

UNCLE SHELBY

Written by

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Based on,

The life and works of Shel Silverstein

OVER BLACK WE HEAR A VOICE, ROUGH LIKE GRAVEL, READING A POEM:

VOICE(V.O.)

I went to find the pot of gold
That's waiting where the rainbow
ends.
I searched and searched and
searched and searched and searched
and searched, and then--
There it was, deep in the grass,
Under an old and twisty bough.
It's mine, it's mine, it's mine at
last...
What do I search for now?

FADE IN:

A CLIP FROM "THE JOHNNY CASH SHOW" - APRIL 1, 1970

JOHNNY CASH, 38, hair slicked back and guitar in hand, looks into the camera from the living room set of his short-lived ABC variety show.

JOHNNY CASH

Here's what my friend Harlan Howard had to say about the fellow you're about to meet. Sometimes he wears a beard and shaves his head. Sometimes he shaves his beard and wears his head. Sometimes he's drawing cartoons and writing articles for magazines. He's in Hollywood working on movies and sometimes he's lonesome. But, wherever he is, he's the one and only Shel Silverstein and one of the most talented guys I ever met.

Sitting on the coffee table beside Cash is the owner of the voice we heard before: SHEL SILVERSTEIN, 39, with a thick beard, madhouse smile, and an overwhelmingly bald head.

JOHNNY CASH (CONT'D)

I know a lot of people call you Uncle Shelby. What's that all about?

SHEL

That's for the children's books, John. Because I write a lot of children's books and I'm Uncle Shelby to the kids.

(MORE)

SHEL (CONT'D)

They're sort of weird children's books but they're pretty good.

JOHNNY CASH

Well, a lot of your writings have meant a great deal to me. One song in particular has been largely responsible for a lot of the success I've had lately. Shel wrote "A Boy Named Sue."

At the mention of the song, the live studio audience goes crazy. This is the moment they've been waiting for.

For what it's worth, Shel and Johnny Cash have no problem giving them exactly what they want. They stand and Shel grabs a guitar of his own, which he carries without a strap.

Cash sings alone at first, starting mid-song:

JOHNNY CASH (CONT'D)

(singing)

Well it was Gatlinburg in mid-July
and I'd just hit town and my throat
was dry...

Then, seemingly without warning, Shel jumps in, screaming more than singing, startling Cash so much that he trails off mid-line.

SHEL

(singing)

--at an old saloon on a street of
mud, there at a table, dealing
stud, sat the dirty, mangy dog that
named me "Sue."

This is a voice country singer Chet Atkins described as "the worst voice in the world."

Johnny Cash collects himself and continues to play as they walk across the set, to an old west backdrop, complete with hitching post.

They alternate now. Cash's melodic croon stands in sharp contrast to Shel's guttural barks. Then they reach that moment, the two men, turning to each other, Shel leaning into Cash like a maniac, both screaming:

SHEL & JOHNNY CASH

MY NAME IS SUE, HOW DO YOU DO? NOW
YOU'RE GOING TO DIE!

Shel CACKLES before tackling the rest of the song solo, as it continues over--

CUT TO:

--a drawing of Uncle Shelby as he appears in Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book. It's in Shel's distinct drawing style, all scraggly black lines on a white background.

He's even weirder looking than the man from the Johnny Cash Show, in clothes fitting a hobo. A squiggly cartoon arrow appears and points out the holes in his shoes.

Uncle Shelby shuffles along, hands in his pocket, seemingly oblivious as he passes line drawings from his children's work: a lion aiming a pistol, a boy hanging from a rope tied to the snout of a giraffe, and a tree dropping an apple to a boy with out stretched hands--

Uncle Shelby is so unaware of his surroundings that he trips over a wedge-- The Missing Piece-- and falls, his head hitting a wedge-less circle, sending it rolling away, rolling right off the edge, right Where the Sidewalk Ends...

CUT TO:

...THE IMAGE OF THE SIDEWALK'S END, DRAWN ON A SHIRTSLEEVE

INT. TRAIN - FLORIDA - 1991 - DAY

It's Shel's shirtsleeve. He's alone, on the train, traveling South towards Key West. He's actually drawn the whole scene on a large sketch pad, until finally running out of room and continuing on to his sleeve.

As he finishes the drawing, Shel snaps out of his daze and realizes what he's done. He holds his arm up. His shirt's ruined; he laughs to himself.

INT. DINING CAR - MOMENTS LATER

A dining car attendant hands Shel an ice cream cone.

SHEL

Thanks.

As Shel turns from the counter, he notices a LITTLE GIRL staring at him. Or, actually, she's staring at the ice cream cone. It's certainly more appealing than the bruised banana in the girl's hand.

SHEL (CONT'D)
 Did your mom not get you any ice
 cream?

The girl shakes her head.

SHEL (CONT'D)
 Why not?

The Little Girl motions to her HEALTH-CONSCIOUS MOTHER,
 currently paying for the banana and a bottle of water.

LITTLE GIRL
 She says it's bad for me.

SHEL
 Bad for you? This is the best ice
 cream I've ever had.

Shel takes a big lick of his ice cream cone for emphasis. The
 girl's mother finally takes notice, grabbing the girl's hand
 and shooting Shel a DIRTY LOOK.

Shel smiles and puts his hands up in surrender...

...though, not without a wink and another big lick of the ice
 cream.

INT. TRAIN - LATER

Shel walks through the train, stretching.

He smiles as he passes the Little Girl, now eating an ice
 cream cone of her own.

As Shel passes her, he notices a green hardcover book in her
 lap. It's The Giving Tree.

SHEL
 You like that book?

The girl, her mouth full of ice cream, can't speak. But she
 nods vigorously.

SHEL (CONT'D)
 Yeah, it's a good one.

With that, Shel heads back for his seat, leaving the girl to
 enjoy her ice cream, which is smeared all over her face.

INT. TRAIN - LATER

Ice cream finished, the Little Girl is now lying across three seats, reading The Giving Tree. She's at the very end, the part where the old man just needs somewhere to sit and so he sits on the stump. She's really into it.

When the girl finishes, she closes the book. There, on the back cover, is a terrifying image of the scowling, bearded author-- Shel.

The girl looks up in shock, to find--

-- Shel himself, a few rows ahead, staring right at her. His face is contorted into the exact bizarre grimace from the photograph.

The Little Girl and Shel both burst into laughter.

INT. TRAIN - MOMENTS LATER

The Little Girl and her mother have now joined Shel in his row. The Health-Conscious Mother certainly seems to have forgiven the ice cream incident, given that she's practically in Shel's lap. Her name is MADELINE.

MADELINE

You know, she just loves that book. She loves all your books. We both do. We can't wait to read your next one.

Shel, who was eating up the attention to this point, hesitates a moment here. It's a reminder that he may not be as carefree as he appears.

SHEL

There isn't going to be a next one.

MADELINE

I'm sorry?

SHEL

I don't write children's books anymore.

MADELINE

What do you do instead?

Here, Shel manages to compose himself again. He smiles at Madeline mischievously.

SHEL
Well, whatever I like, I suppose.

Madeline returns that mischievous smile right back, upping it by leaning in very close to whisper:

MADELINE
That must be very nice.

SHEL
Oh you have no idea.

With that, Shel leans in. He's about to kiss her when--

LITTLE GIRL
Is that supposed to be you?

The Little Girl is looking at the sketch from earlier, pointing to the hobo-attired, face-planted Uncle Shelby.

SHEL
Yep, that's me. Uncle Shelby.

LITTLE GIRL
But you don't have holes in your shoes.

SHEL
I used to.

The girl flips the page to find countless other sketches. She's entirely absorbed in it.

MADELINE
And what brings you to Key West?

Shel turns, looks out the window as the ocean rushes past.

SHEL
The wind, I guess.

CUT TO:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY BUS STOP - 1949 - DAY

Close on a newspaper blowing down the frosted wintry streets of New York like an urban tumbleweed. The wind blows it into a bus that has just pulled into town from far away.

A nineteen-year-old Shel, lanky and not-yet-bald, steps off the bus. Under his arm he carries a large portfolio of cartoons.

He takes his first step off the bus and immediately feels something is wrong. Shel examines his shoe--there is a hole in it. He frowns.

Another frigid gust blows in as Shel pulls his collar up and marches on into the cold city.

CUT TO:

INT. OFFICE BUILDING ELEVATOR BANK - 1949 - DAY

DING... DING... DING...

One by one, the indicator lights above a bank of gold-plated elevators click on and off, climbing ever higher in an elegant New York office building.

DING.

The light stops on the top floor, prompting a set of elevator doors to open wide. The interior is packed-- businessmen and secretaries arranged shoulder to shoulder.

They stream out, one by one, until the elevator is completely empty-- save for Shel Silverstein.

Somewhat nervously, Shel steps out of the elevator, his portfolio still tucked under-arm.

He heads down the hall toward an office with a large sign reading COLLIER'S MAGAZINE.

INT. COLLIER'S OFFICES - 1949 - MOMENTS LATER

The headquarters of Collier's magazine. Copywriters, editors, and secretaries buzz about. Shel breathes in the air. He smiles. To him, this office is magic.

Shel makes his way to the front desk but an ancient RECEPTIONIST stops him fast with a COLD GLARE--

RECEPTIONIST

Can I help you?

SHEL

I'm here to see Gurney Williams.
The cartoon editor.

The Receptionist opens up a large logbook. She uses a long and bony witchfinger to thumb through the day's agenda.

She frowns.

RECEPTIONIST
Do you have an appointment?

SHEL
Not exactly.

RECEPTIONIST
I'm sorry, Mr.--

SHEL
Silverstein. Sheldon Allan
Silverstein. Call me Shel.

RECEPTIONIST
Mr. Silverstein, let me explain
something to you. It's very simple:
If you aren't in these logs then
you don't have an appointment.

SHEL
Right, I understand that. I just
think once Mr. Williams sees my
work it won't matter.

As if to demonstrate this, Shel opens the portfolio for her.
He truly believes in his work.

RECEPTIONIST
That's not how it works.

SHEL
I came a very long way for this.

RECEPTIONIST
Well then you must be very
disappointed.

The Receptionist closes her logbook. She shoots a sneering
smile Shel's way.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
But thank you so much for stopping
by.

Shel is frozen. After a moment's hesitation he reaches for
the portfolio but--

-- he stops, spotting in the back of the office an OLDER,
BESPECTACLED MAN heading into an office marked WILLIAMS.

Shel smiles at the Receptionist.

SHEL
Excuse me.

He snatches up his portfolio and makes a beeline to the Williams office. The shocked Receptionist darts after him.

RECEPTIONIST

Where are you going? Stop right now!

But Shel won't stop. He can't.

INT. GURNEY WILLIAMS' OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Shel bursts in, stunning an unsuspecting GURNEY WILLIAMS. He blurts out the only thing that's on his mind:

SHEL

Mr. Williams I've come all the way from Chicago to show you my work.

The Receptionist, having finally caught up, places herself between Shel and the seated Gurney. She huffs an exasperated apology:

RECEPTIONIST

I'm so sorry. He doesn't have an appointment. I told him to leave but he wouldn't--

Gurney holds up a hand.

GURNEY

It's fine.
(to Shel)
Let's see what you've got.

With a smile, Shel hands his portfolio over to Gurney. The editor opens the portfolio and puzzles over cartoon after cartoon. He doesn't smile.

Shel is undeterred:

SHEL

As you can see, they're great. I'm only doing great work these days.

Gurney holds up a cartoon for Shel: It is a drawing of two prisoners chained up in a jail cell. High above them-- and obviously out of reach-- is a barred window. The caption reads: "So here's my plan!"

GURNEY

Can you explain this to me?

Shel's smile evaporates. He looks annoyed, defensive.

SHEL

What do you mean, explain it? It is what it is. It's not like there is some deeper meaning.

Gurney nods. He hands the work back to Shel.

GURNEY

I'm sorry. I just don't see it.

CUT TO:

EXT. WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK - 1949 - DAY

Angry and hurt, Shel stomps his way through Washington Square Park, tightening his jacket collar to protect against the wind. A gust sends a newspaper his way, the pages wrapping around his leg.

Shel slams the papers into a trash can, nearly barrelling into a young FOLKIE who had been warbling a rendition of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land"

FOLKIE

Hey pal, watch it!

Shel looks the Folkie over-- he notices the phrase "THIS MACHINE FIGHTS FOR FREEDOM" scrawled across his guitar in thick black lettering.

Shel points at the motto.

SHEL

Really? This fights for freedom?

FOLKIE

That's right.

Shel laughs. It is a bitter, sneering laugh.

SHEL

It's a goddamn guitar is what it is. And it don't fight for nothin'.

CUT TO:

INT. PORT AUTHORITY BUS TERMINAL - 1949 - EVENING

Travelers stream into the bus. Shel brings up the rear, his portfolio still in hand. The bus driver is taking tickets at the head.

BUS DRIVER

This is the seven-oh-five to Chicago! The seven-oh-five to Chicago! Have your tickets out and ready!

Shel hands the driver his ticket.

BUS DRIVER (CONT'D)

Thank you. Any baggage?

Shel holds up his portfolio.

SHEL

Just this.

BUS DRIVER

Good. There's no room anyway.

INT. GREYHOUND BUS - MOMENTS LATER

Shel makes his way down the aisle of the crowded bus, looking for a seat.

There's a possibility towards the back, a seat next to a cute, young, hiccuping, possibly-drunk woman. This is JOANIE.

The only problem is Joanie's bag, which takes up most of the seat beside her.

Still, Shel gives it a shot:

SHEL

Seat taken?

Joanie looks up at him, hiccuping and smiling.

JOANIE

Depends.

SHEL

On what?

JOANIE

Are you Jewish?

SHEL

Yes?

It's the right answer. After giving him a final once over, she pulls her bag from the seat. Shel smiles a big winning smile and sits down.

As soon as he sits, Joanie starts with the questions:

JOANIE

So, why do you have that beard?

Shel looks her in the eye, takes a deep, meaningful pause. He really wants this answer to stick--

SHEL

It's to cover the scars.

-- it does.

JOANIE

Oh wow. Scars from what?

Maybe a bit too well. Shel doesn't have an answer to that and he laughs, afraid he might have blown this.

SHEL

I don't know. There aren't any scars. It just seemed like the romantic thing to say.

Joanie bursts out laughing. It's a big, over-the-top laugh. She's definitely drunk. But, at the same time, Shel definitely hasn't blown it.

JOANIE

You're funny.

SHEL

I'm glad someone thinks so.

And with that, Joanie closes her eyes. She rests her head on Shel's shoulder and drifts off to sleep. Shel's loving it. This trip may not be a total failure after a--

-- BLAGH!!!!--

-- Joanie leans forward and PUKES ALL OVER SHEL!

CUT TO:

EXT. CHICAGO - NIGHT

The Chicago skyline is just as cold and unforgiving as New York's. But, for Shel at least, there's one difference: This is home.

VOICE (O.S.)

You're getting flour all over the couch!

INT. SILVERSTEIN APARTMENT - NIGHT

Shel's parents' apartment is tiny and covered in knick-knacks. Even with just two people in it, it feels crowded.

NATHAN SILVERSTEIN, a baker still covered in a light dusting of flour sits on an ancient floral-patterned sofa.

NATHAN

It's fine. It's fine.

His wife, HELEN, stands over him, unhappy he didn't change clothes before sitting down:

HELEN

It's not fine! It's flour!

NATHAN

This flour bought your damn couch!

HELEN

Well, it can't afford another one so you better--

-- the sound of a key in the door stops both of them in their tracks. Nathan stands from the couch, leaving a sprinkling of flour behind.

NATHAN

Son?

Helen grabs for Nathan's arm, trying to stop him.

HELEN

You wait. Give him a minute.

But there's no use. Nathan makes a beeline for the door as--

NATHAN

Shel?

-- his son walks in. There's still a vomit stain on Shel's jacket and he seems exhausted.

SHEL

Hi, guys.

HELEN

How'd it go?

SHEL

Swimmingly.

Shel nods at the vomit stain.

NATHAN
Did you sell any?

HELEN
Is that vomit?

SHEL
Yes, Ma. But it's not mine.

HELEN
It's somebody else's vomit?

NATHAN
How many did you sell?

Shel pretends to think for a moment, making calculations in his head. He even counts on his fingers before telling the truth:

SHEL
Uh...none.

His parents have very different reactions to this. Helen goes for her son, looking to comfort him--

HELEN
Oh, Shel.

-- while Nathan has lost none of his demanding nature:

NATHAN
So what are you going to do?

SHEL
Well, I'm going to put this down,
to start.
(setting down his
portfolio)
Then I'll take off my jacket and go
to bed. Maybe I'll grab a snack
somewhere in there.

Helen reaches over to help Shel out of his jacket.

HELEN
There's a plate for you in the
oven.

SHEL
Thanks, ma.

NATHAN
No, son. What are you going to do?

SHEL

Dad, I really don't want to do this right now.

NATHAN

You never want to do this.

Shel sighs deeply. This is a conversation they've had a million times before.

SHEL

I'm going to keep doing what I've been doing. I'll go back to school. I'll draw. I'll get better. I'll make another trip to New York.

NATHAN

Back to school, huh?

Shel rolls his eyes. How many times do they have to go over this?

SHEL

Yeah, Dad. I know, I know. An education's important even for a guy drawing funny pictures--

Nathan cuts Shel off by handing him a letter. It's addressed to Sheldon A. Silverstein from the University of Illinois and it's already been opened.

Shel pulls the letter from the envelope and reads it. We don't see the whole thing but we see enough of it to get the idea:

"Your academic performance has fallen far short of the standards of this University." "...poor attendance record..." "...shown little of merit..."

And most importantly: "...EXPELLED."

NATHAN

Now, son, I'll say it again. What are you going to do?

But Shel just stares at the letter. For once in his life, he doesn't have an answer.

CUT TO:

EXT. TRAIN STATION - 1991 - DAY

Shel steps out of the station into the bright Florida sun. Families and couples are reuniting all around him but Shel's not finding what he's looking for until...

...in the glare of the sun, he finds a beautiful, tan woman standing with a seven year old boy. This is SARAH SPENCER and her son MATT.

When Matt catches sight of Shel he comes running--

MATT
Uncle Shelby!

-- wrapping his arms around Shel in a huge hug. Shel scoops Matt up.

SHEL
Happy birthday, pal. How ya been?

MATT
Good. I climbed on the roof but mom says I'm not supposed to do that.

Sarah finally catches up with them and Shel turns to her.

SHEL
Sarah. It's good to see you.

SARAH
It's good to see you too, Shel.
(beat)
It's been a while.

Just then, Madeline walks up and puts her arm around Sarah, whispering:

MADELINE
You're a lucky girl, sweetheart.
This one's a keeper.

SARAH
Oh, uhm...

But, before Sarah can explain that she and Shel are not together, the woman winks and she and her daughter walk off.

MATT
Who was that?

SHEL
Just some friends.

MATT

You sure do have a lot of friends.

Sarah rolls her eyes as Shel shrugs, trying to play innocent.

SARAH

Let's get going, shall we?

KEY WEST MONTAGE

A) Shel, Matt, and Sarah swim in the ocean. Matt dives underwater and comes up with a handful of sand. Then Shel dives under and comes up with a huge conch shell. Matt and Sarah cheer.

B) Matt and Sarah riding bicycles, Matt's still on training wheels. Shel goes riding by on a bike of his own, standing on the frame. Matt is in awe of it.

C) Shel sits on Sarah's porch playing a guitar for Sarah and Matt.

D) Matt runs ahead as Shel and Sarah walk down the beach at sunset. After a moment, Shel reaches out and takes Sarah's hand. She gives him a look, a look that asks "you sure about this?" He smiles and shrugs as if to say "what the hell?"

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Shel pokes candles into a birthday cake. "Happy Birthday Matt!" is scrawled across it in frosting.

SHEL

Six?

Sarah, who is frantically opening drawers looking for something, stops and gives Shel an "are you kidding me?" look.

SARAH

Seven.

SHEL

Right. Seven.

Shel places the final candle.

SARAH

Shit. I'm out of matches.

SHEL

I can go grab some.

SARAH
No. You stay, I'll just go the
neighbors.

Shel panics a bit at this.

SHEL
Really. I can go to the neighbors.

SARAH
You stay. Get some alone time with
him.

Sarah kisses Shel's cheek as she passes, oblivious to the
look of terror on his face.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Shel and Matt stare at each other from across the table. As
great as Shel is with children, this is the first time we've
seen him responsible for one, if only for a moment.

He is way out of his element.

SHEL
So?

Matt doesn't say anything. He just smiles back, this big
smile full of missing teeth.

SHEL (CONT'D)
You hungry?

MATT
We just ate.

Shel either doesn't hear Matt or ignores him because he turns
from the table and goes to the refrigerator.

SHEL
You know your ABZs, pal?

MATT
They're ABCs!

SHEL
What do you know that starts with
the letter e?

MATT
Uhm, elephants?

Shel comes back to the table, carrying a carton of eggs.

SHEL
That's right, elephants. You know
what else starts with e?

Shel pulls an egg from the container and holds it up so Matt
can get what he's going for.

MATT
Eggs.

SHEL
Do you like to eat eggs?

MATT
I'm not hungry.

SHEL
Yeah. Eggs are gross. They're full
of slimey, gooey white stuff and
icky yellow stuff.

Shel makes a face here, sticking his tongue out. Matt laughs
and tries to make the same face.

SHEL (CONT'D)
E is also for Ernie.

MATT
Who's Ernie?

SHEL
Ernie's the genie who lives in the
ceiling.

Matt looks up to make sure he hasn't missed something.

MATT
There's no genie in the ceiling.

SHEL
Yes there is. And his name is
Ernie. And he loves eggs.

MATT
He does?

Shel nods and hands Matt an egg.

SHEL
Here. Throw it as high as you can
and yell "Catch, Ernie! Catch the
egg!"

Matt's eyes go wide. He looks at Shel in disbelief.

MATT

Really?

SHEL

Yep. He'll reach down and catch it.
I'm telling you Ernie loves eggs.

A little unsure of himself, Matt goes to throw the egg up in the air--

-- but Shel stops him.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Don't forget to yell!

Matt throws the egg, yelling--

MATT

Hey Ernie! Want some eggs?

-- and the egg flies into the air--

-- and drops back down--

-- splattering at Matt's feet. Matt looks up at Shel, laughing.

SHEL

He probably didn't hear you. Try it again.

Shel hands Matt two eggs this time.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Make sure you're really screaming.
You've gotta wake him up.

MATT

You help.

SHEL

Okay.

Shel takes out an egg of his own. He and Matt set themselves and heave the eggs into the air, shouting:

SHEL & MATT

CATCH ERNIE! CATCH THE EGGS!

The eggs fly into the air--

-- SMASHING INTO THE CEILING--

-- spraying slimey, gooey white stuff and icky yellow stuff all over the kitchen, just as Sarah enters, a pack of matches in her hand.

SARAH
What are you doing?

MATT
We're feeding Ernie!

SARAH
Ernie?

SHEL
He's a genie who lives in the ceiling.

MATT
And he loves eggs!

Matt grabs another egg from the carton and goes to throw it but--

SARAH
Matt!

-- Sarah stops him. She turns to Shel unable to believe what happened when she was gone for five minutes.

SHEL
Come on, Sarah. We were just having a little bit of fun.

SARAH
You never change, do you?

SHEL
Why would I?

Shel flashes a big smile, but Sarah is having none of it. She turns and promptly leaves the room. Shel droops.

SHEL (CONT'D)
I guess we should clean up.

Shel searches the kitchen for some paper towels and starts to wipe up the mess. Matt comes to help but Shel gently waves him off.

SHEL (CONT'D)
It's okay, buddy. I got it.

MATT
Is Mom mad at you?

SHEL

I think so.

MATT

What did she mean that you never
change?

Shel unrolls several sheets of paper towels and starts to
work on another egg.

SHEL

She means I've always been getting
into trouble.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNITED STATES ARMY BASE (TOKYO) - 1953 - DAWN

The air is heavy with smoke and the telltale RATATATAT of a
long line of machinegunners in military garb. Thousands of
bullets are unloaded on targets as a DRILL INSTRUCTOR makes
his rounds of the cadets. The level of gunfire is incredible,
deafening.

Onscreen a title, fades up: U.S. MILITARY INSTALLATION,
TOKYO, JAPAN.

Then: 1953. THIRD YEAR OF THE KOREAN WAR.

As the mists rise in the early Tokyo hours on the base, it is
already buzzing with activity: soldiers raising flags,
sergeants drilling squads in marching exercises, officers
inspecting their regiments.

Private Shel Silverstein, 23 and BEARDLESS, hurries his way
along the barracks. He is promptly stopped short by THREE
MP'S.

FIRST MP

Stop right there, private.

Shel stops.

SHEL

What is it this time?

SECOND MP

When an MP speaks to you, you wait
for permission to speak back.

THIRD MP

Stand at attention, private.

Shel straightens up. The First MP scrutinizes his posture.

FIRST MP

What do we think? Pretty straight?

The second MP shrugs. The Third MP gets right in Shel's face.

THIRD MP

Private, when's the last time you shaved?

SHEL

This morning. Sir.

The Second MP inspects Shel's dress but finds nothing out of order. His slacks and shirt freshly starched, his cap impeccable. The Second MP even catches his reflection in the glint of Shel's brass jacket buttons. He frowns:

SECOND MP

Nice polish job.

SHEL

Thank you, sir. May I go now?

FIRST MP

Not yet.

The First MP gives Shel a final once-over. He stops when he sees Shel's feet. A smile creeps onto his face.

FIRST MP (CONT'D)

Hike up those cuffs, soldier.

Shel lifts the cuffs of his slacks, revealing a pair of BRIGHTLY COLORED ARGYLE SOCKS. The MP's GRIN.

FIRST MP (CONT'D)

Looks like insubordination, don't it boys?

SECOND MP

Gonna have to write you up for this one.

The Third MP pulls out a notepad.

THIRD MP

Name?

SHEL

Silverstein. Shel.

The Second MP's eyes widen in recognition.

SECOND MP
Shel Silverstein the cartoon guy?

SHEL
Yeah, that's right.

The other MP's are suddenly excited.

FIRST MP
Wait, you draw for Stars and Stripes, right?

Shel nods.

THIRD MP
That cartoon you did of Captain Bradshaw was a riot.

FIRST MP
Where he was eating powdered eggs in the mess hall? Oh my God!

The three MP's all crack up. The first one waves him off in between belly laughs.

FIRST MP (CONT'D)
Go on. Get out of here.

Shel, smiling, continues on his way.

INT. STARS AND STRIPES OFFICES (TOKYO) - 1953 - DAY

Like a troublemaker that's been sent to the principal's office, Shel is seated in front of the desk of CARLTON WHITEHEAD, 38, the put-upon editor of *Stars and Stripes*.

While Shel sports a mischievous grin, the look on the editor's face is strained, tentative. He rubs his temples. He's clearly had Shel in his office many times before and is struggling to find new ways to give an old lecture:

WHITEHEAD
Silverstein-- we can't keep having this conversation. Everyone loves your cartoons, but you need to stop making fun of officers.

Shel does his best to stifle a defiant grin. There is a part of him that loves this sort of trouble.

SHEL

Fine. It'll be sergeants only. I've got nothing against the sarges, but you've forced my hand.

WHITEHEAD

No sergeants, either.

Shel scoffs.

SHEL

What isn't off limits? Civilians?

WHITEHEAD

And animals.

SHEL

For now. Next thing I know you're gonna be on my ass about zebras because they've got *stripes*.

Whitehead sighs. He gets up and paces the room a bit-- he stares out the office window, focusing his attention of a troop of soldiers marching by.

WHITEHEAD

Shel. We're at war right now.

SHEL

I know.

WHITEHEAD

And we're soldiers. We've lucked out in that we've stayed away from the front, but part of our job is to support the effort in Korea and it's important that we do our best. You like that you get to cartoon, right?

SHEL

Hell of a lot better than dying face down in some swamp.

WHITEHEAD

Then help me out, here. Go easy on the bosses. I don't want to have to ship you out.

SHEL

But you will if you have to.

Shel stares Whitehead down. Eventually the man breaks the tiniest of smiles.

WHITEHEAD

In a heartbeat.

Shel laughs along with the editor.

SHEL

All right. I'll play nice. Or I'll try to at least.

WHITEHEAD

Good. Now get out of here before I do something drastic.

SHEL

Sir, yes sir.

Shel shoots an exaggerated salute at Whitehead, who promptly waves him out with a laugh.

WHITEHEAD

You're gonna get us both fired.

CUT TO:

A SKETCH OF A SKUNK, QUICKLY CRUMPLED UP...

INT. JAPANESE RESTAURANT - 1953 - DAY

... as Shel, in uniform, sits at a table sketching. There's a spread of sushi and sake but he's mostly ignoring it. There are also a bunch of balls of paper, failed attempts at "safe" cartoons.

Frustrated, Shel looks away from his table--

-- catching the eye of a JAPANESE WOMAN across the restaurant. Shel smiles and nods but the woman shyly looks away.

Reluctantly, Shel goes back to his sketch book. He tries another line, doesn't get anywhere, even as far as sketching anything recognizable as an animal before ripping the page up all over again.

Trying to be casual, he looks in the Japanese Woman's direction only to find--

-- she's gone. Or, not quite. Shel finds the woman by the door, looking in his direction, waiting for him. When they lock eyes, she smiles and walks out the door.

With that, Shel drops everything he's doing, downs his sake, throws money on the table and hurries out after her.

CUT TO:

EXT. KEY WEST - 1991 - EVENING

Shel walks along the beach as the sun sinks low at the horizon. The beach is mostly empty, save for the odd jogging couple.

A HEMINGWAY CAT strolls up to Shel, brushing against his leg. He stops to give the cat a few good pets before it runs off in the direction of the town's main drag.

Lights are just coming on in a number of the buildings as the evening yields to night. The sound of laughter and music is heard.

Shel makes his way toward the noise.

INT. LAFCADIO CAFE - 1991 - MOMENTS LATER

Shel enters a crowded and smoky bar, stuffed with tourists, locals, marine-themed tchotchkies, and heavy clouds of cigarette smoke.

At the far end of a bar is a stage packed with musicians. A hanging oversize banner ID's the group as: PAPA BUE'S BEARDED VIKING NEW ORLEANS DANISH JAZZ BAND-- they're exactly what they sound like: a ragtag group of Scandinavians going WILD on dixieland standards.

The scene is electric. Shel LOVES it, clapping his hands, stamping his feet, and singing along with the crowd to a drunken rendition of "TIGER RAG".

But he isn't content just watching--

Shel spots an unused washboard and, without much thought, hops on stage to start playing. He grabs the mic and joins the band in a grand finale, singing in his exaggerated screech.

SHEL

Hold that tiger! Hold that tiger!
Oh that tiger raaaaaaaag!!

The Danes crack up and join with the audience in applauding Shel. After some backslaps Shel gestures to a BAND MEMBER'S GUITAR.

BAND MEMBER

You play?

SHEL

A little!

That's good enough for the tipsy band member, who hands his guitar over to the balding madman who just stormed the stage. The audience CHEERS. They want to see where this is going.

Shel approaches the mic:

SHEL (CONT'D)

So, uh, I've been coming down to Key West for a couple of years now. I've been a lot of places, but lately I keep coming back here, and this song sort of reminds me of that.

After some slight tuning. Shel begins a rendition of his song "You're Always Welcome At Our House":

SHEL (CONT'D)

(singing)

Well, a man came to our house, our house, our house. A man came to our house to sell some brooms. So we asked him to come in, and we hit him with a hammer, and we hid him in the closet in my father's room.

The crowd is stunned. Who is this guy? But Shel just keeps singing.

SHEL (CONT'D)

(singing)

But you're always welcome at our house. Any time of the day. Yes, you're always welcome at our house. And we hope you will stay.

The band members look around at one another as if to say, "whose bright idea was it to let this psycho play?"

SHEL (CONT'D)

(singing)

Then a lady came to our house, our house, our house. A lady came to find out why I wasn't in school. So we asked her to come in, and we gave her some poisoned lemonade, and hid her in the freezer where it's nice and cool.

And here, finally, everyone starts to get it. They come around on the song and its dark humor.

SHEL (CONT'D)

(singing)

So when you come to our house, our house, our house. When you come to our house, we'll have some fun. We'll ask you to come in, and we'll take you in the kitchen, and we'll put you in the oven until you're done.

And finally, as Shel reaches the final chorus, the rowdy crowd joins him, singing along at the top of their lungs:

SHEL (CONT'D)

(singing)

But you're always welcome at our house. Any time of the day. Yes, you're always welcome at our house, and we hope you will stay. And we know you will stay. And we know you will stay.

That crowd goes wild. Shel chuckles to himself, pleased with the reaction.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Thanks.

INT. LAFCADIO CAFE - 1991 - LATER

Shel stands at the bar, enjoying a complimentary drink. A cute college girl approaches him. This is RUTH.

RUTH

Settle a bet I have with my friends over there.

Ruth motions to a group of 20-somethings on the other side of the bar. All of them are watching him.

SHEL

Sure.

RUTH

Are you him?

SHEL

I sure as hell hope so.

Ruth laughs.

RUTH
Are you Shel Silverstein?

Shel smiles.

SHEL
What do we win?

INT. LAFCADIO CAFE - 1991 - LATER

Shel drinks with the girl and her friends.

RUTH
You have no idea how much those
books mean to me. To us. Where the
Sidewalk Ends? I wore my copy out.

SHEL
Well, thanks. That's nice to hear--

Just then, one of Ruth's DRUNKEN FRIENDS butts in.

DRUNKEN FRIEND
I've got that beat.

RUTH
Oh yeah?

DRUNKEN FRIEND
Yeah.

The guy puts his arm on the table and rolls up his sleeve. He has a not very good tattoo of an illustration from Shel's The Missing Piece.

DRUNKEN FRIEND (CONT'D)
It's the Missing Piece.

SHEL
Yeah. I see that.

DRUNKEN FRIEND
Your book!

SHEL
I know. You probably owe me
royalties for that one.

Drunken Friend's face drops, not getting it for a moment,
until--

DRUNKEN FRIEND
You're fucking with me.

SHEL
I'm fucking with you.

This makes Drunken Friends night. He stands, calling out to the whole bar:

DRUNKEN FRIEND
You hear that everybody? Shel
Silverstein is fucking with me!

EXT. KEY WEST - 1991 - LATER

Shel and Ruth walk the street, holding hands.

RUTH
So do you, like, live here now? Is
this where you're writing your next
book?

Shel pauses for a moment, tentative. Here it is again, the "what's next?" question.

SHEL
There is no next book.

RUTH
Oh.

SHEL
And I don't stay anywhere for very
long.

RUTH
Mysterious.

INT. BEDROOM - 1991 - LATER

Shel and Ruth are naked in bed. The girl is hitting a joint. She tries to pass it to Shel but he declines.

RUTH
You're different than I thought.

SHEL
Better looking?

RUTH
Not as terrifying at least.

SHEL
I'll take it.

RUTH
And, I don't know...

She looks at him, trying to put her finger on it.

RUTH (CONT'D)
...sadder, maybe?

SHEL
That's wisdom, my dear.

RUTH
Is it?

SHEL
I hope so.

INT. BEDROOM - 1991 - EARLY MORNING

Early the next morning, Shel dresses. Ruth is asleep in bed. He kisses her on the forehead before slipping out the door.

EXT. KEY WEST - 1991 - SUNRISE

Shel walks along the beach. The sun is rising, bathing the island in a warm orange. Shel looks exhausted but content-- he takes in the surroundings. It is as close to paradise as he has been in a long time.

He continues walking, wandering down a line of residential streets until--

-- he notices a CAT sitting in the street. It's not certain if it's the same cat from the night before but it might be.

Shel watches as the cat walks across a front yard, brushing against a sign post. The house is a nice one, with a big front porch and a view of the water. The sign reads:

"FOR RENT"

Shel stares at the house for a long moment, getting an idea.

CUT TO:

INT. SILVERSTEIN APARTMENT - 1957 - DAY

Shel, 27 and bearded once again, lays on his back on his parents' couch in Chicago. He's staring at the tattered armrest, absentmindedly picking at the upholstery until--

-- a hand SLAPS him away.

NATHAN

Stop that.

Nathan stands over Shel. He's just as frustrated as ever.

SHEL

Sorry.

NATHAN

I work hard for this couch and what do you do? You pick at it. Pick, pick, pick--

SHEL

I said I was sorry!

NATHAN

Yeah, yeah. You're always sorry. But what am I supposed to do? You come back from Korea and you mope around here. Every day with the moping. All the other kids that came home alive are making good and all you do is mope and draw cartoons.

SHEL

We can't keep having this conversation.

NATHAN

You don't want to have this conversation? Easy solution. Get a job.

SHEL

I have a job.

NATHAN

Selling hotdogs is not a job.

Shel sighs. He grabs his messenger bag and heads for the door.

SHEL

Well, then they won't mind that I'm late for work.

CUT TO:

EXT. COMISKEY PARK - 1957 - DAY

A sold-out crowd has turned up at Comiskey Park to cheer on the Chicago White Sox as they play the visiting Kansas City Athletics.

Shel, decked out in the full uniform of a hotdog vendor-- complete with a tray of dogs-- watches the game, enraptured.

The Sox are up at bat, and with a distinctive CRACK from the bat, a fly ball careens over Shel's head and lands a few rows behind him.

There is a mild SCUFFLE as fans fight for the ball, after which an OLD LADY emerges victorious. She holds the fly ball high in triumph.

OLD LADY

I got it!

Shel laughs and goes back to watching the game. He clearly loves it.

However, his enjoyment is interrupted by some shouting from an IRATE SOX FAN:

IRATE SOX FAN (O.S.)

Pal! Hey pal!

Shel turns to see one of the angriest faces imaginable.

IRATE SOX FAN (CONT'D)

Who do I gotta kill to get a dog around here?

The Sox Fan is half-heartedly given a plain hotdog as Shel returns to the game. But it's not enough--

-- the Fan taps Shel on the shoulder.

IRATE SOX FAN (CONT'D)

Pal, there's no mustard on this!

Shel is about to hand him some mustard when ANOTHER PATRON taps him on the back, holding up a dog.

ANOTHER PATRON

This bun is cold! What's wrong with you?

More SOX FANS come out of the woodwork:

JEAN
You want a go?

Shel shakes his head.

SHEL
You'll shoot your eye out with this
thing.

Jean shrugs, taking another shot at a tray of French fries.

JEAN
You sound like my old man.

SHEL
Better than sounding like my old
man.

Shel kicks at some beer cups. Jean jumps in on a pretty accurate impression of Nathan Silverstein:

JEAN
Why are you drawing funny pictures,
son? Why can't you be a proper war
hero? Why can't you be the son I
always wanted?

Defeated, Shel takes a seat in the stands. Jean sits down next to him.

SHEL
The crazy thing is, I miss it.

JEAN
Miss what?

SHEL
The war.

JEAN
The fuck you do.

SHEL
I do.

JEAN
You're mourning a war, Shel. That's
not right.

SHEL
At least I was getting paid to do
my work. I come back home and my
parents think I'm a joke, nobody
buys my work.

Jean pours a few more BB's into his gun.

JEAN
I hear that.

SHEL
How's your writing?

Jean pumps the BB gun.

JEAN
Terrible. You sending your work out?

SHEL
I sent my portfolio over to this new magazine outfit but that was months ago.

JEAN
Have you heard anything?

SHEL
Nothing, man. But it was a clown show over there. It's probably already shuttered.

JEAN
I hate that. The way they leave you hanging. It'd be so much better if they just said no. You should go down there. Make them say no to your face.

SHEL
I could at least get my portfolio back.

JEAN
Exactly. Months? Who do these people think they are? You gotta go! For both of us!

SHEL
All right, all right! I'll go.

JEAN
Fuck them up!

SHEL
Yeah, fuck them up!

Jean hands the BB gun to Shel, who, in spite of being worked up, does realize it might be a step too far:

SHEL (CONT'D)
 Jesus, Jean!

CUT TO:

EXT. CHICAGO OFFICE BUILDING - DAY

BZZZZZZZ-ZZZ-ZZZ-BZZZZ. BZZZ. BZZ.

Shel stands in front of a large office building, repeatedly hitting the buzzer. He tries talking into the intercom but he's buzzing way too much for any response to be heard.

SHEL
 I know you're in there--

-- **BZZZ**--

SHEL (CONT'D)
 You have my drawings--

-- **BZZZ**--

SHEL (CONT'D)
 I need them--

-- but this time, as Shel trails off, it isn't to hit the buzzer. Instead, the door swings open and a string of movers exit, all of them carrying big boxes.

Shel reaches out to hold the door for them, making their job a lot easier. The final mover nods at Shel as he walks past--

FINAL MOVER
 Thanks.

SHEL
 No problem.

-- and Shel enters the building.

INT. MAGAZINE OFFICES - DAY

Shel steps off the elevator into the chaos of moving day. It's a frenzy of cardboard boxes and papers. Everyone is too busy to notice him.

As Shel makes his way through the office, he looks around, unable to get his bearings. In many ways this is just your standard, everyday magazine office full of writers and secretaries.

But there are also plenty of women. Beautiful women. And some of them are hardly wearing much more than make up and a smile.

In fact, Shel finds himself walking behind a gorgeous woman with long, dark legs and a tiny mini-skirt. He's so wrapped up in the view he--

-- runs right into a Photographer--

PHOTOGRAPHER

Watch it, man.

But Shel's too stunned to respond. He keeps on, though the woman with the perfect legs is gone.

Finally, Shel reaches a door that reads EDITOR-IN-CHIEF. Or, at the very least, he makes it to the desk of a stunning, blonde secretary positioned in front of the door, packing her desk.

This is MARY O'CONNOR. She hardly looks up from her packing to acknowledge Shel:

MARY O'CONNOR

May I help you?

SHEL

I'm Shel Silverstein. I dropped my portfolio off a few months ago.

MARY O'CONNOR

Portfolio?

SHEL

Yes.

Exasperated, Mary stops her packing and looks at Shel. If he wants her help, he's going to have to be a bit more specific.

MARY O'CONNOR

Of what?

SHEL

Cartoons.

This is enough information for Mary, who goes back to her packing.

MARY O'CONNOR

Oh. Right. Sorry about this. We're--

SHEL

-- shutting down?

MARY O'CONNOR
Moving offices.

Shel isn't convinced:

SHEL
Sure. My portfolio?

MARY O'CONNOR
It's in there.

Mary points to the Editor-in-Chief's office. Shel waits for a moment, gives Mary a chance to call the office and let them know he's coming in but she just keeps pointing.

Still unsure of himself, Shel heads for the door which--

-- opens, just as Shel reaches it--

-- and THREE OF THE MOST STUNNING WOMEN EVER exit, each of them walking confidently past him. The last one, adjusts her blouse, buttoning a button.

INT. EDITOR-IN-CHIEF'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Shel enters to find the EDITOR-IN-CHIEF sitting behind a desk, with his feet up, in an absolute disaster area of an office. This place is not ready for a move and the guy seems to be in no hurry to get it ready as he's wearing a silk bathrobe over pajamas.

SHEL
Listen, if you need a moment to get dressed.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
I assure you, this is as dressed as I plan on getting today. Now, who're you?

SHEL
Shel Silverstein. I do cartoons. I dropped my portfolio off a few months ago. She said it was in here somewhere.

The Editor-in-Chief stands and looks around but has no luck. He calls out:

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Mary?

MARY (O.S.)
It's on the desk.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Thank you.

The Editor-in-Chief picks up a file of photographs from the table but finds nothing under them.

MARY (O.S.)
The other desk.

He turns to another desk and finds it there, under a stack of typed pages. He picks up the portfolio and turns back to Shel.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
I guess it is. I have to apologize,
Mr. Silver--

SHEL
(interrupting)
Shel.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Shel. I'm afraid I haven't--

But Shel isn't up for this routine again:

SHEL
Look, we don't need to go through
all this. I just need my portfolio
so I can take it to another
magazine. Then I can go through
this whole rejection dance we're
doing with them instead.

The Editor-in-Chief smiles. He likes Shel's spark.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
I was just going to say, I haven't
had a chance to look at this. As
you can see, it's pretty easy to
get distracted around here.

SHEL
That's one way to put it.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Unconventional, I know. But I think
we've got staying power.

As if to prove this or, just because he can, the Editor-in-Chief picks up a cigar and lights it.

SHEL
My portfolio?

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Oh, right. You mind if I take a
look now? Before you go racing out
the door?

SHEL
Knock yourself out.

The Editor-in-Chief unzips the portfolio and starts going
through Shel's work.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
This is good.

SHEL
I know.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Some of it's really good.

The man hands Shel the cigar as he continues to go through
the portfolio. Shel doesn't know what to do with it so he
just holds it awkwardly.

Eventually, the Editor finishes. But, instead of handing the
portfolio to Shel, he sets it back down on his desk. He takes
a seat, finds a pen amidst all the clutter--

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF (CONT'D)
Silverstein, you said?

Shel nods.

The man writes something in a book, signs it, and rips a
piece of paper from the book.

He gets up, walks over, and hands the paper to Shel.

SHEL
What's this?

It's a check.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
A job. We need a cartoonist. I
think you're just the man.

SHEL
Are you serious?

The Editor smiles mischievously. It's a smile not dissimilar to one we've already seen on Shel himself.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As serious as I get, yes.

SHEL

Uh, thanks a lot Mr...

The Editor takes the cigar back from Shel, putting it in his own mouth.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Hefner. Hugh Hefner. Welcome to Playboy.

Yep, that's right. If the women and pajamas weren't enough of a give away. The name definitely is. The Editor-in-Chief is a young HUGH HEFNER.

Shel looks down at the check. It's a lot of money. Way more than Shel's ever made on cartoons-- or selling hot dogs-- anyway.

SHEL

Wow.

Hef smiles. He sort of can't believe he can do this-- write checks to support the careers of artists he believes in-- either.

HEF

I know.

SHEL

And this won't bounce?

HEF

No. It won't bounce.

In spite of Hef's confidence and swagger, Shel doesn't really buy it.

SHEL

Okay.

HEF

You don't trust me?

SHEL

No. No. I trust you--

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. BANK - MOMENTS LATER

Shel stands nervously at a teller window, waiting.

After a moment, a BANK TELLER walks over.

BANK TELLER
Here we are, sir.

The Teller sets a number of banded stacks of bills on the counter in front of Shel.

SHEL
It cleared?

BANK TELLER
Yes, sir.

SHEL
That's mine?

BANK TELLER
Yes, sir.

The Bank Teller pushes the money to Shel, whose eyes go wide.

INT. SILVERSTEIN APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Shel rushes into the his parents apartment where Helen and Nathan are sitting down to dinner.

HELEN
Shel?

NATHAN
Where have you been?

SHEL
Good news, Dad--

-- Shel slams the money down on the dinner table--

SHEL (CONT'D)
-- I'm outta here.

CUT TO:

INT. KEY WEST RENTAL - 1991 - DAY

Shel starts moving things into his new rental home, carrying stack after stack of books.

The cat from earlier brushes up against Shel's leg, making itself at home right along side him.

Shel takes a moment to scratch the cat behind his ears before returning to his stacks.

The books are mostly fairy tales and folklore. These are all the books Shel promised he'd buy himself when he was a poor kid, a baker's son.

They're a reminder of how far he's come.

There's plenty more stuff, too. A bunch of guitars and assorted musical instruments. Sketch pads and art supplies.

Shel moves it all in, scattering it around the house making the place home.

EXT. SHEL'S BACKYARD - DAY

A large lemon tree dominates the backyard. Shel walks right up to the tree, running his hand across the bark.

Shel pulls a pocket knife from his pocket and carves a heart into the tree. He writes a name in the heart "Shanna."

When he's finished, the heart looks very similar to the one carved into The Giving Tree.

Shel heads back to the house but pauses on the way to pull a few lemons from the tree. He holds them up, as if speaking to the tree itself:

SHEL
Thanks for this.

EXT. PORCH - EVENING

Shel sits in a rocking chair as the sun sets. He's sketching and sipping lemonade from a mason jar. It's a pretty relaxing moment until Sarah comes storming up the driveway.

Shel sees her and welcomes her with open arms--

SHEL
My first visitor!

-- but Sarah wants nothing of it. She's furious.

SARAH
What are you doing?

Shel, as always, tries to play it off:

SHEL
Sketching. Having some lemonade.
There's a tree in the back. You
want some?

SARAH
Don't be an asshole.

SHEL
Okay. No lemonade.

Shel tosses the lemonade, mason jar and all, off the porch.
He keeps smiling, but there's no getting through to Sarah.

SARAH
I mean what are you doing here? In
this house?

SHEL
Isn't it great? The view's amazing--

SARAH
-- Stop.

And finally, Shel accepts defeat.

This is going to be a serious conversation whether he wants
one or not.

SHEL
Okay.

SARAH
That boy, he loves you so much.

SHEL
And I love him.

SARAH
Yeah and you're great at showing it
three days a year.

SHEL
That's the whole point of this
house. I'll see him more. I'll be
here for him. Isn't that what you
want?

SARAH
I knew what I was getting into with
you, Shel. I've never complained.
But Matt has no idea.

(MORE)

SARAH (CONT'D)

Don't do this to him. Don't get his hopes up only to go running off the minute your feet itch.

SHEL

I'll stay. I promise.

SARAH

You're not his Uncle Shelby.

SHEL

I know.

SARAH

You're his dad. And if you stay, you better start acting like it.

With that, Sarah storms off, leaving Shel to wonder if he really is up for what he's trying to do, if he's really ready to give up so much...

CUT TO:

A BRASS PLATE, MOUNTED ON A BRICK WALL ABOVE A DOORBELL

It reads "Si Non Oscillas, Noli Tintinnare."

We get a subtitle, too. For those of us who don't read Latin.

"If you don't swing, don't ring."

Someone, a swinger apparently, rings the doorbell--

EXT. PLAYBOY MANSION - 1958 - DAY

-- it's Shel. He has an army bag full of things under his arm.

This is the first Playboy Mansion, in Chicago. It's made of brick and limestone and is absolutely enormous. There are more than seventy rooms.

Shel goes to ring the doorbell again but, just before he does, the door swings open--

INT. PLAYBOY MANSION - CONTINUOUS

Hef answers, smiling, wearing an impeccably tailored tuxedo, smoking a pipe, a BUNNY on either arm.

HUGH HEFNER
Shel! Come in, come in!

Shel walks inside as Cy Coleman's "Kiss and Run" starts up.

HEF
Here, let me show you around.

Hef leads Shel over to a beautiful blonde. This is SUSAN.

HEF (CONT'D)
Shel, this is Susan Taylor
Hastings. Ms. July.

SHEL
A pleasure.

SUSAN
I'm sure.

A man walks towards them, trying to uncork a bottle of
champagne--

HEF
And you know Lenny Bruce, the
foremost exponent of sick humor and--
-

-- POP--

-- LENNY BRUCE pops the cork, champagne spilling everywhere--

LENNY BRUCE
Oh! Isn't that sick?
(in weird child's voice)
Oh boy, this champagne is really
making my nose bubbly, Uncle
Junior!

HEF
Especially known for his
extemporaneous and ad-libbed jokes.

LENNY BRUCE
That was ad-libbed. You like that?

HEF
That was very ad-libbed.

Hef continues on, they come upon a man playing the piano. Hef
grabs his pipe from the piano and lights it, then puts his
hands on the piano player's shoulders--

HEF (CONT'D)
Cy Coleman.

-- CY COLEMAN smiles up at Hef.

Hef leads Shel to a nearby fireman's pole, which goes down to the floor below. Hef gives Shel a troublemaker's smile.

HEF (CONT'D)
What do you say, Shel? Care to give it a go?

SHEL
After you.

HEF
Don't mind if I do.

With that, Hef grabs onto the pole and slides down. Shel chuckles to himself before following after--

INT. DOWNSTAIRS PLAYBOY MANSION - MONTHS LATER

-- as Shel lands downstairs, he's now wearing a robe of his own. But that's not the only change. In fact, by now Shel's the one giving the tour to--

-- JEAN SHEPHERD who comes flying down the pole behind him.

JEAN
This is insane.

SHEL
You haven't seen anything yet.

Shel leads Jean into the Red Room-- one of Shel's favorites-- which gets its name from the fact that everything in it is, well, red.

SHEL (CONT'D)
This is the Red Room.

JEAN
I can see that. Is there a blue one?

SHEL
Maybe? It's hard to keep track. Too many distractions--

-- just then, one of those distractions passes them: Susan. She runs her hand across Shel's shoulders as she walks by.

SUSAN

Shel.

SHEL

Susan.

Jean watches her go, in disbelief.

JEAN

And the girls, they're here all the time?

SHEL

All the time.

Shel leads Jean off to a bedroom. It's full of art supplies and a large circular bed.

SHEL (CONT'D)

This is my room. I'm getting a surprising amount of work done--

Jean eyes the bed, which is enormous.

JEAN

-- in spite of the distractions?

SHEL

Most likely because of them.

Shel smiles and hits a button on a big, chunky, old-fashioned remote control...

...the bed starts to spin. Jean just shakes his head.

JEAN

You're making it hard to be gracefully happy for my friend's success. You know that right?

SHEL

Eh, I can't really use it. Motion sickness.

Jean laughs.

SHEL (CONT'D)

How 'bout a drink?

JEAN

Sure.

Shel leads Jean out another entrance to the bedroom, through a hallway, down a flight of stairs, and out into--

INT. GROTTO - CONTINUOUS

The grotto in the original Mansion is actually just the basement. This is the Playboy Mansion, though, so it is no ordinary basement. There's a swimming pool and one wall is made entirely of glass.

As Shel leads Jean out into the grotto, the party just keeps getting bigger. Out here, there's a group of men passing around an acoustic guitar, while a reverent crowd watches.

One of the men-- KRIS KRISTOFFERSON, actually-- notices Shel and calls out to him. Johnny Cash is there, too.

KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

Shel!

SHEL

Hey there, Kris.

Jean is utterly star-struck.

KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

Want to play a song?

SHEL

Oh, that's okay.

JOHNNY CASH

Come on.

It's clear these guys won't take no for an answer. The guy with the guitar holds it out to Shel--

JEAN

(leaning in, whispering)
Is that Bob Dylan?

SHEL

(whispering)
Yep.

BOB DYLAN

Play.

Shel nods and takes the guitar from BOB DYLAN.

He settles in with the gathered crowd and strums the guitar.

SHEL

Well, I've been working on a little something for my friend Shep here. You may not know him but he's a fantastic writer.

(MORE)

SHEL (CONT'D)

In fact, he's going to start writing pieces for the magazine. Okay, Hef?

Shel calls out to Hef, who is in the pool, surrounded by women. He raises his martini to Shel and Jean.

HEF

Sure thing!

Jean can't believe any of this.

SHEL

Great. But, you know, he hasn't always gone by Shep. In fact, his real name's Jean. Jean Shepherd. And when Jean was a kid all the other kids used to make fun of him, for having a girl's name and all. Isn't that right, Shep?

Jean's reluctant to answer, not sure why Shel wants to relive past pains when he's in the middle of the craziest night of his life.

JEAN

That's right.

SHEL

Anyway, I'd been thinking about that and how hard it must have been so I wrote this song.

And then Shel starts playing. It's "A Boy Named Sue," of course. But, just as he starts--

-- Shel notices Susan in the audience. They lock eyes as Shel begins and they never let go.

SHEL (CONT'D)

(singing)

My daddy left home when I was three
and he didn't leave much to ma and
me just this old guitar and an
empty bottle of booze. Now, I don't
blame him cause he run and his but
the meanest thing that he ever did
was before he left he went and
named me "Sue."

There may be a huge crowd gathered around (loving the song, for what it's worth) and Shel may have written it for Jean but, in this moment, Shel is singing to Susan and Susan only.

For him, she's the only person there.

INT. PLAYBOY MANSION - LATER

The party at the Mansion is still in full swing. Of course it is. The party is always in swing.

But Shel and Susan are apart from it, somehow. Even while being right in the middle of everything. They're wrapped up around each other, passionately making out, ignoring everything else, even--

-- Johnny Cash as he approaches Shel and Susan. He sits next to Shel, intent to say something, to get through anyway he can.

JOHNNY CASH

Shel, that was really great. I just loved that song.

Shel takes a moment away from making out with Susan to say--

SHEL

Thanks, John.

-- but only the moment it takes to get out the words, then he's right back to kissing her. But Johnny Cash doesn't stop there--

JOHNNY CASH

I don't know if you heard but I'm heading to California tomorrow.

Again, just barely a gulp of air--

SHEL

Have a great trip.

-- before going back to Susan.

JOHNNY CASH

We're doing a recording at San Quentin. A follow up to the Folsom record.

Finally frustrated and realizing there's no shaking Johnny Cash, Shel pulls away from Susan to make an introduction:

SHEL

John, meet Susan. Susan this is Johnny Cash.

JOHNNY CASH
Well, hi there, Susan.

Johnny Cash takes Susan's hand and kisses it. She's not really charmed by it, though. Or that taken aback by his celebrity.

SUSAN
Johnny.

She's a Playmate. She's seen it all.

JOHNNY CASH
Like I said, we're heading to San Quentin and I think the guys there would really get a kick out of your song.

SHEL
I'm not going to prison, John.

SUSAN
He's too pretty for prison.

JOHNNY CASH
No, I was wondering if I could sing it. Maybe you could write the words down for me and--

Shel cuts him off, seeing an opportunity...if only for a little freedom.

SHEL
If I do that, will you give us some space here.

JOHNNY CASH
Oh, sure. Of course.

Shel grabs his messenger bag, pulls out a sketch pad, and quickly scribbles the lyrics down.

He then tears the page from the book and hands it to Johnny Cash.

JOHNNY CASH (CONT'D)
Thanks, Shel. I think this one's going to be something special.

SHEL
No problem. But, if you don't mind, I have some business to attend to.

JOHNNY CASH

Yes. Of course.

But Shel and Susan don't even hear him. They're already all over each other again.

Johnny Cash folds the paper and takes it off to San Quentin to become the massive hit it will soon be.

INT. SUSAN'S ROOM - MORNING

Susan wakes up in her room in the Playboy mansion. Shel is SNORING in bed beside her. There's evidence of a wild night everywhere.

Susan, however, plays it all with style and grace. She climbs out of bed, allowing Shel to continue sleeping and grabs a robe.

We follow Susan as she walks to her closet and vanity, a song kicking in, The Marvelettes doing "Playboy" as we watch the process of Susan preparing for the day.

There's no denying Susan's a beautiful woman. She looks great just out of bed, even with her hair a mess and no make up on her face. But, she's also a Playmate in the 70s and there's a lot that goes into that.

And so she begins her daily routine. She does her hair, a huge production of curling irons and hair spray. She straps on one of those sturdy 70s bras, garter belts, and all kinds of assorted underthings.

Finally, she starts with the make up. As she applies her mascara, Susan notices something--

-- Shel's been watching her the entire time. He is absolutely riveted.

SUSAN

Stop.

SHEL

I'm not doing anything. I'm just watching you.

SUSAN

It makes me feel weird.

SHEL

You don't look weird to me. You look perfect.

And Shel means it. He seems absolutely smitten.

Susan takes a deep breath and tries to go back to her make up but can't--

SUSAN

No. I can't do it. I don't watch you while you work.

SHEL

You can if you want. I don't have any secrets.

SUSAN

Oh no?

Susan stands from the vanity and walks across the room, Shel watching every step.

She picks up Shel's messenger bag, holding it open, menacingly, daring him to challenge her. But Shel doesn't. He seems genuinely nonplussed.

SHEL

Nope.

SUSAN

Okay then.

Susan reaches in the bag and pulls out a packet of sketches. She sets the bag down and starts shuffling through them. Shel doesn't object, he just rolls over on the bed.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

What is this? This isn't for the magazine.

She's right. They're not. The sketches are a series of drawings of a boy and a tree.

SHEL

It's nothing. Just something I've been working on-- it's about a boy and a tree. It has a pretty sad ending.

There's writing on the pages, too. Susan's looking at an early draft of The Giving Tree. She's absolutely absorbed in it.

SUSAN

It's beautiful.

SHEL

Well, tell that to the publishers.

SUSAN

You can't get this published?

SHEL

They say they don't know what to do with it. It's too sad for kids, too simple for adults. Plus, I'm that guy who draws cartoons for a girlie magazine.

But Susan doesn't hear any of this. She's entirely caught up in reading the manuscript. In fact, as she finishes, she begins to tear up.

Finally, she close the manuscript and collects herself. She turns to Shel, forcing him to make eye contact with her.

SUSAN

You can't give up on this, Shel.

Shel tries to shrug her off but Susan won't let him. She is deadly serious.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

You have to promise me.

Shel physically reacts to this, completely freaked out by even the hint of promise or commitment.

SHEL

I don't know. I don't really do promises.

SUSAN

Oh shut up. I don't care if we ever fuck again. Just get this out there. It needs to be seen.

She walks over to the bed, kneels in front of Shel, and hands him the manuscript.

Shel looks at it for a moment before giving in:

SHEL

Okay.

SUSAN

Promise?

SHEL

Promise.

SUSAN

Good.

She climbs up onto the bed, onto Shel. She smiles down at him.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

Maybe once more?

Shel smiles back and tosses the manuscript aside. He's game.

SHEL

I suppose. For old time's sake.

CUT TO:

INT. SARAH'S HOUSE, KEY WEST - 1991 - EVENING

Shel and Matt both brush their teeth. It starts off routine, but midway through the brush Shel decides to kick it up a notch, increasing the speed and intensity of his brushing.

Matt picks up on this, and starts to brush faster himself. It becomes an all-out brush race, building to a fever pitch when Shel finally spits out a mouthful of toothpaste.

SHEL

I win!

Matt spits his toothpaste out too, as the two of them crack up.

CUT TO:

INT. MATT'S BEDROOM - LATER

Shel is tucking Matt into bed. He is extra careful to ensure maximum snugness.

SHEL

There we go. Nice and snug.

MATT

It's hard to move!

SHEL

That'll make it easier for the monsters when they come for you.

MATT

There's no such thing as monsters, Dad.

SHEL

If you say so. You do know a lot more than--

Shel stops short. He holds up a finger for silence.

SHEL (CONT'D)

What was that? Did you hear that?

MATT

No.

SHEL

That sound. Just listen.

Matt, a little nervous now, listens a bit. All that can be heard is a distant sound of palm trees rustling in the breeze.

SHEL (CONT'D)

It's a high pitch gargling sound-- but also like a weird guitar solo.

Shel makes the ridiculous sound he described. It's clear that he's joking around.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Glad you can't hear that-- that's a werewolf sound and we don't want any of those running around.

Shel makes the noise again. Matt smiles.

MATT

Oh I hear it, too!

SHEL

You do? What does it sound like?

Matt gets out of his covers and stands on the bed. He mimes slashing motions with his claw-hands:

MATT

RAAARRRRRR!!

Shel growls right back:

SHEL

RAAAARRRRRR!!!!

MATT

RAAAAWWWRRRRRR!!!!!!!!

SHEL

Wait a minute. That's not the sound
a werewolf makes. That's the
boogeyman!

Matt grows silent. He is a little scared.

MATT

Really?

SHEL

No. There's nothing out there. Time
for bed.

He tucks Matt in again and kisses him on the forehead. He
makes his way for the door.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Besides, the boogeyman lives under
beds.

Matt pulls the covers close.

MATT

Why?

SHEL

No idea. Certainly not where I
would want to be.

MATT

Where would you want to be?

SHEL

Nowhere. I never want to stay in
one place.

Shel realizes Matt might not like this answer.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Maybe you'll understand when you're
older. But I hope not.

He waits a moment--

SHEL (CONT'D)

How about you, buddy? Where would
you live?

MATT

Here. With you and mom and the
ocean.

(MORE)

MATT (CONT'D)

I'd live just like this, only I wouldn't have to go to school and I could climb on the roof whenever I wanted.

Shel smiles.

SHEL

That sounds pretty all right.

Shel turns out the light. He leaves, letting darkness fill the room.

INT. SARAH'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Closing the door to Matt's room behind him, Shel takes a moment to himself to think before moving on. He makes his way down the hall to the living room.

Sarah is there, reading. She looks up as Shel enters. She smiles.

SARAH

How'd it go?

Shel smiles, but he doesn't have an answer.

CUT TO:

INT. PLAYBOY MANSION - 1962 - DAY

Shel sits in his room, sketching. Susan, now several months pregnant, is there as well. She rubs cocoa butter across her swollen belly.

Shel stops his sketch to watch Susan's hand movements. They are slow, gentle circles.

Then, quite suddenly, Susan pulls her hand back--

SUSAN

Oh!

SHEL

Is everything okay?

Susan smiles.

SUSAN

She moved. Here.

She grabs Shel's hand and places it on her belly.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
Can you feel that?

Shel can definitely feel that. He looks up at Susan and manages a smile-- but it is clearly forced. There is conflict in his eyes. He seems frightened by what he feels.

INT. HUGH HEFNER'S OFFICE - DAY

Hef, dressed in pajamas, sits behind his desk. He strikes a match, lighting his pipe.

Shel is seated across from him. He fidgets, tapping his fingers against the armrest.

SHEL
I have to quit.

HEF
Shel--

SHEL
I really think I should.

HEF
What's going on, here?

Shel hesitates before going further--

SHEL
A lot. Work, personal life.
Everything's getting...

Shel trails off. Hef lights another match.

HEF
Stale.

SHEL
Yep.

HEF
So where would you go?

SHEL
I want to go back to Japan. I was
happy there. I think.

HEF
Shel, I get it. You're trying to
get your books out, you've got a
baby on the way. It's a lot. How
about this:

Hef grabs an issue of the magazine and slides it across the desk to Shel. Shel looks at it, puzzled.

HEF (CONT'D)

Travel for us. Do a travelogue.
"Shel Silverstein returns to
Tokyo!"

SHEL

Really?

HEF

Yep.

Hef reaches over and opens the magazine. We zoom in on the magazine to see one of Shel's travelogue cartoons:

Shel's on an airplane. He sits hunched over looking extremely uncomfortable in coach. He asks the flight attendant "Excuse me, miss? May I see a wine list?"

The magazine page turns. It continues to turn, transitioning from scenes to cartoons and back again for the following section.

PAGE TURN TO:

INT. SHEL'S ROOM - 1962 - DAY

Shel packs his belongings into a large suitcase. Susan is near, and visibly upset.

SUSAN

You're running out on me.

SHEL

No. That's not what's happening.

SUSAN

Wake up, Shel. I'm pregnant and you're packing a suitcase. What exactly am I missing here?

Shel starts to say something but stops himself. He returns to packing.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

You're a coward. You should just be honest-- be a man and tell me you can't handle it.

SHEL

Maybe I can't. I don't know.

At that line, Susan begins to tear up. Shel stops his packing momentarily and comes to her side.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Don't cry. Please.

SUSAN

You've got a real shitty knack for timing, Shel.

SHEL

You'll be fine. I'll be back soon.

SUSAN

I wish I could believe that.

Susan leaves.

Shel takes a moment, then closes his suitcase.

PAGE TURN TO:

INT. TOKYO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT CUSTOMS - DAY

Shel makes his way to an empty desk and presents his passport to a CUSTOMS AGENT.

The customs agent looks at Shel's passport photo--strange and wild like all the photographs he takes--and looks back at Shel.

CUSTOMS AGENT

Your trip. Is the purpose business or pleasure?

SHEL

Both, I hope.

The agent nods. He stamps Shel's passport.

PAGE TURN TO:

A HAND-DRAWN CARTOON IN SHEL'S DISTINCT PLAYBOY STYLE

A title card is sketched onscreen: "Silverstein in Tokyo"

We see a frumpy and jet-lagged Shel wander up to a gigantic buddha statue looming high over a Tokyo shrine. Cartoon Shel is moved by the scale of it, when he notices an obnoxious American tourist couple sizing up the statue for themselves.

The tourist husband turns to his wife: "It's nice Martha, but where would we put it?"

PAGE TURN TO:

INT. TOKYO BATHHOUSE - LATER

Shel sits naked in a Japanese steam room, surrounded by a number of towel-clad local men.

Shel is trying his damndest to sketch but the steam is making it close to impossible.

PAGE TURN TO:

A CARTOON OF SHEL DANCING AT A TOKYO DISCO.

Shel dances awkwardly with a JAPANESE WOMAN in a crowded Tokyo disco. She is clearly looking for an exit, but an oblivious Shel exclaims "American women just don't understand me!"

PAGE TURN TO:

EXT. TOKYO STREETS - NIGHT

Shel's on a payphone talking to Hef back in Chicago.

SHEL
Hef? You there?

HEF (O.S.)
How's Japan?

SHEL
I love it. I wish I could stay longer, honestly.

HEF (O.S.)
How about the next best thing: Why don't you keep going? We can make it a whole series. "Shel Silverstein Around The World."

SHEL
Hef, my man, you got a deal.

Shel hangs up the phone. He heads off in the neon-tinged Tokyo night, a kick in his step.

PAGE TURN TO:

EXT. - PARIS CAFE - AFTERNOON

Onscreen a title reads: "Silverstein in Paris"

Shel is seated at a small, unadorned table in a French cafe. A moustachioed WAITER comes by. He has a pen and pad ready for Shel's order.

Shel looks up from his menu.

SHEL

A bottle of absinthe, a checkered tablecloth, and a candle in a wine bottle, please.

The waiter jots it down, rolling his eyes.

PAGE TURN TO:

A CARTOON OF SHEL AT THE PARIS CAFE

Shel is seated at the same table with everything he requested, save one thing: THE TABLECLOTH IS WHITE.

A grumpy-looking cartoon of Shel has broken out his pen and is HAND-DRAWING A CHECKERED PATTERN on the tablecloth.

PAGE TURN TO:

EXT. PARIS - LE PARC DE BUTTES-CHAMAUNT - AFTERNOON

Shel sits alongside a middle aged FRENCH WOMAN on a blanket in a grassy park field. Around them, Parisians and tourists stream by. The woman leans in close to Shel.

FRENCH WOMAN

Tell me, what is this thing called an American kiss?

With a grin, Shel leans in and plants a kiss on the French woman's lips.

PAGE TURN TO:

ANOTHER CARTOON:

A French POLICE OFFICER is writing a ticket for an irate Shel, who screams: "You let Gene Kelly dance in the street! You let Fred Astaire daince in the street! You let Audrey Hepburn dance in the street! But I can't?"

PAGE TURN TO:

INT. CHICAGO HOSPITAL - DELIVERY ROOM - NIGHT

Susan is ROLLED into a delivery room by a team of doctors and nurses.

In quick succession, we see:

--The hospital staff getting Susan in place.

--The staff moving Susan through the birthing process.

--Susan letting out an agonizing scream, followed by the sound of a BABY GIRL crying. A DOCTOR holds the newborn up for Susan. Tears well in Susan's eyes.

DOCTOR

She certainly is beautiful. What's her name?

SUSAN

Shoshanna.

The doctor hands SHOSHANNA to one of the nurses.

Shel is nowhere to be found.

PAGE TURN TO:

EXT. SWISS VILLAGE - LATE AFTERNOON

A title reading: "Silverstein In Switzerland"

Shel walks down the snow-packed street of an Alpine Village. He is ridiculously attired, wearing lederhosen, large boots, and a thick, furry snow hat, amongst other winter accessories.

He passes by a small group of SMIRKING LOCALS.

LOCAL #1

Swiss pipe. Swiss cane. Swiss hat.
Swiss shorts. Swiss boots...

LOCAL #2
Must be an American tourist.

PAGE TURN TO:

EXT. SUNNY REST LODGE NUDIST CAMP - DAY

A title reads: "Shel Silverstein... in a Nudist Camp"

Shel sits in the shallow end of a pool sketching. He is trying his best to keep his sketchpad dry as naked men and women play a game of water polo around him.

PAGE TURN TO:

A CARTOON OF SHEL AT THE NUDIST CAMP

A NAKED Shel making his way through a crowded group of nudists. He attempts awkward small talk:

"What's nude? Here I am-- in the flesh! Bare-ly made it here. Gimme some skin!"

Nobody seems to appreciate his puns.

PAGE TURN TO:

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Shel, his photographer, and a few residents of the nudist camp-- all sans-clothing-- speed down the highway in a convertible. Everyone is laughing, having a great time.

They pass alongside a trucker and wave.

Surprised, the trucker waves back.

PAGE TURN TO:

A Close Up of SHEL'S PASSPORT. It's stamped with the countries we've seen so far. We see a series of countries quickly added in rapid succession: ENGLAND, RUSSIA, ITALY, ABU DHABI, ZIMBABWE, NORWAY, and finally SPAIN.

MAGAZINE CLOSES.

INT. SAN PABLO AIRPORT - SPAIN - EARLY MORNING

Shel is dialing a number a payphone. He winds his watch as he waits for the call to connect.

SHEL

Hello? Did the call go through?

SUSAN (O.S.)

Hi Shel.

SHEL

I'm in Spain right now. What are you up to?

SUSAN (O.S.)

You know. Same old same old. Or maybe you wouldn't know.

SHEL

Come on. Don't be mean.

(a beat)

Is she there?

SUSAN

She just woke up from a nap. Do you want to talk to her?

SHEL

Sure.

Shel wait a few moments. The next voice he'll hear is SHOSHANNA's. She is almost two years old now.

SHOSHANNA

Hi.

SHEL

Hi Shoshanna. How are you doing?

SHOSHANNA

Ummm...

SHEL

Uh, is the weather good?

SHOSHANNA

Ummm. Yes.

SHEL

That's good. I'm in Spain.

SHOSHANNA

Okay.

SHEL

Well it's great to talk to you. Can you put your mother back on?

EXT. STREETS OF SEVILLE, SPAIN - LATE AFTERNOON

A beautiful scene as the sun sets in Seville.

Shel makes his way down a busy thoroughfare on the back of a SMALL HORSE, burdened with carrying not only Shel but all of his belongings too.

As the four-legged troop ambles down a crowded line of shops, Shel tips a wide-brimmed hat at a group of BEAUTIFUL SPANISH WOMEN.

SHEL

Senoras!

The women, one by one, pass by Shel. They barely pay any mind to his attempts at gentlemanly behavior.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Hello? Senoras?

A discouraged Shel rides past a BORED-LOOKING MAN sitting on a bus bench.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Any advice on the women in Seville?

The man shrugs slowly, says nothing.

SHEL (CONT'D)

All right. Know where I can get any tranquilizers, then?

And then-- a ray of hope. A BEAUTIFUL SPANISH WOMAN casts her gaze in Shel's direction.

BEAUTIFUL SPANISH WOMAN

¡Es el! ¡Es el!

We see a subtitle that translates her words: "It's him! It's him!"

And with that, the other women on the street begin RUNNING toward Shel. A prominent grin stretching across his face. He opens his arms in a welcoming gesture, prepared to take in the women headed his way.

They come right towards him-- in fact they KEEP GOING, running past an oblivious Shel, mobbing a MAN behind him.

With great difficulty, Shel manages to turn the horse around. A CROWD has built, and after a few moments it parts, revealing the women have been crowding around--

A MATADOR, elegant and magnetic. He SIGNS AUTOGRAPHS with a practiced and regal touch. He MAKES LOVE to each adoring fan with his eyes.

They SWOON as he kisses their hands individually.

Shel looks on: Confounded. Envious.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. SEVILLE DRESSING ROOM - DAY

SHEL

I'm going to fight a bull!

We are close in on Shel as he speaks emphatically into a telephone. A voice, distorted but recognizable as Hugh Hefner's, screams from the other end.

HEF (O.S.)

You're what?!

The sheer loudness of Hef's voice causes Shel to hold the phone back a few inches.

SHEL

It's okay. I've found a few local guys who are gonna help me out.

Hef continues to shout protestations in an indecipherable stupor, causing Shel to hold the phone back even further.

We pull back from Shel's closeup to reveal Shel is standing in the center of a mirrored dressing room. He is being dressed in FULL MATADOR REGALIA, a pair of SEVILLE TAILORS taking a full round of measurements with their tapes.

He's actually overdoing it, his outfit a garish mess. Shel hands the phone to one of the men to hang up.

Another one starts fastening a GOLD-LINED CAPE to Shel's doublet. He deadpans:

SHEL (CONT'D)

Nothing fancy, now.

CUT TO:

INT. BULLFIGHT ARENA HALLWAY - LATER

Shel, now in full costume, is being led down a long hallway by his trainers, JOHN SHORT and TITO PALACIOS, two serious-looking men in their late thirties. They both have a habit of speaking quickly, without wasting time.

SHEL

So there isn't much to bullfighting, right?

TITO PALACIOS

Just hope that the bull is a coward, senior. He has been tried in a tiente and found to have no courage.

JOHN SHORT

Aside from that, just use your head.

The hallway the three men are walking terminates, leading them out into--

EXT. BULL-FIGHTING ARENA - CONTINUOUS

A large, open-air arena packed with spectators. In the center, a ring for toreadors to battle. At the moment, a bullfight is actually occurring. Shel takes in the scene--the matador staring down the bull, unfurling his RED CAPE--twirling it to taunt the animal.

Despite a gallant effort, the matador is promptly GORED by the bull--he is carried off the scene by his team and trailed by WEEPING WOMEN.

Shel GULPS. He is led to the ring by the tournament officials. Tito places his hand on Shel's shoulder. He leans in:

TITO PALACIOS

Feel no sympathy for the bull, senior-- he was born to die in this moment of truth. He was bred for this moment. It is his purpose. His tradition. His destiny to die on the sword of the torero.

SHEL

Thanks, Tito.

TITO PALACIOS

Of course, the bull does not know this.

Shel turns to find Tito has already walked away, leaving him alone. An official SHOVES Shel into the ring.

It is just him and the bull now. Mano-a-mano.

Shel looks toward the stands. He finds a PRETTY GIRL and makes his best attempt to toss a handkerchief at her.

SHEL

A memento.

He makes a deep bow before turning to the bull. Shel holds up his red flag, tries his best to remember the advice given to him by the bullfighters. But it's not enough--

The bull CHARGES. Shel RUNS. The bull catches up, SLASHING the back side of his hip. Shel hobbles to safety, outside the ring, rubbing his BUTT--

He looks toward the woman in the stands: She tosses the handkerchief back, clearly embarrassed for him.

CUT TO:

EXT. COMMUNITY SWIMMING POOL - 1991 - DAY

Matt stands on a diving board, jumping up and down but not diving.

MATT

Dad, you're not looking!

Shel and Sarah are down below, clad in bathing suits. Sarah's wearing a large sun hat and Shel has sunglasses. They sit by the pool, sketch pads in their laps.

Shel looks up, calling out to Matt:

SHEL

I'm looking, buddy! I don't see you jumping, though!

MATT

Gotta make sure it's just right.

Matt carefully tests the board to make sure it bounces. He looks at the springs, running his hand across the surface to make sure it's not too slick.

He basically does everything he can while standing on the board, but dive.

Shel laughs, watching it with Sarah.

SARAH

He'll get to it eventually. He always does.

Sarah returns to her sketch pad. She is hard at work on something. Shel is still watching Matt.

SHEL

He's something else.

SARAH

Stop moving.

SHEL

Oh, you're not finished.

SARAH

Ah ah.

Sarah reaches out, putting her fingers on Shel's lips.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Zip it, mister.

Shel pantomimes zipping his mouth shut as Sarah puts the finishing touches on her sketch.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Okay. You first.

Shel holds up his pad to reveal a drawing of Sarah, most of the image dominated by her exaggeratedly LARGE SUN HAT.

SHEL

Voila! Le grand chapeau.

SARAH

I love it.

SHEL

Good. Your turn.

SARAH

Okay. Promise you won't make fun of me?

SHEL

Cross my heart.

Sarah takes a deep breath and then shows him her drawing.

It's not amazing but it's pretty good.

But Sarah hasn't drawn the deranged/terrifying Shel he usually presents in his work. This Shel is handsome. Noble.

A little sad.

SHEL (CONT'D)

That's some monster.

SARAH

But you're our monster, Shel.

Shel makes a face like he just bit into a lemon. Sarah gives him a playful shove.

SARAH (CONT'D)

You're the worst. You know that?

On the high dive, Matt has finally jumped off. He lands in the water below with a BIG SPLASH.

SHEL

I'm not that bad.

Shel grins. He leans in to Sarah, his lips beginning to pucker, when--

MATT

AAHHHHHH!!!!

-- Matt has resurfaced, shrieking.

A trickle of BLOOD leaks from his mouth as he cries, coloring the pool water.

Sarah and Shel rush to Matt.

SARAH

Baby what happened?

MATT

My tooth. I lost my tooth!

He bares his teeth, showing them that the one in the very front is missing.

CUT TO:

INT. SHEL'S HOUSE - 1991 - NIGHT

Sarah and Shel are tucking Matt into bed.

MATT
I'm worried.

SHEL
It's okay, Matt. There aren't any
werewolves here.

SARAH
Werewolves?

Shel shrugs at Sarah.

MATT
No, it's not that. It's the tooth
fairy. How will she find me if I'm
at your house?

SHEL
Oh. You don't have to worry about
that either. There's no suc--

Sarah gives Shel a sharp JAB to the ribs with her elbow.

SHEL (CONT'D)
What was that for?

SARAH
Don't worry, Matt. Daddy's right.
You don't have to worry. I'll leave
her a note tonight so she doesn't
miss you.

Matt smiles.

MATT
Thanks, Mom.

INT. SHEL'S HOUSE - LATER

Shel and Sarah leave Matt's room. Shel shoots Sarah a look:

SHEL
The tooth fairy?

SARAH
What?

SHEL

We're not doing this, are we,
Sarah? Lying to our son?

SARAH

Oh Jesus. Lighten up. It's just a
little fantasy. You have a problem
with that?

SHEL

I've got no problem with fantasy
when it's fantasy. Not a life
option. The tooth fairy? Santa
Claus? They're phantoms.

SARAH

Don't be so dramatic. Santa Claus
and the tooth fairy are good for
kids. They work the imagination.

Shel scoffs.

SHEL

He's my son, Sarah. He's not going
to have any trouble with his
imagination.

SARAH

Our son, Shel. He's our son. And
we're a family.

Shel makes the same lemon face he made at the pool.

SARAH (CONT'D)

What's with that face?

SHEL

What face?

SARAH

That face you just made. You made
it at the pool, too. What the fuck
is that? Are you grossed out or
something?

SHEL

No. I'm not. It's just-- this is
great. I love this. But I don't
want you to get the wrong idea. I'm
here for Matt. I'm not settling
down.

Sarah stares at Shel a moment.

Then she CRACKS UP.

SHEL (CONT'D)
Are you okay?

SARAH
What in the world makes you think
I'd want to settle down with you?

SHEL
Well, you just said--

SARAH
Shel, fool me once.

At that, the doorbell RINGS. Shel moves to get it.

SARAH (CONT'D)
It's all right. It's for me.

Shel isn't sure how to respond. Sarah heads for the door.

SARAH (CONT'D)
When I said we were a family, I
meant that you and I could still be
a team for Matt.

She kisses Shel on the cheek.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Leave the kid a few dollars, okay?

Sarah grabs her things and heads to the door where a very
HANDSOME MAN-- with a FULL HEAD OF HAIR-- is waiting for her.

CUT TO:

INT. SHEL'S HOUSE - 1991 - MORNING

A column of early morning sunlight creeps over Shel's face as
he lies unconscious on his undersized couch. He SNORES
gently, when all of the sudden--

AHHHHH!!!

A BLOOD-CURDLING SCREAM comes from Matt's room.

Shel, jolted awake runs straight to his son:

SHEL
What's wrong? What's wrong?

INT. MATT'S BEDROOM - 1991 - CONTINUOUS

Matt's crying. He points to his tooth, still where he left it under his pillow the night before.

MATT
She didn't come!

Shel frowns. He's really fucked this one up.

SHEL
Maybe she took the night off?

Matt cries harder. He's freaking out. Losing his shit.

SHEL (CONT'D)
Matt, don't cry.

He tries to shush his son but nothing works. He runs to his closet, tossing aside dirty clothes and empty shoeboxes until he finds a WATER COOLER BOTTLE full of LOOSE CHANGE.

He drags the bottle back to Matt's room.

SHEL (CONT'D)
Here!

Shel tosses a handful of change in the air.

SHEL (CONT'D)
She left this for you!

Shel starts pours the change on the bed.

SHEL (CONT'D)
She's real and she left all of it.
Just for you.

Matt stops crying.

MATT
All of it?

SHEL
All of it.

This seems to satisfy Matt, who starts collecting the change that got lost in his sheets. But he stops, puzzled:

MATT
But she left my tooth.

CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT - 1974 - DAY

Shel sits on the floor across from Shanna, who is four years old and focused on an open book: Shel's Who Wants a Cheap Rhinoceros? She's trying to read. Shel's getting a real kick out of it.

SHANNA
(struggling)
Who wants a cheap...r-hi...

SHEL
Rhinoceros.

SHANNA
...rhinoceros? I know of one for
sale, with fl..fl..fl...

SHEL
...floppy ears and cloppy feet.

Shanna looks up from the book, not sure if she can believe him.

SHANNA
How do you know? You can't see.

SHEL
I wrote it.

SHANNA
You wrote it?

SHEL
Here.

Shel reaches over and flips the book to show another one of his terrifying author photos.

SHEL (CONT'D)
Who is that?

SHANNA
You.

SHEL
I wrote it.

SHANNA
But you look scary.

SHEL
No I don't. I look like me.

SHANNA

No! You look like this.

Shanna makes a scary face of her own. Shel shudders in mock-horror.

SHEL

That is scary.

SHANNA

Have you written other books?

SHEL

Mmm-hmm. I wrote all of those.

Shel motions to a pile of books on the floor. There's Lafcadio: The Lion Who Shot Back, A Giraffe and a Half, and, of course, The Giving Tree.

SHANNA

Wow.

Shanna sorts through the pile, obviously impressed. Shel beams with pride. Even though he's not the best dad, he obviously adores her.

SHANNA (CONT'D)

Are you going to write more?

Shel smiles. There's none of the hesitation we've seen from him when he's asked this question in Key West.

SHEL

Of course.

SHANNA

How many?

SHEL

As many as you could ever want,
baby girl.

Shel wraps his arms around her and kisses her on the forehead.

INT. SUSAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Later, Shel and Susan are in bed, naked. Shel is propped up against the headboard, savoring all of this. He's really enjoying his visit.

SHEL

This has been really good. It's good to see her. It's good to see you. She's grown so much--

-- Shel's stops short as he hears Susan crying. She's doing her best to hide it, to muffle the sobs, but it's no use.

Shel takes a moment, unsure of what to do.

SHEL (CONT'D)

I told you I wasn't good at promises.

SUSAN

I know.

He reach out to her but she rolls over, pulling the sheets around herself, covering up and moving out of his reach.

EXT. NEW YORK CITY PARK - DAY

Shel walks through the city with Jean. Both men have come a long way from their hot dog selling days. They dress in bold 70s fashion, not caring about the looks they're drawing.

Shel's wearing a pirate shirt way before Seinfeld gave it a shot.

JEAN

What do you expect, man? You show up, have your fun, and then you leave. No chick's going to be happy with that.

SHEL

What am I supposed to do? Give up my life? After I worked so hard for it?

JEAN

I think that's exactly what you're supposed to do.

SHEL

In that case, they're better off without me.

JEAN

If that's what you have to keep telling yourself.

But Shel doesn't want to talk about it, doesn't have time. There's something else on his mind:

SHEL
Listen, I know what the next book
is.

JEAN
Oh yeah?

SHEL
Poems.

JEAN
Poems? What's a kid supposed to do
with a poem?

SHEL
Love it.

Jean's still a bit skeptical. He's a guy who writes wordy, biographical humor pieces. Poetry is not his thing but, Shel's determined to convince him--

SHEL (CONT'D)
Here, watch--

-- and he leads Jean into a nearby playground. The parents eye these two weirdos nervously as Shel launches into full Uncle Shelby mode:

SHEL (CONT'D)
Come one! Come all!

-- it's working somehow, the kids are gathering around him, drawn in by his sheer charisma. The parents, though, are still nervous and move in to make sure nothing goes wrong.

SHEL (CONT'D)
Your Uncle Shelby has something
he'd like to share with all of you.

At this, the parents are ready to pounce but then, a CURIOUS KID calls out:

CURIOUS KID
Who's Uncle Shelby?

Jean, who is trying to stay unnoticed on the outside of the crowd can't help but chime in:

JEAN
Good question!

Shel smiles, ready to perform:

SHEL

It's funny you should ask that...

And then Shel starts in, performing "The Dirtiest Man in the World" a poem from Where the Sidewalk Ends:

SHEL (CONT'D)

...Oh I'm Dirty Dan, the world's dirtiest man,
I never have taken a shower.
I can't see my shirt- it's so covered with dirt,
And my ears have enough to grow flowers.

At that, Shel picks up a handful of dirt from the ground and rubs it all over his pirate shirt. The kids are delighted; the adults, not so much.

SHEL (CONT'D)

But the water is either a little too hot,
Or else it's a little too cold.
I'm musty and dusty and patchy and scratchy
And mangy and covered with mold.
But the water is always a little too hot,
Or else it's a little too cold.

Shel scratches himself all over. Jean looks around, in awe. This may be starting to work.

SHEL (CONT'D)

I live in a pen with five hogs and a hen
And tree squiggly lizards who creep in
My bed, and they itch as I squirm,
and I twitch
In the cruddy old sheets that I sleep in.

Shel opens his mouth wide for this next part, so everyone watching can see:

SHEL (CONT'D)

(mouth open)

If you looked down my throat with a flashlight, you'd note
That my insides are coated with rust.

(MORE)

SHEL (CONT'D)
 I creak when I walk and I squeak
 when I talk,
 And each time I sneeze I blow dust.

The parents are definitely starting to ease up. They're still moving in closer and closer, only now it's...

SHEL (CONT'D)
 The thought of a towel and some
 soap make me howl,
 And when people have something to
 tell me
 They don't come and tell it- they
 stand back and yell it.
 I think they're afraid they might
 smell me.

...because they're as drawn in as the kids are.

SHEL (CONT'D)
 The bedbugs that leap on me sing me
 to sleep,
 And the garbage flies buzz me
 awake.
 They're the best friends I've found
 and I fear they might drown
 So I never go too near a lake.

He has them all now. Every single one of them. Even Jean finds himself hanging on his friend's words.

SHEL (CONT'D)
 Each evening at nine I set down to
 dine
 With the termites who live in my
 chair,
 And I joke with the bats and have
 intimate chats
 With the cooties who crawl through
 my hair.

Shel motions as if things are crawling all through his hair. There are, of course, no cooties-- or hair, while we're at it.

SHEL (CONT'D)
 I'd brighten my life if I just
 found a wife,
 But I fear that never will be
 Until I can find a girl, gentle and
 kind,
 With a beautiful face and sensitive
 mind,

(MORE)

SHEL (CONT'D)
 Who sparkles and twinkles and
 glistens and shines—
 And who's almost as dirty as me.

At that, Shel turns and winks at a PARK MOTHER. Jean laughs and shakes his head. Same ol' Shel.

The whole crowd goes wild. People really do love this guy.

CUT TO:

WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS MONTAGE

A recording of Shel's song "My Mind Keeps Movin'" plays over...

A) Shel in his apartment late at night working like a mad man putting together drawings and poems.

B) Shel meticulously sets the poems and drawings with exacting attention to detail in his publisher's office. People step in to try and help him but he blocks them out.

C) Shel sits by as his editor flips through the proof. She's blown away by it and Shel enjoys every minute of it. This is the reaction he was always supposed to get.

D) We see the printing process. Pages rolling through a printing press, pages being bound, covers slipped on.

E) And, finally, the book itself. Where the Sidewalk Ends. It looks almost identical to any copy you'll find in almost every single bookstore across the country. Shel's strict specifications for the production of his children's books are still followed today.

But this isn't today, this is 1974 and this is one of the first copies ever...

EXT. CITY STREET - 1974 - EVENING

...and Shel's holding the book, standing beside a mailbox and trying to decide how to sign it.

Eventually, he settles on "Another one for Shanna, with love, Uncle Shelby."

He quickly realizes his mistake and adds "(Dad)" beneath the signature before slipping the book into a large envelope, (addressed to Shoshanna Silverstein in Baltimore, Maryland) and dropping it in the mailbox.

Smiling, Shel turns to find--

SHEL

Shall we?

-- the PARK MOTHER, now dressed to the nines and waiting for him. She nods and takes Shel's hand, leaning in to whisper in his ear as they head off into the city:

PARK MOTHER

(whispering)

Now, let's see just how dirty you can be...

CUT TO:

EXT. SHEL'S HOUSE - 1991

Shel sits on his porch, sipping lemonade and drawing a picture of an old fortune teller. The cat rubs against his legs.

Matt rides up on his bike, which he drops in the lawn.

SHEL

Well, this is a nice a surprise.

MATT

What're you working on?

Shel tosses the sketch pad aside as if it means very little to him.

SHEL

Not much. What're you working on?

MATT

I don't work.

SHEL

Well, neither do I.

MATT

Good. Then we can play catch.

Matt holds up a baseball and two gloves he brought over. Shel snatches the ball from him and holds it very gingerly in his hand.

SHEL

Catch? With this crystal ball? You can't play catch with this.

MATT
It's a baseball.

But, for Shel at least, it isn't. It's a magical crystal ball and he does everything he can to convince Matt. He runs his hand across its surface, stares into its imaginary depths.

SHEL
Come see your life in my crystal glass-- twenty-five cents is all you pay.

Matt turns out his pockets, they're empty.

MATT
I don't have any money.

Doesn't matter to Shel. He keeps going, runs his hand over the baseball again, pulls it in close to his face--

SHEL
Let me look into your past-- here's what you had for lunch today: Tuna salad and mashed potatoes.

Matt's jaw drops. Shel's right.

SHEL (CONT'D)
Green pea soup and apple juice.

MATT
Well, no soup. But apple juice, yeah.

SHEL
Collard greens and stewed tomatoes.

Matt shakes his head, makes a disgusted face.

SHEL (CONT'D)
Chocolate soup and lemon mousse.

MATT
Nope.

SHEL
You admit I've told it all?

MATT
You were mostly wrong. Except the tuna and the mashed potatoes. How'd you get those?

Shel smiles mischievously, unsure if he's ready to share his secret--

VOICE (O.S.)
Check your shirt, kid!

Shel and Matt turn to find--

-- Jean, standing in front of the house, suitcase in hand. He's gained quite a bit of weight since we last saw him and is sweating in the Florida sun.

JEAN
It's all over your shirt.

Matt looks down to find there are food stains all over his t-shirt. It's how Shel guessed his lunch.

Shel beams:

SHEL
Well if it isn't Mr. Christmas
Story himself!

JEAN
Jesus. Yeah. That's me, I guess.

Matt turns to Shel.

MATT
Who is that?

SHEL
That's my friend. His name is Jean.

MATT
That's a girl's name.

SHEL
Sometimes.

Jean steps up to the porch.

JEAN
Watch it, kid. Keep that up and I
won't give you your present.

Matt's eyes go wide.

MATT
Present?

Jean nods.

Shel stands, greets his friend:

SHEL
It's good to see you, pal. Thanks
for coming.

They hug.

JEAN
You kidding me? I had to see it for
myself: Shel Silverstein, family
man. Your most fantastic invention
yet.

CUT TO:

MATT UNWRAPPING A GIFT--

INT. SHEL'S HOUSE - 1991 - MOMENTS LATER

-- it's --

MATT
A BB gun!

-- of course. Shel and Jean sit on the couch and watch as
Matt rips open the Red Ryder box.

Matt's thrilled and Jean's possibly even happier than he is.
Shel's the only buzzkill, already shaking his head, knowing
exactly where this will end up.

SHEL
Jean, you shouldn't have.

JEAN
I know, I know. I'm a paragon of
generosity.

SHEL
No. I meant, you shouldn't have
given the kid a gun. Now I'll have
to take it away from him; he'll get
upset. It'll be a whole thing.

JEAN
So don't take it away. Don't make
it a thing.

SHEL
Trust me. It's better me than--

SARAH (O.S.)
What the hell is that?

Sarah's walked in on the scene, to find her son pumping a gun.

MATT
My present!

CUT TO:

A MISERABLE MATT SITTING IN A...

INT. T.G.I. FRIDAYS - 1991 - NIGHT

SHEL
Eat your dinner.

All of them-- Shel, Matt, Sarah, and Jean-- are sitting in the restaurant trying to eat dinner but Matt, upset about having his gun taken away, is making it difficult:

MATT
No.

SARAH
Matthew.

Matt turns to her and does a mean impression--

MATT
Aren't you afraid the fork will
"poke my eye out?"

SHEL
You don't need a fork for chicken
fingers and french fries.

MATT
Yes I do.

Matt grabs two forks and starts tossing his fingers and fries like a salad. They fly in the air, hitting some nearby diners.

Matt laughs. In the commotion, he manages to knock over a glass of water, spilling it all over the purse of a woman at the next table over.

SARAH
(to woman, then Matt)
I'm so sorry. Let me get that.
(MORE)

SARAH (CONT'D)

Okay. We're going. You boys have fun.

Sarah stands and grabs Matt. Shel stands too.

SHEL

We can go. We can help you put him down. Right, Shep?

Jean, who is still sitting, fills with panic at just the idea of dealing with this.

JEAN

Uh, of course?

SARAH

No. You stay.

Shel looks Sarah in the eyes. He means it when he says he wants to help.

SHEL

You sure?

SARAH

Yes. You two have done more than enough.

But she smiles after saying it, letting Shel off the hook a tiny bit before leaving the restaurant.

SHEL

Get your act together, buddy!

Shel drops into his seat beside Jean, who has called a waitress over to order a pitcher of beer.

JEAN

I do not get it, man.

SHEL

He's a good kid, really. It's just, you know, he's a kid.

JEAN

And what do you get out of it?

Shel thinks on this a moment, surprising even himself with his answer:

SHEL

Everything.

Jean rolls his eyes.

JEAN
Seems like a real drag to me.

SHEL
Well, it's a good thing you're not
his dad.

JEAN
For him and me both.

The beer arrives and Jean pours two glasses.

JEAN (CONT'D)
And how's the work?

Shel tries to blow it off with a flutter of his hands.

SHEL
What work?

JEAN
What happened to "not giving your
life up after you worked so hard
for it?"

Shel smiles at his own words, his naivete.

SHEL
That was a long time ago.

JEAN
Not as long as you seem to think.

Jean motions over to a nearby table, where a family is openly
staring at Shel.

SHEL
Well now I'm working at this.

Jean sighs. The two old friends drink in silence for a
moment.

JEAN
But it's not you, right? This dad
thing? It's like some suit that
doesn't fit well. You're a creative
force and you're what, rotting in
Florida? You think you've got a
right to keep that in?

SHEL
Jean--

JEAN

You're kidding yourself, pal. I'm your best friend and I can see how this will all end. I'm just doing everyone the favor of calling it before more folks get hurt.

Shel rubs his bald head. He looks troubled.

SHEL

What do you want me to do?

JEAN

Let's do a tour. We could do college campuses. I could do a monologue. You could sing songs, put on plays, anything. We could do the work and get ourselves out there.

SHEL

You know I can't, Jean. I've made promises.

JEAN

I'm not asking you to do the kids stuff. I know that's hard for you ever since--

Here, Shel hardens. He's been humoring his friend up to this point but not now--

SHEL

Don't.

Jean backs off a little bit, his hands up in surrender.

JEAN

I'm just asking you to do the things we've spent our entire lives trying to do.

Again, they drink in silence. Shel looks around at the restaurant. It's certainly a long way from all the amazing places he's been.

JEAN (CONT'D)

Face it, fathead. We're not cut out for the suburbs.

CUT TO:

INT. SILVERSTEIN APARTMENT - 1977 - DAY

A BLINDFOLDED Nathan Silverstein is being led through the Silverstein apartment by Shel.

SHEL
No peeking.

NATHAN
How could I see anything? You've got this around my head so tight.

Nathan is brought into his living room. Shel, a HUGE GRIN on his face, removes Nathan's blindfold.

SHEL
Tada!

Nathan sees a bow-topped BRAND-NEW RECLINING COUCH where the old one used to be.

Despite Shel's wishes, Nathan does not beam.

He looks disappointed.

NATHAN
What is this?

SHEL
What do you mean "what is this"?
It's a couch.

NATHAN
I don't need this. Take it back.

SHEL
If it's about the money, the books are doing really well.

NATHAN
I'm a grown man. I can't have a couch paid for by cartoons.

SHEL
Excuse me?

NATHAN
(ignoring Shel)
Helen, did you know about this?

Helen, caught off guard, isn't sure how to answer. Shel jumps in--

SHEL
 Mom knew about it. It was a
 surprise. I thought you'd be happy.

NATHAN
 You take my couch and you expect me
 to be happy?

Shel throws up his hands.

SHEL
 All right. All right.

He stomps off into the next room, leaving Helen and Nathan
 alone with the couch. Nathan calls out to him:

NATHAN
 You want to make me happy you can
 go and be a father to your
 daughter.

HELEN
 Nathan!

NATHAN
 What? The boy's an embarrassment.

CUT TO:

EXT. SARAH'S HOUSE - NIGHT - 1991

Slightly drunk, Shel stands in front of Sarah's house just
 staring.

After a moment, the porch light turns on. Sarah steps out
 bearing a baseball bat and wearing nothing but an oversized t-
 shirt.

She softens when she sees it's only Shel.

She walks out to him and he smiles sheepishly.

SARAH
 God damn it, Shel. I thought you
 were--

SHEL
 What?

SARAH
 I don't know. Something bad.

Shel doesn't answer, afraid she might be right after all.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Come on.

Sarah takes Shel by the hand and leads him inside.

INT. SARAH'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS - 1991

Shel sits on the couch while Sarah starts a pot of coffee.

SHEL

I'm sorry about earlier.

SARAH

It's okay.

SHEL

No, it isn't.

SARAH

It wasn't you. It was your stupid friend.

The coffee's ready. Sarah pours two mugs and brings them over to Shel. She hands him one and takes a seat on the couch beside him.

SHEL

Thanks.

SARAH

No problem.

SHEL

You were always too good for me.

SARAH

Oh, I know.

They sit on the couch, quietly sipping coffee. It's a moment that shows all the potential here. This could have worked, they could have been a family, but--

SHEL

Jean asked what I've been working on.

SARAH

I told you. Stupid friend.

SHEL

It's a good question.

SARAH

You've been working on being a better father.

SHEL

Yeah, but...

SARAH

It's not enough.

SHEL

It's not that. Jean just reminded me of old times, how hard I had to fight for anyone to want my stuff. Now everyone wants it and I'm not giving it to them. We were talking about maybe touring some colleges--

Sarah knows where this is going. She sets her mug down and braces herself.

SARAH

You made a promise.

SHEL

I know.

Sarah takes Shel's coffee away and gets off the couch.

SARAH

If you're giving up on this, that's on you. I'm not going to fight you for it.

SHEL

I'm sorry.

SARAH

It's not me you need to apologize to.

Shel looks off towards Matt's bedroom. This really is hard for him-- even if he's making the wrong decision.

SHEL

Tell him I'll be back soon.

SARAH

Oh no. I'm done telling him anything for you.

INT. MATT'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER - 1991

Shel quietly enters Matt's room. He walks over and sits on the edge of Matt's bed.

SHEL
Hey, buddy.

Matt wakes up a bit, though he's extremely confused.

MATT
Dad?

SHEL
Yeah, don't worry about it, pal. Go back to sleep. I'm just going to hang out here for a second. If that's okay.

MATT
Okay.

Matt sits up to give his father a big hug and then falls right back to sleep.

After a moment, Shel begins to talk, though in a low whisper, which doesn't seem to wake Matt up.

SHEL
So, it looks like I may be taking off for a little bit. Don't worry; I'll still come back and see you. I'll always be one call away, okay?

Matt doesn't answer. Instead, he starts to faintly snore.

SHEL (CONT'D)
I love you, son. I love you very much.

On the verge of tears, Shel gets up and stumbles for the exit but--

-- he stops at the door. He turns back to Matt, whispering...

SHEL (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I really wish I was better at this.

...before leaving the room.

CUT TO:

INT. SHANNA'S BEDROOM - MORNING - 1981

Shanna sits on the floor, leg-crossed, leaning forward. She's eleven now, with braids and a few teeth missing from her smile. She's utterly wrapped up in telling a story--

SHANNA

And, this time, when the boy called
"Wolf!" no one listened.

-- she's telling the story to a line of stuffed animals. Even with this toy audience, she has all of her father's showmanship.

SHANNA (CONT'D)

And as the boy shouted, he heard
rustling all around him, he saw the
yellow eyes out in the woods. The
eyes were staring straight at him--

Susan sticks her head in--

SUSAN

We're late, bug. Let's go.

SHANNA

Okay.

-- and is quickly gone. Shanna gets up and grabs her backpack but she can't leave yet, not when there's a story to finish.

She walks over to her stuffed animals, leans into them...

SHANNA (CONT'D)

So don't lie, guys. Unless you want
to be eaten.

She makes a chomping motion, as if about to bite into one of her animals.

EXT. BALTIMORE STREET - MORNING - 1981

Shanna and Susan walk to school, holding hands.

SUSAN

What do you think you'll learn
today?

SHANNA

How should I know? I haven't
learned it yet.

SUSAN

Well, what do you want to learn?

Shanna thinks for a second before answering:

SHANNA

Everything.

Susan smiles. She leans over and kisses the top of Shanna's head.

SHANNA (CONT'D)

Mom, stop!

INT. ART CLASS - DAY - 1981

Shanna stands in front of an easel, wearing a smock-- all the other kids are wearing men's dress shirts, backwards and huge on them. Shanna is the only one noticeably wearing a blouse.

But she doesn't seem to be letting it get to her. She's concentrating hard on her painting-- the ocean's depths, complete with jellyfish, sharks, and dolphins-- her tongue poking out the side of her mouth.

The ART TEACHER makes his rounds through the classroom--

ART TEACHER

Ah look at that!

-- stopping at Shanna's station. He's very impressed. It's pretty great work for a 5th grader.

ART TEACHER (CONT'D)

Very nice work, Shanna.

Shanna beams, obviously loving the praise.

INT. CAFETERIA - DAY - 1981

Shanna sits in the cafeteria with two FRIENDS. She blows up a Ziploc bag, sealing the air in.

SHANNA

Here, you put this in there--

One of Shanna's friends places a baby carrot on the inflated bag.

SHANNA'S FRIEND 1

Here?

SHANNA

No, here.

Shanna pushes in one of the corners of the bag.

SHANNA'S FRIEND 2

Like this?

The other friend places the carrot in the corner.

SHANNA

Yeah, then you--

-- Shanna slaps the bag--

-- sending the carrot flying across the cafeteria. The girls' eyes go wide.

Then they burst into laughter.

EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY - 1981

It's recess and Shanna is jumping rope, her two friends are on either end. All three girls sing in rhythm with Shanna's hopping--

GIRLS

(singing)

Had a little sports car, two-forty-eight, ran around the corner, and SLAMMED on the brakes! Policeman caught me and put me in jail. All I had was ginger ale. How many bottles did I drink? 10! 20! 30! 40! 50--

-- Shanna stumbles, the rope hitting against her legs--

-- but Shanna doesn't seem to notice. She pinches the bridge of her nose, her eyes squeezed shut as if taken by a sudden headache.

She takes a few uneasy steps; her friends look worried--

SHANNA'S FRIEND 1

Shanna?

-- Shanna stops, unable to take another step--

SHANNA'S FRIEND 2

Shanna?

-- she drops to her knees before--

-- collapsing. Shanna's friends rush to her side, calling out:

SHANNA'S FRIENDS

Shanna!

CUT TO:

INT. LAFCADIO CAFE - 1991 - NIGHT

Shel sits at the bar, hunched over and nursing a beer. The bar is quiet and a bit sad, with only Shel and handful of oldtimers. Everyone is drinking to forget and keeping to themselves.

There's none of the summer weekend crowd and buzz from earlier.

As Shel finishes his drink, the BARTENDER sets another one in front of him.

BARTENDER

For you. From over there.

The Bartender motions to the other side of the bar where Shel finds--

-- Madeline, from the train into Key West. She looks tired and isn't wearing much make up. She's nursing a drink of her own.

Shel manages as much of a smile as he can, grabs the drink, and walks over to her.

SHEL

Hey, you.

MADELINE

You looked like you could use that.

SHEL

I could.

Shel takes a big gulp before sitting on the bar stool beside her.

SHEL (CONT'D)

How's...

...Shel blanks, not remembering the name...

MADELINE

Amy.

SHEL
Yeah, Amy. How's Amy?

Madeline sighs heavily.

MADELINE
She's good...or, hell, I don't know. She better be good. She's with her father for the week, in Dallas.

SHEL
That's a nice. Gives you a little break.

MADELINE
It's terrible.

Shel finishes his beer. He motions to the Bartender for two more drinks.

They drink together in silence. Whatever spark was there on the train is gone. These are two miserable people.

EXT. BEACH - 1991 - NIGHT

Shel takes his shoes off and steps into the water. The moon is full above him as he walks, the waves lapping at his bare feet.

He is incredibly alone.

INT. SHEL'S HOUSE - 1991 - NIGHT

Shel fills a cardboard box with books. It's the middle of the night and he's pretty drunk but he's decided it's time to pack.

As he picks up another stack of books, a flutter of papers falls to the ground. Shel bends over to look at them.

They're drawings. A few of them were done by Matt but most of them are Shel's. There's a kid sitting on the ground with a waste bucket on his head, a baby pig riding on the back of his father, and a nervous girl waiting to cross the street entirely unaware of the large safe falling from above.

Shel takes a moment to sort through the pictures. There's writing, too. Poems jotted down in Shel's sloppy handwriting all over the place.

He tries to set the drawings aside and goes back to his packing. But it's no use--

-- here in the kitchen he finds the drawing of a boy on a diving board and an accompanying poem--

-- his desk drawer is full of them, the drawing of Sarah's sun hat and Ernie's hand reaching for eggs--

-- even in the bathroom, there's a sketch of a man with an apple balanced on his head and an arrow through his forehead done on toilet paper--

-- there's the fortune teller along with the poem about the food on Matt's shirt--

-- eventually, it's all too much. Shel can't keep up with all of it. Rather than packing, he's gathering. He's sorting and organizing

Shel's hard at work in a way he hasn't been in a long time-- or, that's not right, exactly--

-- because he *has* been doing the work. He's been doing it the entire time he's been in Key West. Matt's bringing it out of him. Matt has him inspired.

Shel just hadn't realized it until now.

CUT TO:

INT. PLAYBOY MANSION - LOS ANGELES - 1981

Shel is sprawled out on a couch in his favorite room at the Playboy Mansion. Piled around him are stacks of books, magazines, days-old containers of Chinese food.

A few PLAYMATES sit around, eager to do whatever they can for him. But Shel waves them away. There is nothing to do.

Hef enters the room. He walks over to the couch and eases next to Shel.

HEF

How you holding up?

SHEL

I should have been there.

HEF

There's nothing you could have done.

Hef places his hand on Shel's shoulder.

SHEL

Brain aneurysm. She was dead before she hit the ground.

Tears stream down Shel's cheeks.

SHEL (CONT'D)

I miss her so much.

HEF

She was a good kid.

SHEL

And I was a rotten father.

HEF

Don't say that. You did your best. It's a tough gig.

SHEL

I wish I was dead.

Hef pats Shel on the shoulder again.

HEF

Take a walk with me?

CUT TO:

INT. PLAYBOY MANSION - GROTTO - MOMENTS LATER

Shel and Hef stroll along the expansive lagoon and waterfall that surrounds the new grotto of the opulent West Coast Playboy Mansion.

With his move to Los Angeles, Hef has managed to build his own idea of paradise. The sun shines gently on the two men as they walk under cloudless California skies.

HEF

There was a part of me that didn't think you'd come when we moved out to LA, but I'm glad you did. It's beautiful out here.

Shel trudges along listlessly.

SHEL

If you say so.

HEF

Listen, I can't even begin to imagine how hard this is for you. You won't want to hear this but you'll get through it. It'll always be terrible but it'll get easier. You can't beat yourself up forever.

SHEL

I can try.

HEF

Do you know how much good you've done? For kids? Your books, your work.

SHEL

I'm done with kids books. I let the only kid that matters slip away.

HEF

Well, why don't you do some more work for us? Or we'll send you out. See the world all over again.

Shel takes a look at his surroundings--the pools, the mansion, the expansive lawn, the grotto.

He looks sick.

He looks empty.

SHEL

I've seen enough, Hef.

And with that, Shel walks out of the mansion.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE - 1981 - NIGHT

Shel sits in first class, staring straight ahead. All his fellow passengers are asleep, the cabin gone dark. Shel is the only one whose light is on.

CUT TO:

INT. SILVERSTEIN APARTMENT - 1981 - DAY

Nathan and Helen stand at the door silently as Shel enters the apartment. Shel stops so both of them can hug him. He lets them do it but does not hug back.

Shel enters the living room to find the couch he bought his parents is gone. Instead, Nathan's old couch is back in its place of prominence.

Shel collapses on it, buries his face in it, and cries. It's been a hard year.

CUT TO:

INT. MATT'S ROOM - 1991 - MORNING

Matt wakes up in bed, he's groggy and sweaty and not paying any attention as he climbs out of bed and steps directly on--

-- A HUMAN HAND.

Terrified, Matt drops to the floor to find his father sprawled out under the bed, asleep. There's a stack of papers clutched in Shel's other arm.

MATT

I thought you were leaving.

At this, Shel jumps awake, bumping his head on the underside of the bed.

But he doesn't let it get to him. He smiles brightly at Matt.

SHEL

Had a change of heart.

MATT

Really?

SHEL

Yeah. I was thinking, if I could be anywhere in the world, where would I want to be?

MATT

I thought you wanted to be nowhere.

Shel crawls out from under the bed.

SHEL

Did I say that?

MATT

Yep.

SHEL

Okay. Maybe I did. But I was wrong. See, last night, I was thinking about it and I realized I knew exactly where I wanted to be.

MATT

With me?

SHEL

Well, a little bit maybe, but mostly with these--

-- Shel reaches under the bed and pulls out a pair of--

SHEL (CONT'D)

-- rollerblades.

Matt laughs. Shel gives him a big hug.

SHEL (CONT'D)

I'm not going anywhere, okay?

Matt hugs a bit tighter before letting go.

SHEL (CONT'D)

Let's get some breakfast.

CUT TO:

INT. SARAH'S KITCHEN - LATER

Shel, Matt, and Sarah sit together eating breakfast.

It is a peaceful scene. Sarah looks on at Shel and Matt, her face flush with relief.

Shel finishes his last bite of breakfast and starts searching through his messenger bag. He looks at Matt:

SHEL

I have one more thing for you.

Shel hands Matt the loose manuscript, bound with string.

Matt takes it, turning it over in his hands. He looks at the title page: a rough illustration of a Boy that looks just like Matt.

MATT

Falling Up?

SHEL
It's my new book.

SARAH
I thought you didn't write these
anymore.

Shel smiles.

SHEL
I didn't. But then I found someone
to write for.

He gently ruffles Matt's hair. Matt turns the cover page to
find a dedication:

FOR MATT

CUT TO:

EXT. SHEL'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Matt and Shel sit in the backyard, shaded by the branches of
his lemon tree. They're leaning up against the tree trunk,
reminiscent of the illustration of the boy and the girl in
The Giving Tree.

Matt and Shel take turns reading poems from "Falling Up".

MATT
Your turn.

SHEL
Okay. Which one?

Matt points to an open page.

MATT
That one.

SHEL
Okay.

Shel clears his throat.

SHEL (CONT'D)
There is a voice inside of you,
That whispers all day long.
I feel this is right for me,
I know that *this* is wrong.
(MORE)

SHEL (CONT'D)

No teacher, preacher, parent,
friend, or wise man can decide
what's right for you--
just listen to
the voice that speaks inside.

Shel closes the book. He pulls Matt close as the two of them lean against the tree.

A sense of release overcomes the man. After all the travels, all the mistakes, for this one moment he finally felt he was where he was meant to be.

And he was happy.

FADE TO: BLACK