Chuck Berry's "Dear Dad" starts to play, and
Carter leans back, listening more than playing. And as he
takes a little spin in the swivel chair and contemplates how
he got here, the place he always wanted to be, and why it's
so different than he ever imagined, we-- *

FADE TO BLACK.

T H E E N D