

EXT. COLLEGE CAMPUS- AFTERNOON

Five COLLEGE BOYS walk briskly up a sidewalk in front of the University of Michigan student union on a sunny spring afternoon. Each is dressed in a dark blue suit with a red or burgundy tie, and carries a briefcase.

INT. STUDENT UNION- CONTINUOUS

The five college boys enters a large hall under a maize and blue banner reading "WELCOME, CLASS OF 2001!". They pass a sign reading "RECRUITER INTERVIEWS" and enter a room full of booths manned by slick-looking recruiters. One by one, the STUDENTS peel off and stride purposefully towards their destinations; the first to a booth labeled "DAIMLER CHRYSLER", the second to "MERRILL LYNCH", the third to "HOTJOBS.COM", the fourth to "ENRON".

Finally, one remains standing alone: JASON SANDERSON, 21. He wears glasses, and his hair is clipper-short on the sides and back; he is cute in a bookwormy way. He surveys the horde of ambitious go-getters swirling around him, squares his shoulders, and walks against the throng like a salmon swimming upstream. He is headed toward an ignored booth in a far corner of the room.

Jason approaches the booth, which is labeled "UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS OFFICER PROGRAMS". CAPTAIN MUNSON, a short, barrel-chested recruiter resplendent in Marine khakis, greets him with a hand-shake. They sit.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Looks like your buddies prefer the corporate sector.

JASON

Yes, sir. They think they're doing the selling, but they're the ones being sold. Corporate America needs some new pawns.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

No second thoughts then?

JASON

Negative, sir.

(gazing narrowly at his comrades)
Opportunity knocks, duty calls. I hear the call.

Captain Munson reaches down and produces a packet of materials. He hands them across to Jason. JASON's P.O.V.:

A videotape entitled "RITE OF PASSAGE".

Another tape: "FORGED WITH SPIRIT AND PRIDE".

A manual labeled "COUNTDOWN TO O.C.S.; BASIC EXERCISES TO PRACTICE".

A red and yellow bumper-sticker that reads "SEMPER FIDELIS".

And finally, a shiny silver sticker bearing the Marine eagle, globe and anchor symbol below the words "Proud Parents of a U.S. Marine". We see Jason's face cloud as he lingers over this last item.

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- EVENING

KEVIN SANDERSON, 52, stands at the sink. He has most of his hair and few wrinkles, but there is a weariness to his eyes and movements. He's next to MERYL SANDERSON, who is 51 but looks 38. Her hair is long and straight, making her appear vaguely hippy-esque. She plucks a rogue hair from her chin while Kevin nervously inspects his slightly receding hair line.

KEVIN

I can't believe how much hair I'm losing.

MERYL

Oh, you're exaggerating.

KEVIN

Are you kidding? Every morning I get out of the shower, and the tub's so full of hair, it looks like somebody blew up a schnauzer!

Meryl inspects his face in the light.

MERYL

What have you been shaving with, broken glass? You missed here and over here; I swear to God, my uncle has Parkinson's and he shaves better than you.

Kevin lathers his face.

KEVIN

I'm getting so near-sighted, I can't even shave without my glasses. I'm losing my hair, my eye-sight, and my teeth are going from yellow to brown. Help me find a silver-lining here, hon.

MERYL

Well, you're not impotent. Yet.

KEVIN

And I'm hardly ever incontinent.

MERYL

See there? The glass is half-full.

KEVIN

Of what, Metamucil?

MERYL

I was thinking prune juice.

KEVIN

What made you think of prunes? Were you looking at my ass?

MERYL

You're getting awfully paranoid in your twilight years.

Meryl walks out of bathroom into the adjoining bedroom. She eyes a pile of Kevin's clothes in front of the closet.

MERYL (cont'd)

What are you doing with all these old clothes?

KEVIN

I'm gonna put 'em in the trash.

MERYL

Why don't you give them to Goodwill?

KEVIN

Because I have no good will.

MERYL

Ha! See, you've still got your sense of humor.

KEVIN

You're right! Who needs an erection?

MERYL

(looking at watch)
It's almost quarter-to. Are you ready?

KEVIN

One minute. I have to whiz.

Kevin undoes his pants and sits on the commode.

MERYL

You're sitting down to pee?

KEVIN

I'm fifty-two years old; I sit down every chance I get.

CUT TO:

INT. CLOTHING STORE- AFTERNOON

Jason is modelling graduation gowns for JESSIE LEGACE, 20. She's a tad overweight by contemporary standards, and wears a baggy sweater and jeans. She's pale with striking features, and hair dyed a serious shade of red. He takes a long swig from his Super Big Gulp and belches.

JASON

Excuse me.

JESSIE

I don't excuse pigs; I slaughter them and eat them for supper.

JASON

(shaking his head)
Our children are going to be traumatized.

Jason does a mock-seductive pose in a black gown.

JASON (cont'd)

So what do you think?

JESSIE

I think you look like Judge Judy.

JASON

Well, that's what I was going for.

JESSIE

Don't forget we're leaving for Aunt Tina's cottage right after the party.

JASON

Oh, right. Let me put that in the ol' Palm Pilot...

He pulls a Bic pen from his shirt-pocket and scribbles on the palm of his hand.

JASON (cont'd)

I don't know how I survived before I had my palm.

JESSIE

I don't know how you survive period.

Jason puts on a graduation cap and tries it at different angles.

JASON

Where's this cottage, anyway?

JESSIE

It's up near Bad Axe.

JASON

Which is...?

Jessie holds up her right hand with her palm facing forward and points to a spot halfway up her thumb.

JASON (cont'd)

Up in the thumb, huh? God, I love living in a state that's shaped like a mitten!

JESSIE

I forgot to ask, how was your interview with Ernst and Young?

JASON

Oh, I ended up not going.

JESSIE
You blew off your big interview?

JASON
They refused to send a limo. I won't work
for cheap bastards.

JESSIE
Do you ever give a straight answer?

JASON
I was being droll. It's part of my charm.

JESSIE
Yeah? What are the other parts?

A pause.

JASON
It's mostly just the droll thing.

JESSIE
I'm starving. Let's do Quizno's!

JASON
I have to run my three miles first.

JESSIE
What are you talking about? You hate
running.

He digs in his pocket, producing a small, wrapped object
which he hands to her.

JASON
Will this tide you over?

JESSIE
(examining)
A stick of Dentyne? Well, there goes the
diet.

JASON
It was my last piece.

JESSIE
Oh, how sweet! Kiss me, you tool.

He kisses her full on the lips.

CUT TO:

INT. OFFICE BUILDING- DAY

A sign on the outer office door reads "EDWARD D. JONES FINANCIAL SERVICES". Kevin, in a small office, sits at his desk typing on his computer.

KEVIN's P.O.V.; he is playing "ESPN Fantasy Hockey", and is in the process of trading Dominic Hasek for Patrick Roy when his secretary BETTY, 40, sticks her head in the door.

BETTY

Hey, the tech funds are going ballistic;
the NASDAQ's up sixty points. Cha-ching!

KEVIN

Yeah, we're up...

He quickly minimizes his game and opens a stock ticker.

KEVIN (cont'd)

...sixty-three points and counting.

BETTY

"Recession" my dimpled ass! Oh, by the way, the Davisons are here for their eleven o'clock.

KEVIN

(consulting watch)

Gee, they're only twenty minutes early. They must've had a flat... Go ahead and send them in.

Betty exits. Kevin saves and closes his hockey game, and pulls the Davison file out of a desk-drawer.

CUT TO:

INT. RESTAURANT- EVENING

An intimate Italian restaurant. Jason sits across from proud parents Kevin and Meryl. They are all dressed to the nines.

MERYL

Jason, we're so proud of you. Graduating cum laude in three and a half years; it's a great accomplishment.

JASON

Thanks, Mom. It's all in the genes.

KEVIN

We really mean it, Jason; you worked extremely hard, and it's all going to pay off. You're going to be successful at whatever you do, and no one deserves it more.

JASON

Hey, what's with all the compliments? I thought this was gonna be a roast!

KEVIN

Well, Don Rickles should be here any minute. He's out front, busting the valet's balls.

MERYL

Jason, we've noticed that you've been a little- well, reticent about your future. And we just want you to know that everyone has anxiety when they realize a diploma isn't a road-map for the rest of your life. And we want you to know that we're one-hundred percent behind you, whatever career path you choose.

KEVIN

C'mon, what's it going to be, son? An ad agency? Grad school? A year abroad touring Amsterdam's Red-Light District?

MERYL

The point is, Kevin, he doesn't have to make up his mind tonight.

JASON

Um, actually, the truth is, I have made up my mind.

KEVIN

(to Meryl)

See there? He's made up his mind. It looks like you brought your Tarot Cards for nothing.

MERYL

Well, don't keep us in suspense; you know your father has a weak bladder.

JASON

I'm going to be an officer in the United States Marine Corps.

MERYL

Ha! You're kidding, right?

JASON

No, Mom, this is on the level.

KEVIN

Jason, I thought we decided- I thought you decided back in high school that the military wasn't a viable option!

JASON

(shaking his head)

No, Dad; out of respect for you and Mom, I agreed to wait until after I got my B.A. to decide on the service.

MERYL

You haven't signed anything, have you?

JASON

No, not yet.

MERYL

You haven't taken a physical or been inducted or anything?

JASON

Not yet, but-

MERYL

Oh, thank God.

JASON

Mom, this isn't some whim; I'm not changing my mind.

KEVIN

Jason, can you just please tell us why?

JASON

Why? Because the Marines are the elite; the first to fight for right and freedom. They personify honor and courage and integrity. And frankly, I'm looking for a true rite of passage. High school and college weren't a real test; sure, I had to apply myself, but I never had to push myself. The Corps is my chance for a "defining moment".

MERYL

Jason, you sound like you're reading off a goddamn brochure!

JASON

Mom, the armed forces are barely making two-thirds of their quota. Do you have any idea why that is?

MERYL

Well, it's probably because the military has a well-deserved reputation for screwing people over or getting them killed.

JASON

It's because my generation has no sense of duty and zero sense of history; they think the freedom that they bask in is this inalienable, god-given right, and they're wrong!

MERYL

Jason, listen to me; I want you to promise me that you'll think about this.

JASON

Mom, I've been thinking about it since I was six, remember? Listen; I'm not gonna be a lifer. I'm only signing for three years; this is not a "life choice".

MERYL

Well let me tell you something, Jason; if we end up going to war in the next three years, it could very well be a "life and death choice".

Painfully awkward silence as a bus-boy removes their salad plates.

JASON

"Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!"

MERYL

That's very noble, Patrick Henry, but in case you haven't noticed, the Redcoats and the Nazis and the commies are all toast. There are no more barbarians at the gate.

JASON

Mom, there are always barbarians at the gate!

CUT TO:

INT. MEIJER SUPERMARKET- CEREAL AISLE

Kevin carries a basket and walks the aisle distractedly. He is looking for something on the top shelf when he trips over a man in a motorized cart. Items go flying. The man is DOUG, 50; he is portly, and minus a leg.

KEVIN

Oh, God, I'm terribly sorry! Are you okay?

DOUG

Yeah, it's fine. I'm kind of under people's radar down here.

Kevin scrambles to help the man pick up his spilled items.

KEVIN

Geez, let me get your, uh, spiral bologna here.

DOUG

Thank you... Hey, you look familiar. Did you go to Royal Oak Kimball?

KEVIN

Yeah, about a hundred years ago. You too?

DOUG

Wait a second; you're Kevin Sanderson, aren't you?

KEVIN

Yeah, and you are...

DOUG

Doug Melvin! I went to Kimball with you- about a hundred pounds ago!

He explodes into hoarse laughter. They shake hands.

KEVIN

Well, Doug, it sure is good to see you. How have you been?

DOUG

Well, not bad, considering. I'm a foreman over at G.M. Truck and Body. Of course...
(nodding at missing appendage)
I missed a little time due to the leg. Or lack thereof!

Doug laughs uproariously.

KEVIN

Right. Ha!

DOUG

Yeah, I was diagnosed with adult-onset diabetes nine years ago, and I lost the leg in March.

KEVIN

Diabetes? Jesus. I'm sorry, Doug.

Doug

Oh, that's okay. It's really my own fault for getting so fat. I knew good and well we had a family history of diabetes, but I still ate everything that wasn't nailed down.

KEVIN

Ha. Well, it's great seeing you again, Doug. I wish I had more time to reminisce, but-

DOUG

So what happened to you, Kevin? You haven't been to one reunion! We thought you'd moved to Canada or bought it in 'Nam!

KEVIN

No, no! I'm still sucking air. I'd planned to go to our twentieth, but I had this business trip...

DOUG

Well, buddy, we've got our thirty-fifth coming up in August. You gotta be there.

KEVIN

I am gonna try like hell, Doug. My schedule can be a little, you know, unpredictable, but I'm gonna give it the old high-school try!

DOUG

They're really fun. Bob Mackey always puts on quite a show.

KEVIN

Bob Mackey? The big farm boy with the lisp?

DOUG

(nodding)

He's an Elvis impersonator. Always comes in full-costume; he was Skinny-Elvis up 'til our twentieth, but now he's more the bloated, pill-popping, croak-on-the-shitter Elvis. But he can still belt out "Suspicious Minds" with the best of 'em.

KEVIN

Doug, it was really great seeing you, but
I've really gotta run.

DOUG

Well it was good seein' you, Kevin.
(calling after him)
Hey, you wanna race to the check-out?
This baby's got an eight-volt battery. On
this waxed tile, I can almost break the
sound-barrier!

KEVIN

(calling back)

You take it easy, Evil Kneivel!

Kevin walks briskly away.

CUT TO:

EXT. VIETNAM- JUNGLE- DAY

Kevin is in Marine jungle fatigues, sporting a Second
Lieutenant's bronze bar on his collar. He is standing among a
platoon of grunts who are distributing ammunition and
cleaning weapons. A transistor radio is playing "THE TIME HAS
COME TODAY" by the CHAMBERS BROTHERS.

COLEMAN

We gonna light up this ville or what,
L.T.?

KEVIN

If they don't hear your noisy ass coming
and light us up first, Coleman.

COLEMAN

That is a harsh indictment, sir.

KEVIN

Yeah, well, I call 'em like I hear 'em.
Coleman, you and Schmitt rotate the
point.

SCHMITT

Oh, shit. I gotta be up front with
Coleman? Why don't you just shoot me
yourself, L.T.?

COLEMAN

Schmitt, I am not gonna save the V.C. valuable ammunition. If they want your sorry ass dead, they're gonna have to shoot you themselves.

SCHMITT

(grinning)

Thanks, L.T.; at least I'll die smilin'.

Schmitt and Coleman move out ahead of the squad. The platoon proceeds in a column towards a heavy tree-line five-hundred yards away. The point men are twenty-five yards in front of the platoon.

As they close within a hundred yards of the tree-line, Kevin pulls out his field-glasses and survey the trees. As he scans back and forth, we see his magnified view of the trees. As he pans left, we see a V.C. SNIPER bungeed high in a tree.

The SNIPER slowly brings his rifle to bear on the point men. Kevin lowers the glasses and attempts to call out a warning, but finds his voice gone. The CRACK of the sniper's rifle and a large-caliber round impacts Schmitt's shoulder, spinning him like a top. Kevin sees the sniper turn to take a bead on Coleman. Kevin tries to run to Coleman, but his legs fail him. He stumbles and falls. He attempts to crawl forward, but can only move in the slowest of motion.

Coleman is shot just below the ear. The other Marines scramble. Mortar rounds start impacting among them; several more are hit. Kevin crawls forward with a medical kit; the first Marine he reaches is face down. Kevin carefully rolls him over; it is Doug, his high-school chum, whose leg has been blown off beneath the knee.

DOUG

(frantically)

Help me, Lieutenant! My leg's around here somewhere. Find it and put it on some ice, willya?

Kevin nods dumbly; as he hunts for the missing leg, he sees another Marine hit nearby. We can't see this Marine's face, but as Kevin approaches, we see real panic in his eyes. He has to crawl through a disturbingly large pool of blood to reach the wounded man. When the Marine turns towards him, we see it is Jason, who is gut-shot.

JASON
(smiling)

What does a guy have to do to get a shot
of morphine around here?

Kevin fumbles around in his first-aid kit, but finds nothing
but tiny band-aids and Bactine. The pool of blood spreads
beneath his boots.

JASON (cont'd)
That's a whole lot of blood, huh? Is it
enough to wash away the sins of the
world, Lieutenant?
(a beat)
Maybe just your sins, then, "sir"?

CUT TO:

INT. SANDERSON BEDROOM- DEAD OF NIGHT

Kevin is moaning in his sleep; his eyes pop open as he wakes
gasping. He finds a remote on the night-stand and turns on
the bedroom T.V. He props himself up on two pillows and
watches a CNN Financial News report on after-hours trading.

CUT TO:

INT. SANDERSON BASEMENT- NIGHT

Kevin is in a storage room listening to "The Time Has Come
Today" by The Chambers Brothers on a turn-table as he sorts
through a box of records. Meryl creaks down the stairs,
peering into the gloom.

MERYL
Kevin? What are you doing down here?
Facing your fear of spiders?

KEVIN
No, I'm just strolling down Amnesia Lane.

MERYL
I didn't know you had this record.

KEVIN
I used to love the Chambers Brothers.

MERYL
God, this is a great song. Sixty-eight?

KEVIN

Sixty-seven. This whole box is records from sixty-seven. The Animals, Buffalo Springfield, Peter Paul and Mary, Paul Revere and the Raiders, Procul Harem...

MERYL

That was a good year for rock and roll, wasn't it?

KEVIN

The best.

MERYL

So, you just felt like reminiscing?

KEVIN

Well, I ran into a kid from my high school the other day, and then Jason drops that bombshell about the Marines, and it occurred to me- I was exactly Jason's age in sixty-seven. And, that was a pivotal year for me, too.

MERYL

That's the year you got your B.A., right?

KEVIN

Yeah.

MERYL

Well, since I didn't meet you 'til sixty-nine, I'm going to have to implore you to throw me a clue.

KEVIN

Yeah, well, the thing of it is- and there is some really sublime irony here- when I graduated, I was supposed join the Marines, too.

MERYL

"Supposed to"? You mean you were drafted?

KEVIN

No, no, I had an S-2 deferrment; but I had this friend named Wyatt, my roommate from the dorms, and we... well, we decided to join the Marines on the "buddy system" and go to Vietnam.

MERYL

You're telling me that you were going to volunteer to go to Vietnam?

KEVIN

Well, it seemed like the thing to do. At the time...

CUT TO:

INT. DORM ROOM- FLASHBACK- 1967

Kevin and WYATT CORKUM, both age 21, are playing poker while drinking Miller High Life long-necks and listening to "Kicks" by Paul Revere and the Raiders. Wyatt has wavy red-hair and no eyebrows to speak of, and looks too young to be either drinking or playing poker.

WYATT

I don't know; a lot of people are saying this is just a Vietnamese civil war.

KEVIN

Well, who do they think the V.C. and the N.V.A. are getting all their weapons and equipment from? Red China and the fucking Russians, that's who.

WYATT

I just wish this war had more of a World War II-style "moral imperative", you know? Is it too much to ask for a war that unifies the country instead of splitting it in two?

KEVIN

I feel exactly the same way, but I'll tell you something; we don't get to pick and choose our war. That just ain't the way it works. It'd be nice if the whole country was on the same page like in the world wars, but you gotta play the hand you're dealt.

He puts a full-house down on Wyatt's pair of eights and giggles.

KEVIN (cont'd)

I mean, my Uncle Bob was not exactly thrilled to have to go to Korea and fight a "police action" against three million Chinese; that was no bed of roses, either, but he went because that's the straw he drew. And our generation's drawn Vietnam, and that's the only war we've got.

THE CHUNKMAN, a stocky hippie, sticks his head in the door. He is gnawing on a Bonomo's Turkish Taffy.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

It's the Chunkman!

WYATT

What's up, Chunk?

CHUNKMAN

Hey. What're you dudes rappin' about?

KEVIN

Vietnam.

CHUNKMAN

Fuckin' bumner, huh? You guys goin' to grad school to keep your deferments, or what?

KEVIN

Actually, we're thinking about volunteering.

CHUNKMAN

Volunteering? For what, like, volunteer firemen?

WYATT

No, volunteer for the Marines. You know, see lush, exotic southeast Asia on the government's nickel.

CHUNKMAN

(smiling)

You're fuckin' with me.

WYATT

We would never fuck with the Chunkman.

CHUNKMAN

Look, if you guys wanna commit suicide, do it the easy way and O.D. on heroin.

KEVIN

Words of wisdom, Chunk.

CHUNKMAN

You two take it easy on the fuckin' hallucinogens; you're startin' to scare me.

The Chunkman exits. Kevin carefully removes a new album from it's packaging; it is "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

KEVIN

This buddy of mine from high school just got drafted. Reginald LaCoste. He and his Mom lived on this ramshackle farm outside of town with no indoor plumbing. I'm pretty sure they survived by poaching deer. Anyway, he's not retarded, but he's definitely slow. We played football together, and it took him four years to learn he had to pull on a forty-two toss-sweep. How long's it going to take him to learn to pull the pin before he throws the grenade?

WYATT

Well, who do you think is fighting this war? The poor and the academically-disinclined. That's who's fighting the Cong while us "privileged" kids sit around in dormitories arguing about the fucking Domino effect.

KEVIN

It's total discrimination. Why should we get a free pass just 'cuz our folks can afford tuition?

WYATT

And who's gonna keep the Reginald Lacostes of America from playing "kick the can" with a goddamn land-mine?

KEVIN

Is the answer Jesus?

CUT TO:

INT. SPACEY BASEMENT- CONTINUOUS

KEVIN

Not just Vietnam; the Marines. The infantry.

MERYL

But why? Because of your Dad?

KEVIN

That was part of it. It wasn't just that he'd been a Marine; he was appointed to the Macomb County draft board in sixty-six.

MERYL

Ah! There's the rub.

KEVIN

(nodding)

We took our physicals together down in Fort Wayne. And then, the night before we were bussing down to get inducted, I saw on the eleven o'clock news that two-hundred and seventy-five American troops had been killed in 'Nam the previous week, and I panicked; I freaked out, and I ran over to Wyatt's at two in the morning and told him I wasn't going. And I thought that, since it was originally my idea, I thought when he heard I was backing out, he'd back out too, but... well, Wyatt just didn't have a "backing out" kind of disposition. He got on that
(MORE)

KEVIN (cont'd)

bus at oh-eight-hundred, and I never saw him again.

MERYL

Jesus. Do you know if he made it?

KEVIN

(shaking his head)

We corresponded while he was at O.C.S., but when he got to 'Nam, I- well, I was scared shitless that I'd send him a letter and it would come back stamped "Return To Sender: Deceased".

MERYL

So what did you do?

KEVIN

All I could think to do was, I applied to business school to keep my deferment. Business school! Jesus; Wyatt and I used to make fun of guys who went to B-school! And that's how I ended up with the M.B.A I never dreamed of. And a trite, meaningless career as a financial advisor is what cowardice has wrought.

MERYL

Why didn't you ever tell me?

KEVIN

Well, in a word, shame. In two words, "shame" and "guilt".

MERYL

Guilt? Because you didn't want to go to Vietnam? Of course you had second thoughts; it's called a "survival instinct".

KEVIN

But it was my idea! And when it came down to "gut check" time, I realized I didn't have any...

MERYL

Come on, Kevin; there's a reason fear isn't a "deadly sin"; the fear of death or dismemberment is a normal, rational human emotion. And you weren't just afraid of dying, you were afraid of dying for nothing! How can you beat yourself up for that?

KEVIN

(as if to himself)

I just couldn't bear the thought of getting killed before I had a chance to make my mark, you know? I was so sure I was gonna leave a mark...

A long silence ensues. Meryl strokes his arm.

KEVIN (cont'd)

Do you know why I haven't gone to a single one of my high school reunions?

MERYL

I guess I just assumed you hated high school as much as I did.

KEVIN

Well, I did kind of hate it, but that's not why. Ever since I got the invite to our tenth, I've had these horrible visions of sitting there in some banquet room and watching the vets roll in on wheelchairs or limp in on prosthetic legs, staring at me with eyes full of contempt. The boys who heeded their country's call while I was off at grad school burrowing in my loophole...

MERYL

Listen, we'll look for Wyatt. Together.

KEVIN

I don't know if I can risk it.

MERYL

Come on. Since Jason dragged me kicking and screaming into the "Electronic Age", I can search for people online. Here, write down his full name.

She hands him pen and paper. He begins scribbling.

KEVIN

Second Lt. Wyatt Merritt Corkum. He was with Bravo Company, First Battalion, Third Marines.

MERYL

And... you wanna know either way?

The song is over. He takes the record off the turn-table and puts it carefully back in a slip-cover.

KEVIN

I don't know. No. Maybe...

He looks skyward as if for guidance.

KEVIN (cont'd)

Isn't it better to keep living a lie when the truth might destroy you?

CUT TO:

INT. JASON'S CAR- EVENING

Jason is driving as Jessie stares out the passenger window at an upscale mall.

JASON

My Aunt Gail's back in the hospital. I should get her something.

JESSIE

You wanna stop at the mall?

JASON

Well, what can I get at Marshall Fields for five bucks?

JESSIE

Uh, the finger!

Jason laughs so hard he snorts, but Jessie doesn't crack a smile.

JASON
Looks like rain, huh?

JESSIE
Okay, enough with the fucking chit-chat.
What did you want to tell me? It must be
important if you're missing "The
Sopranos".

JASON
I didn't mean to be cryptic. What I
wanted to tell you is, I've made a
decision on a short-term career path.

JESSIE
Well, all right. Let's hear it.

JASON
I'm afraid you're not gonna like it.

JESSIE
I don't like anything. Let's hear it.

JASON
I've decided I'm gonna be a Marine.

A tense silence.

JESSIE
You better be about to say "biologist".

JASON
No, a United States Marine.

JESSIE
Right, okay, well, I've just got one
small question then.

JASON
Fire away.

JESSIE
(exploding)
You're fucking kidding me, right? Or is
this the first recorded case of adult-
onset retardation?

JASON

Um, that's actually two questions.

JESSIE

Why would you join the military? Why would anyone join the military; the unemployment rate is fucking three percent!

JASON

Well, that may be true, but-

JESSIE

People join the military as a last resort. It's for people who have no other options. You have options coming out of your ass!

JASON

I know I could get a job in advertising, but I'm looking for something meaningful, you know? Something fulfilling, something-

JESSIE

Listen, my uncle guaranteed he can get you in at J. Walter Thompson: They'll pay for your relocation, you'll get profit sharing and-

JASON

I don't care about their profit margin! I don't want any part of that corporate boot-licking.

JESSIE

No, no, you'd prefer to get your ass shot off for coolie wages!

JASON

No, I like my ass. I just want to do my part to defend this country.

JESSIE

Defend this country? From who? Didn't you hear? The Cold War is over! We won! The only invasion we have to worry about now is the invasion of privacy!

Jessie shakes her head disgustedly. Jason stops for a red light and bangs his head repeatedly on the steering wheel.

CUT TO:

EXT. VIETNAM JUNGLE- DAY

Marine Second Lieutenant Kevin Sanderson is using the handset of a radio carried on his RADIO OPERATOR's back.

KEVIN

Six actual, this is three actual,
negative contact, over.

SIX ACTUAL

Roger that; proceed towards the ville two
clicks down that trail, over.

KEVIN

All right, boys, we're moving out.

(A beat)

Spread out, goddammit! You bunch up like
that, one lucky mortar round could out
five morons.

Two young Marines approach timidly: Private First Class REGINALD LACOSTE is accompanied by Private DYLAN, both teenagers sporting peach-fuzz. Their helmets and body-armor are several sizes too big, making them appear childlike. Dylan is practically dragging his M-16.

REGINALD

Excuse me, sir, but, uh, where am we
supposed to be, again?

KEVIN

Reginald, I told you I wanted you and
Dylan twenty metres out, guarding our
flank. Keeping an eye on those hooches.
Remember?

REGINALD

Right, I... we just weren't exactly sure
on the distance, sir. Dylan thinks a
metre's about the same as a foot, but I-

KEVIN

Take twenty paces that way. Copy that?
Anything moves around those hooches, you
light it up; there's no friendlies out
here.

DYLAN

Sir? I did see something movin' yonder,
but it was just a dog. A big lab, or
maybe a Shepherd. Should I have wasted
it?

KEVIN

No, Dylan, the dog's aren't V.C. They
love Americans, 'cuz they know they're
our best friends, whereas the V.C. look
at them as emergency rations. You follow
me?

DYLAN

Roger that, sir.

REGINALD

We'll be twenty paces that-a-way guardin'
your flank, sir.

KEVIN

Well, that's very reassuring.

Dylan and Reginald pace out their assigned twenty meters.
They're so close together it looks as if they might be
holding hands.

KEVIN (cont'd)

(to himself)

Oh, look; Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle Dumb-
Ass are walking arm-in-arm.

(yelling)

Hey, Dylan! Reginald! Quit playing grab-
ass and-

His voice fades away to nothing. His eyes bug as he spots a
thin trip-wire five meters in front of Dylan and Reginald,
who appear to be counting their strides on their fingers.
Kevin tries again to yell a warning, but he is now in a
silent movie. He tries to run toward them, but he is moving
in slow-motion. Dylan and Reginald, at normal speed, are
about to trip the wire.

Dylan bends over to pick up the clip that has just fallen out of his M-16. As he is leaning over, Reginald calls to the aforementioned DOG, a big German Shepherd who comes bounding toward them. Reginald moves forward with his hand outstretched to pet the dog, and trips the wire.

The wire snap as Reginald spills forward. As Kevin watches in horror, Reginald, Dylan, and the dog are engulfed in a fiery explosion. Kevin falls to the ground and buries his head in his hands. Jason approaches in uniform, carrying a M-60 and a leash.

JASON

Dad, have you seen Ranger?

KEVIN

What? Who's "Ranger"?

JASON

Ranger, my German Shepherd! You said you'd keep an eye on him while I was out on patrol.

KEVIN

Oh, well, I- I don't know what happened. I tried to stop it, but I-

Jason eyes the smoke from the recent explosion.

JASON

You let him get killed, didn't you? And Reginald too, by the looks of it. Jesus, Dad! Couldn't you have kept your word? Just this once?

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- NIGHT

Kevin is sleeping with his eyes half-closed. They pop open as he wakes with a start.

His P.O.V.; he's been staring at Jason's soccer statuette on the night-stand.

INT. SANDERSON KITCHEN-DAY

Meryl is at the sink, scrubbing the hell out of a skillet with steel wool. Enter Jason in his work-out attire, favoring his right leg. He limps to the 'fridge.

MERYL

So, have you or have you not been considering your options?

JASON

If you mean re-considering the Marines, mother, I keep telling you; my mind's made up.

MERYL

I'll take that as a "Yes, Mother, I'm still mulling things over".

JASON

(mutters to himself)

Jesus, do they make a hearing-aid for selective listeners?

MERYL

And why haven't we met your recruiter? I've got a few four-letter words for him, by god.

JASON

Mom, Captain Munson's a stand-up guy. He didn't have to sell me. I went to him, for God's sake.

MERYL

Jason, these fucking recruiters are no better than pimps! They prey on the kids that are most vulnerable; the half-wits and the misfits and the drop-outs! And they convince them to sell their bodies to Uncle Sam's war machine in exchange for an "Enlistment Bonus". Instead of going trolling at pool halls in uniform, they should have to wear satin suits and feathered hats like the scheming pimps they are!

JASON

So which am I, Mom? A half-wit or a misfit?

MERYL

Neither! That's why you don't belong.

JASON

Oh, so it's the dumb, unskilled naifs who should assume all the risks? Those with the least to lose should be the cannon-fodder, is that what you're saying?

MERYL

Yes! That maybe sound callous, but I don't give a shit! Besides, the military doesn't want smart kids like you; the dumb ones are much easier to brainwash.

JASON

Mother, I am aghast; the P.C. Police will be here any second to take you away in chains.

MERYL

I just think you should take more time and explore all your options. You are familiar with the dictum "Fools rush in"?

JASON

"Rush in"? Mom, come on, I've wanted this since I was in grade school. And if I should ever run for office, a tour of duty as a Marine officer will look pretty good on the ol' record.

MERYL

Oh, so you want to risk your life for, what, a resume builder?

JASON

Come on, Mom. It's like Doc Holmes said when I caught him smoking Marlboro Reds; (imitates old, raspy voice)
"Well, kid, everybody's gotta die, and everybody's gotta die of somethin'!"

MERYL

This is nothing to be glib about, Jason.

JASON

I wasn't being glib; I was being droll.
It's part of my charm.

Jason smiles, hoping for a chuckle. Instead, Meryl's eyes smolder.

MERYL

Look, Jason, I know you think we're overreacting, but you cannot expect your father and I to just sit idly by and watch you throw your life away.

JASON

"Throw my life away"? Mom, for Christ's sake; people throw their lives away on drugs or crime or gambling, not serving their country!

MERYL

By the way, what did your pimp say about your asthma?

JASON

I don't have asthma.

MERYL

You had asthma until you were eighteen! I would think they'd be interested in your medical background.

JASON

It didn't come up.

MERYL

Well, don't you have to disclose your medical history?

JASON

I might've forgotten to mention the asthma thing.

MERYL

And you can just withhold information?

JASON

Mom, there's rampant Alzheimer's on both sides of the family; I'm bound to be forgetful.

Jason exits through the swinging-door to the living room.

MERYL
(yells)
Speaking of which, you forgot to mow the
lawn yesterday!

Meryl turns back to finish the dishes; she pauses, staring
out the window above the sink, lost in a thought.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- EVENING

Kevin and Meryl brood over take-out cartons.

MERYL
I'm getting some aspirin. Can you take
care of these leftovers?

KEVIN
Sure. Do you want me to throw them out,
or do you want me to put them in
tupperware, and throw them out next week?

MERYL
Are you mocking my tupperware?

KEVIN
I wouldn't dream of it.

MERYL
So, have you had that little father-to-
son chat yet?

KEVIN
No, I've been- well, I'm working on a
script. I don't know if I'll get another
crack at him, so I'm not leaving anything
to chance.

MERYL
You'll do great. You're a salesman; you
know how to overcome objections and
"close" people. And don't be afraid to
play your trump card.

KEVIN
What trump card?

MERYL

The "If you join the Marines, your mother will have a psychotic episode" card!

KEVIN

Well let's not panic. It's not like he's being inducted tomorrow. Is it?

MERYL

No, but his physical's on Monday. He's hiding the asthma. Can you believe that? Thirty years ago, boys his age were faking asthma to get out of the draft, and now our son is concealing it to get into the Marines?

(a pause)

I fucking hate irony!

KEVIN

It is highly overrated.

MERYL

I pray every night, "Please, God, let him be flat-footed. Let him be anemic. Let him have hepatitis!"

KEVIN

Honey, I'm afraid he's the picture of health.

MERYL

I remember how gung-ho he was about the service back in like tenth grade, but I was positive that after four-years at a good college, he'd be one-hundred percent focused on a professional career.

KEVIN

I thought the same thing. Man, were we living a lie!

MERYL

How the hell are we gonna deprogram him before he signs his life away?

KEVIN

(shaking his head)

I don't know, but I've been thinking; is it possible that he's doing this just to spite me? Is this his way of saying "Like Father, Like Son, Like Hell!"?

MERYL

Kevin, why would he want to do anything to spite you? He loves you.

Kevin runs a hand through his hair and checks for fall-out.

KEVIN

It started when he was just a kid; I give him my complete collection of Hardy Boys mysteries, he'll only read Nancy Drew. In junior high I was first-chair tenor sax, so what does he pick? The French Horn! It couldn't even be another woodwind instrument I could help him with! And does it stop there? Hell, no; high school rolls around, he sees my football trophies, so of course, he goes out for the soccer team. Time for college, the old man went to Michigan State, he goes to U of M. I use Windows, he has to have a Mac! Are you starting to see a trend here? Am I so loathsome and pathetic and embarrassing that he feels compelled to live a life the polar opposite of mine?

MERYL

Kevin, you're being paranoid.

KEVIN

And as a final dig at Dad, the ultimate coup de grace; his old man dodged the draft, so he volunteers for the Marines! "In your face! Fuck you, Dad!"

MERYL

I don't think this is about spite, Kevin. If he wanted to hurt us, he could've stolen a car, or done drugs, or dropped out of college and married a stripper named "Bubbles".

KEVIN

I don't know. The Marine Corps? It's gotta be payback. 'Cuz if "living well is the best revenge", then living dangerously is the best revenge on your parents.

MERYL

That's not it. That can't be it.

KEVIN

Well if it's not about us, what is it about? You think it's really about "defending any ally, opposing any foe" and all that J.F.K. rhetoric? I mean, my God, isn't that attitude just totally anachronistic? What did he do, buy Mr. Peabody's Wayback Machine and set it for nineteen sixty-one?

MERYL

Kids today don't need time machines; they've got the fucking internet! They just type the letters "J-F-K" into a search engine, and five minutes later they're walking around shouting "Ich Bein Ein Berliner!"

Kevin smiles, but Meryl's brow furrows deeply.

MERYL (cont'd)

I hate to say this, but I can't help but think this is your father's fault.

KEVIN

My father's fault? For what, being a war hero?

MERYL

Jesus, Kevin, Jason started wearing his Grandpa's dog-tags when he was four years old.

KEVIN

So, I guess Jason got the recessive "warrior gene" that skipped me. You're not saying Dad brainwashed him, are you?

MERYL

No, I just think he planted the seed, that's all! By the time Jason was in grammar school, his two most valued possessions were your Dad's Bronze Star and his purple heart... I just think this whole crazy notion of "duty" and "honor" was instilled by your father when Jason was at a very impressionable age. And I could just kick myself for not nipping it in the bud.

KEVIN

Like how? What could we have done to "nip it in the bud"? Show him pictures from My Lai? Take him down to the V.A. for a horror show? Drive him to D.C., march him up to The Wall and show him fifty-eight thousand reasons not to trust his life to the U.S. government?

MERYL

Maybe we should have.

CUT TO:

INT. DORM ROOM- FLASHBACK- 1967

Wyatt and Kevin stand facing a dart-board, each with darts in one hand and a beer in the other. "The Time Has Come Today" blares on the radio.

WYATT

I'm not "waffling"; I just wish things over there were a little more black and white. I mean, the Diem regime is just a puppet government with LBJ's hand up their ass. And Ho Chi Minh may not be George Washington, but he sure as hell ain't Hitler or Stalin either.

KEVIN

Hey, I hear you. I wish we had a Pearl Harbor or a Lusitania to rally around instead of the fucking "Gulf of Tonkin Incident".

Kevin heaves a dart and misses the board by a yard.

WYATT

You're sure you're right-handed?

KEVIN

Wait, let me check...

Kevin examines both hands, and flips Wyatt off with his right.

KEVIN (cont'd)

Yep!

Wyatt wolfs a shot of tequila.

WYATT

(singing along to Chambers Brothers)
"Now the time has come! There's no place
to run! I might get burned up by the
sun..."

KEVIN

You know, I still think becoming pilots
is a legitimate option. We'd have to sign
for four years instead of two, but that's
a small price to pay for flying lessons.
And a scarf.

WYATT

Yeah, it's an option, but, so's the
National Guard. I don't know; I still
think it's weaseling out.

KEVIN

Well, what about Sandy? He's going Air
Force to fly a jet, and you don't think
he's a weasel.

WYATT

Yeah, but Sandy was Air Force R.O.T.C.
before the war. He's not doing it as a
dodge; his dream is to fly a big ass
jumbo jet for United.

KEVIN

Doesn't sound so bad to me. I've always
had a stewardess fetish.

WYATT

Who doesn't? Here, let's even this game up a little...

Wyatt picks up a neck-tie and wraps it around his head as a blind-fold. He throws his dart, scoring an eight.

WYATT (cont'd)

He's the thing; if you're a pilot, once a day you climb into your air-conditioned cockpit and fly thirty-thousand feet over the jungle, you press a button, and then you fly back to your air-craft carrier and spend the night in an Officer's Club while Reginald LaCoste is shooting it out in the jungle; as far as I'm concerned, being a pilot is still getting away with it.

KEVIN

Yeah, that's true... Besides, being a pilot requires perfect vision, and judging by your ensemble there, it's pretty clear that you're color blind.

Wyatt removes his blind-fold

WYATT

Me? The only thing you're wearing that matches that ugly yellow shirt is your teeth!

Kevin launches a dart that nearly parts Wyatt's hair. A dangerous game of tag-darts ensues.

CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- EVENING

Meryl is chewing a pen and balancing her check-book when the phone on the table rings. She picks up on the second ring.

MERYL

Hello?

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Hello, is Jason there?

MERYL

Who's calling, please?

CAPTAIN MUNSON

This is Captain Munson, United States Marine Corps.

MERYL

Oh, Captain Munson; you must be his recruiter!

CAPTAIN MUNSON

That's affirmative, Ma'am.

MERYL

Do you have a first name, Captain?

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Uh, yes, it's Bill.

MERYL

Well, let me tell you something, Bill; I find it very troubling that you sold Jason on the Marine Corps without ever discussing the matter with his father and me. Don't you think Mr. Sanderson and I should have some input into our son's future? Or were you just afraid that we might attempt to talk some sense into him?

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Listen, ma'am, I don't think that-

MERYL

No, you listen to me, Bill; don't go polishing your new medal for recruiting my son just yet.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Ma'am, I apologize; I had no intention of upsetting you-

MERYL

"Upsetting me"? You recruit my only child into the armed forces without my knowledge or consent, and now you're worried about upsetting me? Is that supposed to be funny, Bill?

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Negative, ma'am, I just- is Jason there, by any chance?

MERYL

What was your pitch, Bill? Degradation, minimum wage, and a free flag for the folks if he's killed in Kosovo?

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Ma'am, the truth of the matter is, I never "pitched" Jason; he came to me determined to be a Marine.

MERYL

Is that right, Bill? Well I'm even more determined that he not be a Marine, and Bill, he owes me a helluva lot more than he owes you, the Marine Corps, and Uncle Sam all rolled into one!

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Uh, ma'am, could I possibly leave a brief message-

MERYL

Bill, let me ask you something; exactly what kind of organizations need "recruiters", anyway? I'll tell you what kind; the military, Amway and cults! Face it, Bill; no organization with any merit needs recruiters trolling for drop-outs at Pinball Pete's!

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Mrs. Sanderson, would you be so kind as to tell Jason that his physical is a "go" for Thursday morning at the M.E.P.S. in Lansing? Please?

MERYL

You know, I really don't feel inclined to do the Marine Corps any favors right now, Bill. Why don't you send him a telegram?

She pauses for effect.

MERYL (cont'd)

Or do you save those for when one of the kids you recruited is on his way home to his parents in a plastic bag?

She slams down the receiver.

CUT TO:

INT. FOOTBALL STADIUM- DAY

Meryl and Kevin are seated alongside hundreds of other proud parents inside the cavernous Michigan Stadium, a.k.a. "The Big House". Kevin is gnawing on a stick of Beef Jerky and reading a Commencement Program.

KEVIN

The University of Michigan is a presitigious school; you'd think they could get a better commencement speaker than Charles Nelson Reilly.

Meryl smiles, and snatches his program away. She peruses it for a moment.

MERYL

Did you know James Earl Jones is a U of M alumnus?

KEVIN

I guess that explains the Darth Vader planetarium.

He rolls up his program and swats at a winged insect.

KEVIN (cont'd)

So there's, what, two thousand kids down there in black? How the hell are we gonna spot Jason?

MERYL

Oh, I don't think he'll be too hard to pick out...

Meryl produces opera glasses and scans the graduates. She goes from mortarboard to mortarboard decorated with slogans; "Schools Out Forever!"; "Seduce Me, Mrs. Robinson!"; "Will Work For 75K and Stock Options".

She stops at one emblazoned with the "Eagle, Globe and Anchor" Marine logo, with "Semper Fidelis" scrawled across the bottom.

MERYL (cont'd)

There's ol' John Wayne right there.

KEVIN

Let me see.

Kevin borrows the glasses and inspects his son's lid.

KEVIN (cont'd)

I definitely prefer that to the skull n' crossbones over "Mess With The Best, Die Like The Rest".

MERYL

It took me a week to talk him out of that. I told him people would think he was going to Pirate School.

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE

Jason enters literally whistling Dixie, closes the door behind him, drops his pants and sits on the commode. As he's picking up a New Yorker magazine, his eyes are drawn to the wall on his left; just above the toilet-paper roll is a sheet of paper taped to the wall with the words "U of M diplomas: take one!", and an arrow pointing to the toilet-paper.

JASON

(yelling)

Jealousy will get you nowhere, Dad!

He takes a pen from his pants pocket and scribbles out "U of M", replacing it with "M.S.U.".

EXT. WASHINGTON MALL- DAY

Kevin is seated in the middle of a deserted Washington Mall. He looks down and finds himself in a wheelchair. He glances around him at the Washington Monument, the Potomac River, the Jefferson Memorial. He calls out several times but there is no one to reply.

His wheelchair begins rolling forward. He inspects the chair and finds that it is not motorized, and he is not on an incline. Yet the chair moves steadily forward, seemingly of its own accord. The speed increases and he becomes frightened, but can't find a brake with which to slow his progress. The chair is moving inexorably towards what he now recognizes as the Vietnam Memorial. He tries to stop the chair by applying his hands to the wheels, but the friction from the fast-moving tires burns him.

The chair carries him closer to the Memorial, within thirty yards, twenty, ten; the chair rolls to a stop within a yard of the gleaming black marble,

KEVIN'S P.O.V.: the large black marble panels that comprise "The Wall" begin sliding by, with increasing speed, as if they were on rails, until they're hurtling past like the cars of a speeding locomotive. The speed of the panels makes the names an illegible blur. After a minute of panels whizzing past bearing thousands of names, the "train" begins to slow, and finally rolls to a halt. Two of the panels loom directly over Kevin and his wheelchair.

Kevin looks first to the panel on his left, and begins reading.

ANGLE The Wall. The first name is "Wyatt M. Corkum". The second is also Wyatt, as is the third, and every subsequent name on the panel. Horrified, Kevin turns to the other panel.

ANGLE The Wall. The name "Reginald P. Lacoste", followed by another "Reginald P. Lacoste", and another and another.

ANGLE Kevin, closing his eyes tight to shut out the vision. Seconds pass; a nearby tapping sound draws his attention.

ANGLE A MAN IN UNIFORM on one knee, chiseling a name into a vacant spot at the bottom of the second panel. He finishes the last name, and blows away the excess sediment. He stands, salutes the panel, and executes an about-face before marching away. Kevin strains forward in his chair to read the freshly engraved name. KEVIN'S P.O.V.: the name is "Jason M. Sanderson".

Kevin can't catch his breath; he tries to roll away from the looming black slabs of rock but the wheelchair will not budge. Unable to retreat, he begins rocking the chair with all his weight from side to side, and...

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- CONTINUOUS

Kevin is on top of the covers, tossing and turning until finally he rolls out of bed onto the floor. He is startled to consciousness as he hits the carpet. He writhes on the floor; the horror in his eyes slowly subsides, replaced by waves of relief as he realizes it was only a dream.

INT. KITCHEN- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- MORNING

Kevin is at the table, reading the classifieds. Enter Meryl from the living room, smiling ear to ear.

KEVIN

What the hell are you grinning at?

MERYL

Oh, am I smiling? I wasn't aware.

KEVIN

Specifically, you've got that shit-eating "I know something you don't know" grin that makes me want to wipe it off with steel wool.

MERYL

Oooh! Well, then, maybe I'll just keep my unbelievably fantastic news to myself.

KEVIN

Fantastic news? Well, in that case, I retract my statement: You have such a pretty smile, dear.

MERYL

That's better; okay, are you ready for this?

KEVIN

I am ready. Is sitting down sufficient, or should I curl up in the fetal position?

MERYL

Sitting is fine; okay, I was up 'til four a.m. snooping on the internet, and I made a couple of phone calls this afternoon, and I have some news.

KEVIN

If I'm adopted, I really... I don't think I want to know.

MERYL

It's better; oh god, I can't wait to see your face.

KEVIN

Would you spit it out?

MERYL

I found Wyatt. I found Wyatt Corkum! He's alive and well and living in Detroit!

Kevin's jaw drops. Meryl leaps up and screams exultantly.

KEVIN

Wyatt's alive? You're sure it's- you're positive it's Wyatt Merritt Corkum?

MERYL

Yes, First Lt. Wyatt Merritt Corkum, USMC retired! He's a paramedic!

KEVIN

Well, what did- how did you find him?

MERYL

Research. It really wasn't that hard.

KEVIN

You're amazing.

MERYL

Yeah, as it turns out, I'm quite the cyber-stalker!

KEVIN

Well, what do you think I should do?

MERYL

Call him! I got his e-mail too, if you want. And here's his work number.

She hands him a yellow legal-pad page full of scribbled notes, phone numbers and addresses.

KEVIN

But what if he hates me? What if he's been holding a grudge? Just letting it fester all these decades?

MERYL

Honey, I'm sure he'd love to hear from you. Why don't you give him a ring?

KEVIN

(shaking his head in awe)
He actually made it. Wyatt lives!

He embraces Meryl, lifting her feet off the ground.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

Thank you, Meryl. Thank you, God! I'm so thrilled. I'm so relieved. I guess I've been torturing myself for thirty years for nothing.

(a pause)

Or, maybe 'Nam ruined his life. And he blames me.

MERYL

Only one way to find out.

KEVIN

Jesus, what if this whole time I've been hoping he's alive, he's been wishing I were dead?

CUT TO:

INT. CAR- NIGHT

Kevin sits alone in his Ford Taurus, parked opposite a softball field, where a game is in progress under lights. He is still in his work attire. In his left hand, he holds a cellular phone. C.U. on the phone; the blue L.C.D. displays six digits have been entered. The cursor blinks, awaiting the last entry.

ANGLE ON KEVIN, staring at the phone, then glancing at a legal-pad page resting against the steering wheel, which we recognize as the scratch sheet Meryl gave him with Wyatt's numbers. Smoke swirls around the page, the source of which is A JOINT in his right hand. He takes a long hit off the joint and stares again at the tiny blue screen. He shakes his head, takes another monster hit, and presses the seven and then the 'send' key on the cell. He exhales a mighty cloud and straightens up in his bucket seat as someone answers.

KEVIN

Lieutenant Corkum, I presume?

CUT TO:

INT. BAR- NIGHT

Kevin is seated alone in a booth near the door. He is closely inspecting faces as people walk in. Suddenly, a hand is on his shoulder.

WYATT

Can I see some I.D., son?

KEVIN

Wyatt Corkum? Is that really you?

WYATT CORKUM, 52, wiry and a bit haggard, but with bright, lively eyes and still-thick red hair.

WYATT

Well, it damn sure ain't Elvis! Come here, you middle-aged bastard.

They embrace.

KEVIN

Christ, I thought I'd never see your ugly ass again!

WYATT

Well, you haven't seen my ass yet, but the night's still young.

KEVIN

God, you really look good. Still trim, still got all your hair; you prick!

WYATT

Yeah, well, you don't look half as bad as I hoped, either. So what's this I hear about a wife? Mail-order bride, or is it a green-card scam?

KEVIN

Neither, as far as you know. Actually, I met Meryl in sixty-nine, we've been married since seventy-two, and Jason was born in seventy-nine. I really lucked out with Meryl. She, uh... she's the one who found you.

WYATT

I didn't know I was lost.

KEVIN

Well, I'd wanted to track you down for decades, but I was... you know, I was afraid of where I might find you.

WYATT

Yeah, I understand. Well, I'm so glad she did. Find me.

Wyatt produces a cigarette and lights it expertly.

KEVIN

Yeah, well, I wouldn't have known you with the beard. And the cigarette! How long you been smoking?

WYATT

Since sixty-seven; my third day in-country. I don't blame all my vices on 'Nam, but in this case, I have a five-hundred-pound gorilla on my back, and his name is Charlie!

Kevin flags down a young bleach-blonde WAITRESS.

WAITRESS

What'll it be, gentlemen?

WYATT

Uh, Chivas on the rocks, and-

KEVIN

And a Labatt.

WAITRESS

Right away, sirs.

The Waitress departs.

KEVIN

So, you mentioned in your e-mail you were wounded over there. Do you not like to talk about it, or-

WYATT

Actually, I got hit twice. The first time up near Dai Loc; I took shrapnel from an R.P.G. in both legs. The second time, outside Tan Phouc, an AK round went through my forearm here-

Wyatt rolls up his sleeve, revealing a large, shiny scar resembling a severe burn.

WYATT (cont'd)

-and ended up in my abdomen, where it ruptured the ol' spleen. They did a spleenectomy and shipped me to a V.A. hospital in California.

KEVIN

Jesus, a spleenectomy?

WYATT

Yeah. I left my heart in San Francisco, but my fucking spleen is in Vietnam.

KEVIN

You can function normally without one?

WYATT

Absolutely. It's no big deal. They say you don't know what you got 'til it's gone, but frankly, I don't miss my spleen one fucking bit! After that, the military labeled me "twenty-five-percent disabled", so I get a little check from the government every month. It started out at forty bucks, but it's adjusted for
(MORE)

WYATT (cont'd)
inflation, so now I'm up to a whoppin'
hundred-and-eighty-three dollars a month.

KEVIN
Wow! Not bad for a fucking spleen!

WYATT
Yeah. I always blow it on liquor and
smokes. The scotch tastes a little
sweeter when it's on Uncle Sam.

KEVIN
The least he can do is buy you a drink,
the cheap bastard.

WYATT
(nodding)
He is kind of a fucking ingrate.

KEVIN
You don't... you don't know whatever
happened to that Reginal Lacoste kid we
used to talk about, do you?

WYATT
Yeah. I was gonna tell you; my first
month in-country, I tracked him down, and
I found out he was K.I.A. And I thought
to myself, "Well, so much for saving
Reginald Lacoste"!

Kevin is visibly shaken. The waitress arrives with their
drinks. He clears his throat and chugs down half his beer.

KEVIN
Jesus. Do you know what happened to him?

WYATT
Well, according to this dude from his
company, Reggie and two other grunts were
washing a helicopter out in the Mekong
River, and ol' Reg got caught up in the
current; I guess he wasn't too strong a
swimmer, and before they could get to
him, he drowned.

KEVIN
Jesus Christ! Poor Reginald.

Kevin shakes his head in disbelief as Wyatt unleashes a cough of lung-ripping ferocity.

KEVIN (cont'd)
Did I happen to mention that Jason wants
to join the Marines?

WYATT
(smiling)
The Marine Corps? Jesus, Kevin, didn't
you raise him any better than that?

CUT TO:

EXT. SANDERSON RESIDENCE- AFTERNOON

EMMIT SANDERSON, 79, beer-bellied and bespectacled, walks stiffly up toward the front door carrying a box. He rings; Kevin answers.

KEVIN
Hey, Dad. Come on in.

EMMIT
Sorry to drop by unannounced. Hope I'm
not interrupting anything.

KEVIN
Oh, well, fortunately, the Sultan of
Brunei just left... What's this? Did you
bring us a bundt cake?

EMMIT
If I had a bundt cake, I would've eaten
it myself. This here is for Jason.

Meryl enters from the kitchen wearing a floppy chef's hat.

MERYL
Hi, Dad. How are you?

EMMIT
Oh, I'm still suckin' air.

KEVIN
Well, Dad, Jason's out with Jessie, just
for a change. Do you want to leave that
for him, or-

EMMIT

Yeah, I guess I can do that. It's not his graduation gift or anything; it's just my old service revolver. I cleaned it up real nice; the grips are pretty worn, but he can replace those if he wants.

MERYL

You're giving him a gun?

EMMIT

Yeah. Is that a problem?

KEVIN

Well, Dad, we've just never had a firearm on the premises.

MERYL

I don't want a gun in this house.

EMMIT

Well, I just figured that since Jason's an adult now, and joining the "armed forces", he should have his own weapon.

MERYL

The jury's still out on that, Dad.

EMMIT

On Jason bein' an adult?

MERYL

No, on the service. He hasn't signed anything yet.

EMMIT

Well, my hearing ain't what it used to be, but he sounded pretty sure to me.

MERYL

Dad, I really wish you wouldn't encourage him on this. It's too late to undo all the military rhetoric you force-fed him as a child, but-

EMMIT

Military rhetoric? What the hell is that supposed to mean?

MERYL

Oh, you don't remember, Dad? The indoctrination started when he was about, oh, four years old; making him dig foxholes and pull guard-duty up at your cabin? Playing drill instructor and marching him around the yard for hours on end like he was on the parade ground at Parris Island?

EMMIT

Now wait just a minute; from the time he could talk, Jason asked me about the war. But I never made combat out to be a goddam John Wayne movie. As soon as he was old enough, I told him all kinds of grisly details. And as far as playing drill instructor, he loved getting marched around, doing push-ups, stacking cords of firewood; and I got a lot of work out of him!

(shaking his head)

"Indoctrination", for Chrissake. Quit treating this like it's some kind of tragedy, will ya?

MERYL

And what if they send him to the Balkans and get him killed at the ripe old age of twenty-two, Dad? Will it be a tragedy then?

EMMIT

What are you doin' to that boy? Are you really gonna make him choose between his country and his mother? Do you think that's fair?

MERYL

Oh, so now I'm not just overprotective, I'm a manipulative bitch, is that it?

KEVIN

Meryl-

EMMIT

Listen; all I know is, he thought maybe you'd be proud of him, and now he's just hoping not to get disowned.

KEVIN

We're not going to disown him, Dad; we just want him to think this through. We know he loves his country, but we're not sure he fully comprehends the level of risk involved.

EMMIT

I think he does. Standing up for your beliefs isn't always the "safe" thing. Sometimes it's downright risky, but risk is better than regret, in my opinion. But I'm just an old war-horse with insomnia and an ass full of shrapnel, so who the hell am I to give advice?

Emmit wheels around and marches out.

MERYL

Dad, wait! I...

Emmit slams the front door behind. Meryl sits and drops her head to the kitchen table.

MERYL (cont'd)

Shit! Me and my big mouth.

KEVIN

You have a beautiful mouth, honey. It's just the words that spill out of it that tend to piss people off.

Meryl gives him a big fake grin and flips him off.

CUT TO:

EXT. RAMADA INN- LOADING ZONE- PRE-DAWN

A dozen sleepy-eyed teenagers carrying gym bags, most smoking, wait to file into a conversion van. Jason, drinking coffee, is first in line. Two boys behind him are in mid-banter.

JEB

Christie Martin? With the fluorescent yellow teeth? Man, I can't believe you slept with that!

TYLER

Dude, you have no idea how drunk I was.
The next morning, I was halfway out the
window before I realized we were at my
house!

Jason stifles a laugh and turns away. A pair of teenyboppers
smoking silver-filtered cigarettes walks by.

MARTY

The Marines are too gung-ho for me, man.
I think I'm gonna talk to the Coast
Guard.

PATRICK

The Coast Guard? Dude, you're
embarrassing me. Take your balls out of
your purse and buck up!

Jason can't help snorting, but plays it off as a sneeze. The
doors to the van open and the recruits file in.

CUT TO:

INT. VAN- CONTINUOUS

Jason and the young recruits are on their way to the Military
Entry Processing Station (M.E.P.S.) for physicals. Jason is
clearly older than the other passengers by several years. He
sits in the back row by himself, listening in on some of
their banter.

BILLY

I'm tellin' you, boys, if one of my arms
gets blown off, I'm gonna grab it up and
get it right to the taxidermist. Then
it's goin' up over the fireplace right
next to my trophy bass!

DAVE

Billy, how the hell are you gonna lose an
arm in Legal Administration?

The others howl.

DAVE (cont'd)

(mocking Billy)

Ow! Corpsman! I got a fuckin' paper cut!

Riotous laughter at Billy's expense.

BILLY

Fuck you grunt assholes!

DAVE

Hey Billy; if your arm gets blown off in court, can I have your watch?

Explosive laughter. Dave grabs Billy's arm and examines his plastic watch.

DAVE (cont'd)

Dude, I've always wanted a Goofy Swatch!

Billy quickly inspects his own watch.

BILLY

That's Pluto, motherfucker!

The other boys are in hysterics; CLOSE UP of Jason smiling and shaking his head.

CUT TO:

INT. RESTAURANT- NIGHT

Kevin and Wyatt are eating in a booth. Wyatt has a cigarette burning in an ashtray nearly full of butts.

KEVIN

You haven't been to the Detroit Zoo since sixty-six? You used to love animals!

WYATT

I do. It's just... My last week in-country, I took two squads out on an ambush. And just when we get set in, we hear something' big comin' our way. I swear to God, I thought I was losin' it when I saw the elephants, but it was real. The N.V.A. had elephants hauling big-ass artillery pieces down this hidden trail. They couldn't use trucks on the roads or we'd have blown the shit out of 'em, so they had this ol' "Pachyderm Express".

Wyatt pauses briefly to light a fresh gasper.

WYATT (cont'd)

There was a whole company of infantry with 'em, so as we're pulling out, I had to call in an air-strike on the elephants. I'm tellin' you, we had to stop this artillery from getting deployed, but I was one conflicted sonuvabitch. Jesus, it's been thirty-three years and I still can't go to the circus without bustin' out cryin'!

KEVIN

Jesus, Wyatt, you killed Dumbo?

WYATT

I think I wasted Babar and Queen Celeste, too!

They giggle contagiously.

KEVIN

Jesus... Well, did you ever feel like you were doing some good over there?

Wyatt mulls it over a bit before nodding.

WYATT

I remember this one guy, Heynen. He was a short-timer; we were going out on a patrol, and he's wearing a bandana instead of his helmet. So I bitched him out, and he goes off whining about the heat and gets his steel pot. And while we're patrolling near this "friendly ville", a sniper pops off a round, and it hits ol' Heynen smack in the melon.

Wyatt taps the side of his head to indicate the spot of the impact.

WYATT (cont'd)

It burst his ear-drum, but he lived to bitch about it.

KEVIN

Jesus, Wyatt, you saved his life! Now that's what I had in mind when we talked about volunteering.

WYATT

Yeah, well, unfortunately, it didn't always work out like that.

KEVIN

Really?

A pause. He can't resist.

KEVIN (cont'd)

Like when?

WYATT

Like, for example, the time I was leading a security patrol through this supposedly "friendly" hamlet outside of Bien Dinh, up near the DMZ.

Wyatt takes a long, slow drag off his cigarette and exhales a cloud that shrouds him in smoke. He shakes his head.

WYATT (cont'd)

Jesus, I never shoulda been out there; we'd been in contact three nights in a row, so I hadn't slept a fuckin' wink...

Wyatt uncharacteristically fidgets with his Zippo lighter.

WYATT (cont'd)

So we're approaching this long dike by the hamlet, and we start taking small-arms fire; we took cover in an old trench, and they're really pouring it on us from the dike. So I'm thinking, if I wait for reinforcement, they're gonna bail, but if I split my platoon, I can envelop their ass behind the dike, or maybe catch them in the open trying to retreat.

He pauses to take another hit off his Winston.

WYATT (cont'd)

It was an aggressive tactic, but we were told over and over to "maneuver aggressively", you know, "rack up those body-counts!" My platoon had the highest kill-ratio in the company, and I took some sort of twisted pride in that, God help me...

KEVIN

So what happened?

WYATT

What happened is, I was so flaky from fatigue, when we deployed forward, I forgot to leave a fire-team to cover our rear, which is like Day One at Officer Candidate School. So our rear's exposed like a fat man's ass in a hospital gown, and while we're enveloping the dike, they work their way up behind us, up the same trail we'd used, hauling a twelve-seven.

KEVIN

What's a "twelve-seven"?

WYATT

It's a heavy machine gun. They were infamous for knocking down trees.

KEVIN

Holy shit.

WYATT

Yeah, those were my exact words when I heard that fucker open up behind me; the first volley took out my radio operator and my medic. Those rounds could knock down a rubber tree; imagine what they did to human flesh...

Wyatt trails off. His eyes go from looking at Kevin to looking through him.

CUT TO:

EXT. VIETNAM JUNGLE- DAY

A young Wyatt is crouching behind a massive ant-hill. He is leaning over his RADIO OPERATOR, checking for a pulse. The RADIO OPERATOR is eviscerated and clearly dead. Rounds from the 12/7 are impacting all around. The NOISE is terrifying.

Cries for "Ammo!" from a machine gunner. WYATT'S P.O.V.: A boyish-looking Marine, P.F.C. BEATTY, working up his courage and bolting from behind a grave-stone. He runs awkwardly while hauling a large can of ammunition. He gets within twenty yards of the machine gunner's position before he's cut down by an angry burst from the 12/7.

ANGLE ON Wyatt, frustrated to the point of rage, exposes himself to return fire, but is sent reeling backwards by the impact of a rocket-propelled grenade. Dazed and helmetless, he reaches for his weapon, and finds his M-16 blown to pieces.

He looks up from the ground to see a Lance Corporal, GILL, run in a crouch to the crumpled body of the DEAD CORPSMAN; Gill rifles the corpsman's medical kit for morphine styrettes and tourniquets. A large caliber machine gun zeroes in, mutilating the DEAD CORPSMAN.

As Gill pivots away from the corpse and breaks into a sprint, he is hit squarely in the back. He's spun around and lands awkwardly on his side; he is dead, with wide-eyes seemingly staring at Wyatt.

CLOSE UP of Wyatt's reaction: His face distorts and crumples. He drops his head in the dirt and pounds the ground in front of him with the stock of his shattered M-16. We hear measured BURSTS from the 12/7, intermingled with SCREAMS from the wounded. Wyatt lifts his face from the dirt and shakes his head rapidly, struggling to compose himself.

CUT TO:

INT. BAR- CONTINUOUS

Wyatt shakes his head in a similar fashion, as if to disspell a bad dream.

WYATT

By the time I could get a Cobra on line to take out that gun, I had eleven guys wasted. Eleven lives wasted because of one dumb-shit mistake.

KEVIN

Wyatt, you can't torture yourself forever. You didn't commit a war crime; you were just totally sleep-deprived, and you made an honest mistake!

WYATT

Yeah... But that doesn't make them any less dead, does it?

CUT TO:

INT. M.E.P.S.- MORNING

Jason is sitting in a class-room full of recruits. A buff black female Army Staff Sergeant, SGT. MACAULEY, is standing in front of a portable blood-pressure machine.

SGT. MACAULEY

Okay, it's time for your urine tests. Follow the blue line to the men's room, where Ensign Jones will observe you as you fill a specimen cup for Uncle Sam.

The recruits file out along the blue line. Jason lingers behind and approaches Sgt. Macauley.

JASON

Excuse me, Sergeant; did you say that the Ensign will be watching us urinate?

SGT. MACAULEY

Oh yeah, he'll be up close and personal.

JASON

You've gotta be kidding.

SGT. MACAULEY

Listen, son; if you're joinin' the service, my advice to you is, get used to indignities.

JASON

But Sergeant, I can't even go with
someone in the next stall!

SGT. MACAULEY

Well then, I have one suggestion for
you...

CUT TO:

INT. M.E.P.S. HALLWAY- CONTINUOUS

Jason at the drinking fountain, slamming one Dixie Cup after
another of water.

CUT TO:

INT. MEPS WAITING ROOM- CONTINUOUS

Jason is sitting at the front of the line for the Men's room.
A relieved-looking recruit exits the head as ENSIGN JONES
calls from inside.

ENSIGN JONES (O.C.)

Next!

Jason rises awkwardly, and scurries into the bathroom with a
shuffling gait indicative of a bursting bladder. Ensign Jones
hands him a small jar.

JASON

This is it? Hell, I could fill up your
gas tank.

CUT TO:

INT. BAR- NIGHT

We pick up the conversation between Kevin and Wyatt.

WYATT

That's some ironic shit, isn't it? I go
riding in on my white horse to help these
teeny-boppers survive the bush, and I end
up getting them wasted?

He tosses back the last of his Chivas.

WYATT (cont'd)

Well, I guess the road to 'Nam was paved with good intentions, right?

KEVIN

That seems to be the consensus.

THE WAITER picks a bad time to top off their water glasses. Wyatt takes a filter-hit and grinds out the butt.

WYATT

All I could think about when I got back to the world was, I've got those kids' blood on my hands, and there's no washing them clean. Ever. There's no forgiveness, because I could never forgive myself for doing something so stupid, and they can't forgive me 'cuz they're dead... But I decided that I could redeem myself if I could somehow even the score. So, this might sound crazy, but, I got it in my head that the only atonement would be to save eleven lives. You know, balance the karmic slate. Med school seemed out of the question, so, I became a paramedic.

KEVIN

So, where are you exactly on this "quest"?

WYATT

I've helped a lot of mangled people, but as far as actually pulling someone back from the "white light", I'm up to ten... There was one other kid, back in 'Nam; we were mortared, and he took beaucoup shrapnel in his legs and neck. He was bleedin' out, but I kept him alive with field-bandages and tourniquets 'til the medevac came. But, I never found out if he made it. So he doesn't count.

KEVIN

Do you remember his name?

WYATT

(nodding)

It's kind of a hard name to forget:
"Justin Jackets". He was a huge Native
American kid from Chicago. Why?

KEVIN

Oh, just curious...

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- EVENING

Meryl is standing in front of the sink taking vitamins. Jason
walks in the side door, carrying his ever-present gym bag.

MERYL

Did you pass your physical?

JASON

That is most affirmative.

MERYL

You'll excuse me if I don't jump for joy.

JASON

I guess I'd understand.

MERYL

Did you tell them about your adolescent
asthma?

JASON

Didn't come up.

MERYL

Your medical history didn't come up?

JASON

(shaking his head)

This doctor, "Major Seymour Duncan,
Retired", I swear to God he's a Civil War
vet.

MERYL

Did anyone flunk?

JASON

This one fat tub of goo couldn't duck-walk. They said he might have fallen-arches, so he has to get a waiver.

MERYL

So they're not especially stringent these days?

JASON

They're not making quota. I think you'd have a pretty good shot at getting in with emphyszema and a glass eye.

MERYL

Well, it's a shame Sammy Davis is dead; you two could have joined on the buddy system!

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE - MORNING

Meryl enters from the hall, closing the bedroom door behind her. She produces a pen and a phone book from the night-stand and looks up a number, then picks up the cordless and clicks the phone "on". She hesitates for a moment with the phone in her hand.

MERYL

(to herself)

I better call the Navy... That fucking jarhead might know my voice.

She dials a number.

INT. RECRUITING OFFICE- SIMULTANEOUS

A young Ensign in Navy khakis is leafing through the classfieds. The phone on his desk RINGS. He quickly highlights an ad before picking up.

ENSIGN BURKE

U.S. Navy Officer Recruiting, Ensign
Burke speaking.

Meryl extends the antenna on the cordless.

MERYL

Yes, hello, ensign, I've got this friend who's interested in joining the service, but, we've got a question; he used to use a prescription inhaler called "Alupent" for some breathing problems; would that be problematic?

ENSIGN BURKE

Yes, ma'am, I'm afraid it would; Alupent is on the military's "automatic decline" list; pretty much any medication prescribed to treat any asthmatic or pre-asthmatic condition is an automatic decline.

MERYL

Oh, well, he'll be very disappointed. Isn't there some way to get one of those, whaddya call, "waivers" for that?

ENSIGN BURKE

No, ma'am, I'm sorry to say that's a non-waiverable condition, like psoriasis or diabetes.

MERYL

Oh, well, damn the luck. Thank you for the information, ensign.

ENSIGN BURKE

Yes, ma'am. You have a great Navy day!

MERYL

Yes, I believe I will.

Meryl disconnects, and chews the end of her pen pensively.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- EVENING

Kevin and Meryl eat Breyer's chocolate-chip mint out of the carton with large wooden spoons.

KEVIN

So the recruiter said he couldn't get in?

MERYL
(shaking her head)
He's an "automatic decline".

KEVIN
So if they find out about it, he's out?

MERYL
He's out. No exceptions, no waivers,
nada.

KEVIN
Well, he's obviously not going to tell
them. What do you propose?

MERYL
Well, maybe I'll call Captain Dickhead
and tell him myself.

KEVIN
Meryl, we can't narc on him; he'd never
forgive us! And he is our only child, so
let's not forget he's going to be picking
out the rest-home!

MERYL
Well, he already passed his physical; do
you have a Plan B?

KEVIN
Well, we can't call them. And I think
Jason's probably smart enough to trace an
anonymous note back to us.

Meryl paces in a distinctly agitated manner.

MERYL
Say, do you think Wyatt could talk some
sense into him? I mean, even if he didn't
get doused with Agent Orange, he's still
gotta be bitter. After that war, how
could he not?

KEVIN
Well, he did have some awful shit happen
to him, but... I don't know about
introducing them.

MERYL

Well, why not?

KEVIN

I don't know; maybe I'm just a tad insecure. I mean, here's Wyatt, this decorated Marine officer with his Bronze Star and two purple-hearts, and I'm this fucking draft-dodger. I don't want Jason to think even less of me. If he found out what happened with Wyatt and me in sixty-seven- Jesus, he'll probably ask Wyatt to adopt him!

MERYL

Well, please at least think about it; we're running out of time.

Kevin stands at the window staring out into the yard.

KEVIN

Jesus, he's out back practicing close-order drill with a broom.

Meryl joins him. We see Jason through the glass, his lips moving as he twirls the broom.

MERYL

What's that he's shouting?

She cracks the window to eavesdrop. Jason is holding his broom at "present-arms".

JASON

This is my rifle! There are many like it, but this one is mine! Without me, my rifle is useless! Without my rifle, I am useless!

KEVIN

Okay, I'll call Wyatt.

MERYL

Oh, thank god.

Meryl closes the window quickly.

A CLOSE-UP on Jason's face as he shouts:

JASON

I must shoot straighter than my enemy,
who is trying to kill me! I must shoot
him before he shoots me!

CUT TO:

INT. JASON'S BEDROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- DAY

Jason is studying his Marine handbook. Meryl is walking by carrying three Target bags. She sees the door is ajar, and pokes her head in.

MERYL

What are you studying?

JASON

The "General Orders for a Marine Sentry".
I'm on number eight.

MERYL

Oh, yeah? What's number five?

JASON

"This recruit's fifth general order is to
quit my post only when properly relieved,
sir!"

MERYL

Bravo.

JASON

That's the easiest one.

MERYL

Jason, wouldn't you really rather be
memorizing a sonnet by Shakespeare or Zen
koans or the Gettysburgh Address?

JASON

Well, I guess, but-

MERYL

Son, let me be blunt; a mind is a
terrible thing to waste on military
bullshit.

JASON

"Military bullshit"? You been watchin' your Jane Fonda work-out tapes again?

MERYL

What do you know about Jane Fonda, sonny? The only place you've ever seen her is "On Golden Pond"!

JASON

I know "I'm not Fonda Jane". And I also know that former Secretary of Defense James Webb "wouldn't cross the street to watch Jane Fonda cut her wrists".

MERYL

Well, that's a charming sentiment.

JASON

He was a Marine. In 'Nam. He wrote a novel called "Fields of Fire".

Jason holds up a battered paperback from his night-stand.

MERYL

Jesus, have you been using that for a pillow?

JASON

I read it every night. Sometimes I fall asleep and it gets drooled on. Shoulda bought the hard cover.

MERYL

Well, live and learn.

Meryl starts to exit before turning back.

MERYL (cont'd)

You know, when I peeked in and saw you hunched over studying there, reciting to yourself, all I could think of was when you were eight years old; sitting at that very desk, memorizing the Ten Commandments for Sunday School.

JASON

Those were a bitch, too, but there's eleven of these, and they're wordy.

MERYL

Then maybe you should join the seminary
instead.

She raises her eyebrows knowingly and exits. Jason smiles and shakes his head.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIFLE RANGE- DAY

An overgrown, dilapidated rifle-range in the middle of nowhere. Jason, wearing a Stars 'N Stripes 'do-rag as a head-band, is tacking a paper target to a bail of hay. He retreats to a bench fifty-yards away, on which is resting his twenty-two caliber rifle and a range bag. He fills the ten-round clip, and slams the clip into the Remington, then removes yellow wrap-around safety glasses and orange foam earplugs from the bag. He puts on the glasses and inserts the earplugs with maximum care.

He eyes the target and methodically squeezes off a clip. He reloads, fires a second clip, then jogs up to the target to see his results.

JASON'S P.O.V.: there are only three holes, all on the periphery of the target. He furrows and frowns.

As he is circling the holes in the target with a pen, a SHOT rings out and a bullet strikes a hay-bail five-yards to his left. Jason drops to the ground and starts crawling in the opposite direction, but another round kicks up dirt to his front. He lies flat and shields his eyes, trying to make out the shooter.

JESSIE (O.C.)

(yelling)

You like getting shot at, Soldier Boy?

JASON

Jessie? Jesus Christ!

JESSIE (O.C.)

You were right the first time!

She cranks off another round.

JESSIE (cont'd)

You think this is exciting? You think this is fun? Then by all means, join the Marines and adopt a stray bullet!

JASON

Jessie, I do not have a death wish; I just want to be a Marine!

JESSIE

You really think there's a difference?

Another SHOT rings out, this one splintering the hay-bail to his right.

JESSIE (cont'd)

I can hear the President now; "Send in the Marines; there's always plenty more!"

JASON

Jessie! That one was pretty close!

JESSIE (O.C.)

I love you enough to cripple you for your own good!

JASON

Hey! I'm getting up now!

He starts to rise; another shot whistles overhead, and he hits the deck.

JESSIE

The first thing the Marines will teach you is to stay low!

She cranks off four rounds. Jason's P.O.V.: four holes are neatly clustered around the bullseye on his paper target.

JASON

Woah! Where did you learn to shoot like that?

JESSIE

It's the one thing my Dad taught me. Other than to hate men.

Jason rises with hands above his head and approaches Jessie; he clasps his hands behind his head in the manner of a P.O.W.

She reluctantly lowers the rifle and clicks on the safety. Jason notices that she is wearing an army jacket. He squints to make out the lettering on the chest pocket.

JASON

"Greenwald, U.S. Army"? Who the hell is Greenwald?

JESSIE

My Dad. Ronald Lee Greenwald. This was his jacket. He was a lerp in 'Nam.

JASON

A "lerp"?

She turns profile to show him a shoulder-patch that reads "L.R.R.P."

JESSIE

"Long-Range Recon Patrol": L.R.R.P.

JASON

So, he was... killed in 'Nam?

JESSIE

No, see, that's the thing. He's actually still alive. Last I knew.

JASON

Well, why would you tell me he was dead?

JESSIE

I don't like talking about him. I don't like thinking about him. And I really don't care for the fact that I look like him.

JASON

Well, what happened to him?

JESSIE

He came back from 'Nam all fucked up, that's what happened. I was three when he went berserk and trashed the house and broke my mother's wrist when she tried to call the cops.

JASON

Jesus, Jessie. I kinda wish you'd have let me in on this sooner.

JESSIE

You want to know what kind of a father he was? When I was five, I left some crayons in my pants pocket when I put 'em in the hamper. And they melted in the washer and made this huge mess.

As she speaks, she fidgets with the rifle, clicking the safety on and off, on and off.

JESSIE (cont'd)

So for my punishment, he made me eat crayons. And I don't mean a crayon, I mean a bunch of crayons. To this day, I can't look at a box of Crayolas without gagging.

JASON

Jesus. What an a-hole!

JESSIE

The military ruined him. And they'll ruin you, too. Or, get you killed. It's kind of a lose-lose proposition, don't you think?

She shoulders the rifle and turns toward her car. After a few strides, she calls back over her shoulder.

JESSIE (cont'd)

I don't think I can stand to lose another man in my life to the military. I think maybe I should cut my losses... That may not be fair to you, but, what's fair got to do with it?

JASON

Jessie, I- Jessie, wait up!

He sprints after her, but she is in her car and gone in a cloud of gravel and dust. Jason watches dejectedly as her car recedes in the distance. He turns back toward the range and spots his patriotic 'do-rag, fallen in the dirt. He marches up and gives it a savage kick, then another, and storms off towards his car without it.

CUT TO:

INT. HOCKEY RINK- NIGHT

Kevin and Wyatt are drinking coffee in a cloud of Wyatt's cigarette smoke, in a booth near the concessions stand. Wyatt is in his paramedic uniform. Through the glass behind them we can see a "Midget A" hockey game raging on.

KEVIN

So you're here in case a player gets injured?

WYATT

Or in case a coach punches out a ref. Or one of the parents decks a coach. What can I say? It's a contact sport.

KEVIN

You know, there was something else I wanted to tell you. About the war.

WYATT

Fire away.

KEVIN

It's just, well, guilt is what it is. I talked you into the whole "buddy system", and then I failed you. Some "buddy", huh? God, what a schmuck. You should hate me. I'd hate me! Why don't you hate me?

WYATT

"Talked me into it"? What the hell kind of revisionist history is that, Kevin?

KEVIN

Well, Jesus, Wyatt, "rescuing Reggie LaCoste"? Doing the "noble thing"? It was all my idea, remember?

WYATT

Kevin, don't tell me you've been living that lie for thirty-three fucking years?

Wyatt shakes his head incredulously.

WYATT (cont'd)

The truth is, there were two reasons I went; firstly, I was brought up that when your country calls, you "ruck up and move out". My granddaddy paid his dues to freedom in World War I, and my old man in W.W.II; Jesus, Dad lost four cousins, and most of his toes, and he never let us forget it. After all the family had sacrificed over generations, military service was handed down like a bad gene! My father was a die-hard believer in "My country, right or wrong!" I went to 'Nam for the same reason I went to college and worked at the mill in the summers; because it was expected of me...

He pauses for a drag on his cig; he holds the smoke in his lungs for a dog's age before exhaling.

KEVIN

C'mon, don't let me off the hook. I fucked you over!

WYATT

Kevin, my Dad was counting on me; Jesus, my little brother sure wasn't going to bring him back any medals. Dale always had this deep-seeded, psychotic hatred for authority. He couldn't even hack it as a Cub scout, remember? Christ, I can still see him kicking our den-master right in the balls!

He laughs hoarsely.

WYATT (cont'd)

And that's the second reason; Dale was nineteen, working odd jobs, and draft-eligible. With his attitude and general lack of coping skills, he wouldn't have been much better off over there than Reg Lacoste. So, my volunteering kept him out of the draft.

Wyatt grinds out a butt.

WYATT (cont'd)

Kevin, you were my best friend, but I didn't risk life and limb over there because of your hypnotic, Svengali-like influence. And I sure as hell didn't go to thwart the "insidious evil" of communism; I did it to protect my fuck-up of a kid brother. And because Dad taught me that fighting for your country is a matter of honor. And I don't blame him for instilling that in me. The fact is, there's no one to blame for my fucking-up over there but me.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM- EMMIT'S HOUSE- EVENING

Jason and Emmitt are sitting on chairs in front of T.V. dinner trays bearing gun-cleaning supplies rather than chow; Jason is meticulously cleaning his new revolver, and Emmitt is adjusting the front-sight on an ancient twelve-gauge shotgun.

JASON

Thanks again for the pistol, Gramps.

EMMIT

My pleasure. You can practice your marksmanship before you ship... Or, if you have second thoughts, you can always blow off a toe.

JASON

(nodding)

A contingency plan. Great.

They resume their tasks. After a long silence, Jason looks up.

JASON (CONT'D)

Do you think I'm doing the right thing, Gramps?

EMMIT

Yes, sir, I guess I do... It's a dream of yours, isn't it?

JASON

It is indeed.

EMMIT

Well then, you owe it to yourself.
Because you know one thing I've learned
the hard way over the years, Jason?

JASON

What's that?

EMMIT

You get the life you settle for. So don't
you settle for anything less than your
dreams.

JASON

Roger that, sir.

They get back to their work.

CUT TO:

INT. HALLWAY- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- EVENING

Meryl is walking to her bedroom when Jason, shirtless,
emerges from the bathroom and almost bumps into her.

JASON

Woah! Looks like this house ain't big
enough for the both of us, stranger.

MERYL

Speaking of strangers, where's Jessie
been hiding herself?

JASON

I think she broke up with me.

MERYL

You think so, huh? Did it perchance have
anything to do with this Marine thing?

JASON

Naw, it was just me. Being a prick. You
know, the usual.

Meryl senses he's full of shit and is about to pursue it when
she notices a brightly colored tattoo on his right bicep; a
coiled pair of snakes wrapped around the slogan "Death Before
Dishonor". Her expression is half-shock and half-horror.

MERYL
What the hell is that?

JASON
Oh, that. That's nothing. It's a, uh, I think it's a birthmark. Isn't it?

MERYL
(reading)
"Death Before Dishonor"? Oh, nice snakes! Very flattering! What are those, pythons?

JASON
Mom, relax! It's just ink. I drew it on last night. See, I can just-

He licks his finger and attempts to rub it off, to no effect. He must have used indelible ink.

JASON (cont'd)
Trust me; it's just pen.

Meryl turns and heads to her bedroom door. She looks back over her shoulder.

MERYL
Oh, good one! You like practical jokes, huh? Well, I guess two can play that game...

JASON
(calling after her)
Mom, come on: Two wrongs don't make a right! You taught me that, remember? You're not gonna- Mom, you're not gonna do something to my food, are you?

Meryl, opening her bedroom door, throws up her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug and slams it behind her. Jason shakes his head disconsolately.

JASON (cont'd)
Oh, I'm... I am definitely fucked.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- DAY

A small, black-topped court in the backyard. A shot misses wildly, banking off the top of the backboard. Wyatt and Kevin are playing a ragged game of one-one-one, talking trash, and sucking air.

Jason eases his Grand Am up the driveway, and spots the action. He saunters out back; this looks good for a few laughs.

JASON

What, are the Globetrotter tryouts today?

KEVIN

I'm taking it easy on him, son. He's a smoker.

Kevin drives for an uncontested lay-up; brick city.

JASON

Maybe you guys should try playing "Horse".

Wyatt has a wide-open look from ten feet: airball.

JASON (cont'd)

Or poker.

Kevin corrals the rebound and holds the ball.

KEVIN

Wyatt, this is my son, Jason.

They shake hands.

WYATT

Jason, it's great to meet you.

JASON

It's my pleasure.

WYATT

I heard a vicious rumor you're going to O.C.S.

JASON

Yessir. My Dad tells me you were with the Third Marines over in 'Nam.

WYATT

Yeah, that's true.

JASON

Wow, that's- Good for you, sir.

(a beat)

Could you give me any tips for O.C.S.?

WYATT

Well, when they're trying to break you down with the insults and the condescension, just let it go in one ear and out the other.

JASON

In one ear, out the other. Roger that.

WYATT

What helped me was to think of it as live theater; the D.I. plays the role of masochistic asshole, and you play the part of maggot. 'Cuz the truth is, Basic is really just an elaborate, mostly scripted production. When you think of it as a scene in a play, you don't take any of it personally, and that's the key.

JASON

This is outstanding, sir. I'd like to jot down some notes. Could you wait one second while I grab a pen?

WYATT

Sure.

JASON

Thank you, sir!

Jason literally runs to the back door.

KEVIN

Uh, Wyatt, ol' Buddy, I was wondering if- well, do you think maybe you could help us, you know, talk him out of it? I mean, after 'Nam, you've probably got a zillion stories about the military fucking people over. I think it would really help if he got a dose of reality. What do you say there, L.T.?

WYATT

Well, Kevin, to be honest; I wouldn't be comfortable trying to influence him. In either direction. I mean, he seems to be going into this with both eyes open. Are you worried he got a snow-job from his recruiter?

KEVIN

No, it's just- well, he seems to feel this misguided sense of "obligation", and, we're just worried that he might be doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. You know?

WYATT

To tell you the truth, Kevin, I don't know if there's any such thing as "doing the right thing for the wrong reason". There's just doing the right thing or not doing the right thing, isn't there?

A long pause. Kevin sees Jason reappear at the back door.

KEVIN

I didn't mean to put you on the spot, Wyatt. I just want him to hear our concerns, but, he isn't keen on listening to any goddamned civilians.

WYATT

Serving your country is one risky, thankless fuckin' job, Kevin. I promise you, I'd never candy-coat it.

Jason jogs up, carrying a notebook and holding up a pen.

JASON

(winded)

Got my inkstick! Okay, where were we?

WYATT

Well, I don't know if this is noteworthy, but, I'll tell you this factoid; I have more nightmares about my Senior Drill Instructor than I do about the goddam war.

JASON

You're kidding, right? Sir?

WYATT

(shakes his head)

You don't want me to candy-coat it, do you, recruit?

JASON

No, sir. Well, I didn't think so, 'til just about ten second ago.

Wyatt winks discreetly at Kevin.

CUT TO:

INT. HALLWAY- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- EVENING

Meryl, carrying a laundry-basket of folded clothes, knocks on Jason's open door, and hears him in the shower. THE CAMERA follows her into...

INT. KEVIN'S BEDROOM- CONTINUOUS

She enters and begins putting some items in the dresser next to his desk. She inadvertently knocks a book off the dresser, and when she retrieves it, she sees it's "JFK: Boyhood to the White House". She sets it next to his collection of Marine classics: "The Small Wars Manual", Philip Caputo's "A Rumor of War", and his well-worn "Fields of Fire", which she picks up and begins leafing through. A number of passages are highlighted in green.

In the background, Jason sings "The Marine Corps Hymn" while the Marine Corps' Band accompanies on his boom-box.

JASON (O.C.)
(singing)

"From the halls of Montezuma to the
shores of Tripoli, we will fight our
countries battles in the air on land and
sea! First to fight for right and
freedom, and to keep our honor clean, we
are proud to claim the title of United
States Marine!"

Meryl reads a highlighted passage from the "Acknowledgments".

JASON (V.O.) (cont'd)
"In addition, I would like to reaffirm my
undying pride in having been a part of
that anomalous insanity embodied in the
word 'Marine'."

She flips a few pages and finds a dog-eared page with another
passage in green.

JASON (V.O.) (cont'd)
"My war is not as simple as yours was,
Grandfather. People seem to question
their obligation to serve on other than
their own terms. But enough of that; I
fight because we have always fought. It
doesn't matter who."

Meryl replaces the book and notices a Microsoft Word file
open on his desktop. Next to the keyboard is a sheet of paper
bearing the Marine eagle, globe and anchor logo. She reads
the highlighted "Why I Seek A Marine Commission" and "in 250
words". He has scribbled "Semper Fidelis = Always Faithful"
in the margin. She reads from the monitor.

JASON (V.O.) (cont'd)
As a great American named Thomas Paine
once wrote, "Those who expect to reap the
blessings of freedom must undergo the
fatigue of supporting it." I can think of
no better way to support the nation that
has provided me with the blessings of
freedom than by serving as an officer in
the United States Marine Corps.

She scrolls down the page.

JASON (V.O.) (cont'd)
While it is easy for my generation to
take for granted, freedom is not our
birth-rite; it is a gift paid for in
blood by our servicemen and women.

She scrolls to the last paragraph.

JASON (V.O.) (cont'd)
In the words of another patriot named
Elmer Davis, "This will remain the land
of the free only so long as it is the
home of the brave!" The Marine motto is
"Semper Fidelis", and you can trust that
I will always be faithful to the cause of
liberty and justice for all.

She scrolls back to the beginning and turns to go.

JASON (O.C.) (cont'd)
(singing)
"If the Army and the Navy ever gaze on
heaven's scenes, they will find the
streets are guarded by United States
Marines!"

She shakes her head as she exits.

CUT TO:

INT. RESTAURANT- NIGHT

Kevin escorts Wyatt through the front door.

WYATT
What kind of "surprise"?

KEVIN
You'll see.

WYATT
My birthday's not 'til November, you
know.

KEVIN
I know.

WYATT

I told you I'm trying to quit. If this is some kind of smoking "intervention", I promise you, I will fight my way out of there!

KEVIN

Don't get your dukes up, "Smokin' Joe".

Kevin leads him to a room in the back. A large black-haired man in his early fifties is seated alone; when they enter, he looks up expectantly.

Kevin steps aside, and the man from the table rises stiffly to greet Wyatt.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

Wyatt, I believe you're acquainted with this gentleman.

WYATT

Yeah, you do look kinda familiar...

(shaking his head)

I'm sorry, I drink. Is someone gonna throw me a clue?

JUSTIN

Lieutenant Corkum, I'm P.F.C. Justin Jackets, Bravo Company, third platoon.

WYATT

(incredulous)

Justin Jackets? The Justin Jackets?

JUSTIN

I don't think there's too many of us running around, sir.

They shake hands vigorously.

WYATT

I can't believe it. You're alive!

JUSTIN

Still got that keen eye for detail, eh, Lieutenant?

WYATT

God, it's good to see you. The way you were hit, I... well, I was worried you wouldn't make it.

JUSTIN

I almost didn't; the shrapnel nicked my femoral artery. If you hadn't tied me off with that tourniquet, the doc said I would've bled out in the field. I've been hoping to buy you a beer for thirty-two years, sir.

WYATT

Well, Private, if we tack on the interest, I believe you owe me a pitcher.

JUSTIN

Roger that, sir.

CUT TO:

EXT. RESTAURANT- NIGHT- CONTINUOUS

Kevin and Wyatt reel out the bar door after quite possibly one-too-many.

KEVIN

You never mentioned the running-out-in-a-hail-of-bullets part.

WYATT

(shaking his head)

It wasn't a "hail". It was more of a steady drizzle.

KEVIN

So how do you feel, hero?

WYATT

I don't know, man. Jesus; I guess maybe there is a flip-side to guilt.

KEVIN

Wyatt, you're "even"! Put this fucking self-imposed penance behind you! You've spent three decades judging yourself too harshly; now it's time to change the verdict to "not guilty".

Wyatt nods and smiles as he light up. He blows a pair of smoke-rings as stares at the stars in the clear night sky.

WYATT

Jackets was a good kid, you know? A sweet kid... I had another good kid, Draper. From Valdosta. We got ambushed one day; some small arms, some rockets, no big thing. After the firefight, the N.V.A. left two of their wounded behind. And Draper came up on this guy- this kid, really- in a straddle-trench. He was hit pretty bad in the gut, and Draper kicks away his weapon, and reaches out his hand to help him up. And the N.V.A. kid leans forward to grab his hand, but instead, he spits right in Draper's face. And Draper just- I was fifty meters away at least and I could see Draper's face turn red as a chili pepper. And he brought up his 'sixteen and just emptied a fucking clip into him.

A long silence. Kevin gropes for words, but has none.

WYATT (cont'd)

It's just, sometimes I'm not even sure which things to feel guilty about, you know?

Kevin nods dumbly, and doesn't know quite when to stop.

CUT TO:

INT. LARGE ROOM- MILITARY ENTRANCE PROCESSING STATION

Jason and ANOTHER RECRUIT are standing at "parade rest" in front of a podium; behind the podium hangs a large American flag, surrounded by flags representing each branch of the armed forces. They are both wearing name-tags; Jason's has "U.S.M.C." in bold, while the Other Recruit's tag reads "U.S. AIR FORCE".

There are folding chairs set up along the back wall. There's a large contingent of the Other Recruit's friends and family in attendance. On the other side of the room, Emmet sits alone.

As the boys stand waiting, Jason is humming the first stanza of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A."

An ARMY CAPTAIN strides purposefully in. The boys snap to "attention". As Jason stops humming, the organ chords that mark the beginning of the Springsteen song begin. The rest of the scene is m.o.s. over "Born in the U.S.A."

Emmit gives Jason the thumbs up sign. Jason and the Other Recruit stand at attention, then at-ease. They raise their right hands and their lips move in unison as they follow the Army Captain in reciting the Oath Of Service.

The oath completed, the Army Captain shakes hands with the two recruits, and walks over to say a few words to the Other Recruit's clan. Emmit rises and shakes Jason's hand. He puts an around around Jason, who is smiling irrepressibly. An Air Force STAFF SERGEANT brings Jason a clip-board holding a document and pen. A CLOSE-UP on Jason's hand as he signs "Jason P. Sanderson" with a flourish and on the subsequent line "09/09/01".

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- 9:05 A.M.

Meryl walks in with a crossword and sits on the couch. She clicks on Good Morning, America. From her P.O.V.: the show is interrupted by a "ABC Special Report". A somber Peter Jennings reports that United Airlines Flight 175 has just struck the South Tower of the World Trade Center, fifteen minutes after American Airlines Flight 11 impacted the North Tower.

We don't see the video of the plane crashes, but a CLOSE UP on Meryl's reaction.

MERYL

Holy shit.

INT. KEVIN'S OFFICE- 9:45 A.M.

Kevin and several co-workers are gathered in stunned silence around a boom box, which is tuned to NBC Radio. Tom Brokaw is announcing that the first of the towers has collapsed.

KEVIN

Holy shit!

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM- EMMIT'S HOUSE- EVENING

Emmit sits hunched in front of his television squinting through bifocals. From Emmit's P.O.V.: MSNBC introduces its "Crisis Coverage". Brian Williams gives details on the increasing hopelessness of the rescue search at Ground Zero.

Emmit points the remote and cranks the volume.

BRIAN WILLIAMS

As evidence continues to mount against Osama bin Laden's terrorist network, the U.S. Navy dispatched a fourth carrier group to parts East, and there are also reports that a third Marine expeditionary unit is headed toward Afghanistan as well. President Bush signed an order today for the mobilization of thirty-five thousand reservists, and will address the nation tonight at nine p.m. eastern...

Emmit turns to a framed five-by-seven photo on an end-table. C.U. on the photo; a six-year-old Jason posing with a fifty-something Emmit on a fishing boat. Emmit is wearing a fishing vest and U.S.M.C. hat; he is holding up a sizable large-mouth bass in one hand and giving a thumbs-up with the other. Jason sports a camouflage bush-hat and no shirt. He is wearing Emmit's dog-tags, which hang nearly to his waist. He is holding up a good size small-mouth bass in his left hand, and is saluting the camera with his right.

MSNBC goes to Andrea Mitchell at the Pentagon, but Emmit continues staring at the photo.

CUT TO:

INT. MERYL'S CAR- NIGHT

MERYL is listening to "Crisis Coverage" on the radio and gnawing on her thumb-nail while driving in the rain. She pulls into the driveway and kills the engine.

EXT. SANDERSON HOUSE- CONTINUOUS

Meryl exits the car and as she walks to the side door, she hears a voice in the backyard. She walks around the house and sees a soaked Jason doing push-ups and shouting a cadence. As she walks up behind him, she can make out the words.

JASON

One-two-three-four, I-love-Marine-Corps!
One-two-three-four, I-love-Marine-Corps!

After several dozen push-ups, he collapses on his face. He hears Meryl clear her throat behind him and whirls around. She stands over him with her arms crossed.

MERYL

You're still planning to go through with this?

JASON

Hey, let's go inside and talk in the-

MERYL

You are still planning to go through with this, aren't you?

JASON

Of course I am. Mom... the barbarians just kicked the fuckin' gate in.

MERYL

Jesus Christ, Jason! Joining the Marines in peace-time is sado-masochism, but joining when we're on the brink of war is suicide! Please, don't be foolish!

JASON

Mom, I'm not suicidal, and I'm not a fool; we are under attack. I know this is hard for you, but it's not nineteen sixty-eight, this isn't Vietnam, and I'm not Dad!

A pause; Meryl is visibly taken aback.

JASON (cont'd)

I spoke to Grandpa; I'm not saying that what Dad did was wrong or that I don't respect him. I just happen to think that
(MORE)

JASON (cont'd)

some things in life are more important than self-preservation.

MERYL

Your father did the smart thing, Jason! He was a bright, sensitive young man with everything to lose; just like you! You respect your Grandpa and all his goddam medals, but you don't approve of your father; so now you're going to get yourself killed in some crusade against "evil" just to prove you're not a coward like your old man?

JASON

No, Mom, I don't think he was a coward. I just think he put himself before his country, that's all. I know he did the smart thing and the "prudent" thing; I just want to do the honorable thing.

MERYL

You want to do something honorable, Jason? Volunteer at the hospital! Be a Big Brother! Go to law school and defend the indigent! There are hundreds of ways to live an honorable life; quit fixating on an honorable death!

JASON

I don't want to argue with you, Mom. I know I could snake out of it and let all the misfits and the half-wits fend for themselves. But I won't do that. Because I happen to think that when our country is threatened, we all have to make sacrifices.

MERYL

Yeah, well, you'll pardon me if I don't feel like sacrificing my only son!

She wheels around and charges back toward the house, leaving Jason sitting dejectedly in a puddle of water.

CUT TO:

INT. JASON'S BEDROOM- DAY

Jason is lying on his bed with a Detroit News dated September fourteenth. He reads an article on the attack on the Pentagon. The cordless phone at his side rings. He picks up after the second ring.

JASON

Hello?

JESSIE (O.S.)

Come over. Now.

She disconnects. Jason tries to jump to his feet and in his haste falls heavily off the bed.

CUT TO:

INT. JASON'S CAR- CONTINUOUS

JASON squeals his tires as he whips around a corner, his face a mask of determination.

INT. BEDROOM- JESSIE'S APT.

Jason, panting, knocks gently on her bedroom door, which is slightly ajar. Music emerges from within. When there is no response, he sticks his head in. Jessie is laying back on her unmade bed with a stuffed bulldog perched on her chest, listening to "Pyramids Along The Nile" by Patti Page.

JESSIE

(singing along)

"Fly the ocean in a silver plane, see the
jungle when it's wet with rain... Just
remember when you're home again, you
belong to me."

JASON

They don't sing 'em like that anymore.

JESSIE

My grandpa always sang this to my
grandma; after she died, he'd sing it to
me.

JASON

I'm glad you called.

JESSIE

I missed you.

JASON

I'm a little confused, though. I thought you dumped my sorry ass.

JESSIE

Well, I haven't filed for the restraining order just yet.

Jason collapses on an oversized bean-bag chair next to the bed.

JASON

You know, I'm really sorry about your Dad. You know, the war and all.

Another pause, as Jessie stares fixedly at a point on the ceiling.

JESSIE

Did you know that when I was little, I used to spend hours searching for my adoption papers? Yessiree, Bob; I can still remember rooting through my Mom's strong-box, just praying they'd be in there somewhere under my immunization records and savings bonds.

JASON

Wishful thinking, huh?

JESSIE

(nodding)

But the hell of it is, I was talking about it with my mother for the first time in like twelve years, and she told me that-

(a beat)

Well, I'd always just kind of assumed that something happened in 'Nam to turn him into this raving asshole, but she told me that the truth is, he was a total control freak and basically an insensitive prick before he got drafted.

(MORE)

JESSIE (cont'd)

She thinks that being over there and catching malaria and getting shot in the foot just gave him an excuse to "embrace his inner asshole".

JASON

That's good to know.

JESSIE

So, since my Mom confided in me, and since this goddam nine-eleven has made even a pacifist like me bloodthirsty for revenge, I guess maybe I can get behind this whole Marine escapade after all.

JASON

Really?

JESSIE

(nodding)

Give 'em hell, Devil Dog. Just don't get yourself killed, if it's not too much to ask.

JASON

Your wish is my command.

JESSIE

In that case, don't get maimed either.

JASON

I'll wear kevlar boxers the whole time, I promise.

He leaps on the bed with a roar and they wrestle. She wins.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- THE WEE HOURS

Kevin is snoring gently. The room is dark save for a lamp on a small desk across the room. Meryl is seated at the desk wearing a robe and reading glasses. She is carefully sorting a pile of documents.

MERYL'S P.O.V.: The documents are Jason's medical records; Blue Cross patient statements from different dates in the late eighties and nineties. Each is for a different asthma-related treatment. She organizes them in chronological order, then produces from a side-drawer an eight-by-eleven envelope:

It is addressed "U.S.M.C. Recruiting Depot, c/o Captain Bill Munson", with an address in Plymouth, Michigan. She stuffs the envelope with the dozen or more documents, and then produces a roll of stamps from another drawer and begins affixing postage. She pauses with a stamp halfway to her mouth.

MERYL

Jesus. What the hell am I doing?

She stares intensely at the envelope for several seconds.

MERYL (cont'd)

Oh, yeah; saving my son's life.

She goes back to licking stamps.

CUT TO:

EXT. POWERHOUSE GYM- AFTERNOON

It is raining to beat hell. Jason exits holding his gym bag over his head to ward off the downpour, and begins jogging through the puddles.

Idling slowly, Kevin's Ford Taurus creeps up behind the unsuspecting Jason and HONKS. Jason jumps and drops his bag in a flooded pot-hole. He looks back, and Kevin salutes him from the driver's seat. Jason retrieves his bag, runs around to the passenger side and jumps in.

JASON

Pop! What a nice surprise. To what do I owe?

KEVIN

Well, I know you like walking home, but in this monsoon, it seemed cruel and unusual, even by Marine standards...

JASON

Yeah, it woulda been a long swim home.

KEVIN

And I wanted a chance to speak to you man to man. There's something that's been on my mind... I may be overstepping my bounds here, but I'm fairly sure I'm right to tell you this. It's about your mother.

JASON

Okay. Well, just between us, then.

KEVIN

Her high school boyfriend, Tommy Doyle... he was a year older, and they broke up when he graduated and moved to Chicago to join a band. But then the war started heating up, so, instead of waiting around to get drafted by the Army or Marines, he volunteered for the Navy. Which seemed like a good strategy at the time.

JASON

(nodding)

Avoid the infantry. Sounds prudent.

KEVIN

Anyway, while he was over there, your grandfather Renny was diagnosed with throat cancer, and your Mom wrote Tommy a lot of grief-sticken letters about it. And in July of sixty-eight when he passed, she wrote him, and, without her knowing anything about it, he got an emergency leave and came home to spend ten days with her.

JASON

Wow. Nice feller.

KEVIN

Yes, he certainly was a nice feller. But the catch was, in order to procure this little two-week furlough, the Navy made him extend his tour for another six months.

JASON

Six months? Crikey!

KEVIN

Yeah. He only had sixty days left on his tour, but he signed the paperwork, and he was back in Michigan two days later.

JASON

So what happened?

KEVIN

Well, he spent the ten days cheering up your Mom. And then, when his time was up, she drove him to Metro airport, and he flew back to Saigon to complete his tour.

JASON

Wow.

KEVIN

Before he left, he told her he'd been planning to re-up anyway, that he'd been planning to extend for a full year, so the six-month extension was saving him time in-country. He swore it was the truth, but, I don't think she ever believed it.

JASON

So what happened?

KEVIN

Well, three months later, his patrol boat was ambushed and Tommy got killed. It was two days before his twenty-first birthday... Of course your mother took it hard. She was still pretty shaky when I met her a year later.

JASON

Poor Mom! Geez, no wonder she's so unkeen on the military.

KEVIN

I really struggled with whether to tell you. But I thought that since you have to deal with the repercussions, you had a right to know.

A beat. Jason stares at his old man's profile.

JASON

Hey, Dad?

KEVIN

Yes, son?

JASON

Thanks for the knowledge. That makes me feel better. You know, about Mom... I'm glad you went with your instincts.

KEVIN

Yeah? I didn't know I had any.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL TRACK- AFTERNOON

Jason is shirtless, running laps on a quarter-mile oval at his old high school. While still lean, his upper body is much more defined than three months before. The sun is high in the sky, but he is pushing himself hard. As he comes barreling around a corner at a near-sprint, he pulls up suddenly, gasping. In a moment, the gasping has turned to wheezing, and he's having a full-blown asthma attack. He doesn't panic, but walks quickly off the track toward the adjacent parking lot.

EXT. PARKING LOT- CONTINUOUS

He reaches his car, opens the passenger-side door and then the glove-box. Under his registration and maintenance records he finds an inhaler. He shakes it and pushes down on the barrel; it's empty. His wheezing is getting more desperate now, and he hurries around the car and keys the trunk. He digs through sports gear and assorted tools and ice-scrapers, finally locating an old gym bag. Under a pair of shorts and a jock-strap he finds another inhaler. He's getting panicky now, and fumbles with the inhaler before hitting it successfully. He takes huge gulps of air through his rapidly clearing lungs; sweat and tears mingle as they roll down his face. He looks quickly around him for witnesses, but the parking lot is deserted. Relief spreads over his features, but quickly changes to disgust. He whips the inhaler back into the trunk and slams it shut with such vigor that the entire car rocks on its struts.

EXT. SANDERSON RESIDENCE- DUSK

A young Airborne Express DELIVERY WOMAN jogs up the steps and rings the bell twice. Kevin appears at the front door.

DELIVERY WOMAN
Kevin Sanderson?

KEVIN
Yes?

DELIVERY WOMAN
Package for you, sir. Just sign here,
please.

Kevin signs and accepts a small package wrapped in plain brown paper.

KEVIN
Thank you. I think.

The Delivery Woman smiles as she jogs away. Kevin reads his name hand-written on the delivery slip as he closes the door behind him.

INT. HALLWAY- CONTINUOUS

Kevin tears open the package. Inside is a tattered white jewelry box and a hand-written note. He starts with the note.

WYATT (V.O.)
Kevin: Thanks for everything. Here's a
little memento from one veteran of the
fucking sixties to another.

Kevin smiles and turns to the box. He opens it and extracts a purple heart bordered with gold, suspended from a pink and white ribbon. The lump in his throat is almost visible as he stares at the bust of George Washington in the center.

CUT TO:

EXT. BATTING CAGES- NEAR DUSK

It is a beautiful late-summer evening. Jason carries a black aluminum Easton bat over his shoulder as he walks up to a pot-bellied man in his seventies, SAM, wearing suspenders and a change belt. He finishes emptying a trash-can and looks up.

SAM

Hey, Kiddo! Haven't seen you in ages.

JASON

Yeah, well, school and all. How you been, Sam?

SAM

If I felt any better, I'd have to call a doctor!

Sam chuckles appreciatively at his little joke. Jason smiles politely and hands him a twenty.

SAM (CONT'D)

How much in quarters?

JASON

All of it.

SAM

Twenty in quarters? What's your next stop, the laundromat?

JASON

No, I- well, I might not be back for a while, so, I wanna get in my licks.

SAM

Those flood lights ain't worth a damn. You better get in your licks before the sun sets, or you'll have to use "The Force".

(walking away)

And I ain't exactly Yoda!

Jason smiles and starts toward the cages. He stops at a vending machine and gets two bottles of Faygo Grape pop and two bags of Cheetos, then proceeds to the deserted cages.

SAM (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Still drinking the grape pop, eh?

JASON

Like there's no tomorrow.

Jason takes his cuts in the warm twilight. He piles the quarters on top of the token box. He is in the cage labelled "Major League: Fast Pitch".

The pitches are humming at seventy-plus miles per hour, but he makes steady contact. The piles of quarters on top of the token box grow slimmer. He swills from a grape pop and scarfs handfuls of Cheetohs.

JASON (cont'd)
Man, civilian life is the shit.
(a beat)
America is the shit... Goddam, I love
Cheetohs.

Jason examines his left hand; he's not wearing a batting-glove, and the lower-half of his palm is painfully red and beginning to blister. Undaunted, he continues batting in the faint glow of the lights. A CLOSE-UP of Jason's eyes welling up as he fouls one back. He stops and shakes his head, wiping at a runaway tear.

JASON (CONT'D)
(to himself)
What the hell am I doing? Jesus...
Marines don't spazz out under pressure!

SAM (O.S.)
Marines? You joinin' up, son?

Jason is startled by Sam's sudden appearance behind him.

JASON
Uh, it looks that way, Sam... Were you in
the service?

SAM
I was in Korea with the First Cav.
Fightin' thirty divisions of Chinese was
a helluva way to earn my G.I. Bill.

Jason pulls his right elbow behind his head to stretch his triceps, and Sam turns to walk away.

JASON
Did you ever get scared, Sam?

SAM
All the time... Somethin' occurred to me
my very first day in combat: As glamorous
as it may sound, dyin' for your country's
still dyin'. Know what I mean?

JASON

Yeah. I think I do, Sam.

SAM

I knew a few guys who were too stupid to be scared shitless. Lord, how I envied those poor dumb bastards.

JASON

Ignorance is bliss, eh, Sam?

SAM

You take care of yourself, son.
(turning back)
Oh, and... semper fi!

Sam ambles off. Jason smiles and shakes his head, then deposits more tokens. He is back-lit by the flood-lights as he swings for imaginary fences in the summer night.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- EVENING

Meryl is engrossed in the evening news. There is a KNOCK. Meryl crosses to the front door. Her P.O.V.: The door opens and Captain Munson stands wearing street clothes under a red and yellow windbreaker with U.S.M.C. embroidered on the sleeves. He is wearing spectacles, a Detroit Tigers cap, and holding a large leather-bound book under one arm.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Mrs. Sanderson?

MERYL

Yeah. Captain Munson, I presume?

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Yes, ma'am. May I come in for a moment?

MERYL

Jason isn't here. He hasn't come to his senses, if that's what you're worried about.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Well, the fact is, I'm not here to see Jason, Ma'am; I'm here to see you.

MERYL

You gotta be shitting me, Bill.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

No, ma'am. I'm on the level. May I come in?

MERYL

Yeah, you might as well. I've got something I was going to mail you; I'll save myself the postage.

ANGLE THE ENVELOPE sitting out on the kitchen table. Meryl steps out of the doorway to let Munson pass. He removes his cap and puts it under his arm as he enters.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

You have a beautiful home here.

MERYL

Bill? What do you want?

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Well, I brought something I'd like to show you. But first, I want to tell you something about myself; I've got a mother too, Mrs. Sanderson.

MERYL

Well, that's certainly a revelation.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Kay Ann Munson of Dayton, Ohio. My old man left when I was in grammar school, so she raised me and my three sisters herself. And when I graduated from Ball State and announced I was joining the Corps, she cried for a week. I hated to see her like that, but, I loved the Corps. My uncle Johnny had been a Marine; killed at Khe Sahn in sixty-eight. He was my hero from the day I could read his obituary. And his letters home.

MERYL

Well, thanks for sharing, Bill.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Actually, Ma'am, what I wanted to share was this; one of the scrap-books she kept while I was over in the Gulf.

He opens the book and flips through a few pages.

CAPTAIN MUNSON (cont'd)

When I shipped home, I could see how the stress had aged her. Her hair had gone half gray, and around her eyes, well- she looked like she hadn't slept a wink my whole tour.

MERYL

So Kay Ann suffered and I should too? That's very persuasive, Bill, but-

CAPTAIN MUNSON

While we were outside Kuwait City diverting their Republican Guard, we got into some pretty hairy fire-fights. I took some mortar shrapnel, right through the biceps, here. Got a purple heart and a six-inch keloid scar out of it. Both of which I've managed to keep hidden from Mom for going on ten years.

MERYL is flipping pages of the scrap-book. Her P.O.V.:

Pictures of a younger Lieutenant Munson posing with his boyish-looking troops in the desert, smiling and brandishing weapons; his letters home to "My Dearest Mother"; articles from the Dayton News and the USA Today touting the battlefield successes of Desert Storm.

CAPTAIN MUNSON (cont'd)

My platoon took over four hundred prisoners, and we didn't lose a man. Getting forty-one pimply-faced teenagers out of some hairy spots without a casualty, well... not to sound boastful, but that's the crowning achievement of my life, Ma'am.

MERYL

I see.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

I get hung-up on by angry mothers about three times a week, Mrs. Sanderson. And I never blame a single one of 'em for hating my camouflaged guts. Sometimes, I know they're right. Some of their kids are nowhere near ready for the level of discipline and sacrifice we demand in the Corps. But I want to tell you, Mrs. Sanderson, Jason's ready. He's smart. He's disciplined. And he's got grit.

A beat.

CAPTAIN MUNSON (cont'd)

And if he is called upon to serve his country on the front lines of this new war, his leadership and his quick thinking will save the lives of enlisted Marines. That's not a line from the "Recruiter's Manual", Ma'am; that's the gospel truth.

He catches her looking at the muted television. Familiar footage of students in a Middle-East country burning the American flag and dancing triumphantly around the flames.

CAPTAIN MUNSON (cont'd)

I know it's not just Jason we're asking to sacrifice for his country, Ma'am. It's you, and Mr. Sanderson, and everyone who loves him. If we didn't need young men of his caliber so badly now, I wouldn't be here with my hat in my hands asking. For you to sacrifice. For your blessing.

Meryl's eyes well up in spite of her. She turns away from Munson. He closes the scrap-book and rises stiffly.

CAPTAIN MUNSON (cont'd)

I'm sorry to have dropped by unannounced, Ma'am. I can see myself out.

He starts toward the door.

CAPTAIN MUNSON (cont'd)

Oh, uh, did you say you had something for me, Ma'am?

Meryl rises and walks to the table. She takes a long look at THE ENVELOPE, sitting next to a platter of homemade cookies. After a tense pause, she grabs the platter and offers it to Captain Munson.

MERYL

Here, Bill. Have a cookie.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

Mmm. Toll house?

MERYL

Peanut butter chip. They're Jason's favorite.

CAPTAIN MUNSON

My wife won't bake sweets anymore. Says I'm gettin' too chunky for my dress blues.

MERYL

Well, we'll keep this between us, Bill.

He inhales the cookie. She offers the plate again. He takes a second and third cookie, and heads toward the door. As he exits, Meryl turns back toward the kitchen with the plate in one hand and the envelope in the other.

CUT TO:

INT. BASEMENT- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- NIGHT

Kevin is alone in the storage room with the turntable; he has "A Lighter Shade of Pale" by Procul Harem playing low. He is going through a stack of boxes; he finds one labelled "1960-65". He opens the box and digs through books and loose photos. Finally, he finds what he's looking for.

Kevin's P.O.V.: it is the Royal Oak Kimball High School yearbook, class of 1963. He turns to the index at the back and looks up "Melvin, Douglas". He finds a photo of a fit and trim Doug in the marching band, toting a tenor sax. Another of Doug in a three-piece suit posing with the Key Club. He turns to the Senior portraits and finds Doug's boyish face. He lingers over the photo, then abruptly flips back to the index.

He looks up "Lacoste, Reginald". He finds Reginald in the varsity football team-photo, in the top row; gangly even in pads, squinting through horn-rimmed glasses. He turns to a photo from a basketball game; Reginald and another boy are at the end of the bench, chins in hand, under the heading "The Thinkers". The caption reads "Bobby Beatty and Reginald Lacoste contemplate matters of splinter-removal." He then turns to Reginald's senior picture, and we see Reginald posing in a bow-tie, smiling broadly despite crooked incisors.

At the top of the page, he notices a survey: "Class of '63; Where Will You Be In Ten Years?" Kevin finds his own name and reads his reply: "Bootlegging in Tennessee". He shakes his head in bewilderment. He locates Reginald Lacoste two names below: "If you believe my mom, dead or in jail!" Kevin stares unblinkingly at the words until tears pool and a single drop falls, landing darkly just above Reginald's grinning mug.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARKING LOT- EVENING

A car pulls up in front of the restaurant. Kevin and Jason disembark. Kevin has his arm around Jason as they walk from the car to the restaurant door. The neon sign out front reads "Reno's Steakhouse".

JASON

Dad, I'm shipping in two days. I love Reno's, but you know I can't eat anything starchy.

KEVIN

Relax, Sgt. Bilko; you can take a few minutes to have a bite with your folks. We won't be eating many meals together the next... well, for a while.

JASON

I'll just have salad. And a baked potato. No sour cream.

KEVIN

Oh, come on. Have a New York Strip and onion rings!

JASON

Onion rings ain't "warrior food", Dad.

KEVIN

Let's splurge. And son, do me a favor;
don't say "ain't" around your mother. It
might push her over the edge.

They walk in through the front entrance.

INT. RESTAURANT- CONTINUOUS

As they approach the server station, Kevin makes eye-contact with the hostess; she nods and leads them to a booth in the back.

Meryl is waiting; as they approach, she stands to greet them, revealing a scarlet t-shirt bearing the Marine logo and the words "Proud Parent of a U.S. Marine". Jason positively beams.

JASON

Nice shirt, Mom.

MERYL

Well, you know, red's always been my
color.

Kevin removes his coat and has the identical t-shirt underneath.

KEVIN

It's not red, it's scarlet, and it's my
color.

A MONTAGE, m.o.s. over New Order's "Regret".

THE WAITER serves Jason a steak so big it overlaps the plate, and what looks like a triple-order of onion rings. Meryl snaps a photo of Jason with an onion-ring monocle while Kevin wears an onion nose-ring.

The Waiter brings a cake for dessert; it has red frosting and the words "Semper Fidelis" in yellow cursive. A G.I. Joe-like action-figure sits in the middle of the cake in full camouflage, sporting an M-16. Jason salutes the figure and says "dis-missed!" before removing him from the frosting.

Meryl gives The Waiter the camera, and he adjusts the focus while they pose; Meryl and Kevin are on either side of Jason, showing off their t-shirts, each with an arm around their son, while Jason holds the cake up to his mouth.

Kevin pushes the back of his head so his nose goes in the frosting. As Jason pulls his snout out of the cake, The Waiter captures the moment for posterity.

CUT TO:

INT. BASEMENT- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- DAY

Meryl removes clothes from the dryer. Jason jogs down the steps doing some arm stretches and doesn't notice her. He stops in front of his chin-up bar, which is roughly eight feet from the ground. He springs up confidently to grab the bar, but as he grasps it, his hands slip off, and he tumbles down in a heap. Meryl puts her hand to her mouth and attempts to stifle her laughter, to no avail.

JASON

(flat on his back)

Mom, did you by any chance grease my chin-up bar?

MERYL

Why, no, son.

(beat)

It's Crisco!

She staggers up the stairs laughing.

JASON

Seeing you happy like this really takes the sting out of my punctured lung!

He hears Meryl's distant cackling upstairs.

JASON (cont'd)

(to himself)

Well, she brought me into this world; I guess she can take me out.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- DAY

Kevin sits alone on the couch, reading "A Call To Arms". He hears a car pulling up out front. He crosses to the window, and peers through the blinds.

ANGLE on a long black sedan with white "U.S. Government" plates pulling to the curb.

From the front-passenger seat, Wyatt emerges, decked out in his Marine dress blues, sparkling with medals. He opens the back door and a bespectacled CHAPLAIN disembarks the back seat, clutching a leather Bible. Kevin recognizes the Chaplain as Father Mulcahy from M*A*S*H.

It finally strikes Kevin what they've come for, and we see real panic in his eyes. At that moment, Meryl appears at the top of the stairs.

MERYL

What's going on? Who's here? Is Jason home from the war?

As she begins descending the staircase, Kevin runs to the bottom of the stairs to block her path.

KEVIN

No, it's nothing, honey. Jehovah's Witnesses, I think. Go back to bed!

ANGLE on Wyatt and Father Mulcahy at the door, steeling themselves for the task at hand. Wyatt reaches out to press the buzzer.

ANGLE on Kevin; his face fills with dread as they hear the BUZZER for the front door. Meryl is trying to get by him but he has his arms out to restrain her. The BUZZER becomes louder and more insistent; Meryl breaks through Kevin's grasp and runs for the door. He looks on helplessly as she reaches for the knob.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM- SANDERSON RESIDENCE- THE WEE HOURS

The alarm clock BUZZES obnoxiously. Kevin's eyes open and he bangs the alarm off. He stares at the green digital display reading "4:00 AM" until it turns to 4:01, and then turns to wake Meryl.

EXT. MILITARY ENTRANCE PROCESSING STATION- EARLY MORNING

It's pitch black. KEVIN'S CAR pulls up in the nearly empty parking lot. Kevin is driving, Jason is riding shotgun with a duffel bag on his lap, and Meryl is in back with a Kleenex balled up in her hand.

KEVIN

(rubbing his eyes)

Is it just me, or is there something
profoundly disturbing about waking before
dawn?

JASON

You wouldn't make much of a farmer, Dad.

KEVIN

Or a Marine.

MERYL

How much time have we got?

JASON

Uh, T-minus five minutes.

They disembark into the pre-dawn chill. There are other cars
pulling up with families seeing off their sons. Meryl pays
special notice to the young men being hugged and fussed over;
they look painfully young.

MERYL

(to Kevin)

God, would you look at these kids?
They're just kids.

JASON

Yeah. Jesus, they make Jason look like
Norman Schwarzkopf.

MERYL

(to Jason)

You're sure you can't make any phone
calls?

JASON

No, Mom.

MERYL

I won't talk to you for three months?

JASON

Mom, ten weeks is nothing; you go that
long without eating a vegetable.

MERYL

Yes, but I hate vegetables; I love you.

KEVIN

You're positive you want to do this, son?
Because you can always back out at the
last minute; trust me, I know what I'm
talking about.

Meryl almost manages a smile.

MERYL

Now honey, be sure to wear your helmet,
and always do your chin-strap nice and
snug.

(tousling his hair)

I don't want that handsome head of yours
getting shot off.

JASON

I'll be careful, Mom.

MERYL

Well, kick some terrorist ass, son!

They hug. She holds on as if for dear life.

JASON

I'm not going to war, Mom; I'm going to
Virginia.

MERYL

Don't you placate me, Jason; Virginia's
just a rest-stop on the road to Kabul.

JASON

I love you, Mom.

JASON hugs her again. She smiles through tears.

KEVIN

You better get moving, son. The Marines
are not known for their infinite
patience.

JASON

Aye, sir!

Jason gives them each one last hug.

JASON (CONT'D)

Stop looking so sad; you'll see my ugly mug again in ten weeks.

He starts toward the building, then turns back.

JASON (cont'd)

Don't forget to tape the Sopranos!

KEVIN

You got it, paيسان!

Kevin turns to console Meryl, who is valiantly fighting back sobs. A BEATER CAR roars up and dumps off a passenger without coming to a full stop. Meryl takes notice of the lad as he reels out of the car; a duffel bag is tossed out behind him, and the car is gone. THE KID must be seventeen to enlist, but looks fifteen tops. He is taller than Jason but rail thin.

The Kid struggles under the weight of his duffel bag, and appears on the verge of tears. Jason spots the boy at the same moment as his mother. He saunters over to him. Meryl watches Jason greet the boy, and strains to hear their conversation as she and Kevin walk back to the car.

JASON

What branch you joining?

KID

Marines.

JASON

Yeah? Me, too. What's your M.O.S.?

KID

Diesel engine repair.

JASON

Good gig.

KID

(nodding)

Had to take that sonuvabitch ASVAB three times just to get the fifty you need for Motor T.

JASON

Good for you, man. Persistence pays off.

Jason notices the folder full of paperwork shaking in The Kid's trembling hand.

JASON (cont'd)
You're not nervous, are you?

KID
Kinda. I watched "Full Metal Jacket" last night; that shook me up a little.

JASON
Hey, don't even sweat about that. That was the Marine Corps back in the dark ages. The D.I.s can't beat the shit out of you anymore.

KID
Is that true?

JASON
(nodding)
They can't lay a hand on ya. Hell, they can't even swear at you.

KID
(actually smiling)
No shit?

JASON
Oh, yeah. They still yell and scream, but I've heard the trick is, let it go in one ear and out the other.

KID
I'll try that.

They walk together toward the government building.

Meryl and Kevin climb back in the car. Kevin starts the engine, as they watch Jason help The Kid with his bag. Kevin backs out and honks twice; Jason snaps to attention, but instead of saluting blows a kiss.

MERYL
Did you see? He's already helping someone.

A CLOSE-UP of Kevin staring intently at The Kid. ANGLE ON The Kid tripping over a crack in the sidewalk, and the forms from his folder spilling everywhere.

KEVIN
(thinking aloud)
Jesus, it's Reggie LaCoste.

MERYL
Who's Reggie LaCoste?

KEVIN
Oh, he's... just this kid I used to know.

CUT TO:

INT. BALL ROOM- EVENING

Kevin and Meryl, in dapper evening-wear, are seated at a table. Sitting opposite Doug Melvin, resplendent in a blue Nehru jacket, and his tiny wisp of a WIFE. PULL BACK to reveal that they are surrounded by tables of fifty-something couples. A banner on the wall behind Kevin reads "Welcome, Class of '63!"

The lights dim and ANGLE the stage; BOB MACKEY, a portly Elvis impersonator in a size sixty white-sequined jumpsuit, nimbly climbs the steps, and launches into a stellar rendition of "Suspicious Minds". Doug gives Kevin a "I told you so!" nod, Meryl's jaw hangs in amazement, and Kevin's face blooms into a smile.

FADE OUT.