

THE INDEPENDENT

by

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WHITE LETTERS over a BLACK SCREEN:

"In a time of universal deceit -- telling the truth is a revolutionary act." - George Orwell

Letters fall off frame until nothing is left but the word:

"REVOLUTIONARY"

A second quote replaces the first:

"The possibility of a credible independent presidential candidate in the next 10 to 20 years is not only real, it's nearly inevitable." - Dave Wasserman, *Senior Election Night Analyst, NBC News*

Letters fall off frame until nothing is left but our title:

"THE INDEPENDENT"

FADE IN:

EXT. EXPANSIVE PARKING LOT - NIGHT

CHYRON: MONDAY, OCTOBER 21ST

An ocean of NEWS VANS; rows upon rows; tightly packed. Every major outlet and then some. Local. National. International.

SWEATY CAMERAMEN cue TELEGENIC TALKING HEADS; the fourth estate of the 21st Century; a 24-hour feeding frenzy.

A stew of VOICES, each louder than the next, each a paraphrase of the former, and all seemingly unaware of each other's existence, report what is widely known in every corner of the globe:

NATE STERLING, 48, is on the verge of becoming the first Independent to be... LEADER OF THE FREE WORLD

Hone in on alluring CNN CORRESPONDENT, high on reporting history as it's made; striving, unsuccessfully, to hide her personal affinity for the messiah-of-a-candidate in the name of journalistic objectivity.

CNN CORRESPONDENT

... a story unheard of in the history of American politics. One year ago Nate Sterling, well known in academia, but far from a household name, authored the best-selling book "A Declaration of

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CNN CORRESPONDENT (cont'd)  
Independents." Forty million copies later and Sterling has become the most influential political mind since Thomas Paine. His treatise, a modern day "Common Sense."

Pan to an NBC CORRESPONDENT. Imposing jaw, husky voice.

NBC CORRESPONDENT  
... a tsunami thrashing it's way through America's traditional two-party landscape, Nate Sterling leads Republican Senator Roger Turnbull in the polls by just two points with two weeks to go.

Pan to an enchanting TELEMUNDO CORRESPONDENT, eloquent Spanish, the following in subtitles.

TELEMUNDO CORRESPONDENT  
Democrat David Archer, trailing both Turnbull and Sterling by double digits, will need to pull off a Texas miracle to have any hope of inhabiting the White House.

Pan to WOLF BLITZER, conducting an interview of RON THOMPSON, 46, Sterling's effusive campaign manager.

THOMPSON  
Washington's got one foot so far left and the other so far right, it can't stand up straight. Congress is doing a split in quicksand and Nate Sterling's the only fella that can tow us out of this partisan quagmire before we're completely paralyzed by ideological stalemate.

WOLF BLITZER  
This is Nate Sterling's first election for public office at any level. His meteoric rise is not only unprecedented, quite frankly, it's unfathomable. How do you explain it?

THOMPSON  
Freedom. It's our greatest value as Americans. Roger Turnbull and David Archer are not free. They're trapped inside a stenciled party

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

THOMPSON (cont'd)  
platform-- forced to toe the line--  
keep the special interest smiling.  
They're puppets, pandering to a  
tired status quo.

A DEAFENING ROAR from inside the stadium.

THOMPSON (cont'd)  
Sterling, on the other hand, is  
free to explore the best ideas from  
both sides of the aisle because he  
doesn't sit in either one; he  
stands proudly in the middle.

INT. BUSCH STADIUM - CONTINUOUS

We swoop over an army of PASSIONATE CITIZENS. Every  
demographic HOWLING with adulation, admiration, hope.

More than mere cheerleaders, these are champions of a  
movement; ready to follow Sterling into the proverbial  
burning building.

We catch a glimpse of his majestic smile on the jumbo-tron  
before panning down to an oversize stage dwarfed by the  
oversize stage-presence of the man himself. Confident, not  
arrogant. Erudite, not pedantic. Genuine, not soft.

Sterling quiets the crowd with a steady palm. Then speaks in  
a direct, candid tone -- more commonly reserved for a  
lifelong friend than a sold-out stadium of strangers.

NATE STERLING  
I have good news and I have bad  
news. Which would you like first?

Transfixed. Silent. Confused. Waiting.

VOICE  
BAD!

Several more calls of "BAD" reach crescendo until the entire  
crowd BOOS in unison.

NATE STERLING  
Right. Always the bad first. Well,  
here it is: My son Evan turned  
twelve yesterday.

Crowd, baffled. *Where is he going with this?*

(CONTINUED)

NATE STERLING (cont'd)

And as I glared at each of those twelve candles, flickering atop the chocolate frosted cake, do you know what I saw? I'm almost ashamed to admit it.

(beat)

I saw 9/11. I saw a misguided invasion of Iraq. I saw a decade of stagnation in Afghanistan. I saw the worst recession since the Great Depression. I saw ten percent unemployment; a sixteen-trillion dollar debt; a nuclear Iran creeping around the corner; an Israeli-Palestinian conflict with no end in sight. Crumbling education, innovation, infrastructure. Skyrocketing health care premiums, gas prices, sea levels, world temperatures. Cyberterrorism, hyper-partisan gridlock, misinformation, out-of-control lobbying, pollution, corruption, poverty, and socio-economic inequality. All in twelve little candles.

His delivery, brimming with truth. A humble understanding of the monstrous challenges facing his nation.

NATE STERLING (cont'd)

It is a reality that more closely resembles a dystopian science fiction novel than a fairy tale. Nonetheless, it's the world in which Evan has spent his childhood.

The crowd, sobered. Sterling sighs.

NATE STERLING (cont'd)

Now that I've thoroughly depressed you, would you like the good news?

The crowd ERUPTS. Sterling smiles.

NATE STERLING (cont'd)

My son, Evan, turned twelve yesterday. And as I watched him blow out the candles, a funny thing happened. The flames reignited. Evan blew them out again. And again, they flickered back. As hard

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

NATE STERLING (cont'd)  
as he tried, he couldn't blow those  
twelve candles out. Which made me  
think, three things. One: my wife  
has a wonderful sense of humor.

Light laughter.

NATE STERLING (cont'd)  
Two: we cannot erase the past, but  
we can, we *must*, learn from it. And  
most importantly, we can get our  
flame back too.

A swell of APPLAUSE ripples through the stadium. Energy,  
momentum -- palpable. *We might just pull this thing off.*

Then, Sterling morphs into a televised version of himself.

INT. WASHINGTON TRIBUNE HEADQUARTERS - D.C. - SIMULTANEOUSLY

Watching Sterling's speech on a small TV with his feet up on  
his desk, sits KEVIN CONRAD, 28.

A Princeton Tigers pennant is pinned to the wall of Kevin's  
fiercely organized cubicle. He compulsively thumbs a  
pocket-sized version of "The Prince" by Machiavelli as he  
sneers at the electrified reaction to Sterling's rhetoric.

KEVIN  
(hopeful)  
Turnbull will close the gap. He's  
Reagan without the cowboy hat, for  
fuck-sake.

One cubicle down, engulfed in the manic newsroom at the  
height of election-induced chaos, surrounded by coffee  
stained drafts and documents, sits our protagonist...

ELI BROOKS, 28, sharp, hungry, but green as Augusta.

Frustrated by the one-way conversation, Kevin glances at Eli  
who types with the focus of a world-class chess champion.

KEVIN (cont'd)  
Loosen up, buddy. Only eyes on that  
story are the ones you're dotting.

Eli ignores the jab. He's in the zone.

(CONTINUED)

KEVIN (cont'd)  
Korean massage ads got twice the  
readership.

Eli registers the subtlest of smiles, encouraging Kevin.

KEVIN (cont'd)  
Don't get me wrong, your story  
won't go unappreciated. Everyone's  
gotta wrap presents and start fires  
on Christmas morning.

ELI  
(deadpan)  
The horse is dead.

Kevin drapes his sturdy frame over Eli's cubicle.

KEVIN  
A kernel of wisdom, if I may.

ELI  
You may not. But you will--

KEVIN  
The fire that rages the hardest,  
burns out the quickest.

ELI  
(sarcastic)  
Voltaire?

KEVIN  
Conrad.

ELI  
Joseph?

KEVIN  
Kevin.

ELI  
Ah, an original. You should speak  
to legal. Get it trademarked.

KEVIN  
First intelligent thought you've  
had all week.

ELI  
(under his breath)  
Make a fortune in bumper stickers.

Kevin eyes Eli curiously.

(CONTINUED)

KEVIN

Let me ask you something, Eli? Have you ever been in a fight? When was the last time you just wound up and cold cocked someone? High school?

Kevin invades Eli's space, rearranging pens and paper on his desk. Eli ignores Kevin's attempt to ruffle his feathers.

KEVIN (cont'd)

You've never thrown a punch in your life, have you? I'm sitting next to Ghandi reincarnate.

(grinding his knuckles)

Let me see you make a fist.

ELI

Didn't your mother ever teach you: violence is never the answer?

Eli is above Kevin's childish prodding. But he's also deflecting, because the truth is... Kevin is spot on. Eli has only thrown a punch in a daydream.

Eli's cell phone RINGS.

ELI (INTO PHONE)

Hello?

(concerned)

Slow down.

As Eli listens, his face turns ghost white.

He hangs up and stares aimlessly into the tumult of the newsroom. His eyes draining of all vitality.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - MORNING

CHYRON: SEVEN MONTHS EARLIER

CHYRON: FRIDAY, MARCH 28TH

Eli turns the key to his beaten up Ford Echo. The engine sparks but doesn't hit. He SMACKS the steering wheel.

ELI

Not again.

Second try. Nothing. Third time's a charm. He peels out.

A notepad sitting on the passenger seat reads: "LOTTO WINNERS," with names and phone numbers. Scribbled at the top: the address for *Mega Millions Lottery Headquarters*.

(CONTINUED)

ELI (PRELAP)  
How has your life changed?

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

A homely, AFFABLE WOMAN lies on a hammock reading Hemingway.

AFFABLE WOMAN (V.O)  
One word: Time. I'm reading all the classics; enrolled in a Thai cooking class; and would you believe it, I even convinced my husband to take Salsa lessons.

INT. LOCAL DANCE STUDIO - NIGHT

Four left feet, but a grand old time nonetheless.

AFFABLE WOMAN (V.O)  
Oh, God is good.

ELI (PRELAP)  
So you quit your job?

INT. CASINO - DAY

A PUNK KID, 20, tattoos, tank top, flat-brimmed hat, plays Texas hold'em at the Bellagio with a giant stack of chips.

PUNK KID (V.O.)  
Nah, I love working for an alcoholic slave laborer-- fuck yeah I quit-- skipped town fast I could.

ELI (V.O.)  
Why Vegas?

INT. STRIP CLUB - LATER

The PUNK KID slides \$100 under the skimpiest of thongs on a GORGEOUS STRIPPER riding him like a mechanical bull.

PUNK KID (V.O.)  
You're fucking with me, right?

ELI (PRELAP)  
Will you give any to charity?

INT. CHURCH - DAY

A GOD-FEARING MAN takes communion.

GOD-FEARING MAN (V.O.)  
Oh, it's all going to charity. My  
church, the Gates Foundation...

ELI (V.O.)  
All of it?

GOD-FEARING MAN (V.O.)  
(sly smile)  
Well maybe not *all* of it.

INT. MEGA MILLIONS LOTTERY HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Eli takes a business card from a bubbly RECEPTIONIST and slides it into his wallet.

RECEPTIONIST  
There he goes right now.

TOM MAYFIELD, 65, impeccably-dressed Director of *Mega Millions*, strides briskly past the desk. Eli hurries to catch him.

ELI  
Mr. Mayfield!

Mayfield opens a blue and orange UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA umbrella in front of the sliding doors. Eli extends his hand. Mayfield eyes him suspiciously. Shakes begrudgingly.

ELI (cont'd)  
Eli Brooks. Washington Tribune. I'm  
doing a story on lotto winners and  
I was wondering if I could ask--

MAYFIELD  
Sorry kid-- late for a meeting.

Mayfield slides out the door into a windswept DOWNPOUR. Eli sticks to him like a leech, braving the storm.

ELI  
UVA, huh? You're a Cavalier?

Mayfield is a good ole boy. His tone softens at mention of his alma mater, but his pace quickens.

(CONTINUED)

MAYFIELD  
Class of 1970.

Mayfield glances at Eli, enduring an assault by the rain. A hint of sympathy. He extends the umbrella ever so slightly.

MAYFIELD (cont'd)  
One block to the metro. I'm happy  
to spend it on small talk--

ELI  
How has the recession affected your  
jackpots?

MAYFIELD  
Down across the board. But that's  
to be expected.

WHASSHHH! Eli steps shin-deep into a muddy puddle. He shakes it off without breaking stride.

ELI  
Huh. I would have thought jackpots  
would rise in a recession.

MAYFIELD  
(curious)  
How so?

ELI  
Lot more desperate daydreamers.

Mayfield shuffles down to the metro platform. Eli follows to escape the rain but stops short of boarding the train.

MAYFIELD  
If you've got to choose between a  
lotto ticket and feeding your  
child-- what are you gonna do?

Doors close in Eli's face. The train disappears. Eli pulls off his shoe, pours the muddy rain water onto the tracks.

INT. ELI'S CAR - NIGHT

Eli navigates the suburban side streets of Arlington, VA.

Eli's girlfriend, CAMILA HART, 27, sits in the passenger seat. An impassioned environmentalist in her third year at Georgetown Law, Camila is bright, optimistic, and engaging.

(CONTINUED)

ELI  
Ten bucks she says the "M" word  
before dinner.

Camila smiles, knowingly.

CAMILA  
Don't be dramatic.

ELI  
"Babies" before dessert.

CAMILA  
Stop. It's going to be fun.

Eli parks outside a modest, two-story home; one paint job  
away from charming; a remnant of the vanishing middle class.

CAMILA (cont'd)  
Put me down for twenty on career  
advice from your dad.

As he opens the car door...

ELI  
Damn, that's smart money.

EXT. ELI'S PARENTS' HOME - CONTINUOUS

HAL BROOKS, 64, smokes a cigar on his porch in a tattered  
Redskins hat. He rubs a chronically aching hip with his  
large calloused hand. Dark wrinkles under sober eyes betray  
frustration with a dead-end job search at an age he always  
imagined would be devoted to fishing and golfing.

Eli and Camila stroll up the front path, hand in hand. Hal  
embraces them in a warm bear hug. The door swings open.

LYNN BROOKS, 60, proud, opinionated, shoos them inside.

LYNN  
Get in the house... It's freezing  
out there. Take your shoes off.

Lynn places her hands on Camila and Eli's shoulders as she  
follows them to the dining room.

LYNN (cont'd)  
Now when are you two going to start  
making me some grandkids?

Eli smiles at Camila; *you can owe me.*

INT. ELI'S PARENTS' HOUSE - LATER

The bittersweet celebration for Eli's third year at The Tribune doubles as a farewell dinner for his sister...

LIEUTENANT PENNY BROOKS, 25, to be shipped off to Kandahar Province, Afghanistan for her second tour of duty.

Lynn raises her glass of red. A toast.

LYNN

To my children: one makes the news,  
the other reports it.

CHEERS all around.

ELI

I'm no embedded war correspondent,  
Mom. I write fluff for housewives  
to pass time before *Judge Judy*.

LYNN

Just as well.

HAL

What you need is your own opinion  
column. Keep those capitol  
hillbillies honest, the dopes.

Eli steals a glance at Camila, who smiles with the satisfaction of squaring up the bet.

ELI

I'm working on it, Dad. Pass the  
sweet potatoes.

HAL

You want to have a real impact--  
change minds-- you need a pulpit. A  
column in the Tribune is to  
politics, what the Pope's balcony  
is to religion.

ELI

Aren't politics and religion about  
the only two topics to *avoid* with a  
dinner guest?

HAL

Camila? She's practically family!

Camila takes Hal's side.

(CONTINUED)

CAMILA

How else are we going to feed you the right opinions to publish in your bi-weekly column... byline at the top of Op-Ed...

HAL

... right next to Nicholas O'Shea.

ELI

A father can dream.

HAL

What'd I always tell you about believing in yourself?

ELI

I do. Just saying it might take a few decades, that's all.

HAL

The Dalai Lama was a God-King at 2.

ELI

Thanks dad. Mind if I use that to demand a column from Gordon White?

PENNY

If Eli's the Pope *and* the Dalai Lama, what does that make me?

ELI

La Toya.

Hal chokes on his asparagus, laughing.

PENNY

(to Camila)

If Eli hadn't wet the bed till he was eleven I might have developed a serious inferiority complex.

CAMILA

(off Eli's blush)

Oh c'mon, that's adorable.

LYNN

Try changing the sheets seven days a week.

ELI

Dad, would you care to join the Friar's Club?

(CONTINUED)

HAL

I think what we're all trying to say is, you've already surpassed our wildest expectations.

ELI

(in good humor)

I think that's a compliment?

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

Hal, Penny, and Camila settle into old, cozy armchairs. Eli preps the fireplace. Lynn refills wine glasses.

PENNY

President's most important job is Commander-in-Chief.

(beat)

You really believe a Professor could keep us safe?

CAMILA

My thesis adviser and Sterling were neighbors back when they both taught at Harvard.

With the fire lit, Eli turns to the room.

ELI

He recommended Camila for a job on the campaign.

CAMILA

Well, volunteer work.

LYNN

You're telling us he's definitely going to run?!

CAMILA

You didn't hear it from me.

PENNY

Hey Lama. You've been awfully quiet for a guy that wants an opinion column.

ELI

This is our last weekend with you for the next twelve months. Why waste it speculating about a guy whose chances of sitting in the Oval Office are slim to none?

(CONTINUED)

LYNN  
 (sarcastic)  
 You're right, Eli, let's talk about  
 the weather. It's mighty cold  
 outside, brrrr--

ELI  
 You really want my opinion?

Yes. CAMILA/PENNY/HAL LYNN  
 If you insist.

ELI (cont'd)  
 It's embarrassing how much I love  
 the man.

PENNY  
*Don't Ask Don't Tell* was repealed,  
 Eli. If there's something you want  
 to tell us--

ELI  
 Yeah, there is. I want you home,  
 Penny. I want Mom's classroom to  
 have desks with four legs. I want  
 Camila to have the funds to save  
 our planet from Armageddon. I want  
 the economy to give Dad his job  
 back. Or better yet, a new one. I  
 want to report on a President that  
 can do more than read bad poetry  
 from a teleprompter. Imagine that?

HAL  
 Why don't you get Sterling on the  
 front page? Generate some heat.

ELI  
 You're delusional. You know where  
 low man on the totem poll sits?  
 Miles away from the front page.

HAL  
 Does Gordon White know your name?

ELI  
 Here we go.

HAL  
 You've got a personality, Eli! You  
 need to learn when to set it free.

Camila doesn't disagree. Lynn chimes in.

(CONTINUED)

LYNN

Think back to grade school. Teacher asks a question and you *think* you know the answer but you're not a hundred percent sure so you don't raise your hand. Then little Susie answers correctly and it turns out you were right the whole time! Remember how that felt? Happens to my students all the time and all I can tell them is, "raise your goddamn hand!" Not in those words, of course.

HAL

What your mother's trying to say--

LYNN

A newsroom isn't so different than a classroom.

HAL

Worst case scenario... you're wrong. So it goes.

INT. PENNY'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - LATER

Clothing meticulously laid out on her bed; Penny packs. Eli studies an old picture of him and Penny as kids, showing off their snow fort after a blizzard; arms around each other, innocent smiles plastered on their faces.

A heavy silence looms. Eli lays his elbow on Penny's desk.

ELI

C'mon.

Penny smiles, rises to the challenge. They clasp hands.

PENNY

You do know I've been to boot camp since our last match. Not to mention outposts in Taliban infested mountains.

ELI

Yeah, and I've been to sleep away camp in the Berkshires. What's the difference?

Penny laughs. Initiates the arm wrestling match. Surprised by her strength, Eli pushes back with full force. Then slowly backs off, ultimately letting her win.

(CONTINUED)

PENNY

You never let me win?!

ELI

I didn't.

The tips of Eli's lips curl up.

PENNY

Bullshit. That smile.

ELI

What?

PENNY

You're the worst liar.

Penny's laugh is infectious. She returns to packing. The siblings each search for the right words but are met with a somber silence. Eli turns to leave, reaches the doorway.

ELI

Don't tell my sister I said this,  
but I'm really going to miss her.

Without looking up from packing, a faint, solemn, but loving smile grows on Penny's face.

INT. WASHINGTON TRIBUNE - STAFF MEETING - MORNING

GORDON WHITE, 75, surly, Editor-In-Chief of the Tribune, hunches over the head of a conference table. Built like a former power forward; face speckled red from decades of single malt scotch; advancing age no match for his temper.

GORDON WHITE

What's the difference between us  
and the Baltimore Examiner?

Nobody has the balls to answer the rhetorical question.

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)

Nobody? How about the Boston Post?

With each publication, Gordon makes threatening eye contact with a different reporter.

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)

The Los Angeles Herald? Phoenix  
Gazette? Chicago Times? Cincinatti  
Star? The New York Fuckin' Sun?!

He lingers on the last reporter, forcing an answer.

(CONTINUED)

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)  
Don't be bashful.

REPORTER #1  
They no longer exist.

GORDON WHITE  
THEY NO LONGER EXIST! Our obituary  
might have been written but it  
hasn't been published-- not yet--  
and I'll be damned if it's going to  
happen on my watch!

Gordon SLAMS the table.

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)  
The only reason we're not worm feed  
like the rest of them-- we haven't  
stopped to tread water. We don't  
keep swimming, we die.

Gordon glares at a NERDY REPORTER, hiding in the second row.

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)  
You-- how do we swim?

NERDY REPORTER  
(confused)  
Fast?

GORDON WHITE  
What?

NERDY REPORTER  
We swim fast!

The room holds it's breath.

GORDON WHITE  
What do you think this is, a  
fucking half-time pep talk? Give me  
your best idea-- something that  
will ensure we're all still  
employed come Labor Day.

NERDY REPORTER  
(thinks on it)  
Expand our online presence.

Gordon glares at the Reporter like he's the lowest form of  
evolution. With unnerving silence he lets him sweat it out.

(CONTINUED)

NERDY REPORTER (cont'd)  
 (cautiously elaborating)  
 Viral marketing, digital archives,  
 expand social media efforts--

GORDON WHITE  
 (calm and collected)  
 Ladies and gentlemen, we've got a  
 regular Steve Jobs in our midst. He  
 whose name I don't care to learn  
 seems to think because I had a  
 grandkid born before the Internet I  
 don't know we need to expand our  
 online--

On a dime, Gordon unleashes the fury.

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)  
 I'VE GOT A WHOLE FUCKING SWEATSHOP  
 WORKING LIKE VIETNAMESE CHILD  
 LABORERS TO EXPAND OUR ONLINE  
 PRESENCE!

Eli's eyes dart around the room. Reporters stand frozen.  
 Gordon focuses his ire on another meek subject.

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)  
 What's going to make Joe-Six-Pack  
 have no choice but to pick up a  
 Tribune for his election coverage  
 every morning?

REPORTER #2  
 Exclusives.

GORDON WHITE  
 What about them?

REPORTER #2  
 We need more of them.

Gordon is fuming.

GORDON WHITE  
 You're fired. Pack up your stuff,  
 walk down to H.R. and tell whoever  
 hired you they're fired too.

In the deafening silence that follows, Eli sees it; *the opportunity to raise his hand*. Cowering in the back of the room, he summons his courage and clears his throat. Junior beat reporters don't speak in these meetings.

Until now.

(CONTINUED)

ELI

What if we lead with Nate Sterling?

Heads turn. Eli steps cautiously out of the herd. Gordon eyes him suspiciously.

ELI (cont'd)

Wave's coming with this guy. Might as well paddle out to the break.

Beads of sweat form on his palms and forehead. Gordon's glare burns a hole in his self-confidence.

GORDON WHITE

Who are you?

ELI

Eli Brooks, Human Interest.

GORDON WHITE

Tell me why I should waste my front page on this nobody?

ELI

Are you referring to me or Sterling, sir?

GORDON WHITE

Both.

Laughter from the VETERAN REPORTERS.

ELI

The Post and the Globe are treating Sterling like a flash in the pan. If we short him we'll be kicking ourselves later. If we're first to the party, we might sell enough papers to give the Vietnamese children an extra ten minutes on their lunch break.

Muffled gasps.

GORDON WHITE

You willing to bet your job on this wet dream of yours?

High on adrenaline, Eli doubles down.

ELI

With all due respect, sir, the way you're talking we might all be out

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ELI (cont'd)  
of a job soon. Sterling might be a  
Hail Mary, but he beats laying down  
and taking the sack.

Gordon takes a moment. Fooled by Eli's false bravado, a  
slight smile sneaks through his steely glare.

GORDON WHITE  
Fuck it. How can I fold when a tyro  
goes all in?

Gordon looks to RICK ACKERMAN, 52, Senior News Reporter.

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)  
Ackerman, take the reins. Pick your  
co-pilot.

ACKERMAN  
I'll take Conrad.

Kevin fights to contain his excitement. Eli fights to  
contain his jealousy, the wind knocked out of his sails.

GORDON WHITE  
Brooks, what's your HI assignment?

ELI  
Lotto winners. 'When One In A  
Million Becomes A Million And One  
Overnight.'

GORDON WHITE  
Here's hoping you hit the Megaball  
with this Sterling character.

ELI  
I'd like to think I've got better  
odds than that, sir.

Gordon smirks.

GORDON WHITE  
You want better odds? Babysit  
Ackerman's kid and do Conrad's  
laundry for a week. Your future's  
in their hands.

Ackerman winks at Eli, stone-faced.

INT. WASHINGTON TRIBUNE - HALLWAY - POST MEETING

Kevin drapes his arm around Eli.

KEVIN  
(gloats)  
Be sure not to mix colors with  
whites. My pastels tend to run.

NICHOLAS O'SHEA, 60, Senior Op-Ed Columnist, impressed with Eli's performance, throws his arm over Eli's other shoulder.

NICK O'SHEA  
(staring down Kevin)  
Kid gets to scoop Ackerman's shit  
on his first cover story and  
suddenly he's a big shot.

KEVIN  
Sorry Mr. O'Shea. I was just--

NICK  
Thanking Eli for the opportunity?

KEVIN  
(embarrassed)  
Thanks Eli.

Kevin scuffles away. Nick extends his hand.

NICK  
Nick O'Shea.

ELI  
(shaking firmly)  
I've read every column since my  
freshman year of high school.

Nick considers this. Then...

NICK  
Walk back to your desk right now  
and email me the best thing you've  
ever written.

Nick turns and briskly walks away. Eli stands there, trying to process what just happened. Confused. But elated.

INT. THE MONOCLE - NIGHT

Trendy, upscale dinner spot on the Hill. Many a political alliance forged over these table cloths.

Eli sits opposite Nicholas O'Shea, rearranging his place setting with nervous excitement. The MANAGER approaches.

MANAGER

Mr. O'Shea. How are we tonight?

NICK

Can't complain, Brian.

MANAGER

(in jest)

Isn't that your job, sir?

NICK

(to Eli)

Best steak in town. Only reason I let him get away with being such a smart ass.

A MEXICAN WAITER approaches.

NICK (cont'd)

Enrique! How's the wife?

ENRIQUE

Very pregnant, Mr. O'Shea.

NICK

That a boy.

ENRIQUE

What can I get you, sir?

Nick yields to Eli, who glances over the menu, masking his shock at the prices.

ELI

I'll have the house salad.

NICK

And?

ELI

That's fine for me.

Nick is offended by Eli's order.

(CONTINUED)

NICK  
Bring us two Rib-eyes.

ENRIQUE  
Rare?

NICK  
Bloody.

ENRIQUE  
The usual to drink?

NICK  
And one for my friend.

Enrique nods and turns to help the adjacent table.

NICK (cont'd)  
You want be a columnist?  
(off Eli's nod)  
Rule number one: You want the  
Rib-eye, you get the Rib-eye.  
That's the last time I do it for  
you.

Eli thinks on it, meets Nick's gaze, clears his throat.

ELI  
Excuse me, Enrique?

Enrique turns.

ELI (cont'd)  
Give me the house salad.

Enrique consults Nick, who shrugs his shoulders.

ELI (cont'd)  
(scanning the menu)  
And the lobster tail... and a  
bottle of the '63 Merlot. Sounds  
like a good year.

NICK  
Kennedy was assassinated.

ELI  
Koufax was World Series MVP.

NICK  
Only Irish-Catholic to sit in the  
Oval Office.

(CONTINUED)

ELI

Only Jew to pitch a perfect game.

Neither blink. Then, Nick breaks into a hardy laugh.

NICK

This is going to work.

ELI

(bemused)

Can I ask what 'this'--

A hushed commotion interrupts Eli's query as SENATOR ROGER TURNBULL, 66, early favorite to win the Republican primary, strolls in, flanked by STAFFERS and HANGERS-ON.

Eli is star-struck by the larger-than-life presence of the long-time conservative stalwart. Turnbull spots O'Shea from across the restaurant, smiles.

NICK

Hold on to your slacks.

Turnbull saunters over, shaking a few hands along the way. He stares Eli dead in the eye.

ROGER TURNBULL

(aristocratic southern drawl)

Roger Turnbull.

ELI

Eli Brooks. Pleasure to meet--

NICK

Cozy up, Rog. This kid's the future. Like you in '84. Except he's the real deal.

Turnbull laughs, pats Nick on the back.

TURNBULL

Funny how often history repeats itself, isn't it, Nicky?

NICK

Funny how? Like World War II or bell-bottoms?

TURNBULL

Are bell-bottoms back in fashion? I wouldn't know; wife does my shopping.

(CONTINUED)

NICK

Nice to hear one of you knows how to make a decision.

Turnbull circles the table, positioning himself for maximum visibility to the elite patrons stealing glances.

TURNBULL

(to Eli)

That's what I love about Nick. The vitriol doesn't end at the tip of his pen.

NICK

(to Eli)

He knows he's my favorite stormtrooper.

TURNBULL

Stormtroopers have the balls to fight battles. Columnists arrive when the smoke clears to shoot the dead bodies.

Eager to break into conversation, Eli segues to the latest news from the Hill.

ELI

Your Campaign Finance legislation proved quite the battle.

NICK

Passed just in time for the primaries. Flawless orchestration.

TURNBULL

Gene Kent and Diane Roads deserve the real credit--

NICK

You say co-sponsors, I say frontmen, let's call the whole thing off.

TURNBULL

Wouldn't you like that.

NICK

The '*Free Speech Campaign Act.*' Which flack did you throw ten grand to dream up that gem? Benson?

(CONTINUED)

TURNBULL  
(smirks)  
Nicolls. And he's on retainer.

Nick scoffs.

TURNBULL (cont'd)  
It's a good bill, Nick. It will  
fundamentally--

NICK  
Corrupt the democratic process by  
allowing your cronies to stash  
millions behind a two-way mirror at  
a suspiciously coincidental time--

TURNBULL  
Uphold the first amendment for  
those true patriots who stand  
behind their beliefs--

NICK  
Sounds like a country anthem.  
Here's an idea for the album cover:  
a gaggle of greasy lobbyists for  
anonymous multinationals hiding  
under your bed with a pot of gold  
in one hand and a dead leprechaun  
in the other.

TURNBULL  
Good thing you've got the Tribune's  
cartoonist on speed dial.

Nick laughs.

TURNBULL (cont'd)  
I'd love to flirt all night but my  
wife is a very jealous woman. I  
look forward to Sunday's column. A  
good shellacking from Nicholas  
O'Shea is the best endorsement a  
candidate could ask for. My  
approval rating should jump ten  
points.

NICK  
Might even surpass your IQ on the  
way to your shoe-size.

Turnbull laughs, unfazed.

(CONTINUED)

TURNBULL  
Listen, Nick, before you defame--

NICK  
Relax. I'm not going to write about  
the Free Speech Campaign--

Turnbull knows what's coming, but humors Nick nonetheless.

TURNBULL  
Oh, no? What are you going to--

NICK  
The 'Fuck Small Contributions Act.'  
Coming to a primary near you  
courtesy of Gene Kent and Diane  
Roads-- two of our nation's  
crustiest sock puppets.

TURNBULL  
Enjoy your meal. If you need any  
help clarifying the fine print on  
the bill... door's always open.

NICK  
I'll call your aid tomorrow.

TURNBULL  
Wasn't talking to you.

Turnbull hands Eli his card.

TURNBULL (cont'd)  
That's my personal number. You call  
me anytime. Don't be shy.

NICK  
Why don't you unbuckle the kid's  
belt while you're at it.

Enrique lays the lobster tail and '63 Merlot on the table.

TURNBULL  
Looks like you beat me to it.

Turnbull winks and is off to the next table. In this  
political jungle, he is Mufasa.

NICK  
Rule number two: Congressmen think  
they're Presidents, Senators think  
they're Kings, and Presidents think  
they're God. What does that make  
you?

(CONTINUED)

Nick deftly swirls his glass of Merlot. Eli mirrors Nick's sophisticated gesture; far less graceful.

ELI  
An anarchist, an atheist, and an assassin.

NICK  
(smirks)  
A little overboard with 'assassin.'

ELI  
Alliteration. Mom's an English teacher.

Nick studies Eli curiously, as if he were sitting at a poker table about to go all-in with a 2-7 off-suit.

NICK  
You married?

ELI  
No.

NICK  
Good. Don't.

ELI  
Ever?

NICK  
Never.

ELI  
Is that a rule or a suggestion?

NICK  
I'm midway through a divorce.

ELI  
I'm sorry.

NICK  
Congratulations is more appropriate.

ELI  
Okay. Well.

Eli raises his glass.

(CONTINUED)

NICK  
I think you're ready.

ELI  
For what?

NICK  
To be a columnist.

Eli laughs. Nick does not.

NICK (cont'd)  
You just stood toe to toe with the biggest blowhard inside the beltway; you spoke up to Gordon this morning while most guys been here two decades sat holding their dicks-- most important, your writing-- it's got an opinion. That's the beauty of Op-Ed, reporters use their eyes and ears; columnists use their brain.

Eli can't believe what he's hearing.

NICK (cont'd)  
I need someone in my corner on these next few columns. Gonna be in and out of court, real short on time. You be my Angelo Dundee now, and I'll be your Don King when I get my life back. What do ya say?

ELI  
You want me to--

NICK  
Ghostwrite my column.

Eli's shock surrenders to suspicion.

ELI  
You're messing with me?  
(he's not)  
But I'm just a junior beat report--

NICK  
Rule number three: Prison guard opens the gate and flags down a cab, don't tell him you've got ten years left on your sentence.  
(beat)

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

NICK (cont'd)

I wouldn't be doing this if I had another choice; but I can't let the bitch take me for all I got.

(extends his hand)

Our little secret?

Dumbfounded, Eli shakes on it. Enrique sets down two tumblers of whiskey.

ENRIQUE

Courtesy of Senator Turnbull.

They spot Senator Turnbull across the restaurant. He raises his rocks glass. Eli and Nick do the same.

NICK

You think Turnbull recognizes the irony that the top shelf, *premium* blend whiskey he's drinking is identified by a blue label?

(beat)

Johnnie Walker must have been a flaming liberal.

Nick CLINKS his glass against Eli's and throws it down as a shot. Eli follows suit. The manager approaches the table.

MANAGER

Can I get you anything else, Mr. O'Shea.

NICK

Two shots of Johnnie Walker. Red.

Eli raises an eyebrow.

NICK (cont'd)

What? Lobster tail and alimony ain't cheap.

INT. ELI AND CAMILA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Legal briefs sprawled across the bed. Camila crams for an Environmental Law Exam. Eli stumbles in, half-drunk. He dances over to the bed.

CAMILA

What are you so giddy about?

He moves in for the kiss. Camila, head in her book, deflects Eli's advance with a face-palm.

(CONTINUED)

CAMILA (cont'd)  
Get out of here with your bourbon  
breath.

Eli licks her palm.

CAMILA (cont'd)  
Eli!

She wipes her hand on his shirt.

ELI  
Ever heard of foreplay?

Camila shakes her head, failing to hide her amusement.

ELI (cont'd)  
I got you a present. It's worth  
forty-four million dollars.

CAMILA  
I hope it's my own private island  
so I can have some peace and quiet.

Eli slides a lotto ticket out of his pocket.

ELI  
Would you like the lump sum or  
installments over 26 years?

He hands her the ticket.

CAMILA  
Lump. I could die tomorrow.

ELI  
What a pleasant observation on the  
human condition.

CAMILA  
You didn't get one for yourself?

ELI  
(overly cheesy)  
I've already won the lottery. I've  
got you!

Camila grabs the pillow, whacks Eli in the face.

CAMILA  
How come you're never this sweet  
when you're sober?

(CONTINUED)

ELI

Koalas are sweet. I'm a lion. I'm a gorilla. I'm--

CAMILA

A chipmunk.

ELI

--King Kong!

Camila laughs in Eli's face.

ELI (cont'd)

You know what happens to little girls that laugh at King Kong?

Eli pounds his chest, grunting. In one fell swoop, he shoves Camila's books off the bed. Camila inches backwards. Eli crawls on top of her. She playfully resists; giggles as Eli kisses her neck down to her collar-bone.

The lotto drawing flashes on the TV. Camila grabs the remote, turns up the volume, and consults her ticket.

LOTTO PRESENTER

First ball up, is 4. And the next, is 34. And the next, is 22. And the next, is 13. And the last is 3.

Camila crumbles her ticket and shoves it in between Eli's lips. He takes it in his mouth and pops it out at Camila.

CAMILA

Private island would have been too lonely anyway.

They cuddle affectionately, face to face.

ELI

If we were washed away on a desert island for the rest of our lives. And had nothing. No house, no friends, no money, no phone, no newspapers. Nothing but you and me. I would be okay with that.

CAMILA

We would starve.

ELI

I would cut off my leg and cook it for you.

Camila touches her nose to Eli's.

(CONTINUED)

CAMILA

You love me.

She kisses him. Soft. Unconditional.

ELI

You love me.

Then, Eli spots a book dangling off the side of the bed. He grabs it, opens it, and playfully reads in Camila's voice.

ELI (cont'd)

*Fracking, the act of blasting a mix  
of water, sand, and chemicals  
underground to force natural gas...*

Camila steals the book, straddles Eli, tosses it over her shoulder, lets her hair down, and slides off her glasses.

ELI (cont'd)

God, you're so beautiful.

The first kiss was tender; this one is animalistic. The passion mounts, until...

"BREAKING NEWS," flashes across the television. Footage of Nate Sterling. Camila grabs the remote, turns up the volume.

ELI (cont'd)

I'm canceling cable tomorrow.

NEWSCASTER

Nate Sterling declared his  
candidacy for President of the  
United States this evening, on a  
tree stump in rural Iowa...

Eli and Camila share a look of raw euphoria. Eli fishes his cell phone and wallet from his pocket and slides out the card Turnbull gave him at dinner. He dials.

CAMILA

It's 11pm. Who are you calling?

Focused, Eli ignores Camila. Turnbull answers.

ELI (INTO PHONE)

Senator Turnbull. Eli Brooks,  
Washington Tribune.

Camila rolls her eyes.

(CONTINUED)

ELI (INTO PHONE) (cont'd)  
Yeah, O'Shea's guy. I'm sorry to  
call so late, but I was wondering  
if you might share your thoughts on  
Nate Sterling entering the race.

Camila is downright bewildered.

ELI (INTO PHONE) (cont'd)  
Right now? Um, yes, of course. I'll  
be there as fast as you can say  
'filibuster.'

Eli hangs up.

ELI  
I can't believe I just said that.

He grabs his keys and starts for the door.

CAMILA  
Eli! What's going on?

ELI  
I've got an interview with Roger  
Turnbull.

CAMILA  
Stop messing around.

ELI  
Gotta go.

Camila studies Eli's face. No curl at the tip of his lips.

CAMILA  
Wait, you're serious?!

ELI  
I'm terrified.

Eli heads towards the door.

CAMILA  
You're drunk!

ELI  
Never stopped Van Morrison.

CAMILA  
You're a reporter not a rock star.

Eli winks. Camila springs to action, dashes to the bathroom.

(CONTINUED)

CAMILA (cont'd)  
One minute cold shower. Now!

ELI  
I don't have time--

CAMILA  
NOW! And give me the keys.

Eli tosses her the keys and strips frantically.

INT. CAMILA'S CAR - NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

Camila weaves through traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue as Eli chugs instant coffee and buttons his shirt.

CAMILA  
You need to get some real  
substance. You know how these guys  
are with their talking points.

Eli nods as he tinkers with his DIGITAL RECORDING DEVICE.  
Camila pulls in front of the Russell Senate Office Building.

CAMILA (cont'd)  
I love you. Don't fuck this up.

ELI  
Thanks for the pep talk.

INT. RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING - MIDNIGHT

Empty halls. Eli reaches Turnbull's office, knocks.

TURNBULL  
Door's open.

Turnbull sits at his mahogany desk, reading glasses at the tip of his nose, fountain pen in hand, editing a document.

TURNBULL (cont'd)  
Mr. Future. Welcome.

Turnbull gestures to the chair opposite him. Eli sits.

ELI  
Senator. I appreciate--

TURNBULL  
Roger. Don't mention it.

(CONTINUED)

Eli pulls the recording device from his coat pocket; butterflies taking the place of his buzz.

ELI

I'd like to start by asking you--

TURNBULL

Peaceful, isn't it?

ELI

I'm sorry?

TURNBULL

This is when the real work gets done. No ribbon to cut or baby to hold. I'm a night owl, Eli. And a morning lark. Gotta be both to succeed in this business.

ELI

Business?

TURNBULL

(smirks)

That's right. You Tribunistas are under the impression it's a charity.

ELI

May I ask why you want to be CEO of a business 16 trillion in the red?

TURNBULL

It has its perks.

Turnbull winks. Eli clicks on his recording device.

ELI

I'm sorry Senator, but would you mind elaborating on these "perks?"

Turnbull laughs.

TURNBULL

I keep forgetting, you're just a cub. Let me explain to you how this works. I'm a politician with a whole lot of character. What does that mean?

ELI

You should be in the Smithsonian?

(CONTINUED)

TURNBULL

You're a funny kid. O'Shea's got good taste in minions.

(patronizing)

It means that some things I say are...

(using air quotes)

..."on the record." Lots of cameras and microphones are usually a good indicator. Now, when I speak in private, much of what I say is "off the record." You may hear these words; chuckle in response if you so choose; but what you may not do is print them. If you do, I forget that you exist. For me, one less parasite to feed. But for a young reporter trying to make a name for himself during eight years of a Turnbull administration... a death sentence. But I like you, so I'll help you out. When the paper weight is closer to you...

Turnbulls SLIDES a dense glass paperweight towards Eli.

TURNBULL

... "on the record."

(beat)

When it is closer to me...

BANG!

TURNBULL (cont'd)

... "off the record."

A chill runs down Eli's spine. He regains his composure, reaches across the desk, and slides the paperweight back.

ELI

What is your reaction to Nate Sterling entering the race?

Turnbull glances at Eli's recording device.

TURNBULL

I look forward to a healthy, robust debate about the the future of our great nation. I'm not too familiar with Mr. Sterling personally but anyone who aspires to serve his country, be him a teacher, Lieutenant, or President. They're okay by me.

(CONTINUED)

BANG! Eli CLICKS the recorder. Turnbull reclines.

TURNBULL (cont'd)

The kid's swimming with sharks and he can't afford a cage.

ELI

It doesn't worry you that forty percent of the country now identify themselves as Independents.

TURNBULL

Ross Perot was the most successful independent candidate in American history. You know how he did it?

ELI

He appealed to the center with a platform that was fiscally conservative yet socially liberal--

TURNBULL

Open line of credit backed by a cozy spot on the Forbes 100.

ELI

People respond to common sense and bipartisanship.

TURNBULL

People respond to yard signs and attack ads. Moral of the story, if you have a net worth of four billion you can afford nineteen percent of the popular vote. Do you know how many electoral college votes he won? I'll give you a hint.

(points to soda can on desk)

Same number of calories in that Coke Zero. So, does *Professor* Nate Sterling keep me up at night?

(beat)

Does Ross Perot worry about the rent?

Eli retrieves the paper weight, clicks the recorder.

ELI

Let's talk about the FSCA. Does it not strike you as more than coincidental that you championed this bill just before--

(CONTINUED)

TURNBULL

I decided to run for President?

ELI

And then chose to forgo public financing. A first grader could connect the dots.

TURNBULL

And what exactly would that first grader find?

ELI

That's the rub. Nothing, thanks to your bill. Some would say you're putting the Oval Office up for silent auction.

TURNBULL

Presidents are elected by votes not dollars.

ELI

How many votes can you buy with a blank check?

TURNBULL

None.

ELI

But you can buy a hell of a lot of yard signs and attack ads.

TURNBULL

What's legal is legal.

Eli is unimpressed. He presses on.

ELI

How would you describe your relationship with Harvey Altman?

TURNBULL

It's not breaking news that Harvey was a Senior Advisor for years.

ELI

Your former campaign manager, not to mention one of your closest friends.

(CONTINUED)

TURNBULL

Still is.

ELI

Is it not odd that your closest friend splits just before you announce your candidacy to found--

TURNBULL

*RightWay* is an independent organization. I have no affiliation. That's not to say they aren't doing incredible work.

ELI

To benefit your campaign.

TURNBULL

As is their legal right.

ELI

As of last month.

TURNBULL

Yesterday's news.

ELI

Shaping today's.

TURNBULL

I'm bored. Why don't we talk tax reform? How I wanna put a few extra bucks in your pocket so you can afford to shine up those shoes.

Eli glances at his peeling, scuffed shoes.

ELI

Why'd you invite me here tonight?

TURNBULL

Nick was right. You can sling these hard balls after half a bottle, you just might have a future.

ELI

I'm a 28-year-old junior reporter you met just a few hours ago.

TURNBULL

If there's one thing I've learned over thirty years in these chambers it's to keep your friends close.

(CONTINUED)

Turnbull grabs the paper weight. Eli clicks the recorder.

TURNBULL (cont'd)  
And seeing as how you'll be  
ghostwriting the most widely read  
column in the country for the next  
few weeks, I figured we might get  
to know each other.

Eli is shocked. *How does he know?*

TURNBULL (cont'd)  
Reporters use their eyes and ears,  
but they only have two of each.

*Holy shit.* Eli tries to compose himself.

TURNBULL (cont'd)  
By some shockingly absurd twist of  
fate, the twenty-eight year-old  
beat reporter sitting before me has  
been granted a modicum of influence  
over the ballot box. I simply  
invited you here to remind you of  
the many powers bestowed upon the  
executive branch, both formal and  
informal. One of which is the  
ability to make or break a young  
journalist's career.

(beat)

Without Muhammad Ali, Howard  
Cossell is a forgotten toupee.  
Without Joseph McCarthy, you think  
Clooney makes a movie about Edward  
R. Murrow?

ELI  
Are you Ali or McCarthy?

Turnbull laughs.

TURNBULL  
That's for you to decide now isn't  
it?

Eli tries to take back control of the conversation.

ELI  
There are reports that *RightWay*  
has raised upwards of two hundred  
million in just three months. Won't  
that give the rich unfair influence  
over a Turnbull administration?

(CONTINUED)

TURNBULL

Monica didn't shape foreign policy under Clinton, did she?

ELI

I don't see the correlation.

TURNBULL

Then you're not half as smart as Nick gives you credit for.

Turnbull turns the paper weight over in his hands like he would a stress ball.

TURNBULL (cont'd)

Five mill from a fat wallet and a blow job from Lewinsky are one in the same. Both might get me off on a good day-- but if you think they so much as sway my stance on the re-naming of a post office in Wasilla, Alaska, then you haven't done your homework.

Turnbull's tone turns deadly serious; almost sinister.

TURNBULL (cont'd)

Money is a means to an end. Those with it, create jobs. Those without it, come crawling to the government with their hands outstretched like crack fiends. Sterling and Archer want to feed that addiction. They're enablers. Way I see it-- only way to give those people back a shred of dignity is to slap the government check out their hand so they'll get off their ass and fight for it like the rest of us.

Eli is frozen by Turnbull's fierce, draconian glare. Turnbull tosses the paper weight to Eli, who fumbles it.

TURNBULL (cont'd)

Here. You keep it as a souvenir.

The nearly inaudible CLICK of the recorder barely pierces the teeming silence.

EXT. RUSSELL SENATE BUILDING - NIGHT

Eli slides into the car. Camila is on the edge of her seat.

ELI  
(disappointed)  
Well, you were half-right about the  
talking points.

CAMILA  
Play it.

Eli rewinds the recording device and hits "play."  
Surprisingly, Camila's voice plays.

CAMILA (ON RECORDER)  
*Don't fuck this up.*

ELI (ON RECORDER)  
*Thanks for the pep talk.*

Then, AMBIENT SOUND; Eli's FOOTSTEPS climbing the steps and nervous BREATHING. Eli is confused. He fast forwards.

TURNBULL (ON RECORDER)  
*"Five mill from a fat wallet and a  
blow job from Lewinsky are one in  
the same...  
(fast forwards)  
... crawling to the government with  
their hands outstretched like crack  
fiends."*

Camila's jaw drops.

ELI  
I was fiddling with it on the car  
ride over.

CAMILA  
You were drunk on the car ride  
over.

Eli clutches the recorder tight, like it's the Holy Grail.

EXT. STERLING CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - DAY

CHYRON: MONDAY, MAY 12TH

A nondescript building in Ballston, Virginia, camouflaged  
against a concrete jungle of condos and high rises.

INT. RON THOMPSON'S OFFICE - DAY

Sterling's campaign manager eyes a flawless resume. Camila sits upright to mask jitters.

THOMPSON

Professor Abelson speaks very highly of you.

CAMILA

Professor Abelson thinks we can win. I believe him. I don't know if I would be any help, but I'd certainly like to try.

THOMPSON

(reading off Camila's resume)  
Phi Beta Kappa. Founder and President of the Green Hoya Society. Dissertation pending on the Economics of Climate Change: A Case Study of Smart-Grid Technology and Plug-in Electric Vehicles in the Pacific Northwest.

Camila's zeal shines through naturally temperate eyes. Thompson looks up from the resume, ponders for a moment.

THOMPSON (cont'd)

I want you full-time.

Camila is caught off guard.

THOMPSON (cont'd)

I know you mentioned volunteer work. I need you 100 hours a week.

CAMILA

I'd love to, Mr. Thompson, but I'm finishing my thesis at Georgetown and I have a job lined up at the Environmental Defense Fund after--

THOMPSON

Professor Abelson and Nate are very old friends. I'm sure he would be happy to grant you an extension. How much is the EDF paying?

CAMILA

It's not about the money. I'd do it for free if--

(CONTINUED)

THOMPSON

How much?

CAMILA

Ninety plus benefits.

THOMPSON

We can pay twenty no benefits.

The door swings open. It's NATE STERLING himself.

STERLING

Ronnie--

(noticing Camila)

Sorry to interrupt.

THOMPSON

Nate-- meet Camila Hart.

Camila stands, beaming.

CAMILA

It's a pleasure to meet you.

THOMPSON

Camila just accepted a position as our Green Policy Director.

Nate flashes Camila a charming and appreciative smile.

THOMPSON (cont'd)

Representing the campaign at town halls, recruiting an army of activists and volunteers, liaison to the think tanks...

Camila's eyes grow wide as she hears her responsibilities.

STERLING

Beautiful. What do you say we start by getting you a copy of our environmental platform. Currently it's not much more than an outline-- need you to flesh it out-- put some meat on the bones. I'll be back from New Hampshire in a week. Let's get a sit-down on the books.

Camila is over the moon. Nate is charmed by Camila's transparent elation. He flashes a winning smile.

(CONTINUED)

STERLING (cont'd)  
What? If I'm going to be President  
I better learn to delegate, right?

Thompson smiles, knowing he's just sealed the deal.

INT. ELI'S PARENT'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

Eli unloads a stack of "Death of a Salesman" paperbacks from a Barnes and Noble shopping bag onto the kitchen table.

LYNN  
What's this?

ELI  
It was just a matter of time before  
you spent the last of my  
inheritance on new books for your  
kids. Figured I'd beat you to it  
this time.

LYNN  
(moved)  
You didn't have to do that. I know  
they're underpaying you--

ELI  
Used the gift card you gave me for  
my birthday.  
(off Lynn's look)  
Don't worry, got one for myself.

Eli holds "A Declaration of Independents," by Nate Sterling.

ELI (cont'd)  
Figured I'd get a clean first  
edition. Hopefully it will be worth  
something someday.

Lynn forces a smile. Eli detects sadness behind glassy eyes.

ELI (cont'd)  
What's up, mom?

LYNN  
It's nothing.

ELI  
It's not nothing. I'm an adult. You  
don't have to protect--

(CONTINUED)

LYNN

The house.

This catches Eli by surprise; it lands like a bullet.

ELI

You told us we were doing fine.

LYNN

I didn't want to worry you. Lord knows Penny has enough on her mind, and you're working so hard--

ELI

Grandpa built this house!

This fact cuts too deep for Lynn to acknowledge.

LYNN

Your father's worked too hard. He doesn't deserve this.

We hear Hal's CREAKING steps descend the stairs. Eli looks as if he's had the wind knocked out of him.

Hal shuffles into the kitchen in a white undershirt. Too proud to bring up the unfortunate news, he slaps on a smile.

HAL

Hey bud! Didn't know you were stopping by.

ELI

Take it off the market.

LYNN

Eli!

ELI

Why'd you lie to me?

HAL

(demoralized)

We didn't lie. We just--

ELI

Penny grew up in the same room you did. I won't let her come back to anything different.

Eli walks out, leaving Hal slumped against the kitchen counter. Lynn picks up "Death of a Salesman." She considers it for a moment before sliding it back into the bag.

INT. WASHINGTON TRIBUNE HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Kevin flirts with JENNY KLINE, 25, an impressionable young reporter with a body that could put airbrushers out of work. Stealing a glance at Kevin's wedding band, Eli shakes his head in disapproval.

Eli compares two highlighted spreadsheets. He studies a black and white printout of an old University of Virginia FRATERNITY COMPOSITE. Something clicks. He starts towards Nick's office.

KEVIN

Young boys in ancient Greece had  
"mentors" too.

Eli ignores Kevin. Walks on.

KEVIN (cont'd)

(masking jealousy)  
Just say no!

INT. NICK'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Eli shuts the door harder than intended. Nick is reading a draft of Eli's ghostwritten column in disbelief.

ELI

Nick. You're not going to believe--

Nick SMACKS the draft against his desk. We get the sense he would do the same with Eli's face if the blinds were shut.

NICK

What the fuck is this?!

Eli braces for a scolding. Instead, Nick stares daggers. Motionless. The calm before the storm.

ELI

It's all true. I have it on tape.

Nick reaches behind him, swipes his PULITZER PRIZE off the shelf and SLAMS it on his desk.

NICK

They don't give out fucking  
Pulitzers to TMZ cameramen.

ELI

We don't publish this, someone else  
will.

(CONTINUED)

NICK

There's a code, Eli.

ELI

The American people have a right to know the true nature of---

NICK

They teach you anything at Columbia or was it all just margarita mixers with the b-school?

ELI

Half my pre-historic professors thought twitter was a bird feed company. Journalism is evolving. Gordon said it himself. We stop swimming, we die.

NICK

Do you know how many photographs were taken of FDR in a wheelchair? How many stories were written about JFK with Marilyn?

ELI

Today's world-- truth trumps etiquette.

NICK

That's what's fucked about your generation-- you think they're mutually exclusive.

Nick's tone hardens.

NICK (cont'd)

I've known Roger Turnbull forty years. 1986-- he's the Chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and I'm the Tribune's Foreign Correspondent in Berlin. Turnbull calls *me* for perspective, says he needs to give the military intel and soviet propaganda some real context. He'd call twice a week-- three, four in the morning-- and I'd give him the the seismic readout of the city. Without those phone calls he doesn't ride Reagan as hard as he did.

(beat)

In return, he tipped me off from time to time. You think it's a

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

NICK (cont'd)  
coincidence I spent the first week  
of November '89 camped out on the  
Wall?

Nick slides his Pulitzer toward Eli.

NICK (cont'd)  
My name is not engraved on this  
Pulitzer without Roger Turnbull.

Eli is blown away.

NICK (cont'd)  
Is he wrong on most issues? Yes! Do  
I tell him and the country when he  
is? Yes! But I'll be damned if I'm  
going to throw an old friend under  
the bus on a technicality.

(beat)

You talk about the old-school with  
an air of contempt. But show me two  
congressmen on opposite sides of  
the aisle today that share a  
bourbon and a laugh after 5pm.

Nick tosses Eli the Pulitzer. Eli fumbles, and almost drops  
it, but secures it, clutching it like *it's* the holy grail.

NICK (cont'd)  
Now if you still can't wrap your  
head around the principle of  
etiquette, here's a little dose of  
your precious truth: Turnbull's  
twelve points up in the latest  
Gallop. He wins, after I print  
*this*-- forget exclusives at Camp  
David... he'll strip my credentials  
to the goddamn White House press  
room!

ELI  
You're right-- I'm sorry--

But Nick isn't done with Eli. He's enjoying this.

NICK  
I have no interest in committing  
career suicide; literal suicide--  
that's a different story, but  
you're not my therapist-- I know  
this because I want to fuck my  
therapist. I don't want to fuck

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

NICK (cont'd)  
you-- seems the feeling is not mutual.

ELI  
Forget the column. I have something much bigger.

Nick is not amused.

NICK  
Final copy's due in two hours! A new column-- one that I can *publish*-- will be on my desk in one hour-- spit-shined and ready to serve with a fresh cup of coffee to millions of Americans when they wake up tomorrow morning.

ELI  
Nick, listen--

NICK  
If I have to rewrite so much as one preposition you can go back to reporting on the cultural impact of "Toddlers and Tiaras" because our little arrangement will be over.

Determined to be heard, Eli ditches the preface.

ELI  
Lotto jackpots *increase* during recessions.

NICK  
What?

ELI  
Seems counter-intuitive, but it's true. Lot more desperate folks out there dreaming of a quick fix-- even if you're statistically more likely to be crushed to death by a vending machine.

NICK  
Why do I care?

ELI  
Because-- not this time. Since the recession hit in November, jackpots have *fallen* fifteen percent.

(CONTINUED)

NICK

Tragic.

ELI

It's a complete inversion; a behavioral impossibility. Human nature doesn't just reverse itself.

NICK

Wherever you're going with this-- get there faster.

ELI

*Meyers & Goldstein* handles the books for *Mega Millions*. Take a guess what other multimillion dollar account they've secured.

NICK

I'm sure they have several.

ELI

*RightWay* Super PAC.

Nick reads Eli's mind. He doesn't like what he sees.

NICK

I really hope you're not suggesting what I think you're--

ELI

The Director of *Mega Millions*-- guy named Tom Mayfield-- University of Virginia alum. Class of '70.

NICK

Turnbull's alma mater.

Eli hands Nick the frat composite from 1969. On the top row, a 22-year-old Roger Turnbull is circled in red sharpie. Two rows below, a 21-year-old Tom Mayfield, also circled.

ELI

Same fraternity.

(beat)

This is huge, Nick. Watergate-huge.

NICK

You think Turnbull is embezzling money from the lottery and funneling it to his largest super PAC?

(CONTINUED)

ELI

His de facto campaign.

NICK

Let me get this straight because I don't know if I heard you over all that crazy. You're telling me that the sorry bum in the corner deli paying the stupid man's tax is funding the mud being slung over Sterling and Archer's fences.

ELI

*RightWay's* books are sealed shut. Thanks to the FSCA they don't report where the money comes from.

Nick processes, then cracks into a hardy laugh.

NICK

Everything's a conspiracy.  
(beat)  
Don't be that guy.

ELI

What guy?

NICK

The fat, musty, virtual vigilante-- running a bullshit blog and libelous YouTube channel out of his parent's basement.

ELI

I live with my girlfriend.

NICK

(serious)

Turnbull is a bully and a misguided ideologue-- but he's not a crook.

ELI

How do you explain--

NICK

Same way I explain life on earth.  
Coincidence.

ELI

You don't think there's any chance--

(CONTINUED)

NICK

No. And even if there was, you'd need a hell of a lot more than a frat composite and a home-made bar graph to break that story.

ELI

Precisely why I need your help.

NICK

Let it go.

ELI

(charming smile)

Every Woodward needs a Bernstein.

NICK

(humoring him)

Oh yeah? Which one am I?

ELI

Whichever one you want. As long as you pick up the phone and find us a Deep Throat.

Nick softens just a bit. He picks up the composite and studies Turnbull's smug grin.

NICK

You've double checked the lotto stats?

ELI

Triple checked. And get this, Mayfield-- he gave me false info. Acted like nothing was out of the ordinary with the jackpots.

Nick can't believe what he's about to say.

NICK

Let me go *on the record*-- not that you understand the distinction-- that I think this endeavor is as futile as searching for a needle in a barn full of haystacks. But I will make a few phone calls. Only because, on the less than one percent chance that needle exists, and the even smaller chance we find it, there's nothing that would turn me on more than popping the hot air out of Turnbull's balloon.

(CONTINUED)

Eli's ecstatic.

ELI

You won't regret this. It'll be more like finding a needle in a crack house.

NICK

Stop talking. Go write my column.

ELI

But I've got--

NICK

(stern)

One hour.

INT. ELI'S CUBICLE - MOMENTS LATER

Eli tries to snatch a column out of thin air. He types and deletes the following titles:

WHERE'S MY FATHER'S GOLDEN PARACHUTE?; COMPROMISE IS NOT A FOUR LETTER WORD; MOTHER NATURE NEEDS A XANAX

Eli shakes with frustration. *Of all the times to get writer's block?*

STERLING'S MOTHER ADMITS SHE IS A VIRGIN: PROBE INTO STERLING'S PAST FINDS HIS RECORD IMMACULATE.

Eli glances at the clock. Begins to sweat. Types the title:

TALKING HEADS

Finally, he's off to the races. Typing like mad...

ELI (V.O.)

*"All talk. No game." A phrase most commonly heard on the blacktops and playgrounds of urban America is perhaps the most apt description of the culture of punditry that has forced its way into our living rooms and our minds...*

*(slowly drowning out)*

*... eroding the very fabric...*

The voice-over is completely drowned out as it spirals into a MONTAGE of its content:

Music cue: "Burning Down The House" by Talking Heads

(CONTINUED)

The following are all real, direct quotes. We begin with RUSH LIMBAUGH speaking into his infamous microphone.

RUSH LIMBAUGH

Everything about the left is perception, manipulation, and lies. Everything. Everything is "wag the dog." Everything is structured deception...

Split screen. RACHEL MADDOW on the left, Rush on the right. Rush's volume drops.

RACHEL MADDOW

The Republicans are having a hard time getting their members to act as a unit instead of like a bunch of six-year-olds playing anarchist soccer; three teams, two goals, you decide...

Rachel's volume drops to make way for GLENN BECK.

GLENN BECK

Good for you, you have a heart, you can be a liberal. Now, couple your heart with your brain, and you can be a conservative.

The screen keeps splitting. JON STEWART, berates PAUL BEGALA and TUCKER CARLSON on "Crossfire," adjacent BILL O'REILLY.

JON STEWART

You're both partisan, what do you call it, hacks!

BILL O'REILLY

I don't see any difference between Huffington and the Nazis.

BILL MAHER

Over the last 30 odd years the Democrats have moved to the right and the right has moved into a mental hospital. They're a bunch of religious lunatics, flat-earthers, and civil war reenactors, who mostly communicate by AM Radio and call themselves Republicans.

ANN COULTER

Liberals promote the right of Islamic fanatics for the same reason they promote the rights of adulterers, pornographers, abortionists, criminals, and Communists. They instinctively root for anarchy against civilization.

(CONTINUED)

KEITH OLBERMANN

The Tea Party backed  
 Republicans are a group  
 of unqualified, unstable  
 individuals, who will do  
 what they are told, in  
 exchange for money and  
 power, and march this  
 country as far backward  
 as they can.

SEAN HANNITY

Here you are, you're a  
 liberal, probably define  
 peace as the absence of  
 conflict. I define peace  
 as the ability to defend  
 yourself and blow your  
 enemies to smithereens.

The screen is split into 16 talking heads. We slowly bring  
 the volume up on each and every rant until we're bombarded  
 with overwhelming gibberish.

Like The Beatles' "A Day In The Life" the montage builds to  
 a FRENETIC CRESCENDO. The cacophony stops on a dime as we  
 smash cut back to Eli's cubicle.

INT. ELI'S CUBICLE - CONTINUOUS

Eli jerks back, startled at Kevin reading over his shoulder.

ELI

What the fuck, Kevin?

KEVIN

(incredulous)

You're writing O'Shea's column.

ELI

(dismissive)

You're an idiot.

KEVIN

That's not human interest.

Eli tries to cover.

ELI

Alright, listen. *Please* keep this  
 between us but I'm doing a little  
 freelance Op-Ed for this startup  
 newsletter on the side--

KEVIN

(calling bullshit)

Under the pseudonym, Nicholas  
 O'Shea?

Kevin nods to the byline on Eli's computer. Busted!

(CONTINUED)

KEVIN (cont'd)  
How the hell did you pull--

ELI  
Shhhhhhh.  
(aggressive whisper)  
Say anything to anybody and I'll  
tell your wife about Jenny.

Kevin freezes.

KEVIN  
I don't know what you're talking--

ELI  
Oh, you don't? Then try me. First  
you might want to make sure Nina's  
ring came with a buyback guarantee.

Kevin has no comeback. He steals a glance at Jenny.

ELI  
Don't have to be an investigative  
reporter to crack that one.

Fury and resentment pile on top of Kevin's jealousy.

ELI (cont'd)  
You keep my extra-curricular  
activities to yourself, I'll do the  
same.

Eli holds his judgmental glare an extra beat before standing  
and heading to Nick's office.

INT. NICK'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Nick speaks gregariously on the phone. Eli hands him the new  
column and Nick skims it while wrapping up his conversation.

NICK (INTO PHONE)  
Thank you, Jim. But you'll be  
thanking *me* come Labor Day. He's  
that good.-- Alright.-- Bye now.

Nick hangs up.

NICK  
(re: the column)  
It's shit. Barely passable.

(CONTINUED)

ELI

I can change it. Just tell me--

NICK

No time. You have an interview to prepare for.

(off Eli's confusion)

I've got a neighbor that pushes paper at *Meyers & Goldstein*. Got his kid into kindergarten.

(beat)

I love this country... I help him piss away 30k a year for his daughter to play with "exclusive" blocks, and he owes *me* a favor.

ELI

Why aren't we getting *him* to fish around--

NICK

You kidding me? We don't let anyone else in. Not at this stage. Besides, he'd never go for it. He's a Republican.

(beat)

And a pussy.

ELI

How could they be willing to risk life behind bars for--

NICK

Government shells out 320 *billion* a year in private sector contracts. Over half of those are accounting and consulting, *Meyers & Goldstein's* bread and butter. Take a guess who's number three on the list of corporate contributors to the RNC.

ELI

*Meyers & Goldstein?*

NICK

Yes sir. No Turnbull, no contracts. No contracts, no company. It's high stakes poker and they're dealing themselves pocket aces.

Eli processes the compelling motive.

(CONTINUED)

ELI  
So what now?

NICK  
Now you start brushing up on your  
accounting.

ELI  
I didn't study accounting.

NICK  
But you minored in Drama.

ELI  
No I didn't.

Nick prints a word document from his computer and hands it to Eli. It's a resume with **ELI BROOKS**, bold and centered. It reads: "Major in Accounting, Minor in Drama."

NICK  
Sure you did. Use your training.

ELI  
(reading off the resume)  
*Black, Shankman, and Till?*

NICK  
Boutique accounting shop in  
Mississippi.

ELI  
Why Mississippi?

NICK  
They're a few decades behind the  
rest of us. Can get away with not  
having an online presence. Only a  
land line. Which will come in handy  
when *Meyers & Goldstein* calls for  
references.

Eli is confused. Nick picks up the phone, lowers his voice.

NICK (cont'd)  
Robert Black here. Eli Brooks? Why  
he was our star CPA.  
(switches to southern accent)  
Yes, this is Mr. Shankman. The  
kid's a prodigy. You want to double  
your time on the links while  
tripling your bottom line, you go  
'head and hire that young man!'

Eli's eyes wander to Nick's diploma, mounted and framed on the wall behind him. It reads "Major in Journalism, Minor in the Dramatic Arts." Eli shakes his head in disbelief.

INT. ELI'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Eli studies "Accounting for Dummies," at the kitchen table. Camila returns from a long day at campaign headquarters. Eli quickly slides the accounting book into his briefcase.

NICK (V.O.)  
Relax. It's a formality. H.R.  
thinks you're an all-star going in.  
Just be that all-star.

INT. MEYERS & GOLDSTEIN OFFICES - DAY

Eli interviews with JIM FLORENCE, who is in hysterics. We can tell that Eli is killing it, but the sound is muted.

ELI (V.O.)  
What about my job here?

NICK (V.O.)  
You've got vacation time saved up.

Jim shakes Eli's hand, offering him the job.

INT. MEYERS & GOLDSTEIN OFFICES - DAY

Eli is given his security clearance on a lanyard.

ELI (V.O.)  
And when I quit after three weeks?  
That won't raise any red flags?

INT. MEYERS & GOLDSTEIN OFFICES - LATER

Eli shakes hands with a few of his new coworkers.

NICK (V.O.)  
We'll have what we need. Then we  
wait and see what changes. If they  
have nothing to hide they'll have  
no reason to come after you. If  
they do, well...

Nick doesn't finish the thought.

(CONTINUED)

ELI (V.O.)  
Well... ?

NICK (V.O.)  
We'll cross that bridge if there's  
a bridge to cross.

INT. MEYERS & GOLDSTEIN OFFICES - NIGHT

Eli appears to be leaving for the night but instead ducks into a corner office. He tries the file cabinets; locked; the computer; password protected. Frustrated, he sneaks out.

ELI (V.O.)  
I'm not a goddamn PI, Nick.

NICK (V.O.)  
Good journalists are both. Get in.  
Find who handles the *RightWay* and  
*MegaMillions* accounts. Snatch the  
loot. Get out. Simple.

ELI (V.O.)  
Easy for you to say from your ivory  
desk chair. I get caught and my  
career is over before it begins.

INT. MEYERS & GOLDSTEIN OFFICES - DAY

CHYRON: THURSDAY, JULY 10TH

SPENCER EINHORN, 48, walks out of his corner office and into the elevator. Eli checks his watch. It's lunch. He slides in, unnoticed. This time the files are open and the computer unlocked. Eli pops in a flashdrive and raids the hard drive-- anxiously glancing at the door every few seconds.

NICK (V.O.)  
True. But you catch *them* red handed  
and with this one story, your  
career reaches heights it couldn't  
approach if you toiled for fifty  
years in the trenches. Heights *I*  
can't imagine in *my* wildest  
dreams.

INT. BULLFEATHERS RESTUARANT - DAY

Nick is mid-interview with Nate Sterling over a lunch of burgers and fries. It's casual. They laugh like old friends.

NICK

Will you please give me something I can print?

STERLING

What do you mean?

NICK

I mean anything that doesn't involve a socialist rally you attended in the sixties.

STERLING

How about the Kentucky Tea Party meeting I went to last year?

NICK

(humoring him)  
Sure, why not?

STERLING

(sincere)

I'm serious, Nick. Nothing about me is off the record. I'm an open book. Just because I listen to different ideas, crazy as they may be-- doesn't mean I adhere to any one doctrine. Everyone's got *something* to say. And *some* of what anyone says might have some merit. You never know where you might find the spark of the next great idea.

Nick is awestruck by Sterling's candor.

STERLING (cont'd)

There's many wonderful things about a choir. Intimate friends, tight community, beautiful music. But, if you only sing in one choir your whole life, you're only listening to one preacher... you're only meeting one God.

NICK

Amen, brother. And don't worry-- I won't print that last line.

(CONTINUED)

STERLING

You print whatever you like. The Founding Fathers gave us a free press for a reason; just as our politicians should be free; not locked in some ideological prison.

Nick nods his agreement.

STERLING (cont'd)

I read every one of your columns during the lead up to the war in Iraq. You asked the questions everyone else was too afraid to ask. You *know* who you work for: The people-- not us. Hell-- if the rest of your colleagues did their job we wouldn't have started a war on false pretenses-- watched thousands of our own come back in body bags.

Nick looks at Sterling with profound respect.

NICK

Just one last question.

STERLING

Shoot.

NICK

Are you a unicorn?

INT. MEYERS & GOLDSTEIN OFFICES - LATER

Spencer Einhorn steps off the elevator and walks slowly back to his office, chatting with a colleague. Eli peaks out of the office, spots Einhorn. He's trapped.

Eli panics. Dashes to the window. Looks down thirty floors to the hard pavement below. He throws open a closet. It's filled with boxes. Einhorn's footsteps inch closer.

Eli dives under the massive hardwood desk just as Einhorn enters. Einhorn takes a seat at the desk, feet digging into carpet millimeters from Eli's crouched body.

Then, a cell phone RINGS. Eli glances at his. Nothing.

(CONTINUED)

EINHORN (O.S.)

Hi Hunny-- I'm at the office late tonight-- OK, OK, I'll grab him from practice but I gotta drop him home and head right back in-- Yeah, it's killing me-- Love you too.

Einhorn hangs up, stands, and walks out of the office.

INT. NICK'S OFFICE - EVENING

Eli enters, shuts the blinds, and SLAMS a giant stack of paper on Nick's desk: Emails, expense reports, profit and loss spreadsheets, donor lists, etc.

ELI

(proudly)

There's your haystack.

INT. NICK'S OFFICE - PASSAGE OF TIME

Mentor and protege roll up their sleeves. They attack the mountain of pilfered documents with energy and enthusiasm.

In each shot of the montage their attire gets lighter; the sun through the windows brighter.

A CHYRON clicks from JULY to AUGUST to SEPTEMBER.

INT. NICK'S OFFICE - DAY

Nick pours over a master spreadsheet containing the names and contact information for all *RightWay* donors. Included next to each name -- the size of the donation.

NICK

If these books are cooked, the chef moonlights as a magician.

ELI

Why would *RightWay* even bother cooking their books? The records are private.

NICK

Yeah, so were Tiger's fuck buddies. Shit leaks. They'll be careful to cover their tracks in the paper trail, just in case assholes like us manage to get our hands on it.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

NICK (cont'd)

By the looks of it, I'd say they've invested in a big fucking snow blower.

ELI

How do you hide millions?

NICK

*If* they're hiding millions-- either inflate some of these donations or scatter some very generous, yet very fake donors onto the list.

Nick hands Eli the donor list, half the names highlighted.

NICK (cont'd)

I highlighted all the Republican wallets I recognized. Channel your inner Sherlock and find if the John Does check out.

ELI

What are you going to do?

But Nick is already dialing...

NICK (INTO PHONE)

(glancing at donor list)

Hello, Mr. Foster. My name is Richard Halcheck, I'm calling from *RightWay*. I wanted to thank you again for your generous donation and let you know how much we value your support. Five hundred thousand dollars is no modest sum and it's contributions like yours--

Nick stares at the donor list, clearly eying a donation amount of seven hundred thousand next to Bob Foster's name.

BOB FOSTER (ON PHONE)

I'm sorry. Richard is it?-- Did you say five hundred? I donated seven hundred K.

Nick crosses John Foster off the list. *He checks out.*

NICK

Oh yes, so sorry, seven hundred. Says so right here. Had you mixed up with a slightly less generous friend of *RightWay*. I apologize.

(CONTINUED)

BOB FOSTER (ON PHONE)

Why exactly are you calling,  
Richard?

Pulling it out of his ass...

NICK

We're calling our most generous donors to make sure you're happy with the direction *RightWay* has taken thus far and more importantly to see if you have any suggestions where to devote our resources as we inch closer to crunch time...

Nick hits the mute button; keeps talking without missing a beat, but his tone is now harsh, and building...

NICK

(on mute)  
... you embryonic sycophant-- born with a silver spoon up each and every one of your loopholes-- willing to die for the repeal of the estate tax but extend unemployment benefits for an honest factory worker, father of four-- laid off after twenty loyal years because of your decision to cut and run to China? Well, fuck-- that's socialist blasphemy!

BOB FOSTER (ON

PHONE)

Well that certainly is smart of you Richard. I must say, I'm very impressed with the new TV spot. Very targeted. Stay on the offensive. Sterling's a dove. We've clipped his wings but we gotta keep pounding until there's nothing left but a ball of feathers. Focus on his inexperience, hammer it home...

Nick extends the receiver as Bob Foster blabbers on.

NICK (cont'd)

(to Eli)

Find any imaginary friends, yet?

ELI

(frustrated)

Nothing yet.

Bob Foster has stopped blabbering. Nick un-mutes.

NICK (INTO PHONE)

All excellent ideas, I will certainly pass these up the chain.  
(*jerk-off gesture*)

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

NICK (INTO PHONE) (cont'd)  
 We're going to take back our  
 country, Mr. Foster, due in large  
 part to your continued support.

INT. NICK'S OFFICE - MORNING

Disheveled and exhausted from another all-nighter, Nick and Eli wear the expressions of gold panners with empty pans. Neither will admit it but desperation and doubt has set in.

And then, after months of searching, Eli picks up a scent. His weary eyes grow wide as he studies an email from Tom Mayfield to Spencer Einhorn, which praises the excellent job the caterer did on *Mega Millions* Fourth of July party.

Attached is a detailed invoice for "Patriot Catering, Inc." Mayfield has signed the email, "*compliments to the chef.*"

ELI  
 Does it make any sense for the *CEO*  
 of *Mega Millions* to send an *expense*  
*report* for an office holiday party  
 to a *Partner* at *Meyers and*  
*Goldstein*?

NICK  
 No. They pay summer interns ten  
 grand to take care of those menial  
 tasks. Why?

Eli dashes to the trash can. He dumps the "trash" on the floor and fishes through the sea of paper on all fours.

Nick eyes Eli curiously.

Eli finds an email previously discarded as trivial: An expense report for a President's Day Luncheon. Sure enough, "Patriot Catering" invoice attached. "*Compliments to the Chef.*" He shuffles, digs and finds: Memorial Day party. "Patriot Catering" invoice. "*Compliments to the Chef.*"

Eli pulls a business card out of his wallet: It's the receptionist from *Mega Million's*. He dials:

ELI (INTO PHONE)  
 Hi, I was a plus one at your Fourth  
 of July party and I think my money  
 clip fell out of my pocket. Oh, you  
 didn't?-- No party?  
 (smiles)  
 I'm sorry, I must have the wrong  
 number.

(CONTINUED)

*Holy shit.* Eli shoves everything off the desk except for the patriot catering invoices and a calculator. He punches in numbers from the invoices. Hits equal. We see and hear:

ELI  
\$576,000.

Eli moves to the white board and frantically erases everything. He scribbles calculations as he thinks outloud.

ELI (cont'd)  
Average *MegaMillions* jackpot is twenty million. In recessions, jackpots increase by fifteen percent, which means the average jackpot *should* currently be...

NICK  
Twenty-three million.

Eli's calculation lags slightly behind Nick's mental math.

ELI  
Correct. But it's holding steady at seventeen million.

NICK  
That's a gap of six million per drawing over the last forty-eight weeks of recession.

ELI  
With two drawings a week-- we're talking about...

Eli multiplies six by forty-eight by two: Writes 576 million. He holds up the calculator-- still showing 576,000.

Bingo.

ELI

NICK  
Holy shit.

ELI (cont'd)  
For every ten thousand dollars laundered through Patriot Catering--

NICK  
The invoices show a buck.

That's the hiding spot. That's the scheme.

Eli rips the address off the invoice and grabs his coat.

EXT. PATRIOT CATERING - MORNING

A stoned, pony-tailed, COLLEGE KID, slumps behind the counter. A handful of COOKS race around the flaming kitchen behind him. Eli examines the menu board; makes "small talk."

ELI

Haven't seen you guys around. How long you been in business?

COLLEGE KID

Coming up on a year now.

ELI

(re: the kitchen bustle)

Who are you cooking for tonight, the entire state of Virginia?

COLLEGE KID

Some big event. Two hundred heads.

ELI

What's the occasion?

COLLEGE KID

They're all the same to me. Same bacon wrapped scallops. Same monkey suit. Same rich folks boring up the place. So, what can I do you for?

ELI

Throwing my wife a birthday party. Can I take a menu home? Should run it by the Mrs-- no telling how many of her girlfriends are gluten free vegans, or God knows what.

The College Student hands Eli a menu.

COLLEGE KID

Number's up top. Call after your consultation.

Eli nods, heads for the door. Spins around before he exits.

ELI

Hey, is this place family owned?

COLLEGE KID

Nope. Dude named Dean owns it.

(CONTINUED)

ELI  
 (winging it)  
 Wait, not Dean Bender?!

COLLEGE KID  
 Dean Cliffton.

ELI  
 Cliffton. Got it. Is he here?

COLLEGE KID  
 Dean's never here. Comes around  
 once a month at most-- checks the  
 books, counts his money, and bails.

INT. STERLING CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - MORNING

Nate Sterling stands behind a makeshift podium. Ron Thompson and a few SENIOR CAMPAIGN ADVISORS sit in front of him. Camila stands in the back with several CAMPAIGN STAFFERS.

STERLING  
 Donella Meadows, a pioneer of  
 environmental science, when asked  
 if we have enough time to prevent  
 catastrophe, would always say 'we  
 have exactly enough time-- starting  
 now.'

Camila mouths the quote along with Sterling; the admiration in her eyes bordering on idolatry. Ron Thompson, mock moderator, asks the next prep question.

RON THOMPSON  
 Trust in government is at an  
 all-time low. Only six percent of  
 Americans approve of Congress while  
 the vast majority believe that  
 money in politics is crippling our  
 democracy. Can you, and will you,  
 restore trust and accountability?

Sterling's tone is strong, direct, and matter-of-fact.

STERLING  
 Simply put: The American people are  
 sick and tired of two-faced,  
 holier-than-thou, career Washington  
 insiders, speaking out of both  
 sides of their mouths like  
 glorified ventriloquists...

The shocked faces of Sterling's staffers morph into...

INT. JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

CHYRON: MONDAY, OCTOBER 14TH

... Shocked faces in the audience at the Third Presidential Debate. *Wow. The gloves have come off!*

STERLING

When the publicly stated "top priority" of the Senate Minority Leader is to make the opposing party a one-term president... at a time when thousands of our own fight for democracy abroad and millions at home can't find honest work-- frankly, it's deplorable.

Sterling lays bare D.C.'s skewed system of incentives.

STERLING (cont'd)

Congressmen are being held hostage by the extreme factions of each party who they rely on to win primaries and raise millions and I'm the only candidate that can set them free! Why? Because my administration-- unaffiliated, and thus unhindered, by any party line, will have the freedom to pursue the best course of action on every issue-- sometimes more liberal, sometimes more conservative, and most of the time a mix of both.

(beat)

And in turn, our Senators and Congressmen won't have to choose between what's best for their country and what's best for their re-election campaign. They'll be off the hook, free to vote for what they truly believe in.

Faces in the hall are pondering if not already convinced.

CANDY CROWLEY of CNN moderates.

CANDY CROWLEY

Senator Turnbull, two minutes.

ROGER TURNBULL

Listen, the President of the United States has to make hundreds of decisions every day. Some small.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ROGER TURNBULL (cont'd)  
Some profound. Some a matter of  
life and death. America needs a  
leader who makes these decisions  
based on rock solid values and  
unwavering integrity, not political  
convenience.

Turnbull sizes up an uneasy David Archer.

ROGER TURNBULL (cont'd)  
When David Archer first ran for  
Governor of Michigan, he believed  
marriage was between a man and a  
woman. Now that he's safely in his  
second term-- he seems hell bent on  
destroying the institution. He  
voted for the war in Iraq as a  
Congressman-- today, mention the  
United State's role in any foreign  
conflict and watch him run for the  
hills. And don't even get me  
started on his utter disregard for  
the Second Amendment.

Turnbull diverts his ire towards Sterling.

ROGER TURNBULL (cont'd)  
Now, I can't in good conscience say  
the same for *Professor Sterling*--  
but then again, I can't say  
*anything* of the Professor. He has  
no record. No experience. Don't get  
me wrong, I'm not saying that the  
decision to pass or fail an  
eighteen year old freshman in  
Civics 101 should be taken lightly.  
But we're talking about the  
decision to send eighteen-year-old  
boys off to volatile war-zones.

(beat)

The judgment required to make the  
latter decision, can only be gained  
from years of experience. The  
Professor seems to believe that a  
couple months will do.

CANDY CROWLEY  
Governor Archer, Senator Turnbull  
has accused you of running for the  
hills in the face of foreign  
conflict. Meanwhile Iran's nuclear  
ambitions inch closer to reality.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CANDY CROWLEY (cont'd)

How would you respond to Senator Turnbull's attack, and more importantly, how would you respond to an Iran that might someday have the ability to launch an attack against America?

GOVERNOR ARCHER

I won't insult the American people by spending even one breath on the triviality of Senator Turnbull's attack on me when the second attack you've mentioned is infinitely more real and important. I want to make this very clear. My administration will not, under any circumstances, tolerate a nuclear Iran. I will not hesitate to employ military force to prevent the biggest threat to our safety from coming to fruition.

Senator Turnbull breaks in.

SENATOR TURNBULL

I've been saying just that ever since the I.A.E.A. reported Iran's research into nuclear weapons in 2011. You, Governor, have been touting back room pow-wows with Hassan Rohhani until just now. Glad you've finally come around. Must have seen the latest opinion polls. Any way the wind blows.

Sterling interrupts.

STERLING

(to Turnbull)

With all due respect, Senator, this isn't a schoolyard scuffle. We can't just bully our way--

TURNBULL

With all due respect, *Professor*, you have spent your entire career in a cushy teacher's lounge. By the looks of it, I'll bet you've never thrown a punch in your life.

It's turning contentious but Candy let's it go. If anything, it's good television. Sterling gathers himself.

(CONTINUED)

STERLING

Manny Pacquiao isn't the best fighter in the world because he can punch the hardest. Tyson is in his forties, Foreman in his sixties-- I bet they both *still* punch harder. But Pacquiao-- he studies his opponents; tirelessly gathers intel so he can see the fight through their eyes. He trains harder; develops a clear and superior game plan with an experienced and loyal team in his corner. And when the time comes to slide under the ropes and into the ring, it's his *footwork*, not his fists, that put him in position for the knockout.

CANDY CROWLEY

Can I ask if you're referring to Kim Jong-un and Bashar Assad or David Archer and Roger Turnbull?

The crowds gasps. Sterling deftly side-steps the sound-bite trap and answers with a charming smile.

STERLING

I was referring to hard-nosed diplomacy and crippling sanctions.

INT. MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL BALLROOM - NIGHT

Dazzling chandeliers. Sparkling views of the Potomac through crystal clear glass windows. A balcony overlooking a magnificent maze of immaculately manicured rose gardens.

Stunning and sophisticated in a long black dinner gown, Camila rivals the elegance of the setting. She leads Eli through Sterling's debate after-party which doubles as a fundraiser for his most generous donors.

ELI

What do you think's in the gift basket? A Tesla Model S?

Camila smiles, mesmerized herself. Then, noticing the press lanyard around Eli's neck...

CAMILA

Ditch the credentials. You'll scare the personality out of everyone.

Eli obeys. Ron Thompson saunters over with a winning smile.

(CONTINUED)

RON THOMPSON  
Third time's a charm, huh?

CAMILA  
Certainly is! Ron, meet my  
boyfriend, Eli.

RON THOMPSON  
Aha! The scribe. What'd you think  
of Nate's performance?

ELI  
Liberals will love what he said and  
conservatives will love how he said  
it. I'd be surprised if he didn't  
poach a percent or two from *each*  
party tonight.

RON THOMPSON  
(to Camila, re: Eli)  
He's a keeper, this one.  
(to Eli, re: Camila)  
And you, sir, are a lucky man to  
have this one by your side.

ELI  
As are you.

Ron spots a man in a THREE-PIECE SUIT.

RON THOMPSON  
Camila, can I grab you for a  
second. There's someone I want you  
to meet. I'm sorry Eli, it will  
only be a minute.

CAMILA  
He's a big boy. I'm sure he can  
find someone here to interrogate.

Camila kisses Eli on the cheek and walks off with Ron.

A SERVER offers Eli a tray of bacon wrapped scallops. Eli  
does a double take. It's the pony-tailed college kid from  
Patriot Catering.

ELI  
Hey, you're... Patriot Catering?

COLLEGE KID  
Well I'll be fucked! How goes, man?

(CONTINUED)

ELI

*This* is the big event?

COLLEGE KID

Two hundred heads. Seems they lowballed it. Cheapskates.

ELI

You could be serving the next President of the United States and you don't brag about it?

COLLEGE KID

(jaded)

We've been catering this dude since before he entered the race. Luster's worn off. Plus, boss doesn't want it spread around.

ELI

Why's that?

COLLEGE KID

Same reason Michael Jordan was never political.

(off Eli's confusion)

"Republicans buy shoes too." Don't want to scare off half the pool of potential clients.

ELI

So you cater the Republicans too? Turnbull's campaign? *RightWay*?

COLLEGE KID

Nah. Just Sterling. But you don't have to be a politician to have an opinion, right? Dean tells us to keep ours to ourselves. Better for business.

The man in the THREE-PIECE SUIT glares at the server.

COLLEGE KID (cont'd)

Better get back to work. Dean's giving me the stink eye.

ELI

He's here?

COLLEGE KID

(nodding across the room)

Talking to the CEO of Viacom and that hot piece of ass.

(CONTINUED)

Eli glances over to see DEAN CLIFFTON talking with Ron Thompson, Camila, and ANDREW BENNETT, CEO of Viacom.

Dean is smitten with Camila.

COLLEGE KID (cont'd)  
Dude loves the three P's.  
(off Eli's confusion)  
Politics, power, and pussy.

The college kid shuffles off, leaving Eli alone, processing, in utter shock and disbelief. *Is it possible?* Camila returns, floating on adrenaline.

ELI  
Who's Mr. Three-Piece?

CAMILA  
Big donor. Owns a whole slew of restaurants. Ron says he's a culinary mastermind.

ELI  
(biting his lip)  
Oh yeah? What's his name?

CAMILA  
Dean something. But they all just call him, "The Chef."

INT. ELI'S CUBICLE - MORNING

Eli studies the UVA fraternity composite. Under Mayfield it says "Treasurer." Under Turnbull, "President." Eli shudders at the thought. Then focuses on the "Social Chairman," TED CONWAY, long face, goofy smile.

Eli googles "Ted Conway." His LinkedIn profile reveals a tenured professor of sociology at his alma mater.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA - CHARLOTTESVILLE - DAY

Eli and Ted Conway eat lunch at a pavillion overlooking the Rotunda. It's a casual interview. Conway is affable.

ELI  
Were you and Roger Turnbull close?

CONWAY  
We spent "hell week" together with our heads stuck in the dryer along  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONWAY (cont'd)  
with a roll of quarters. Shared  
suffering tends to form a bond.

ELI  
No wonder you became a sociologist.

Conway laughs.

ELI (cont'd)  
Any rivalries among the brothers?

CONWAY  
Roger and Tommy hated each other.

Eli points at a copy of the fraternity composite.

ELI  
This guy? Tom Mayfield?

Conway nods.

CONWAY  
He and Roger were the real  
politicos. Almost came to blows  
over LBJ's "Great Society."

ELI  
So when did Mayfield become a  
Republican?  
(off Conway's confusion)  
I checked the public record for the  
voting history of everyone on the  
composite. Mayfield voted in the  
Republican primary. He's an  
elephant.

CONWAY  
You must have the wrong Tom  
Mayfield. He's a lifelong  
Independent. Always prided himself  
on not being a member of either  
"cult" as he'd call it. Tommy is a  
social liberal-- was a big  
supporter of the Civil Rights Act,  
War on Poverty-- but he came up  
through the Comm School so  
fiscally, he's a free market guy.

ELI  
When's the last you talked politics  
with him?

(CONTINUED)

CONWAY

Why are you so concerned with Tom Mayfield's politics?

Eli covers.

ELI

This Mayfield character seems like one of Turnbull's earliest foils. Every news outlet in the country has been running debate analysis for the past two days. It was stale after the second hour. But Turnbull's first debate-- one that took place with his head in the dryer-- it's what a man says when nobody can hear him that truly fascinates me. That's a story.

Conway seems satisfied.

CONWAY

Last political rant from Tommy came in an email-- read more like a novel. Had a link to *The Declaration of Independents* the week it came out. Happy for the guy. Finally got someone on the national stage he can get behind.

INT. NICK'S OFFICE - MORNING

Nick abuses his calculator, crunching numbers over an avalanche of *RightWay* documents. Eli storms in.

ELI

Nick... we need to talk.

Nick can sense instantly, something is very wrong.

NICK

Shit, someone beat us to the punch? Who was it?! Bryson? That fuck.

Nick swipes a stack of paper off the desk in a fit of anger.

ELI

NICK! Stop. Nobody beat us to it.  
(off Nick's confusion)  
Turnbull isn't stealing any money from *Mega Millions*... Sterling is.

Nick stares daggers.

(CONTINUED)

NICK  
You think that's funny?

ELI  
I'm dead serious.

NICK  
Get the fuck out my office.

Eli stands his ground.

ELI  
Tom Mayfield is a lifelong  
Independent. Hates Turnbull's guts.  
He registered as a Republican a  
month after Sterling's book hit the  
best sellers list. Figured people  
like us picked up a scent, it'd  
steer us off the trail from the  
get-go.  
(beat)  
It worked.

Nick shakes his head in denial. He can't bring himself to believe that the candidate he has been extolling is a fraud.

NICK  
Proof. Give me proof.

ELI  
Patriot Catering worked Sterling's  
debate after-party. They've catered  
all Sterling events within a  
hundred miles of the Beltway.  
(beat)  
It was right in front of our eyes  
the whole time. We were too blinded  
to even check who handles  
Sterling's books.

NICK  
Don't say it.

ELI  
*Meyers & Goldstein.*

The incriminating evidence hits Nick like a bullet.

NICK  
But Sterling refused a Super Pac on  
principle.

(CONTINUED)

ELI

That's what makes it even worse.  
The money's going straight to his  
campaign coffers.

NICK

He'd never be that bold. Juice  
isn't worth the squeeze. Hell, he's  
up three points.

ELI

He is now. This time last year his  
name wasn't on a single poll.

(beat)

What's the only way to win the New  
York City Marathon with no  
training?

NICK

I don't have time for your  
riddles--

ELI

Take the subway and sneak under the  
rope on mile eighteen.

INT. ELI AND CAMILA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Camila rehearses a speech, failing to notice Eli's entrance.

CAMILA

... Sterling is our megaphone. He's  
our voice of reason, of dignity, of  
fairness, of truth.

ELI

Bullshit.

Camila gasps, grabs her heart.

CAMILA

Shit, Eli, you scared me.

ELI

Scrap the whole thing.

CAMILA

What?... Why?

ELI

Because you're not a liar.

A biting coldness in Eli's tone. Camila is utterly confused.

(CONTINUED)

ELI (cont'd)  
He's funding his campaign with  
stolen money. I have hard evidence.

No curl at the tip of his lips. Rather, a mournful  
expression of crushing disappointment.

CAMILA  
Why are you telling me this?

Eli is surprised by the question.

ELI  
I guess I thought you might like to  
know your hero is a fraud.

CAMILA  
(denial setting in)  
Stop.

ELI  
And because I need your help...

CAMILA  
Are you listening to yourself?

ELI  
I need someone on the inside to  
prove he signed off on it.

CAMILA  
You're delusional!

ELI  
GODDAMNIT, CAMILA. HAVE I EVER LIED  
TO YOU?!

Camila is silent; trembling; deep in thought. Then.

CAMILA  
Why do you think O'Shea and  
Turnbull opened up to you?

ELI  
What?

CAMILA  
The most widely read columnist in  
the country and the Republican  
candidate for President confided in  
an unknown junior beat reporter?

(CONTINUED)

ELI

Nick needed help during his divorce  
and Turnbull knew I was writing--

CAMILA

How much time has Nick actually  
taken off for his divorce?

Eli thinks on it. Sees her point.

ELI

Why have you never--

CAMILA

You were flying so high--  
(beat)

Guys like that-- you can't take  
anything they say at face value.  
Always an agenda. Always a pawn.

ELI

You don't know Nick.

CAMILA

Just O'Shea-- only Turnbull-- maybe  
it's a lucky coincidence. But  
both-- on the same day? Given their  
history? C'mon.

ELI

Why are you turning this on me? I'm  
not the one that stole hundreds of  
millions of dollars!

Camila paces feverishly. Head in her hands.

CAMILA

So what if it's true? You go from  
reporting back page news to being  
first page news. I get a seat in  
the witness stand in the trial of  
the century. We both get hate mail  
and death threats from half the  
country-- our friends, the people  
we respect. The other half-- the  
gun-toting, gay-bashing, right-wing  
zealots-- they declare us heroes  
and throw us a parade.  
Congratulations to the both of us!

ELI

Camila, calm down and think--

(CONTINUED)

CAMILA

NO, YOU THINK! Are you willing to keep Penny in Kandahar for the next ten years? Because I'm not.

ELI

What if he's elected and someone else connects the dots while he's in office. Impeachment would throw the country into a tailspin.

Despite herself, Camila attempts to justify.

CAMILA

He's a professor. His parents were school teachers. Nobody knows your name nowadays unless you have millions to get it out there--

ELI

Don't you dare try to justify--

CAMILA

HE'S WHAT THIS COUNTRY NEEDS!

ELI

A LIAR IS THE LAST THING THIS COUNTRY NEEDS! Liars fucked this country up in the first place. *Iraq has stockpiles of WMD's at the ready; these CDC's are foolproof; housing prices will just keep rising.* Lobbyists, pundits, preachers... we have billion dollar industries that run on lies!

CAMILA

What is it that you want, Eli?!

ELI

All I want, for once in my life, is for someone to tell me the fucking truth.

A hint of sympathy in Camila's eyes.

CAMILA

The truth doesn't exist, Eli. Search for it too long, you'll get lost in reality.

Eli lets this settle. Then...

(CONTINUED)

ELI  
I'm publishing the story with or  
without your help.

Camila considers this, then pushes back; quiet but harsh.

CAMILA  
What about me? Do you care--

ELI  
Camila--

CAMILA  
You publish this story I don't want  
anything to do with you.

ELI  
That's not fair.

CAMILA  
Love fades. Values don't.

Eli's expression is pure heartbreak. He grabs a jacket off  
the table and SLAMS the door behind him on the way out.

CAMILA  
That's my jacket!

The door swings back open. Eli throws Camila's jacket hard  
at the chair and misses. He grabs his own jacket, and again,  
SLAMS the door behind him.

EXT. ELI AND CAMILA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Eli fishes a white plastic security KEY CARD out of his  
pocket. It reads: *Sterling Campaign Headquarters - Camila  
Hart*. He pulls Camila's campaign CREDENTIALS out of the  
other pocket. *Bingo*.

INT. ELI'S CAR - NIGHT

Eli races down K street through POURING RAIN. He dials Nick.

ELI (ON PHONE)  
Meet me at *Recessions*. Basement  
dive, two blocks northwest of  
Farragut Square. I have something.

INT. RECESSIONS - LATER

No serious politico would be caught dead in this grimy bar. Even if they were, the CRACK of billiard balls and OFF-KEY karaoke weave a sound proof cocoon around each booth.

It's not lost on us that drunk American University SORORITY GIRLS are butchering "We Didn't Start the Fire."

Eli anxiously TAPS Camila's key card on the table. He glances at his cell: 11:44pm. He places the phone on the table, grabs a napkin and BLOWS his runny nose. Eli is coming down with a nasty cold.

Nick slides into the cocoon. Eli slides him the key card.

ELI  
I'm going tonight.

Nick shakes his head like a disapproving father.

ELI (cont'd)  
I won't get caught.

NICK  
That might be verbatim what Nixon's crooks told themselves in '74, just before they pulled ski masks over their heads.

Eli pulls Camila's credentials from his pocket and puts it around his neck.

ELI  
(re: the credentials)  
My ski mask.

NICK  
Jesus Christ, Eli. You're being irrational--

ELI  
You want the Rib-Eye, you go get the Rib-Eye.

NICK  
Not if it's contaminated. That's what kills a career before it starts.

ELI  
I've already lost my political messiah. I've lost my girlfriend.  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ELI (cont'd)  
I'm losing my childhood home. Why  
not throw in a career for good  
measure?

Eli smiles with the confidence and energy of a man with  
nothing left to lose.

NICK  
You've lost your goddamn mind, is  
what you've lost.  
(then)  
Wait. Your girlfriend?

ELI  
Camila refuses to believe--

NICK  
Fuck Eli, you told her?! They'll  
have the whole place power cleaned  
in an hour.

*Shit, he's right.* Eli gets up to leave. Determined. He turns  
back to Nick, thinks for a moment.

ELI  
Why'd you ask me to ghostwrite your  
column?

NICK  
What do you mean? I was in the  
middle of a nasty divorce battle.

ELI  
You barely missed a day of work.

Eli waits for an answer. It doesn't come. *Fuck it.* Eli  
hurries out of the bar, forgetting his phone on the table.

It RINGS. Camila is on the caller ID. Torn, Nick answers on  
the last ring.

NICK  
Nicholas O'Shea.

INTERCUT with Camila recklessly speeding towards Ballston.  
She yells into speaker phone.

CAMILA  
Put Eli on the phone, please. It's  
his girlfriend.

Nick thinks quick. He channels his drama minor and pretends  
to talk to Eli, loud enough for Camila to overhear.

(CONTINUED)

NICK  
Just talk to her, Eli--  
(pause)  
I'm sorry, Camila, he refuses to  
talk to you.

CAMILA  
Where are you?!

NICK  
We're at Recessions on L and 18th.

CAMILA  
Bullshit! You're at the campaign.  
Don't do anything stupid, I'm on my  
way--

NICK  
They sing karaoke this good at the  
campaign?

Nick holds the phone out to the drunk sorority girls,  
belting the latest Taylor Swift.

CAMILA  
Shit.

Camila hangs a sudden, TIRE-SCREECHING, U-turn as her car  
cuts right in front of...

INT. ELI'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Eli's Ford Echo! Inches from T-Boning him into the  
afterlife. But Eli swerves onto the sidewalk, narrowly  
misses a PEDESTRIAN, and takes out a few NEWSPAPER RACKS,  
before swerving back and racing on.

ELI  
(glancing at his rearview)  
FUCK!

EXT. STERLING CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - LATER

We watch Eli's car from afar as it pulls up and parks a  
block from headquarters. Eli slumps in his seat, canvassing  
the entrance. He COUGHS. We can see his breath.

INT. RECESSIONS - SIMULTANEOUSLY

We watch from afar as Camila storms up to Nick. No Eli. She becomes hysterical. We can't make out words over the raucous bar, but it's heated. Nick slowly manages to calm her down.

EXT. STERLING CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - LATER

Eli walks past TWO SECURITY GUARDS, casually flashing Camila's credentials, picture facing in. Satisfied, they let him pass. He slides the key card into the door.

INT. STERLING CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

Two WEARY VOLUNTEERS walk towards the exit. Eli never breaks stride, slapping on a confident smile as he passes them. He arrives at Sterling's office. The door is closed. He glances left, then right, down the empty hall.

Just as his hand is about to grasp the knob, it turns! Eli zips his jacket over Camila's credentials as the door swings open. He stands face to face with a startled Ron Thompson.

RON THOMPSON

Jesus, you scared the shit out of me, kid. Wait, I know you?

ELI

Camila Hart's boyfriend.

RON THOMPSON

What are you doing here?

ELI

Camila hasn't come home. I figured she was working late, but-- do you know where I might find her?

RON THOMPSON

Everything alright?

ELI

Oh, yeah. It's just-- my mother. She's... not doing so well.

Ron buys it.

RON THOMPSON

Sorry to hear that.

(beat)

If she's still here she'll be down the hall, third door on the right.

(CONTINUED)

ELI

Thank you.

When Eli arrives at the third door on the right, he turns back to see Thompson leaving the building, coat in hand. Once Thompson is out the door, Eli does a 180 and returns to Sterling's office. He peaks inside. Empty. He tiptoes in.

INT. STERLING'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Eli combs Sterling's desk. A draft of the Busch Stadium rally speech sits adjacent framed pictures of his family.

Off screen, we hear a toilet FLUSH. Eli freezes, looks to a door inside the office, apparently leading to a private bathroom. Eli ducks under the desk as the door CREAKS open.

FOOTSTEPS creep closer. Sterling takes a seat.

His feet come to rest inches from Eli who crouches against the back of the desk. A twitch of his foot and contact will be made. *Are you fucking kidding me? Again?*

But Sterling is a steady man. No nervous foot tapping.

Eli has a tingle on his nose. He scratches. His nose runs like the Nile. He feels a sneeze coming on, manages to hold it in. Then another. Holds it in. But the unfortunate thing about sneezes is... they always come in threes...

CHAAAACHOOOOO!

Sterling pops his head under the desk, spots Eli, jolts back and falls off his chair.

STERLING

SECURITY!

ELI

(fast, clear, stern)

One more scream and I tell the world about the lottery.

Sterling is about to scream for security again.

ELI (cont'd)

Think before you scream. The story is written and ready to go to press. Have me arrested-- it hits the blogs instantly. The papers tomorrow morning.

(CONTINUED)

STERLING

Who are you?

ELI

Eli Brooks. Washington Tribune. I'm a great admirer of your platform and policy proposals. I was a great admirer of you and your campaign.

This is the first time we've seen Sterling sweat.

ELI (cont'd)

I have numbers. Emails. Names.

STERLING

I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about.

ELI

Dean Clifton. Tom Mayfield. Patriot Catering. I have concrete proof of involvement for all parties involved.

Sterling's instincts take him straight to damage control.

STERLING

Except me.

ELI

I'm sorry?

STERLING

Why else would you risk breaking into my office at one in the morning? You're here to find proof I knew about this alleged 'operation.' Unfortunately for you, it doesn't exist.

ELI

I don't believe you. But we can let the American people decide for themselves.

STERLING

Why are you doing this?

ELI

Funny. I've been dying to ask you the same question.

Sterling tries to take control.

(CONTINUED)

STERLING  
Are you a patriot, Eli?

Eli doesn't let him.

ELI  
(ruthless)  
Did you know?

STERLING  
All I know is, I love my country.  
I'm our best hope. I give us a  
fighting chance.

ELI  
Answer my question.

Before Sterling can answer, Camila barges in the room,  
soaking wet and raving.

CAMILA  
WHO ARE YOU TO ACCUSE ANYONE OF  
STEALING, YOU FUCKING HYPOCRITE!

Camila rips her credentials off Eli's neck!

STERLING  
Camila! How--

CAMILA  
He's my-- was my boyfriend.

Emotions running high, Sterling attempts to diffuse by  
speaking in a deceptively calm tone.

STERLING  
I'm willing to bet you and I have a  
lot in common, Eli.

Eli resents the accusation.

STERLING (cont'd)  
For one, we both lack experience.  
Turnbull and Archer are canaries  
with that attack line. I'm ahead in  
every position poll from the  
economy to the hot buttons, but the  
race is still a dead heat. Why is  
that? Unfortunately for me, and for  
you, experience, seems to matter.  
(beat)  
The way I see it, your "story"  
might cause a little stir, but when  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

STERLING (cont'd)  
it comes down to it, who's going to believe you? Out of school-- two, three years-- writing what? Exposés on local street fairs?

(beat)

You've got a lot of zeal, but you lack the most vital asset a journalist must have-- credibility.

NICK O'SHEA (O.S.)  
Looks like I'm late to the party.

Nick lurks in the shadow of the doorway; still as stone. Shocked, Sterling walks towards Nick with his palm extended.

STERLING  
Mr. O'Shea! What a surprise-- how are you?!--

NICK  
(steely glare)  
Sit the fuck down.

Sterling lowers his hand.

NICK (cont'd)  
Now, we're all going to take a deep breath and talk this out like the rational people that we are.

CAMILA  
Nate don't say a word! Eli carries a recorder.

Camila charges Eli and tears his shirt, revealing nothing.

ELI  
Whoa. Calm down! It's not on me!

Eli turns his pockets inside out and let's Camila search him. Satisfied, she turns to Nick.

NICK  
That won't be necessary.

STERLING  
You want to talk this out like rational people? It's only rational to establish a level of trust.

Nick shoots Sterling a condescending look, but ultimately gives in. Camila searches him.

(CONTINUED)

NICK

Spare us the lecture on trust.

Satisfied, Sterling gestures to a seating area. They reluctantly sit around a coffee table.

Tension fails to drop a single decibel.

NICK (cont'd)

We know what you did.

STERLING

With all due respect, Mr. O'Shea, I have no idea what you're talking about.

NICK

Maybe you don't. But right now you've got two assholes saying you do. There's no need for us to bluff; you're right-- we haven't found the smoking gun. But, as my esteemed colleague has no doubt informed you, we've got the bullets, the casings and the goddamn forensics report. If we do decide to print, you got every news outlet in the country on a scavenger hunt to find proof of your involvement. And as you well know, once you plant a juicy idea in the American consciousness, they'll believe it whether it's true or not. The allegation itself knocks you out of the White House. You will be disgraced. You will spend the next couple years in court and the next couple decades after that in jail. These are all facts. So the way I see it, if you want any chance of reversing this chain of events, you will tell us the God's honest truth right here and now.

Sterling opens his mouth to speak. Nick cuts him off.

NICK (cont'd)

But before you do, a disclaimer: I've worked in this town for forty-two years. That makes me one of the world's foremost experts at spotting a liar. Lie to me and you

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

NICK (cont'd)  
lose. The election, and your  
freedom. Lucky for you, the truth,  
may still set you free. Because  
believe it or not, I'm still very  
much grappling with a truly  
punishing question:

(beat)  
Is it worth it?

Nick surveys each individual.

NICK (cont'd)  
Eli seems to think so. Camila says  
no way. I'm on the fence. Does my  
loyalty lie with the truth? Or with  
the consequences of the truth?

Sterling wipes sweat from his brow. His eyes dart back and forth, desperate to turn this around.

STERLING  
I know you support my platform,  
Nick. It's all you've written  
about-- and I'm eternally grateful  
for that.

Eli scoffs.

STERLING (cont'd)  
You'll have unfettered access-- my  
ear whenever you want it. You can  
help me turn this country around!

Nick is silent. Stoic. Contemplating. Sterling doubles down.

STERLING (cont'd)  
First interview after I'm sworn in  
and exclusives for eight years  
after. Any leak coming from the  
White House, you're the pot  
catching it. You have my word.

We can't tell if Nick is giving the offer serious consideration, or just relishes the position of power. Eli seems to think he's being swayed.

ELI  
Seriously, Nick?  
(long silence)  
Fuck it, I'll print on my own.

Eli stands to leave but Camila stops him in his tracks.

(CONTINUED)

CAMILA

Speaking of worth, how much is your childhood home worth to you, Eli? How much is it worth to your parents?

Eli shoots Camila the harshest of looks. Ashamed, she turns away, towards Sterling, who is intrigued. *Go on.*

CAMILA (cont'd)

And your sister, Penny. You worry for her safety every day she fights in Afghanistan.

Eli steams with resentment. Camila has thrown Sterling a life-line. Sterling grabs it.

STERLING

You know what I would love more than anything? If your parents enjoyed a happy, comfortable retirement in their own home. Judging by the work ethic they've instilled in you I bet they've worked hard their entire lives. They deserve that much.

(beat)

And Penny, is it?

Camila nods.

ELI

(*seething*)

Lieutenant Penelope Brooks.

STERLING

I would love for Lieutenant Penelope Brooks to be on a plane home the day I'm sworn in. Honorable discharge.

ELI

You don't understand the meaning of the word.

STERLING

I don't have to tell you the alternative if Senator Turnbull wins. He whose favorite term regarding American occupation is "indefinitely."

(CONTINUED)

ELI

If I wasn't so inexperienced I'd think you were using a commissioned officer as collateral in a bribe.

STERLING

I'd call it an agreement among friends. All you have to do is forget this conversation ever happened.

(beat)

We're all on the same team, Eli.

NICK

There we have it. All cards on the table. So, what's the move?

After a long, loaded silence, Eli stands and walks out.

NICK (cont'd)

The man has spoken.

INT. TRIBUNE HEADQUARTERS - ELI'S CUBICLE - LATER

Eli types feverishly. The clock reads 4:04am.

EXT. ELI'S APARTMENT - PRE-DAWN

Eli walks up the path to his apartment in the dark.

INT. ELI'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Adrenaline waning, Eli opens the door. The place is trashed.

Kitchen table flipped over, glass vases smashed, pictures ripped out of frames, clothes everywhere. Eli's fight or flight instincts kick in. He slides cautiously to the kitchen. Grabs a BUTCHER'S KNIFE.

ELI

Hello? Anyone here?-- Camila?

No answer. He tip-toes through the rest of the apartment. Nothing. Out of the corner of his eye... a flashlight beam.

A KNOCK.

DEEP VOICE (O.S.)

Excuse me, sir?

Eli whips around. It's a BEAT COP. Eli SIGHS relief.

(CONTINUED)

BEAT COP

We got a call for a noise disturbance.

ELI

Thank God you're here--

The cop steps into the apartment and shuts the door . Then, he pulls his gun from the holster and raises it at Eli.

Eli drops the butchers knife, back peddles, and trips over the couch, and raises his hands, palms out.

ELI (cont'd)

Whoa, whoa, what-- who are you?

BEAT COP

That's for you to decide now isn't it? I *could* be the only man to know your last words.

(beat)

Then again, maybe I'm a figment of your imagination.

(stepping towards Eli)

So, tell me, Eli, which one am I? I get paid either way.

ELI

The story is with a friend who has strict orders to publish it if he can't get in touch with me by midnight tomorrow.

BEAT COP

You're not much of a poker player are you?

ELI

There's only one way to tell which one of us is bluffing.

BEAT COP

And what would that be?

Eli gathers all the courage he didn't know he had. The barrel of the gun tracking him as he moves slowly to the front door and opens it.

ELI

Get the fuck out of my apartment.

The cop tilts his head slightly, considering Eli's bold move. Then, he lunges at Eli, **SLAMMING** the door shut, and lodging the barrel firmly against Eli's adam's apple.

(CONTINUED)

Eli GASPS for breath. Choking. Seconds are hours.

ELI (cont'd)  
(through gritted teeth)  
And do me a favor. Give my  
compliments to the Chef.

The cop PISTOL-WHIPS Eli across the face. Eli falls to his knees. The cops towers over him.

BEAT COP  
Give me a reason to come back. Next  
time I won't be so gentle.

Blood drips from Eli's lip. The cop KICKS him hard in the gut, grins smugly, opens the door, and walks into the night.

INT. ELI'S CAR - BELTWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Eli races down the highway, holding his ribs, trembling.

INT. ELI'S PARENT'S HOUSE - EARLY MORNING

Eli swings opens the door. Camila sits beside Lynn and Hal.

LYNN  
Eli! Your eye?!

Eli locks the door behind him. He frantically pulls a couch in front of the door and rushes around the living room, closing all blinds as he peaks out the windows, paranoid.

Eli helps his parents off their armchairs.

ELI  
We need to get out of here.

HAL  
Eli, calm down. Camila told us--

ELI  
DON'T BELIEVE A WORD CAMILA SAYS!

Eli stares down Camila, breathing heavily. Camila smiles.

ELI (cont'd)  
What the fuck are you smiling  
about?!

Hal and Lynn are shocked by Eli's erratic behavior. Then, Camila pulls Eli's recording device out of her bra.

(CONTINUED)

CAMILA

You stole my key card. We're even.

She presses play.

RECORDING DEVICE

(Eli)

*If I wasn't so inexperienced I'd think you were using a commissioned officer as collateral in a bribe.*

(Sterling)

*I'd call it an agreement among friends. All you have to do is forget this conversation ever happened.*

Eli can't believe his ears.

ELI

But... you... ??

CAMILA

I had to commit or your face would have given me away. You've got a lot of talents, Eli, but lying isn't one of them.

(beat)

Nick, on the other hand, is a wonderful actor.

(beat)

And a wise man.

Eli takes a moment to process.

ELI

What did he say to you?

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. RECESSIONS - NIGHT

Camila sits across from Nick. Dripping wet and distressed.

NICK

Do you love him?

Camila doesn't answer.

NICK (cont'd)

I've learned a thing or two in my six decades on this planet. But the most meaningful lesson-- didn't learn it until this year.

(CONTINUED)

Camila listens intently.

NICK (cont'd)  
Money, influence; they're nice.  
(beat)  
Love and happiness; even nicer.  
(beat)  
But none of it matters-- none of it  
is real-- unless you have someone  
to share it with.

A tear mixes with the drops of rain on Camila's face. But before she can allow herself to take it to heart...

CAMILA  
Why'd you take Eli under your wing?

Nick takes a long, slow, sip; finishing his beer.

NICK  
Would you believe me if I said I  
saw a little of myself in him?

FLASHFORWARD TO:

INT. ELI'S PARENTS' HOUSE - NIGHT

Eli is moved halfway to tears. Camila hands Eli the recording device.

ELI  
Does this mean you want me to  
publish--

CAMILA  
You know how I feel. That hasn't  
changed. But I love you.  
(beat)  
I know you'll make the right  
decision.

Overwhelmed and exhausted, he collapses into the couch.

ELI  
I don't know what the right  
decision is anymore.

INT. BUSCH STADIUM, ST. LOUIS - NIGHT

CHYRON: MONDAY, OCTOBER 21ST

We have finally arrived back at the first scene. Nate Sterling speaks with extraordinary passion and emotion.

STERLING

... we cannot erase the past, but  
we can, we *must*, learn from it.

He stares directly into the camera, as if pleading with Eli to take his words to heart.

INT. TRIBUNE HEADQUARTERS - NIGHT

Eli watches the tiny TV in Kevin's cubicle. He considers the speech, then shakes it off and turns back to his computer.

He uploads the audio file from the recording device as Kevin continues to watch Sterling's speech in the background, feet up on his desk, completely oblivious.

Eli's cell phone RINGS.

ELI

Hello?  
(concerned)  
Slow down.

As Eli listens, his face turns ghost white. He hangs up and stares aimlessly into the tumult of the newsroom. His eyes draining of all vitality.

For a moment, he is paralyzed with shock. Then, he springs into action. He saves the story, along with the audio evidence, to a flash-drive and hurries to Gordon White's office. Empty.

He barges into Nick's office. Also, NOT there.

Eli dashes back to his cubicle and grabs his jacket. He looks like he's in a trance.

KEVIN

What's up with you, man?

But Eli is already out the door.

We stay with Kevin. *What was that all about?* He glances about the office, then slides into Eli's cubicle and flips on the monitor.

(CONTINUED)

In the shock of the moment, running on no sleep, Eli failed to log out or shut down his computer. Kevin reads the story. Naturally, he's astonished.

He surveys the floor. Hundreds of reporters all too busy to notice anything out of the ordinary. Kevin slips in his own flashdrive and saves the story along with all the carefully organized evidence. He logs out and flips off the monitor.

INT. ELI'S PARENTS' HOUSE - DAY

Heartbroken family and friends pay respects at a Shiva call for Lieutenant Penny Brooks, killed in action.

Lynn uses her hosting duties as distraction but we sense her utter hollowness. Hal is unable to control his emotions.

Eli sits in the corner, trembling uncontrollably. His shirt untucked and his tie hanging low, he stares ahead into nothing, disheveled and numb. Camila sits next to him with her hand on his back. Neither speak. Kevin approaches.

KEVIN

Eli... I'm so sorry.

It's unclear if Eli even registers Kevin's presence. He's paralyzed. Lost. Kevin fidgets uncomfortably.

KEVIN (cont'd)

Senseless war.

Eli looks at his dad, slumped in a chair; broken; surrounded by friends but looking through them. Then to his mom, forcing a lifeless smile. It's emotionally soul-crushing.

ELI

(through tears)

We'll be out soon. Sterling will  
bring Penny's friends home--

Holy shit. He's going to sit on the story.

INT. WASHINGTON TRIBUNE HEADQUARTERS - EVENING

It's a madhouse. No sleep allowed.

Kevin stands outside Gordon White's office, flash-drive in hand. He takes a deep breath, walks in.

(CONTINUED)

KEVIN

Excuse me, Mr. White. Can I have a minute of your time?

GORDON WHITE

No.

KEVIN

I have something you're going--

GORDON WHITE

Who do you think you are marching in here--

KEVIN

I'm your savior.

GORDON WHITE

Excuse me?

Kevin sticks the flash drive into Gordon's computer.

GORDON WHITE (cont'd)

What the hell are you--

KEVIN

Open it.

Gordon opens the file and begrudgingly reads the article. He clicks on the audio file. We hear STERLING'S VOICE.

Gordon's eyes light up like the fourth of July.

GORDON WHITE

Who else knows?

Kevin hesitates.

KEVIN

Nobody.

GORDON WHITE

You just saved this paper, son.  
Hell, you just changed the course  
of history.

Kevin fights to contain his excitement.

INT. PENNY'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - NIGHT

Eli lies in Penny's bed, motionless, curled up in the fetal position. His puffy eyes scan the framed photos on the wall.

EXT. ELI'S PARENTS' HOUSE - MORNING

Eli opens the front door to the sunrise. He grabs the Tribune off the stoop. The front page headline reads:

STERLING EXTENDS LEAD AFTER STIRRING RALLY IN CLEVELAND

His cell phone RINGS. Caller ID reads: Kevin Conrad. Eli answers. Before he can even say hello...

KEVIN

Where are you?

ELI

My parents' house.

KEVIN

Meet me at the IHOP on Delaware in twenty minutes.

ELI

It's 7am!

KEVIN

It's an emergency.

ELI

What's this about?

KEVIN

I was fired.

ELI

What? Why?

KEVIN

Because I used the names Nate Sterling and Tom Mayfield in the same sentence.

Eli's eyes go wide with shock. Kevin hangs up.

INT. IHOP BOOTH - TWENTY MINUTES LATER

Two cups of coffee on the table. Eli sits alone, impatient. Kevin slides across from Eli, frantic.

ELI  
(whispering aggressively)  
How the fuck do you know--

KEVIN  
The other night, when you got...  
the call-- you left in a hurry-- I  
knew something was up.  
(beat)  
I logged into your computer and  
read the whole thing.

Rage boiling over Eli's eyes.

KEVIN (cont'd)  
I would never steal it-- but then  
at the Shiva call I realized you  
were going to sit on it and--  
goddamnit Eli, Turnbull needs to  
win! He's the best man for--

ELI  
(fuming)  
You changed the byline and gave the  
story to Gordon White?

Kevin nods-- half ashamed, half justified in his actions.

KEVIN  
Gordon flipped for it. Said I'd  
wake up to a headline that would  
change the course of history.  
Instead I woke up to an email  
informing me that the Tribune was  
terminating my contract. Rushed to  
the office and security wouldn't  
even let me in the building. I  
called Jenny and she said an IT guy  
had cleared out my computer.

Eli thinks out loud. Cogs turning. Anger mounting.

ELI  
(of course)  
He killed the story to save his own  
ass.

(CONTINUED)

KEVIN

Why would he--

ELI

CEO of Viacom-- what's his name--  
Andrew Bennett. Big Sterling  
supporter. Viacom owns the Tribune.  
Gordon prints the story and  
Sterling loses because of it--  
Bennett orders Gordon's head on a  
platter. He kills the story and  
Sterling wins... guess which paper  
has a direct line to the Oval  
Office.

KEVIN

*(losing his shit)*

Gordon's playing politics dirtier  
than the fucking politicians.

Eli stands abruptly. He takes a few steps toward the door  
then swings back around.

ELI

I almost forgot.

Eli slides a ten out of his wallet, his fingers trembling  
from the avalanche of emotion snowballing from his sister's  
death, the crushing stress of his decision, and the fury at  
Kevin's betrayal.

KEVIN

Eli, I got it. It's the least--

THWACK! Eli SOCKS Kevin across the face with a closed fist.

It lands hard and square, drawing blood. Eli tosses the ten  
on the table, covering the coffees.

ELI

You're unemployed. It wouldn't be  
right.

INT. WASHINGTON TRIBUNE HEADQUARTERS - LATER

Eli navigates the maze of cubicles. A couple colleagues nod  
hello but most are too busy to look up from their computers.

He arrives at his desk and pulls up the story. Begins typing  
like mad to update it. Election coverage plays on every TV.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Lynn writes an essay question on the chalkboard. With her back to the class of inner-city NINTH GRADERS, she takes a deep breath, fighting to hold it together.

The desks are wobbly, the books tattered, the wallpaper crumbling, and the computer at the front, 10 years old.

LYNN

Why does Willie Lowman reject  
Charley's job offer?

INT. WALMART - OFFICE - DAY

Hal sits opposite a WALMART STORE MANAGER. His disheveled hair and wrinkled shirt betrays his lack of enthusiasm for the job prospect.

WALMART STORE MANAGER

Why are you interested in working  
for WALMART?

Hal's sunken eyes look through him; searching for an answer.

INT. ELI'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Camila sits up in bed reading in article in the *American Scientist* entitled "HOW LATE IS TOO LATE?" over pictures of a blazing sun, melting ice caps, and a rising thermometer.

Eli lies under the covers with his back to Camila, pretending to sleep. But his eyes are open. Red. Puffy. Exhausted but unable to shut. Desperately thinking.

INT. ELI'S PARENTS' HOUSE - PENNY'S ROOM - EVENING

Eli sits at Penny's desk. His hands lie gently on the spot where the arm wrestling match took place.

He solemnly gazes up at the picture of him and Penny as kids; showing off their snow fort after a blizzard.

INT. NICK'S OFFICE - MORNING

CHYRON: MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4TH: ONE DAY UNTIL ELECTION

Eli enters. He looks terrible; wholly torn up by the events of the past week and magnitude of the decision. He places his flash-drive with the story on Nick's desk.

(CONTINUED)

ELI

Are you in?

Nick takes off his reading glasses, picks up the flashdrive. Oddly, and suddenly, Nick bursts into laughter.

ELI (cont'd)

What's so funny?

It's gallows humor. Nick too, is entirely overwhelmed. He catches his breath, pulls himself together, and turns the flash-drive over in his hand.

NICK

The weight of the world lies in the palm of my hand.

(beat)

I guess, I thought it'd be a bit heavier.

Then, he tosses the flash-drive back to Eli.

NICK (cont'd)

It's your story.

ELI

I stumbled upon it, yes. But if you didn't guide me, if you didn't get me into *Meyers and Goldstein*--

NICK

You would have gotten in some other way.

ELI

If you want out, just say it.

NICK

I doubted you. You fought through the doubt and took me for the ride. I didn't provide anything you didn't already--

ELI

You can now!

NICK

What?

ELI

Credibility. Sterling was right. Nobody knows my name. We've got less than twenty-four hours to the

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ELI (cont'd)  
election. I publish this myself, it won't get any traction. But coming from Nicholas O'Shea, it's on every front page and television network within minutes. We need to do this together.

Eli senses Nick coming around. He doubles down.

ELI (cont'd)  
And after we shock the world, we set up our own shop. No editor or parent corporation telling us what we can and can't print. A publication that answers to nothing but the truth.

NICK  
What would we call it?

A moment, as Eli considers.

ELI  
The Independent.

NICK  
(*rolling it over*)  
The Independent.

We see life returning to eyes that were once bitter and jaded. An offer of a new mountain peak for a climber that thought he'd scaled them all.

Then, suddenly, Nick opens a drawer in his desk and pulls out the copy of ELI'S ORIGINAL COLUMN with Turnbull's "off the record" remarks about the struggling poor in America.

NICK (cont'd)  
Nothing but the truth, huh?

Eli smiles ear to ear.

NICK (cont'd)  
You got a digital copy of this column?

Eli pops the flash-drive into Nick's computer.

ELI  
The audio file is on here too.

Nick attaches the Turnbull column to a blank outgoing email.

(CONTINUED)

Nick attaches the Turnbull audio file to the email.

NICK

Sterling stole from the people, to help them; Turnbull thinks they should shut up and help themselves.

Nick attaches the Sterling story to the same email.

Nick attaches the Sterling audio file to the email.

Nick drags his entire ADDRESS BOOK into the address box.

Forty-two years of contacts.

Thousands of the biggest names in media.

Eli and Nick share a look of mutual respect, friendship, and now, professional partnership. They are finally at peace with their ultimate decision.

Eli leans over the computer. He deletes Nick's Tribune signature and replaces it with "The Independent." Below that he types "Nicholas O'Shea & Eli Brooks, Editors-in-Chief."

ELI

You do the honors.

Nick smiles, shakes his head.

NICK

That's your privilege.

A deep breath. Then. Eli hits send. A beat, as the earth-shattering significance of that simple click of the mouse, begins to settle in.

ELI

Now what?

NICK

Now, we wait for the tsunami.

Silence. The clock ticks.

Then, through the glass wall... one by one... stunned faces and shocked eyes turn towards Nick's office.

The PHONE RINGS. The second line. And the third.

NICK (cont'd)

What do you say we get out of here?

(CONTINUED)

ELI  
And go where?

NICK  
Watch the fireworks from the Hill.

They exit Nick's office and stroll through the maze of colleagues and cubicles. All eyes are on them. Mouths agape.

EXT. NATIONAL MALL - DAY

Nick and Eli stroll towards Capitol Hill. From a bird's eye view we see the feeding frenzy closing in.

Reporters of all stripes rush with cameras and microphones, tripping over each other to get the first interview as we...

FADE OUT