

YOUTH

written by

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1. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. DAY

A terribly English face, its pale skin flushed in the crisp springtime sun. Short, fair hair. Jacket and tie. A highly intelligent face, persuasive too. The face of a fifty-year-old man who is sitting, legs crossed, in the pretty garden of a hotel.

Slightly behind him sit two younger assistants.

And behind them, a beautiful swimming pool. Only a few bathers, all of them wrapped in identical, soft white robes. A lazy, early morning, vacation atmosphere.

Jacuzzis dot the flawless lawn around the pool.

In the background, a magnificent hotel. Welcoming, dignified, and luxurious all at once.

And framing the hotel, reigning over it, are the mountains.

The fifty-year-old man takes out a pack of cigarettes and is about to light up when a calm, uncritical voice warns him.

CALM VOICE

You can't smoke here.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD

Not even outside?

CALM VOICE

Not even inside.

The calm voice belongs to the man sitting across from him. English, about eighty years old, in a soft beige jacket and trousers, and eyeglasses with imposing black frames, behind which nest watery, light blue eyes, laden with melancholy and cunning. We're talking about Fred Ballinger.

There's a small table between them. An open newspaper in front of Fred. He is calm, placid, serene, but a vague disenchantment hovers in his eyes. In what we realize is a habitual gesture, he unwraps a candy and pops it in his mouth. He's clearly a regular consumer of such candies.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD

Pardon me, Mr. Ballinger, or may I call you Maestro?

Fred Ballinger shrugs his shoulders. It really doesn't matter to him.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD (CONT'D)

And may I ask how your holiday is going?

FRED BALLINGER

Very well, thank you.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD
Have you been coming here long?

FRED BALLINGER
For more than twenty years. I used to come with my wife. Then I kept coming on my own, I have many friends here.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD
Why Switzerland, Maestro?

FRED BALLINGER
It's close to Italy. And I directed the Venice orchestra for twenty-four years. After London and New York, of course.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD
But of course, how silly of me! This must also be a very good place to relax.

FRED BALLINGER
It's *only* a place to relax.

The fifty-year old smiles. Fred doesn't.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD
Are you still directing or composing, Maestro?

FRED BALLINGER
No, I'm retired.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD
It goes without saying, of course, that I, like everyone else, am a great admirer of yours.

FRED BALLINGER
Thank you.

The fifty-year old smiles.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD
Maestro, as I indicated to you in my letter, I work for the Ceremonies and Events Office at Buckingham Palace.

Fred stirs slightly when he hears this.

FRED BALLINGER
You work for the Queen?

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY
Well, in a sense, yes!

FRED BALLINGER

Good. Monarchies are always so endearing.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY

(surprised) If I may, Maestro, why exactly do you find the monarchy endearing?

FRED BALLINGER

Because it's so vulnerable. Eliminate just one person and all of a sudden the whole world changes. Like in a marriage.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY

Her Majesty the Queen would be honored to confer a knighthood upon you this coming June, Maestro.

A little smile darts across Fred's face.

FRED BALLINGER

Do you know what Satie said when he was offered the Legion of Honor? "It's not enough simply to refuse it, you also have to not deserve it." But I am not Satie. And you must excuse me, I have the most dreadful habit of quoting other people.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY

Her Majesty will be delighted to learn you have accepted.

FRED BALLINGER

Her Majesty has never been delighted about anything.

Embarrassed, the Queen's emissary skates over Fred's remark.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY

What is more, your investiture just happens to coincide with the birthday of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, and the Queen would very much like to give him a concert with the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the New Wimbledon Theatre, to which the Prince is deeply attached, for reasons unknown to me. Her Majesty would be delight-- honored if you would agree to conduct, your own compositions of course.

FRED BALLINGER
I haven't conducted for a long
time.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY
(smiles) I'm sure you haven't
forgotten how it's done.

Fred Ballinger ponders this.

FRED BALLINGER
No, I haven't forgotten how it's
done.

The Queen's emissary's smiles radiantly.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY
Prince Philip and Her Majesty will
be simply ecstatic to hear you
conduct your famous "Simple Songs."

In a remarkably calm, resigned voice, Fred says:

FRED BALLINGER
Ah, but I will not conduct any of
my "Simple Songs."

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY
Why not?

FRED BALLINGER
Personal reasons.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY
The great soprano Sumi Jo has
agreed to sing.

FRED BALLINGER
Sumi Jo won't do.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY
Well then, tell me which soprano
would do, and you shall have her.

FRED BALLINGER
No one will do.

Fred Ballinger's refusal seems irrevocable. He goes back to reading the paper, all the flattery already behind him. The emissary is devastated. He lowers his head.

Silence. Only a slight noise. The camera moves to discover what it is. Fred is rubbing the plastic-coated candy wrapper between his fingers at regular intervals. Without a doubt, the quick, alternating tempo creates a distinct musical rhythm.

The Queen's emissary puts a cigarette between his lips and is about to light it when he remembers that smoking is not permitted. He stammers out one last, lame attempt.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY

If I may, Maestro, the Queen might take your refusal rather poorly, she's not used to being told no.

Fred Ballinger, who is reading the paper, interrupts *ex abrupto* rubbing the candy wrapper.

FRED BALLINGER

I'm sure she will come to terms with it. There are far more important things in life than my Simple Songs.

The emissary is disconsolate.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY

Well then, I shall relay our conversation to the Queen. Good day, Maestro.

The emissary takes his leave. His two assistants follow him. When they get up, we see that there is a man sitting behind them, who looks as if he has overheard the whole conversation.

His name is Jimmy Tree. He's thirty-four years old, Californian, drop dead handsome, a Hollywood star. Though it's still early, he's eating a steak and French fries. Hiding behind sunglasses and a few days' razor stubble, wearing an unflattering baseball cap and sloppy clothes, he looks undone.

The three Englishmen are circumnavigating the pool on their way out of the garden, when someone suddenly catches the emissary's attention.

This someone is floating in the pool: a man about fifty, only his face above water. A puffy, South American face, hair dyed a surreal yellow, full lips, tired features, dark, intelligent eyes, and furrows far too deep for a man his age. He stares blankly into space.

The emissary gazes at the South American and whispers to one of his assistants.

FIFTY-YEAR OLD EMISSARY (CONT'D)

Do you see that man? Could it really be him?

His two assistants turn to look at the man in the pool, and recognize him immediately. They get all excited.

FIRST ASSISTANT

Why yes, it is!

SECOND ASSISTANT

Good god, it really is him.

The three Englishmen keep walking, but they can't keep from glancing furtively at the South American who, with the help of a woman in her forties and three lifeguards, whom he leans on like a dead weight, is getting out of the pool. He struggles up the low stairs, which to him seem insurmountable.

As he slowly emerges from the water, we see how extraordinarily obese he is, and how much trouble he has walking. Panting, this cumbersome yet charismatic creature settles himself at the edge of the pool. His arms are swarming with tattoos: faces of famous heroes from famous revolutions.

The lifeguards withdraw.

The forty-year-old woman with a kindly, patient face is his companion, apparently. She sits next to him and lovingly rubs his hair with a towel, caring for this immense whale.

FADE OUT.

2. EXT. VENICE. NIGHT

Guitar notes - irregular, sporadic, imploded, muffled sounds that seem to come from the deepest depths of the sea or your own conscience - surface now and then during the scene.

What we see next is like a vision.

A breathtakingly beautiful vision: high water in a deserted Saint Mark's Square. That vast space, with its unforgettable porticos and palaces, is now a square lake, water lapping at the columns.

A narrow, raised walkway intersects the Square. But there's no one on it, at least not right now.

Then, in the dead of night in this most mysterious city, Fred Ballinger appears at the far end of the long walkway. Like all old people, he looks vulnerable as he shuffles along, taking tiny, trying steps.

Fred looks up and espies a statuesque female figure coming toward him from the other end of the walkway. They move toward each other, the only human beings in this surreal, submerged Venice. They're closer now, they're about to meet. With ill-concealed amazement, Fred fixes his eyes on the woman: she's 6'1".

An impossible beauty, with black hair and eyes so green they seem fake, wearing a one-piece bathing suit and a sash that says MISS UNIVERSE.

She's even closer now, approaching him with the solemn, inhuman gait of a top model in a big-time fashion show. They're about to meet. But the walkway is only three feet wide, so they both move aside to let the other pass without falling in the water. It's inevitable that they touch. Miss Universe's plentiful décolleté brushes against Fred's scrawny chest.

He gazes up at her from below, as if he were beholding a benign tragedy.

Like all beauty queens, she stares coldly into space, not even noticing her perfect body's fleeting contact with Fred.

Having avoided a mishap, they each proceed on their way. The beauty queen sways off into the full moon, surrounded by that expanse of water, like in some debatable Dolce & Gabbana dream.

Fred shuffles along the walkway. He's afraid now, and with good reason: the water is rising quickly, flooding the walkway and swirling around his feet, his ankles, his knees.

Fred tries to hurry, but he's old and the water tugs at his legs. He turns and cries out in a suffocated voice, as if begging Miss Universe for help.

FRED BALLINGER
Melanie, Melanie!

But Miss Universe is no longer there, it's as if she evaporated.

Fred keeps going, but not for much longer. The water is up to his chest now, his neck, his chin, he's panicked, a stifling guitar note sounds, when, luckily...

3. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. NIGHT

... he wakes up. Fred quickly regains his composure. He struggles up from his chair. It's late. No one's around. Except for a small crowd of guests in the distance, real night owls.

The guitar notes flow now, crisp and real.

Fred takes tiny steps toward them, the underwater pool lights providing a shadowy glow.

As he shuffles across the deserted lawn, the OPENING CREDITS start to roll, and a voice joins in with the guitar, it's coming from the little group of people.

The song is "Onward," a magnificent, somber, American folk ballad. Fred instinctively heads toward the music.

Fred hovers near the edge of the gathering, where Mark Kozelek, guitar in his lap, is singing "Onward." Three women, a twenty-year-old kid, and Jimmy Tree are there as well. The little group, all mellow and relaxed, listens contentedly to the great American folksinger.

The OPENING CREDITS continue to roll as Fred Ballinger, standing slightly apart, listens to the beautiful ballad. Mark Kozelek notices him and is unable to conceal his emotion at having such a distinguished spectator.

Mark gives a reverential little bow with his head and then, during an instrumental break, says to Fred.

MARK KOZELEK

Maestro.

Fred smiles slightly.

The OPENING CREDITS are over.

Jimmy Tree is stretched out on the grass, eyes closed. He opens his eyes and sees Fred. They nod hello to each other; then Jimmy gestures amiably to him to join him. Fred goes over and sits near Jimmy, perching on the edge of a chaise lounge. Jimmy offers him a mug.

JIMMY TREE

I slipped a bit of gin and tonic
into the herbal tea. Interested,
Mr. Ballinger?

FRED BALLINGER

No, thanks. I'd prefer a bit of
herbal tea slipped into a gin and
tonic.

They both smile.

Fred takes out a cloth handkerchief, quickly blows his nose, expertly folds his handkerchief and, in a habitual gesture he has clearly done a million times, quickly wipes his nose four times, then puts his handkerchief back in his jacket pocket.

Jimmy Tree, an irresistible smile on his face, has observed Fred's handkerchief routine with utmost attention.

JIMMY TREE

I was thinking today that you and I
have the same problem.

FRED BALLINGER

Is that so.

JIMMY TREE

We've been misunderstood our whole lives because we allowed ourselves to give in - just once - to a little levity.

FRED BALLINGER

Perhaps. Because levity is an irresistible temptation.

JIMMY TREE

I've worked with all the great European and American directors, but I'll be remembered forever for Mister Q, for a fucking robot. I had to wear a suit of armor that weighed two hundred pounds, you couldn't even see my face. But every five minutes someone has to come up and remind me that I did Mister Q, the same way they remind you that you did those "Simple Songs." And they forget that you also composed "The Black Prism," "The Life of Hadrian," and all the rest.

Fred Ballinger smiles and so does Jimmy. They're accomplices now.

FRED BALLINGER

Because levity is also a perversion. What are you doing in Europe?

JIMMY TREE

I'm doing a new film, in Germany, starting in a month. I'm developing the role.

FRED BALLINGER

Is it a lighthearted role?

JIMMY TREE

That depends on your point of view.

FRED BALLINGER

Is it coming along well?

JIMMY TREE

We'll see.

Mark Kozelek breathes the last note of "Onward." The little group claps languidly. Fred doesn't join in. Then, struggling to get up, he takes his leave of Jimmy.

FRED BALLINGER

It's late for me.

JIMMY TREE

Not for me.

Fred smiles. Jimmy salutes him playfully, two fingers to his temple.

Fred moves off with the uncertain gait of an old man. Jimmy drinks and observes Fred's slow walk.

4. INT. HOTEL RECEPTION/ELEVATOR. NIGHT

Fred Ballinger stands immobile in the lobby, across from the reception desk. He's waiting for the elevator.

A young night doorman stares blankly at a small, silent TV.

A very petite, dignified-looking woman, who looks older than her sixty years, rings the doorbell. The doorman, without taking his eyes off the TV, presses a button and buzzes her in. The woman enters and sits on a bench. Melancholy and resigned, she stares into space. Fred Ballinger, still waiting for the elevator, has watched all this, his face expressionless.

Finally, the elevator. An old contraption with a metal grate. Fred steps inside. The elevator ascends. We see his silhouette rising.

4A. INT. HOTEL ELEVATOR/CORRIDOR. NIGHT

It stops at his floor. A chubby, unattractive young woman, about twenty, is waiting to take the elevator down. Her face is pocked here and there with pimples, an adolescent peculiarity that clashes with her sharp, aggressive look. We can safely assume that she's a hooker, but a hooker *sui generis*.

Fred forgets to look at her, and she pays no attention to him.

Alone, Fred Ballinger makes his way down the hallway, taking tiny, slow steps. Next to every door are pairs of hiking boots, neatly arranged, which the guests have put out to be aired.

In the silence of the night, an old man in an electric wheelchair overtakes Fred and vanishes around a corner.

The sound of a violin comes from one of the rooms, stopping Fred in his tracks. He turns, searching for the source. It starts up again, from the beginning: only two notes, played poorly. Someone's obviously practicing, one of those really tedious exercises.

Fred takes a step in the direction of the sound, but it stops again.

He is about to keep walking when he encounters his reflection in a mirror. He touches a sunspot on his temple, which he notices for the first time there in the mirror.

5. INT. MICK BOYLE'S SUITE. NIGHT

Those same violin notes start up again, but extra-diegetic now, and perfectly executed. They give life to a soft, melancholic music.

We're in a room where confusion reigns: papers and notes spread all over the place, laptop computers left open and forgotten. Five kids - four guys and a girl - all under thirty, are sleeping, curled up in armchairs scattered here and there, and on the bed. They are sleeping the sleep of the just.

Fred Ballinger and another elderly man are standing in the room, he too about eighty years old, still attractive, his hair a little long, his bright, sparkling eyes omnivorous and full of life. His name is Mick Boyle.

The two old men silently observe the sleeping kids. The violin vanishes. After a while.

FRED BALLINGER
Did you take a piss today?

MICK BOYLE
Twice. Four drops. You?

FRED BALLINGER
Same. More or less.

MICK BOYLE
More or less?

FRED BALLINGER
Less.

MICK BOYLE
Look how beautiful they are.

FRED BALLINGER
Beautiful, yes.

MICK BOYLE
If you only knew how moving it is to see them working on the screenplay. They're so passionate.

FRED BALLINGER
They've caught your passion.

MICK BOYLE
And have you lost yours?

Fred just shrugs.

Mick, with what is clearly a habitual gesture, smooths his hair across his forehead with the palm of his hand, and then changes the subject.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

See those two?

He points to the girl and one of the guys, who are sleeping on opposite sides of the room.

FRED BALLINGER

Of course I see them.

MICK BOYLE

They're falling in love, but they don't know it yet.

The girl, her eyes still closed, gives a smile that no one sees. Because she's not asleep.

FRED BALLINGER

How do you know?

MICK BOYLE

(reflects) I know because I know everything there is to know about love.

FRED BALLINGER

Then you'll have to give me lessons one of these days.

MICK BOYLE

It's late now.
Have you heard the latest? Joyce Owens, Miss Universe, is coming to stay. Apparently one of her prizes is a free week in our hotel.

FRED BALLINGER

Yeah, I heard. But it seems more like a punishment than a prize to me.

MICK BOYLE

Which is just how it should be. Some forms of beauty have to be punished, to make life bearable for the rest of us.

FRED BALLINGER

How's the screenplay coming along?

MICK BOYLE

It's going to be my masterpiece. My testament.

(MORE)

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

And Brenda is going to make an unforgettable leading lady. We hit on the title today: "Life's Last Day." What do you think?

FRED BALLINGER

(reflects) It's good. I'm going to bed.

Fred heads out while in the background Mick shakes one of the kids.

MICK BOYLE

Come on, guys, wake up, it's time to go back to your hotel.

6. INT. FRED BALLINGER'S SUITE. NIGHT

A beautiful woman, about forty, sleeps soundly in the bed. Her name is Lena.

A sweeping shot of the room. We see the night stand, with a framed photograph from ten years ago, of Fred being hugged by a woman his age. They smile happily in the photo. We can assume it's his wife.

The sweeping shot ends on Fred, sitting in a chair. He's staring bright-eyed at the sleeping woman.

Lena opens her eyes and sees Fred. She's surprised.

LENA

Aren't you sleeping, Daddy?

Fred, trying to hide his tears, smiles sadly.

FRED BALLINGER

No, I'm looking at you.

Lena notices her father's tears.

LENA

But Daddy, you're...

FRED BALLINGER

(anticipates what she is going to say) Don't worry. Old people cry all the time. And for no good reason.

6A. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. DAWN.

Early morning dew. The extensive hotel grounds, punctuated here and there by beautiful, centuries-old trees.

The chubby hooker and the petite, sixty-year-old woman we saw earlier at the reception desk appear, seen from behind. They're probably mother and daughter.

They walk hand in hand, sad and forgotten by the world.

With a awkward, inelegant gesture, the girl adjusts her very short shorts, which have annoyingly worked their way in between her buttocks.

Mick Boyle is sitting on a bench, looking over his work notes. He senses the presence of the two women and looks up. His eyes immediately grow melancholy when he sees the mother and daughter walking hand in hand.

The sky beyond the high mountain peaks begins to brighten, while the dew vanishes from the leaves of the garden's beautiful plants.

7. INT. FRED BALLINGER'S SUITE. DAY

Fred is on his stomach on a massage table. An eighteen-year-old girl, incredibly timid, slight, with delicate features, is giving Fred a massage.

Lena looks out the window and sees an Asian man sitting at the far end of the garden.

LENA

That guy who levitates is out there.

FRED BALLINGER

I've been coming here for years. He's never levitated. So, where is it you decided to go?

LENA

Polynesia. For two weeks. Julian went overboard, as usual.

FRED BALLINGER

Good.

LENA

(smiling) You'll be glad to have the room all to yourself now. I was in your way.

FRED BALLINGER

Not at all. You kept me company. Mick is working and I get bored.

LENA

You won't be bored now. I arranged the full treatment for you.

(MORE)

LENA (CONT'D)

Massage and sauna every day, check-ups with the doctor... to help you get back in shape.

FRED BALLINGER

At my age, getting back in shape is merely a waste of time. I'm going to be even more bored now.

LENA

You're a victim of your own apathy, Daddy. Why don't you go to Venice one of these days? You could bring flowers to Mummy.

Fred doesn't answer.

The masseuse is very discreet, it's as if she weren't listening.

LENA (CONT'D)

By the way, the French write to me every day. They're really insisting that you write your memoirs. What should I do?

FRED BALLINGER

Let them insist.

Lena stares at her naked father being massaged. His body is worn with age. A wave of tenderness washes across her face. Sad now, she takes her leave.

LENA

Bye, Daddy, I'll call you when we get there.

FRED BALLINGER

Have fun.

Lena wheels her carry-on out of the room.

MASSEUSE

(Swiss accent) Would you mind turning over on your back, please?

Her voice is that of a young girl, which makes her even more charming. Fred turns over, though not without difficulty. The masseuse starts rubbing his arms.

His eyes are closed, but he opens one slightly, on the sly, to look at the girl's face.

7A. INT. HOTEL. (VARIOUS SETTINGS). DAY**7A/1**

The day begins at this enormous compound, which is at once a hotel, a spa, a medical center, a sports complex, and a physical rehab facility. With established rhythms and well-defined schedules.

In fact, antique bells ring throughout the hotel, so that the guests will not be late for their appointments.

7A/2 7A/3

Nurses and masseuses, all in uniform, emerge from sterile changing rooms and head to their work stations.

7A/4

Doctors don white coats.

7A/5 7A/6 7A/7

The guests, most of them elderly, and all of them wearing identical hotel bathrobes, form orderly lines and head to their check-ups, or to the swimming pools, saunas, and massage rooms.

The silent, serene, and sparsely attended activity of a world just set in motion.

7A/8

The waiters, backlit, clear tables in the breakfast room.

7A/9

An anorexic cook heads out behind the kitchen. Enjoying the first drag on his cigarette, he stares at the clear blue sky above the mountains.

8. INT. MASSAGE ROOM. DAY

Soporific, new age music pervades the room.

In the darkness, relieved only by a sea of candles, Fred is lying on an enormous straw crib, like an eighty-year-old baby Jesus.

A little Thai man, about fifty, is placing burning black stones on Fred's body. Fred moans lightly in pain each time one touches his skin.

The masseur smiles, then says in halting English.

MASSEUR

After pain come pleasure.

FRED BALLINGER

And then pain again.

9. INT. HOTEL INFIRMARY. DAY

A nurse is drawing Fred's blood.

A doctor, about sixty, comes in. He has a nice, kindly face.

DOCTOR
How's it going, Mr. Ballinger?

FRED BALLINGER
It's going. I don't know where, but
it's going.

The doctor smiles. Then he stops and looks at Fred's face. He puts his glasses on and examines Fred more attentively.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
My daughter says I'm apathetic. Is
it that obvious?

DOCTOR
(smiles) Would you like to have
those sunspots removed? We could
take them off with a laser.

FRED BALLINGER
No, why?

DOCTOR
Because they're unsightly.

FRED BALLINGER
But they remind me of something
fundamental.

DOCTOR
What?

FRED BALLINGER
That my life is full of spots.

The doctor smiles. Fred smiles. The nurse has finished drawing his blood. Fred looks out the window, which frames a spotless mountain peak set against an unbelievably blue sky. Fred is serious now.

10. INT. MICK BOYLE'S SUITE. DAY

The young screenwriters are in the middle of an argument. Mick, immersed in a sea of papers, listens but doesn't intervene.

Fred comes in, but no one pays any attention to him. They're all too embroiled in their argument. So Fred listens impartially.

They're all talking at once, it's impossible to make out everything they're saying, but two of them, arguing fiercely, are louder than the others.

Naturally, it's the boy and the girl who, according to Mick, are falling in love.

SCREENWRITER IN LOVE

You've been watching too many movies, you idiot, you've forgotten what life's about!

FEMALE SCREENWRITER

Movies are life! All you know how to do is criticize. If you only had some inspiration for once.

He laughs and claps sarcastically.

A shy screenwriter, sitting next to Mick, comments under his breath on their argument.

SHY SCREENWRITER

Exactly!

SCREENWRITER IN LOVE

Inspiration?! Didn't they teach you at film school that inspiration doesn't exist? Inspiration's a lie. There's no such thing as inspiration, only fermentation.

SHY SCREENWRITER

Exactly!

FEMALE SCREENWRITER

Inspiration exists, alright, you just don't recognize it, because you have zero talent.

SHY SCREENWRITER

Exactly!

Mick, hearing the contradictory remarks coming from the shy screenwriter sitting next to him, addresses him harshly.

MICK BOYLE

What the fuck are you doing?
Agreeing with everyone?

SHY SCREENWRITER

Of course! I'm timid and insecure. My parents never gave me any encouragement. My brother's favorite sport was beating me up. My sister called me "the failure".
(MORE)

SHY SCREENWRITER (CONT'D)
I've never had a girlfriend, and I
also have serious doubts about my
sexual orientation.

Mick stifles a laugh.

MICK BOYLE
Stop it! You're not going to move
me.

SHY SCREENWRITER
My aunt has polio.

Mick laughs.

SCREENWRITER IN LOVE
(furious) Don't you dare accuse me
of having no talent ever again, you
idiot.

FEMALE SCREENWRITER
Now's not the time for
fermentation, you untalented
parasite.

MICK BOYLE
That's enough, you're really
getting on my nerves. We have to
come up with an ending, and you're
wasting time talking philosophy and
big ideas.

Fred joins in.

FRED BALLINGER
But they're right, Mick. It's the
big ideas that give rise to all the
little ones.

Only now do the others realize Fred is there.

MICK BOYLE
Oh, Fred, you're here. Listen, I
still have a couple of hours to go
here, and then I have to talk to
the doctor. I'll find you after
that.

FRED BALLINGER
Okay.

Sad, and also a bit disappointed because no one even
commented on his observation, Fred leaves the room, while
Mick hounds his screenwriters.

MICK BOYLE
Well? Come on, who's got an idea
for the ending?

Another screenwriter, who hadn't taken part in the argument, speaks up. He has a long beard and tousled hair: the epitome of a well-educated, ironic young man. As if having a vision, he says dreamily.

INTELLECTUAL SCREENWRITER

So he's on his deathbed, he can barely talk, and he whispers to his wife: "Don't cry, honey. You know I've always found women who weep frivolous and repulsive."

The two who had been fighting exchange a conspiratorial look and start to laugh.

The timid, insecure screenwriter thinks for a moment and then says with confidence.

SHY SCREENWRITER

Nice!

Mick throws him a disgusted look, then says.

MICK BOYLE

What a totally asinine idea. What else?

11. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. DAY

A deep torpor has settled over the hotel guests, as if they'd been anesthetized. The silence is numbing. In the early morning light, we watch a slow swarm of rich Russians drop onto chaise lounges to sunbathe, and a handsome black American family, immobile in the pool.

Off to one corner, outdoor massages are available, in the shade of a beautiful canopy. Two teenage boys, in the swirl of a hormonal tempest, are hanging around there, furtively eyeing a beautiful woman who is getting an gentle, oriental style massage.

Few guests, all of them wealthy.

We can make out a pair of parachutists in the distance, set against the crisp, imposing mountains.

An elderly couple has dozed off in their electric wheelchairs.

Their Asian caregivers are as discreet and invisible as mice.

A fifty-year old son does gymnastics with his decrepit father.

At the far end of the garden, near the hedges that act as a fence, the obese South American is leaning on a cane and signing autographs for a whole mix of people, all of whom seem bewitched by their hero. His companion at his side. In eternal apprehension, she regulates how much time each person gets with her husband. Someone takes out a cell and snaps a photo on the sly. She is furious and orders a complete moratorium on photos of her husband.

Fred Ballinger, wrapped in a white robe and lying on a chaise lounge, sucks on a candy and watches, with resigned interest, the autograph-signing ritual. One hand dangling off the chaise, he rubs the candy wrapper between his fingers, the irregular tempo creating a clear rhythm.

Jimmy Tree is stretched out on a chaise lounge next to Fred. He too is studying the South American, but seems more interested in his cane. It's of briarwood, made to look old, all twisted and full of knots.

Jimmy looks around and something else catches his eye: a mother is rubbing suntan lotion on her thirteen-year-old daughter.

The girl, so pale you can almost see through her, stares at the ground, as if overcome by a pathological timidity. Then, for no apparent reason - she must have gotten nervous - she starts biting her fingernails, practically devouring them. After a while, the mother apparently tells her to stop, because she gets all pissed off, screams at her mother, then gets up and storms off.

Jimmy, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, studies her like an entomologist.

The South American, leaning on his cane and his wife, is coming across the garden. They skirt a deserted tennis court. But his attention is drawn to a particular: a forgotten tennis ball lies in the middle of the court.

11A. INT. PHARMACY. DAY

Fred and Mick stand next to each other at the counter of the pharmacy.

Fred waits impassively while Mick, glasses perched on the tip of his nose, checks to make sure that the pharmacist is getting everything right.

The pharmacist places a whole range of drugs on the counter in front of Mick, creating a veritable "mountain" of medicine.

PHARMACIST'S VOICE
That's everything.

MICK BOYLE

Good.

Mick turns to Fred, and only now does he realize that his friend hasn't asked for any medicine for himself. We can hear the puzzlement in Mick's voice as he asks.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

Don't you need anything?

So Fred, faking uncertainty, looks around the pharmacy and fixes his gaze on the first shelf he happens to see, which contains a full selection of Band-aids.

Fred grabs a random box of Band-aids and puts it on the counter in front of the pharmacist.

Mick has observed Fred's actions closely.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

What do you need Band-aids for?

FRED BALLINGER

I don't. I'm getting them out of solidarity with you.

Mick turns back to his mountain of medicine and speaks in a voice that is halfway between serious and humorous. Barely opening his mouth, he says to himself, but as if he were speaking to Fred.

MICK BOYLE

Fuck you.

A wry smile appears on Fred Ballinger's face.

12. EXT. COUNTRY LANE. DAY

Fred and Mick stroll through a meadow in a beautiful valley, with an expanse of trees to the right, and the mountain village to the left.

The two friends are chatting.

FRED BALLINGER

Why do you think we come here on holiday every year?

MICK BOYLE

Because you always want to go back to the places that made you happy.

FRED BALLINGER

(smiles) That's the screenwriter in you talking.

MICK BOYLE

I wish! Actually, it's John Cheever.

FRED BALLINGER

Do you remember Gilda?

MICK BOYLE

The film?

FRED BALLINGER

No, Gilda Black. The Gilda we both were in love with.

MICK BOYLE

Gilda Black???

FRED BALLINGER

Gilda Black.

MICK BOYLE

(laughs) What are you going and remembering her for? That was a hundred years ago.

FRED BALLINGER

To me it seems like yesterday. I would have given twenty years of my life to sleep with her.

MICK BOYLE

Well that would have been a pretty stupid thing to do! Gilda Black wasn't worth twenty years of your life. She wasn't worth a single day.

Fred is suddenly incredibly disappointed and also somewhat apprehensive.

FRED BALLINGER

How would you know? Did you sleep with her?

Mick stammers, he realizes he has put his foot in his mouth.

MICK BOYLE

What? What did you say?

FRED BALLINGER

You heard me. Sixty years ago you swore you never slept with her, out of respect for my love for her. But now you've changed your tune.

MICK BOYLE

Look, I have to confess something.

FRED BALLINGER

Fine, go right ahead!

MICK BOYLE

The real tragedy -- and believe me, it really is a tragedy -- is that I can't even remember if I slept with Gilda Black.

FRED BALLINGER

Are you serious?

MICK BOYLE

Unfortunately, yes. I swear.

FRED BALLINGER

Well then, that changes things.

MICK BOYLE

How?

FRED BALLINGER

If you were sure you'd slept with her, our friendship would be over right this second. But if you're not sure, well, let's just say... that I can live with the uncertainty.

MICK BOYLE

Anyway, if I did go to bed with her and don't remember it, that means she wasn't worth twenty years of your life, wouldn't you say?

FRED BALLINGER

Well yes, I guess you're right. So Gilda Black is a closed book between us.

MICK BOYLE

Good. Have the kids left?

FRED BALLINGER

Your son wanted to do it up in style: Polynesia.

MICK BOYLE

I know, he's a real spendthrift, that one. Who knows where he gets it from.

FRED BALLINGER

Not from you, obviously.

Mick laughs. Silence. All of a sudden, Fred seems anxious. He sighs. Mick notices.

MICK BOYLE

What? Are you still thinking about Gilda Black?

FRED BALLINGER

No. I'm thinking about the things you forget over time. I don't remember my parents any more. What they looked like, how they talked. Last night I was watching Lena as she slept and I started thinking about all those little things, thousands of them, that I did for her as her father. I did them deliberately, so that she would remember them when she grew up. But in time she won't remember a single one.

Mick looks at him but doesn't know what to say. It's a beautiful moment.

Fred meets Mick's gaze and, with a quickness and vigor that is unusual for him, he grabs his friend's arm and hisses angrily.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)

Tremendous efforts, Mick.
Tremendous efforts, and all for the most modest results. That's the way it always is.

Mick is surprised, stunned even.

MICK BOYLE

This conversation's getting interesting. I need a cigarette. I left mine in the hotel, though. Wait here, I'm going to go buy another pack.

Fred nods sadly, as if defeated.

Mick heads off toward the village.

The silence is broken by a cicada singing. Fred turns toward the sound and, as if in a trance, heads toward it.

CUT TO:

12A. EXT. WOODS. DAY

Fred is in the middle of the woods, where hundreds of cicadas are singing. Then a strange bird chimes in, making an odd sound, a sordid chirping that can be heard above the cicadas. Fred forgets about the cicadas and heads off in search of the bird, drawn to this new noise.

He stares up at the trees, hoping to see the mysterious bird. He crosses the woods, is almost at the other side, when a new constellation of sounds is added to the others: cowbells.

Fred comes out of the woods and is greeted by a sunny, gently rolling hill. Scattered across it are fifty or so grazing cows, randomly ringing their bells. Fred's eyes light up at the sight. He sits on a rock and stares.

He listens to this superimposition of sounds: cows, bird, cicadas.

Fred closes his eyes, concentrating now, as the camera slowly zooms in on him.

Fred begins to move his hand - gently, gracefully, just like an orchestra director - and, as if by magic, some of the cowbells fall silent. Others keep ringing, but no longer in anarchic fashion. Now they play in some clearly melodic manner. Fred moves his hand again and silences more bells, so that only two keep ringing, sounding alternate notes. Next Fred waves his arm behind him, and the bird comes in. Then he sweeps both arms wide, inviting the chorus to join in: hundreds of cicadas accompany the bird solo and the cowbell countermelody. A symphony of nature. Fred's eyes are still closed, he is smiling to himself.

The camera has zoomed in to a close-up of Fred's face. For the first time, he looks happy.

Mentally selecting the sounds nature offers him, he is doing something amazing. He is composing.

CUT TO:

12B. EXT. MEADOW. DAY

Mick returns to the spot where he left Fred. He looks around, but there's no sign of him. He lights a cigarette.

As he does so, his eye catches something moving behind a fence in the distance. A white horse.

So Mick does the only thing he knows how to do: he makes a frame with his hands, the way directors do, to simulate the viewfinder of a movie camera. He closes one eye and with the frame of his hands he follows, in a panoramic shot, the movement of the beautiful white horse.

13. INT./EXT. HOTEL. DAY

A pedestrian bridge leads from the back of the hotel to the mountains. About a dozen staff - waiters, cooks, and nurses - have congregated here, enjoying their break.

They're all smoking, chatting, horsing around; this is their time to relax. All except for one girl, who keeps to herself. She smokes too, but doesn't talk to anyone. She seems melancholy. She is leaning over the railing, staring down below, but without really seeing anything. It's the masseuse we saw in Fred's room.

Fred is a hotel hallway, standing at a window that looks out onto the bridge. His face too is veiled in melancholy as he stares at the lonely masseuse who smokes and stares.

The sound of that violin, still practicing that same exercise, catches Fred's attention. Off he goes, searching for the source.

14. INT. HOTEL HALLWAY / ROOM. DAY

Fred moves cautiously down the deserted hallway. The violin can be heard more clearly now. He runs into the sixty-year-old doctor with the kindly face, followed by two nurses. Fred and the doctor nod in greeting.

Fred comes upon a room, the door open. The chambermaid is just finishing tidying up, and at the far end, standing in front of a mirror with a musical score open in front of him, a twelve-year-old boy is practicing those same two notes, over and over and over.

The chambermaid leaves, pushing her cleaning cart through the door.

Fred instinctively steps into the room. He watches the boy play. The child senses someone's presence and turns to look at Fred.

Fred smiles at him. The boy smiles back.

Fred is a little worked up.

FRED BALLINGER
Do you know who composed the piece
you're practicing?

BOY
No, who?

FRED BALLINGER
Me.

BOY
I don't believe you. What's it
called?

FRED BALLINGER
It's called "Simple Song No.3."

The boy checks the title on the cover of his score.

BOY
You're right. And what's the
composer's name?

FRED BALLINGER
Fred Ballinger.

BOY
And you, what's your name?

FRED BALLINGER
Fred Ballinger. You can check at
the front desk. I'm staying here.

The boy is surprised now.

BOY
Incredible.

FRED BALLINGER
Yeah, it is incredible.

BOY
My teacher makes me play it, he
says it's a perfect piece to start
with.

FRED BALLINGER
He's right. Because it's simple.

BOY
But it's not merely simple.

FRED BALLINGER
It's not?

BOY
No, it's also really beautiful.

Fred, cold and impassive, instinctively lets something "hot"
slip.

FRED BALLINGER
Yes, it is beautiful. Because I
composed it when I still loved.

The boy seems not to understand what Fred means, so simply
starts practicing again.

Fred listens for a while, then interrupts him.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
May I do something while you play?

The boy nods uncertainly.

BOY
(doubtful) Okay.

He starts playing again.

Fred steps timidly into the room and shuffles over to the boy, who keeps on playing. Fred stretches out his hand and touches the boy's arm, the one holding the bow. He raises the boy's elbow an inch, correcting his position.

That's all. Fred is relieved.

FRED BALLINGER

There.

15. INT. HOTEL RESTAURANT. EVENING

The lugubrious silence of the rich as they dine. The only sound is the tinkling of silverware.

The Russians are there, the black family, and droves of elderly guests.

Many eyes are irresistibly drawn to the table where the famous, obese South American dines in silence with his wife.

At another table, a twenty-year-old kid can't resist the temptation to take a picture. He discreetly positions his iPhone. The obese South American, who realizes what the kid is doing, merely nods wearily to his wife. She understands immediately, gets up, and goes to get a screen from behind a column. She places the screen between her husband and the rest of the room, angling it so as to block the young man's view. Then she disappears behind it.

Jimmy Tree is eating alone and has followed the scene that has just unfolded with utmost concentration.

Another guest is observing the scene too, a giant of a man, about fifty, with a thick beard, disheveled hair, and dressed in trekking gear. He looks like a belated hippy. Tucking his cloth napkin into his shirt, he tackles a bowl of broth.

The obese South American has finished eating, and now crosses the dining room. He moves with considerable effort, leaning on his cane and his companion. As he goes by, all the guests look at him again out the corners of their eyes.

But Jimmy's attention is still focused on his briarwood cane.

At another table, Fred and Mick.

They obsessively observe a very distinguished, German-looking couple, around sixty years old: husband and wife are dressed alike, in brown and beige, clearly not by chance. They both look incredibly bored and stare into space, not exchanging a single word.

Fred and Mick chat, but never take their eyes off the silent couple.

MICK BOYLE

So where did you disappear to today?

FRED BALLINGER

I got lost following the sounds in the countryside.

MICK BOYLE

Didn't you used to get lost in your music too?

FRED BALLINGER

Everything one hears is music. Stockhausen. What did you get up to?

MICK BOYLE

I couldn't find you, so I went to see my doctor friend. They're going to talk tonight, you'll see.

The married couple still hasn't said a word.

FRED BALLINGER

Thirty Swiss francs says they won't say a word the entire dinner.

MICK BOYLE

I'm so sure they're going to talk, I'll raise you to fifty.

FRED BALLINGER

Done.

The couple is about to leave. He graciously pulls her chair out for her. She takes his arm. They leave the dining room, and Fred and Mick follow them with their gaze all the way to the door. The couple still doesn't speak.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)

Including your losses these past few days, we're up to 250 Swiss francs that you owe me.

Fred blows his nose, then rubs the tip four times with his handkerchief, folds it, and puts it back in his pocket.

Mick Boyle runs his hand over his hair.

Jimmy Tree has been studying their every move from his solitary table.

16. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. NIGHT

A swing band is trying to liven up the evening with an upbeat number that only ends up making people feel sentimental.

Four old men in electric wheelchairs are gathered around a small table, absorbed in a card game.

A handful of energetic types sway awkwardly on the dance floor.

A Russian and his wife twirl around in a sweat, as if they were in a dance competition. He dips her and she laughs.

Jimmy Tree, incongruous in his sunglasses, is in a corner, chatting with a small group of people, including Mark Kozelek.

MARK KOZELEK

When did you go to dinner?

JIMMY TREE

Pretty early.

MARK KOZELEK

I would have joined you if you'd called me.

JIMMY TREE

Just as well. I didn't just eat at dinner.

MARK KOZELEK

What else did you do?

JIMMY TREE

I worked.

Mick and Fred, at another table, gaze distractedly at the gloomy evening.

The upbeat song ends and the band starts in on a slow number.

Couples form.

The eternally mute couple makes its way to the dance floor. They dance with conviction, but still don't say a word, don't even look at each other. She keeps her inexpressive eyes on Jimmy Tree. He realizes it, lowers his sunglasses and smiles courteously at her. She doesn't return the smile. She doesn't react at all. Her husband has followed the whole thing, a severe, jealous expression on his face.

The hippy mountaineer, sad and solitary, watches the swing band and sips his herbal tea. It's so hot it burns his lips. He lets out a quick but intense groan, which no one hears.

Mick and Fred give in to a brief, tragic exchange.

MICK BOYLE

Today?

FRED BALLINGER
Nothing today. You?

MICK BOYLE
Nothing.

FRED BALLINGER
Let's hope we can piss tomorrow.

With enormous effort, the obese South American makes his way to the center of the dance floor, leaning on his cane. He smiles and holds out his hand, inviting his wife to dance. She beams and runs to join him. They dance for all of ten seconds, during which he struggles against his own body, his legs ruined by his weight. Then he stops, completely exhausted. His companion grows anxious and gestures for assistance. Two dutiful waiters carry a chair onto the dance floor, and the South American collapses in it, as if finally able to breathe again.

Everyone observes the happenings with a grave air.

Fred and Mick watch as well. Fred blows his nose in his ritual fashion. Mick, referring to the South American, says:

MICK BOYLE
That man is the last true authentic myth on the face of the planet. Like in ancient Greece. If it were anybody else, we would have laughed at this little scene. But not him. No one is laughing. And do you know why?

FRED BALLINGER
No, why?

MICK BOYLE
Because a myth leaves no room for the ridiculous.

17. INT. HOTEL CORRIDOR. NIGHT

Fred walks down the hallway, away from us. He is overtaken by an old man in an electric wheelchair. When the man gets to the far end of the hallway, he crashes into another wheelchair, which emerges from the hallway to the right. A minor wheelchair accident. An altercation ensues over matters of priority, who has the right of way, and what determines careless driving.

Fred watches the whole thing without batting an eye. He puts his key in the door and disappears into his room.

18. INT. FRED BALLINGER'S SUITE. NIGHT

Fred is in his room, getting undressed. He's taking off his shirt when he hears an inexplicable, muffled lament coming from the bathroom. He shuffles over to the bathroom door and opens it. His daughter Lena is sitting on the edge of the tub, drowning in tears.

It goes without saying that Fred is surprised and, at least for a second, speechless. Then:

FRED BALLINGER
What are you doing here?

Lena doesn't answer, she just goes on weeping.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
Aren't you supposed to be on a
plane to Polynesia?

She cries some more.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
Where's Julian?

Whatever it is she says sounds like the cry of some strange animal. Impossible to understand. She goes back to crying.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
Well, aren't you going to answer
me?

But she doesn't answer him. She can't. Because she needs to cry.

19. INT. MICK BOYLE'S SUITE. NIGHT

Mick Boyle, fully dressed, is lying on his bed, which is covered in papers and computers, talking merrily on the phone.

His young screen writers are all pacing the room, eyes trained on Mick, eager to know the outcome of his phone conversation.

MICK BOYLE
That's great, Nick. I'm glad you
like the second draft... Sure,
we'll work some more on the ending,
we're not totally happy with it
either... I talked to Brenda.
Everything's all set... Yes, of
course, she can't wait. When is she
ever going to get offered a part
like this again, at her age!...
Yeah, I know she's capricious, but
she behaves with me.
(MORE)

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

She always says I'm the best when it comes to actresses, that I'm the only one in the world who knows how to direct her. So, if it's okay with you, I'd like to start scouting out locations next month... perfect. Great... yeah, bye.

The screenwriters, pleased with what they hear, grin and pat each other on the back.

Mick puts down the phone and looks up.

Only now do we discover the presence of Fred Ballinger sitting impassively in a chair.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

What happened to you? You look like you just came from a funeral.

FRED BALLINGER

Your son left my daughter.

FEMALE SCREENWRITER

Fuck!

MICK BOYLE

What do you mean?

FRED BALLINGER

They were boarding the plane for Polynesia, and right there in the tunnel he stops and tells her he's fallen in love with another woman.

MICK BOYLE

Nothing like being in a tunnel to make you feel you're in a tunnel.

FRED BALLINGER

(ironic) How profound! You're quite the magician of metaphor.

The screenwriters snigger.

MICK BOYLE

And then he took this other woman on vacation?

FRED BALLINGER

It seems he at least had the good taste not to do that. At least not yet.

MICK BOYLE

And Lena?

FRED BALLINGER

Lena's in my room, crying her eyes out. I've never seen anybody cry so much my whole life. I didn't think it was possible to cry that much.

MICK BOYLE

I read in some magazine once that tear ducts can produce tears for three days without stopping.

SHY SCREENWRITER

I heard that too, but on a BBC documentary.

INTELLECTUAL SCREENWRITER

He's on his deathbed, and he says to her, "Let's watch one last BBC documentary together, darling."

FRED BALLINGER

Knock it off, guys.

MICK BOYLE

I don't know if it's true, though, this thing about the tear ducts. It was in one of those popular magazines, they have a tendency to exaggerate, you know, better for sales.

FRED BALLINGER

I think we're getting off track.

MICK BOYLE

I think you're right. Julian's such a shit. Just like his mother. Remember? I idolized her, but she was busy idolizing electricians and grips.

FRED BALLINGER

She idolized everyone, Mick.

FEMALE SCREENWRITER

(smiling) Ecumenicalism is a noble ideal.

MICK BOYLE

(with staged anger)
Ecumenicalism??? My best friend is telling me that my ex-wife was sleeping with everyone, and all these years he never said a word! Do you get how serious this is?

FRED BALLINGER

And you never told me about Gilda Black.

MICK BOYLE

Ok, I get it. Now that you've had your little revenge, can we be serious? I'm going to call that shithead son of mine.

Mick grabs the phone again and dials.

FRED BALLINGER

What are you going to do? You really think you can convince him to get back together with Lena? It's hopeless.

MICK BOYLE

No, but I want to at least know what happened.

His son must have said "hello" on the other end of the line, because Mick starts in on him, his tone severe.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

Julian, this is your father, even though at this point, based on the evidence, I'm not so sure you are my son.

The intellectual screenwriter gestures to the shy one to take notes.

INTELLECTUAL SCREENWRITER

Take notes. We can use this in the film.

20. INT. DINING ROOM. HOTEL. DAY

It's late for breakfast. Some of the waiters are already setting up for lunch.

The only guests at this hour are the eternally silent couple. They finish their breakfast, then get up and leave, maintaining their strict silence the whole while.

Mick and Fred follow them with their eyes, and when they disappear from view, Mick, with a mechanical gesture, hands Fred fifty Swiss francs.

MICK BOYLE

How are you always so sure they're not going to speak?

FRED BALLINGER
Because I know something about
them, the waiter told me.

MICK BOYLE
What?

FRED BALLINGER
I can't tell you, it's my advantage
over you.

MICK BOYLE
Tell me right this minute. Besides,
I can always get the waiter to tell
me too, a little bribe... I've
thrown so much money away over this
story already...

FRED BALLINGER
Alright then, I'll tell you:
they're mute.

Mick starts.

MICK BOYLE
You little shit! Give me back my
money, all of it. You're a cheat.
All bets are off.

FRED BALLINGER
You are so gullible! I was joking,
Mick, they're not mute.

Their conversation is interrupted by a silent apparition at the far end of the dining room: a forty-year-old man, impeccably dressed in jacket and tie, followed by a plump woman who is, by all appearances, his secretary, an anonymous-looking woman of about forty, unkempt, hair pulled back any old way, no makeup, decent but inexpensive clothes.

Mick and Fred glare at the man who makes his way toward them. Without even looking at her, he hands his secretary his cell phone, and she slips it into a men's leather briefcase.

They cross the dining room together. The man stops at Fred and Mick's table. The secretary keeps a few feet back and starts fiddling with her phone, checking e-mails.

Mick looks at the man. By now it's clear that this is his son Julian. Stunningly handsome, classic good looks, perfect. Confident and proud, Julian holds his father's gaze. Fred's eyes ping-pong from one to the other.

MICK BOYLE
What the hell is going on?

JULIAN

It's really rather banal, dad. I fell in love with another woman.

MICK BOYLE

Who's all of eighteen, right?

JULIAN

No dad, she's not eighteen. She's thirty. A reasonable age.

MICK BOYLE

Well, however old she is, you've really fucked up.

JULIAN

That's your opinion.

MICK BOYLE

Yes, that is my opinion. Lena is an extraordinary woman. At this point I realize, of course, that she's wasted on you. She's far too intelligent for you.

JULIAN

Perhaps. But why did you make me come? I'm not about to change my mind.

MICK BOYLE

That's what everyone says, at first. Then they end up begging their spouse to take them back. I can't tell you how many times I've seen it...

JULIAN

Mom left you and she never begged you to take her back.

MICK BOYLE

(to Fred) What did I tell you? You see now where he gets it from, this asshole?

JULIAN

So in your opinion, a man's an asshole because, even if he didn't want to, even if he tried like crazy to stay with his wife, even if he booked them a dream vacation, he realizes he just can't go through with it because he has fallen hopelessly in love with another woman?

MICK BOYLE
 Just like your mother!
 Melodramatic, hyperbolic, and
 completely idiotic.

JULIAN
 Thanks, Dad.

MICK BOYLE
 (explodes) Well then, are we
 allowed to know who this whore
 you've fallen in love with is?

WOMAN'S VOICE
 Me.

Fred and Mick go white. They lean forward. We'd nearly forgotten about the nondescript secretary standing behind Julian, but it was she who spoke. She takes a step forward and reaffirms in a dignified manner:

SECRETARY
 I am the woman Julian has lost his
 head for. We're getting married as
 soon as his divorce is finalized.

JULIAN
 Precisely.

Fred's and Mick's jaws drop. Stunned in disbelief, they just gape at her, at a loss for words.

The woman stands close to Julian. They put their arms around each other. He is gorgeous, as handsome as George Clooney. She just the opposite.

MICK BOYLE
 And who the fuck are you?

SECRETARY
 My name is Paloma Faith. And I'm
 not a whore. I'm a singer.

JULIAN
 (proud) We work together. I'm
 producing her next album.

Mick recovers a grain of sense and says:

MICK BOYLE
 Excuse me, Miss, but could you
 leave us alone for a moment? My
 son's father-in-law and I need to
 have a word in private with Julian.

PALOMA FAITH

Okay, but not for long. We can't stand being apart from each other for more than five minutes.

MICK BOYLE

Very kind of you, dear, but don't worry, I'll only need a minute to fathom my son's psychology.

The woman walks away, her gait awkward and ungainly.

Fred and Mick follow her with their eyes and wait until she has left the dining room before they turn to meet Julian's proud, impassive gaze.

Mick seems sincere now. He truly wants to fathom the mystery of the human condition.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

Forgive me, Julian, but I'm trying to understand. It may be banal, and maybe I'm too old to understand, but you have to explain something to me: Lena is a beautiful woman, a dream. And this one here is the most insignificant woman on the face of the planet. In short, I mean, but you, what the fuck do you see in her?

Julian is ill at ease for the first time. He sighs, looks away.

JULIAN

You really want to know?

MICK BOYLE

Yes, Julian, I really want to know.

Julian takes his time. He checks to make sure his secretary is not in the room, then turns and looks at his father and says all in one breath:

JULIAN

She's really good in bed.

Mick and Fred are really at a loss for words now.

21. EXT. COUNTRY LANE. DAY

Fred and Lena walk through that beautiful valley.

Proud and serious, she stares into the distance.

He is ill at ease and doesn't know what to say. He's distracted by the sound of a bird that suddenly starts to sing when Lena calls him back to reality.

LENA

So who is this bitch?

FRED BALLINGER

Somebody by the name of Paloma Faith.

LENA

And what does she do?

FRED BALLINGER

The most obscene thing in the world.

LENA

She's a prostitute?

FRED BALLINGER

Worse. She's a pop star.

LENA

And what did Julian say?

FRED BALLINGER

I already told you.

LENA

Not really. All you did was babble incomprehensibly.

FRED BALLINGER

Julian was the one who was babbling. He's not all there in the head.

LENA

It doesn't seem that way to me. He must have made twenty decisions in two hours. He moved out. He rented an apartment. He spoke with a divorce lawyer. That doesn't seem like a confused man to me. You keep telling me this woman is ugly and insignificant, so what does he see in her that he didn't in me?

FRED BALLINGER

How should I know?

LENA

You told me Mick asked him.

FRED BALLINGER

Did I?

LENA

Yes, that's what you said. So what was Julian's response?

FRED BALLINGER

You know, Lena, I don't remember.

LENA

You're really pissing me off, daddy. You remember perfectly well, and you're hopeless at telling lies. What did he say?

FRED BALLINGER

I really don't remember, I swear. He must have mumbled something idiotic.

LENA

If you don't tell me, I swear I'll scream right here and now. What did he say? What the fuck does this woman have - at least according to Julian - that I don't? I want to know what he said! I want to know.

Fred stops. He can't stand it any more. He sighs deeply. And decides to tell her what she wants to know.

FRED BALLINGER

He said she's good in bed.

Lena turns to stone. Her face tightens, sours nastily. With a savage coldness, she says to her father.

LENA

You didn't have to tell me.

And she storms off, leaving her father alone in the middle of the valley as the two notes the little boy had played return, not on a violin now, but on a gloomy double bass.

21A. INT. WELLNESS CENTER (VARIOUS SETTINGS). DAY

21A/1

Those two gloomy notes hover in the steam of the Turkish baths and saunas, where backlit, naked bodies of all ages look lifeless, abandoned to the heat and sweat.

Toned, gleaming bodies, ample, round bodies, old, worn-out bodies. This is the work of wellness. This is how some people try to prolong the future or awkwardly pursue a youthful past.

21A/2 21A/3

And then, more bodies, eyes closed, buried in tubs, wrapped in herbs and mud. Like living meadows.

Motionless still lifes, while the double bass plays discreetly, without ever moving away from those two simple notes.

22. INT. MASSAGE ROOM. DAY

Candles, incense, shadows.

And the two double bass notes, to which is now added a slight variation.

Fred and Lena are lying on their backs on marble benches. Naked, but completely covered in dark mud.

They look like they've been petrified in some volcanic eruption. Their eyes are the only part of them not covered in mud. They stare lifelessly at the ceiling, on which a soft and hypnotic light plays.

Fred, rather awkwardly, is trying to be fatherly.

FRED BALLINGER

Believe me, Lena, I can understand you, really, I can.

Silence. Lena doesn't respond. But when she does, she is lucid, furious, and ruthless.

LENA

You can understand me, Daddy? Like hell you can! Mummy would have been able to understand me. Mummy found herself with you in the same situation I'm in now, not once but dozens of times. And she always pretended not to know. You had a stream of women, but she just kept going. Not just for us children, but also, above all, for you. She loved you and so she forgave you. No matter what happened, she still wanted to be with you. But who were you? Who? That's what I always asked myself. You never gave anything, not to her, not to me, nothing. You gave everything to your music. Music, music, music! There was nothing else in your life. Only music. And aridness. Never a caress, never a hug, a kiss, nothing. You never knew anything about your children. You never knew if we were suffering, if we were happy. Nothing. Everything was on mummy's shoulders.

(MORE)

LENA (CONT'D)

At home, all you'd ever say to her were two words: "Quiet, Melanie." And mummy would explain to us, "Quiet, daddy's composing," "Quiet, daddy's resting, he has a concert tonight," "Quiet, daddy is talking on the phone with someone important." "Quiet, daddy has Stravinsky coming to the house today." You wanted to be Stravinsky, but you didn't have a single drop of his genius. "Quiet, Melanie!", was all you knew how to say. You never knew the first thing about my mother! You never bothered to take care of her. And even now, you haven't brought her flowers for ten years. And then that letter! You think mummy never read it? Well, you're wrong. She found it and she read it. And I read it too. You probably don't even remember that letter, but we do. The letter in which you declared your love for another man. Mummy had to endure that humiliation too. "My necessary experimentation in sexual matters," as you put it. So your musical experimentation wasn't enough for you, you had to experiment with homosexuality too! And you didn't give a fuck about all the anguish you caused her. So don't come telling me that you can understand, because you don't understand a fucking thing.

She's done. Silence. Fred doesn't say a word. They just lie there, buried in mud, staring at the ceiling.

The double bass notes are done as well.

23. INT. HOTEL GYM. DAY

One entire wall is set up for free climbing.

The hippy mountaineer is at the top of the wall, thirty feet up, hanging by one hand, dangling in the air without a safety rope, with an admirable casualness.

He addresses that pale, thirteen-year-old girl we saw earlier. She stands down below, near the base of the wall. She hasn't even climbed an inch. The mountaineer speaks sweetly from up above.

MOUNTAINEER

Come on, Frances, give it a try.

The girl looks up at him but doesn't say a word. She's still biting her nails.

MOUNTAINEER (CONT'D)

Wouldn't you like to come see what the world looks like from up here?

The girl looks at him and nods.

MOUNTAINEER (CONT'D)

Good, now give it a go.

The girl shakes her head no.

MOUNTAINEER (CONT'D)

Ok, wait there.

In three swift moves, the mountaineer is back at her side.

MOUNTAINEER (CONT'D)

Climb on my shoulders.

The girl gets onto his huge shoulders. He starts climbing confidently, easily, as if he were carrying a knapsack instead of a human being.

MOUNTAINEER (CONT'D)

Ok, now, as we climb, look down. See how beautiful the world is from up here?

The girl, clinging to his shoulders, turns and looks down. And from high up on the wall she spots someone standing at the door to the gym, looking up at them. It's Lena.

So the girl "knocks" on the mountaineer's shoulder, inviting him to turn. He looks down, but Lena's not there. She has already disappeared.

24. EXT./INT. HOTEL GARDEN/MASSEUSE'S ROOM. DAY

We're in a different garden now, more isolated, further away from the hotel, one that abuts the building where the staff lives. Guests never come here. The main hotel seems far away. In the center of the garden are abundant rose bushes, fountains, even a fake little stream. All laid out - rather clumsily - to resemble a lush, lyrical garden of Eden.

As we said, there's no one here. No, wait - there's Fred.

He's sitting on a bench staring at the fake little stream, sucking on a candy. His eyes are so laden with melancholy it would be impossible for them to look any sadder. He seems dazed, absent, lost in thought.

All of a sudden he rouses himself. He blows his nose, quickly rubs the tip four times with his handkerchief, folds it, and puts it back in his pocket.

As he puts his handkerchief away, his eye is drawn to something in a ground-floor window: his tiny, timid masseuse, in shorts and a T-shirt, is dancing, moving gracefully in front of a TV. She's playing a Kinect game. A stylized female figurine on the TV screen demonstrates the moves for her.

It's marvelous and moving to see this petite girl dance. And with such incongruous intensity. She's all sweaty, her hair plastered to her forehead and temples.

Fred watches her while his hand instinctively, rhythmically rubs a candy wrapper.

Fred doesn't notice that there's another man there, behind him, wrapped in a white robe. He's watching the girl dance too. It's Jimmy Tree, the American actor.

25. INT. HOTEL RESTAURANT. EVENING

Lots of people at dinner. Still that cavernous silence.

Fred and Mick stare at the silent German couple, in matching tonalities today too, a blue theme this time.

Lena enters the dining room. She has abandoned her simple, sober look and is wearing a highly provocative dress and has a new, very flattering hairstyle.

A wave of nostalgia floods Mick's heart.

MICK BOYLE

You remind me of Brenda Morel when she was thirty. When she made "At James' house" with me. You should dress this way all the time, Lena.

LENA

From now on that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Fred follows Lena with her eyes, but she deliberately avoids looking at him and takes her seat at the table.

The mountaineer, seated at another table, can't help but notice how beautiful Lena is. His eyes light up, but then grow dull again, as if he's been defeated even before he begins. Dejected, he puts down his spoon and stops eating.

Mark Kozelek and his other friends have joined Jimmy at his table. They're all talking, in groups of two, all except for Jimmy. He's fixated on the mountaineer and Lena, and doesn't miss a thing of what is unfolding between them.

Then, all of a sudden, something unbelievable happens.

The German woman gets up calmly and slaps her husband so hard he nearly falls out of his chair.

It goes without saying that everyone turns and gapes in astonishment.

The woman walks out of the dining room in the most dignified manner imaginable.

Mick's, Fred's and Lena's jaws drop. Stunned, they follow the whole thing.

Everyone at Jimmy Tree's table starts snickering. All but Jimmy, that is. He too follows the scene open-mouthed.

The slapped husband seems indifferent to their stares. He simply returns to his meal, calmly eating his cream of mushroom soup.

The obese South American, supported by his wife, gets up from his table and slowly makes his way toward the dining room door. But when he gets to the table of the slapped husband, he stops. The elderly German lifts his eyes to the obese South American, who does two things: first he smiles slightly, and then he caresses the German's cheek with his pudgy hand. The elderly man looks at him gratefully, and tries to return the smile. The South American walks away amid the deadly silence that has descended over the room.

The camera finds Jimmy Tree. He has followed everything, naturally, and is really moved.

26. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. NIGHT

One of those little stages has been set up in the garden, opposite the pool. A local singer - an elegant woman, about fifty years old - is performing, accompanied by three musicians.

The hotel guests are scattered about on lawn furniture, enjoying the beautiful concert.

Fred, Mick, and Lena are at one table, listening to the singer's splendid rendition of "Lili Marleen."

Jimmy Tree stands and listens too, completely enraptured. A serious, concentrated look on his face, he whispers the German lyrics, which he knows by heart.

Then he senses a presence to his left. Jimmy turns. The silent German woman is looking at him, her hand extended, as if inviting him to dance. He smiles at her and steps closer. They begin to dance slowly.

The German woman's husband, sitting at a table, is a bundle of anger, he is devoured by jealousy.

Fred and Mick are dying of curiosity. They stare at Jimmy and the woman as they dance.

Jimmy murmurs something in her ear, not trying to be seductive though.

JIMMY TREE

What lovely perfume you're wearing... What is it?

Mick and Fred wait for the woman to speak.

The German woman, embarrassed, doesn't respond, but holds him a little tighter. Jimmy holds her tighter too and, as he dances, he lets himself go, closing his eyes.

From their table, Kozelek and his friends stare intently at Jimmy.

The hippy mountaineer pretends rather awkwardly that he just happens to be passing by, but it's clear that he is taking a tortuous path in order to look at Lena. She doesn't even notice him. He is so overcome with emotion that, despite being an expert climber, he trips on a table leg, but doesn't fall.

"Lili Marleen" is over. The German woman smiles at Jimmy and he smiles back. They move apart.

She returns to her husband's table. He glares ferociously at her. She feels his eyes on her but avoids his gaze.

Jimmy approaches Fred carrying a herbal tea. He sits down next to him. Their smiles convey a shared warmth.

FRED BALLINGER

Is that straight herbal tea or is it mixed with a gin and tonic?

JIMMY TREE

Straight tea. I'm trying to be good.

Fred smiles.

FRED BALLINGER

Too bad!

He blows his nose in his usual manner. Jimmy observes him.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)

How's the work on your character going?

JIMMY TREE

So so... pretty well, actually.
I've come up with some interesting
details.

FRED BALLINGER

Good.

JIMMY TREE

This morning, that girl dancing all
by herself. I saw her too. It
was... it was....

FRED BALLINGER

... unforgettable.

JIMMY TREE

Yes. That's exactly the word:
unforgettable.

Jimmy finishes his herbal tea and takes his leave with a playful military salute. Fred smiles at him. But Lena wipes the smile off his face when she says.

LENA

Maybe the problem is that Julian
and I never had children.

Fred turns and looks at her. Serious now.

FRED BALLINGER

I don't know what the problem is.
I'm not going to try and cheer you
up by telling you lies or talking
about things I've never understood.
You're right: all I understand is
music. And do you know why? Because
music doesn't need words or
experience to be understood. It
just is. Your mother would have
understood you. I can't.
But your mother's not here.

They look at each other without saying another word.

26A. INT. HOTEL RESTAURANT. NIGHT

The elegant woman who sang "Lili Marleen" is the only person in the otherwise deserted restaurant. Wearing an evening gown and showing us her ancient and noble profile, she is sitting at one of the tables. Eyes lowered, with the concentration of a starving animal, she devours a chicken leg with her hands. Suddenly she stops eating and looks up, gazing vacantly into space. A fixed, sterile stare. At that very moment a verse she had sung from "Lili Marleen" echoes in her head, a cappella. She lowers her eyes to the chicken leg and the song stops. She starts eating again, as voracious as before.

26B. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. NIGHT

It's late. The garden where the little concerts are held is deserted. Only Fred Ballinger is still there. He has fallen asleep in a chair, as in the opening scene of the film. The lights are low and the wind is blowing. Fred opens his eyes and sees that a dozen rocking chairs, scattered around the garden, are moving in unison in the wind. Everything else is still.

26C. INT. HOTEL LOBBY. NIGHT

The deserted lobby. Only one person is there, sitting on a couch: the young and eternally ungainly hooker.

Mick Boyle crosses the deserted lobby on the way to his room. His eyes fall on the chubby girl.

She gives him an awkward but alluring, knowing look.

He smiles at her, but with the smile of a father, which seems like a tender refusal. He walks away.

The girl looks sad and serious again.

But after a few steps Mick stops, as if he's had second thoughts.

The girl realizes this, but she deliberately keeps from looking at him again.

Mick turns and observes her from afar. He is serious. And tempted. He reflects. He stares at the girl.

She decides to look at him now, but it's too late: Mick is already gone.

27. INT. FRED BALLINGER'S SUITE. NIGHT

Fred and Lena are asleep in the double bed.

Then, through the windows, a theatrical light slowly comes on, illuminating ten women on the balcony, all dressed in black. Somber, immobile.

Slowly, slowly, the violin starts up again, playing those same first notes of "Simple Song No.3."

The women on the balcony join in with the violin and begin to sing in the most splendid soprano voices.

Fred opens his eyes and says.

FRED BALLINGER

Enough.

Then, all of a sudden, as if he were possessed, he throws off the covers and hurls himself at the window.

But there's no one there. The balcony is empty and dark. Fred shouts and punches the glass.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
Enough! Stop singing, now! Enough!

Lena wakes up with a start. She is worried.

LENA
Daddy, stop, that's enough! You were dreaming.

Fred composes himself. He stops shouting, but still clings to the glass, in a daze. Lena looks behind him, now she's the one who doesn't know what to say.

28. EXT. COUNTRY LANE. DAY

Parachutists twirl gracefully, silently just below the craggy mountain peaks.

Fred and Mick are taking a walk.

Out of nowhere, a little dramatically, as if choosing a topic at random, Fred says.

FRED BALLINGER
This morning I took a long, powerful piss. And while I was doing it, I was thinking, Jesus, when is this going to stop? When? I just kept pissing and pissing. And I was so happy! I haven't been that happy in months.

Mick hides his displeasure.

MICK BOYLE
Good, I'm happy for you.

But Fred realizes his friend is upset.

FRED BALLINGER
I was joking, Mick. It didn't happen like that.

MICK BOYLE
Don't joke about these things, Fred. Prostate is serious.

FRED BALLINGER
You always fall for my jokes. You've been believing every word I say for the last sixty years.

MICK BOYLE

I invent stories, Fred. I have to believe everything in order to make things up. Do you remember the other day? When you told me you don't remember your parents any more?

FRED BALLINGER

No, I don't remember.

MICK BOYLE

Of course you do. Well, you made me realize that not only do I not remember my parents, but my childhood, for example, I don't remember a thing about it. There's only one thing I still remember.

FRED BALLINGER

What's that?

MICK BOYLE

The precise moment when I learned to ride a bicycle. I know it sounds banal, but oh, what joy! It was sheer joy. And this morning, as if by magic, for the first time, I also remembered the moment right after I learned to ride a bike.

FRED BALLINGER

The moment in which you fell.

MICK BOYLE

How the fuck did you know?

FRED BALLINGER

Because that's how it was for everyone, Mick. You learn to do something, you're really happy, and then you forget to brake.

MICK BOYLE

Isn't that a terrific metaphor for life?

FRED BALLINGER

Let's not go rushing to conclusions, Mick.

And then something amazing happens. A boy, about eleven years old, comes toward them on the country lane. He's riding a mountain bike, and, with astonishing self-confidence, is doing a wheelie. Mick and Fred watch him, speechless. The boy peddles past them, still up on one wheel. He races all the way to the end of the lane, as silent as a ghost, balanced on one wheel.

Mick and Fred turn to watch him, ecstatic.

Fred thinks for a minute, then says:

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
You know something, Mick?

MICK BOYLE
What?

FRED BALLINGER
You and me, we're never going to die.

Mick turns to his friend. He smiles and then adds:

MICK BOYLE
Now let's not go rushing to conclusions, Fred!

But then something catches his attention: the silent German couple, dressed in matching green, is about to enter the dense woods. Mick gestures to Fred, who turns and sees them too, right as they disappear among the trees. Fred doesn't need to think twice. He turns to Mick and in a serious voice says:

FRED BALLINGER
Let's follow them.

29. EXT. WOODS. DAY

Fred and Mick crouch behind some bushes, perfectly still. Watching. And what do they see?

They see the silent German couple leaning against a tree, their clothes half off. He is penetrating her with a passion worthy of an teenage boy dying to screw.

They are really enjoying it. He is in a frenzy, she's about to climax. They come, both of them, together. The myth of the simultaneous orgasm, right there in the woods. They moan with pleasure.

So in their own way, they have spoken.

Impassive, Fred merely takes out his wallet and hands Mick fifty Swiss francs.

30. INT. HOTEL CORRIDOR. DAY

Fred walks down the hallway. Lena is waiting for him at the door to their suite. She seems restless, short of breath, anxious to talk with her father. In fact, she says to him right away.

LENA

Where have you been, daddy? This man's been here for an hour, he says he's Queen Elizabeth's emissary.

Fred snorts, as if this was the last thing he wanted to hear.

LENA (CONT'D)

I told him to make himself comfortable in the living room.

31. INT. FRED BALLINGER'S SUITE. DAY

Lena pours a coffee for the Queen's emissary, whom we met earlier. He and Fred sit facing each other, one on a love seat, the other in an easy chair, a small table between them. Lena goes and sits on a chair behind her father.

The emissary nervously taps his pants' pocket, where we can see clearly the bulge of a packet of cigarettes. Fred notices his agitation.

FRED BALLINGER

You can smoke here, if you want.

The emissary can't believe his ears. He's as astounded as if there'd just been an earthquake.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

Are you serious?

FRED BALLINGER

The hotel manager is a music lover. So he grants me some small privileges.

The emissary's smile is one of infinite gratitude.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

You have no idea how much pleasure this gives me.

FRED BALLINGER

Are you feeling tense?

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

I'll say.

He says, taking a deep, restorative drag on his cigarette.

FRED BALLINGER

There's no ashtray, though.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

That's fine, I'll cope.

FRED BALLINGER

I don't have much time, so let's skip the formalities. I have to do a thorough cleansing of my intestines soon.

The emissary's expression instinctively looks pained and says.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

Will it hurt?

FRED BALLINGER

No, it's just embarrassing.

The emissary sighs and starts in.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

I wasn't able to convince the Queen. I relayed your reticence about the songs to her. I proposed an alternative repertoire. An alternative musician. An alternative sort of evening. She doesn't want alternatives. She wants you and only you and only your "Simple Songs." She says it's all that Prince Philip listens to.

FRED BALLINGER

I'm sorry. I don't want to seem rude. But I'm afraid it's impossible.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

But why?

FRED BALLINGER

I explained why, the last time we met. Personal reasons.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

And is there no way to resolve these personal reasons?

FRED BALLINGER

Unfortunately not.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

I'm begging you, Maestro. I have a difficult job. I simply must return to London with a positive answer.

FRED BALLINGER

But my answer is negative.

Lena follows every word.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

I simply don't understand. What is it that doesn't work? The date? The location? The orchestra? The soprano? The Queen?

FRED BALLINGER

Please, don't insist. Personal reasons.

The emissary drops his diplomatic demeanor and shows a flash of anger.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

And what exactly are these bloody personal reasons?

Fred doesn't respond.

Lena is beginning to understand. We're not, but she is. She starts to cry quietly, inwardly.

FRED BALLINGER

Personal means that I'm not obliged to explain them.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

Let's see if we can resolve these personal problems then. What is it that is wrong?

FRED BALLINGER

(at random) The soprano.

The emissary beams. He thinks they have arrived at a solution.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

We'll get a different one, then, no problem.

FRED BALLINGER

It wouldn't make any difference.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

Even though Sumi Jo is the absolute best, and she has already expressed her enthusiasm at being directed by you. She's ecstatic! In seventh heaven!

FRED BALLINGER

I'm not interested.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

What is it you have against her?

FRED BALLINGER
Nothing! I don't even know her.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY
And so?!

Fred loses his patience for the first time. He raises his voice, practically shouts.

FRED BALLINGER
So enough already!

Lena cries more openly now, her eyes brimming with tears. She tries to hide them, but she can't.

The emissary notices Lena's tears and is dumbfounded. He's trying to understand, but doesn't know what to say. He throws open his arms in defeat.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY
I just do not understand. What exactly is the problem?

Fred shouts at him again. His words come tumbling out, unplanned.

FRED BALLINGER
The problem is that those Simple Songs were composed for my wife. And only my wife performed them, only my wife recorded them. And as long as I live, my wife will be the only one to sing them. The problem, my dear sir, is that my wife can't sing any more. Now do you understand? Do you?

Lena has buried her face in her hands, trying to stifle her sobs.

Fred is beside himself. He looks exhausted, drained.

The emissary is struck dumb. He gets to his feet and stubs out his cigarette in the pack. He is deeply dismayed.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY
Yes, I do understand now, and I beg your pardon. Maestro.

He walks quickly to the door.

Fred and Lena just sit there, he staring into space and she weeping behind him.

31A. INT/EXT. CORRIDOR + HOTEL BRIDGE. DAY.**31A/1**

In close-up, the bells in the corridors trill merrily.

31A/2

On the bridge where the staff goes to smoke, they all put out their cigarettes and, like a flock of sheep, head back inside the hotel to work.

32. INT. MASSAGE ROOM. DAY

The young masseuse is rubbing oil on her hands.

Fred Ballinger, lying on his stomach on the massage table, his head stuck in the hole, looks down at the floor, right at the girl's tiny sandals.

The masseuse places her hands gently on Fred's naked back. She begins massaging him, but stops after a minute.

MASSEUSE

I'm going to give you a different type of massage, because you are stressed. No, to be precise, you're not stressed, you're emotional.

FRED BALLINGER

You understand everything with your hands.

MASSEUSE

We can understand all sorts of things by touching. Who knows why people are so afraid of touching.

FRED BALLINGER

Maybe because they think it has something to do with pleasure.

MASSEUSE

Which is another good reason for touching instead of talking.

Fred is silent. He stares at the floor for a while. Then he says:

FRED BALLINGER

Don't you like to talk?

MASSEUSE

(frank) I never have anything to say.

FRED BALLINGER

We forget sometimes, but sincerity is beautiful, isn't it?

But the masseuse has changed the kind of massage she is doing. She has nothing more to say, so she doesn't say anything.

Fred relaxes and closes his eyes.

33. EXT. MOUNTAIN PEAK. DAY

Mick and his young screenwriters are climbing up a steep mountain path.

They meet a young family coming down the mountain. The father is wearing a toddler backpack carrier, in which his three-year-old son is sleeping peacefully. Mick looks at the sleeping child.

Dressed for trekking, Mick and his young screenwriters are ascending an impassable mountain trail. They reach the summit - what a view! We can sense that suspended silence, the clean, crisp air, and appreciate the magnificent panorama of the mountains and the valley below.

There is a telescope at the lookout point, one of those tourist ones you have to put a coin in to make it work.

They admire the panorama in silence. Mick breaks away from the group and puts a coin in the telescope. Then he calls his young screenwriters over.

MICK BOYLE

Come look.

The girl goes first. She peers into the telescope. Mick instructs her as the others listen in.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

Now listen. Do you see that mountain over there?

GIRL

Yeah, it seems really close.

MICK BOYLE

Exactly. That's what you see when you're young. Everything seems really close. That's the future. Now come with me.

She takes the girl by the hand and invites her to look through the telescope from the other direction.

The girl looks from the other side and sees the faces of her friends. They look really far away even though they're only six feet away from her.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

And this is what you see when you're old. Everything seems really far away. That's the past.

The girl looking in the telescope is moved. He's too far away in the inverted lens, so she can't see that the boy she's always fighting with is moved as well.

They're all at a loss for words.

Mick crouches over a knapsack and pulls out a bottle of spumante and some plastic cups, talking all the while.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

When I was young, I used to say to myself: if I grow old I'm not going to make the same mistake all old people make, I'm not going to become boring and pedantic. But that's exactly what I have become. So, forgive me. Now for the serious stuff: Brenda can't wait to get started. And I am so proud of having written this screenplay with you. I have to confess something. I've made twenty films, but they're all irrelevant. This is the only film that means anything to me. This film has... yes, well, it's my sentimental, intellectual, and moral testament. This film is the only thing that matters to me. Nothing else. And so, let's toast to the completion of the third draft of "Life's Last Day."

SCREENWRITER 1

What about the ending, Mick?

MICK BOYLE

The ending... We'll come up with one, sooner or later. Cheers.

33A. EXT. GARDEN WITH CANOPY. DAY

The beautiful garden with its centuries-old trees and canopied paths is deserted until a stocky, big-bellied man, completely covered in mud, appears. He looks like a statue that has turned out wrong. He's clutching a cell phone, yelling in Italian with a heavy Neapolitan accent.

MUD MAN

You gotta realize, baby, you're asking me to deliver 24,000 mozzarel in two days.

(MORE)

MUD MAN (CONT'D)

We're not even in the same universe, capisc? Now listen good: don't you go stressing me during my relaxing vacation, cuz the last guy who did that never managed to relax again... Ciao.
I'll send you a WhatsApp tomorrow.

34. EXT. HOTEL POOL. DAY

Jimmy Tree and Fred Ballinger float serenely in the pool. Side by side, their shoulders resting against the edge of the pool, they let themselves be cradled by the powerful jet of water hitting their backs.

Fred opens one eye and spots Mick walking with the doctor not too far away. They are speaking intently. Fred closes his eye.

Fred and Jimmy float in silence, eyes closed.

... until the arrival of the boy violinist makes them open their eyes.

BOY

Hello, Fred Ballinger.

FRED BALLINGER

Hi.

BOY

I wanted to tell you that I checked at the front desk, and you really are Fred Ballinger.

FRED BALLINGER

Good, I'm glad you set your mind to rest on that score.

Jimmy Tree smiles.

BOY

There's something else I wanted to tell you too.

FRED BALLINGER

Go right ahead.

BOY

I wanted to tell you that ever since you corrected the position of my elbow, I play better. The sounds comes more naturally.

FRED BALLINGER

Very good. Do you know why? Because you're left-handed.

(MORE)

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
 And left-handed people are
 irregular, so an irregular position
 helps.

Now we see - we didn't before - the South American's fat face
 looming close to ours. He has been listening in on the
 conversation, and, in a strong Spanish accent, says candidly
 to the other three:

OBESE SOUTH AMERICAN
 I'm left-handed too.

Fred, Jimmy, and the boy are astounded and look at him
 excitedly.

Jimmy flashes him a beautiful smile and says:

JIMMY TREE
 Christ! The whole world knows
 you're left handed.

35. INT. HOTEL POND. DAY

Lena, wearing only a towel, sits at the edge of a beautiful
 pond. Her long wet hair falling on her shoulders, she seems
 even more beautiful than she really is.

The hippy mountaineer, all excited, is facing her. He too in
 only a towel. With his hairy shoulders, hairy chest, shaggy
 beard, and long hair, he looks like a giant bear, like some
 large, peaceful beast.

Lena keeps her eyes closed. The mountaineer can't take his
 kindly eyes off of her.

He swallows, musters his courage, starts to say something,
 changes his mind, too timid to speak, then tries again. This
 is his chance. He has a heavy Tyrolean accent.

MOUNTAINEER
 I'm Luca. Luca Moroder.

Embarrassed, he lets out a moronic laugh that sounds like a
 thunderclap.

Lena opens her eyes, expressionless, and simply says:

LENA
 Hello.

MOUNTAINEER
 I'm a mountaineer. And I teach
 climbing. I give lessons at the
 hotel.

And he produces another laugh, so moronic it makes us doubt
 his intelligence.

MOUNTAINEER (CONT'D)

This is a Forerunner 620, it has a color touch display, it estimates VO2max values - the maximum rate of oxygen consumption during maximum exertion. I'd like to give it to my cousin for Christmas. We always go climbing together. He was supposed to be here too, but he slipped in the bathtub and broke his femur.

Lena smiles politely.

LENA

The bathtub is more dangerous than Mount Everest.

MOUNTAINEER

How true. (hesitates) Do you know what I found once, on the K2 summit?

LENA

What?

MOUNTAINEER

A bedside table.

LENA

No.

MOUNTAINEER

Yes, I did. I opened the drawer, but it was empty.

He's quiet for a moment but then starts in again.

MOUNTAINEER (CONT'D)

It's an amazing feeling, climbing, you know? A real sense of freedom.

Yet another moronic laugh, as if he'd never be able to confirm what he just said.

Lena closes her eyes again and comments somewhat ironically:

LENA

All I would feel is fear.

MOUNTAINEER

That's an amazing feeling too, you know.

And he laughs again.

Lena opens her eyes but doesn't look at him.

Overlooking the little pond is a glass cube that houses the indoor pool. With an expressionless face, Fred Ballinger looks out the window at his daughter down below.

36. EXT. HOTEL SOLARIUM. DAY

Fred, Mick, and Jimmy Tree, in white robes, are sunning peacefully on chaise lounges. Eyes closed. Fred has a newspaper open on his lap. Mick and Jimmy are chatting.

JIMMY TREE

So who's the most talented actress you've ever worked with, Mr. Boyle?

MICK BOYLE

Brenda Morel. Without a doubt. A genius. She can't have read more than two books her whole life, and one of them was her autobiography, written by a ghost writer naturally, but still, Brenda's a genius.

Jimmy chuckles.

JIMMY TREE

A genius in what sense?

MICK BOYLE

If you know how to steal, you don't need training. Stealing becomes your education. That's how Brenda is. Even when, thanks to my films, she'd become a diva, she never forgot where she came from, her home was really the street. And that's where she stayed, on the street, stealing everything. Everything. Which is how she created such unforgettable characters. And won two Oscars.

JIMMY TREE

What would she steal?

MICK BOYLE

We were filming "The Crystal Woman." And in the middle of a scene, an electrician walks by, toward the back of the set. He's got this limp, real slight. Whenever he steps with his shorter leg, it makes a noise, real faint though, barely noticeable. No one even hears it, no one but Brenda, that is.

(MORE)

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

She's reciting her lines and all of a sudden she yells "stop." So I yell back, "What the fuck are you doing, Brenda? Only I can say stop." "Fuck that, Mick," she says to me, "if my character is wrong, then I'll say stop." She looks at the electrician. He's dying, but Brenda lights up and says, "Mick, my character has to have one leg shorter than the other. She limps." I practically fall off my chair. "Are you out of your mind, Brenda?" I say to her. "Your character can't limp. Your character is the most desirable woman in the whole world, every man on the planet wants to get her into bed, she's a dream." And you know what she says? She says to me, "Even dreams have their problems, Mick."

Jimmy laughs.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

And she was right. That little limp won her her second Oscar.

A muffled, intermittent sound, which at first only Fred hears, makes him open his eyes. But the sun is shining right in them, so all he can see is a small black circle that rises up to the sky and then falls again. The sound, and then the black circle again.

It's enough to make Fred want to get up and take a look. Curious, he shuffles toward the tennis court, and Jimmy Tree and Mick Boyle decide to go with him.

37. EXT. TENNIS COURT. DAY

At the tennis court, Fred, Mick, and Jimmy are struck dumb by what they see.

That obese South American is doing something out of this world: with his left foot he sends a tennis ball flying high in the air, and when it comes down, he kicks it up again, without ever letting it touch the ground, sending it sixty, seventy feet in the air. The tennis ball against the blue sky. It falls, he kicks it again, with a naturalness - despite the inhuman effort it takes for that massive body to move - that sparks admiration and horror at the same time.

Mick, Jimmy, and Fred can't believe their eyes. Rightly so.

After five or six feats of such amazing acrobatics, he stops, completely exhausted. He has trouble catching his breath.

Jimmy spots his briarwood cane, leaning against the fence. He grabs it and rushes over with it.

The South American thanks him, eyes brimming with gratitude, body dripping with sweat. Without saying a word, he slowly walks away, leaning heavily on his cane.

Two guitar notes, melancholy and discreet, accompany the South American's broken, belabored gait.

Jimmy, Fred, and Mick just stand there, scattered around the tennis court, and watch the best ex-soccer player in the world leave the field.

FADE TO BLACK.

38. INT. ROOM. AFTERNOON

FADE IN:

The two guitar notes float in here, without developing further.

A flowered wall, English style. In front of it is a small table with a magnificent silver tea service.

A women's purse, flung by who knows whom, crashes into the tea set. Everything ends up on the floor. The purse tumbles open. It's empty.

After a moment, the Queen's emissary enters the frame. He is very distraught. He says in a whisper.

QUEEN'S EMISSARY

Your Majesty, you nearly hit me!

QUEEN ELIZABETH'S VOICE

Yes, Mr. Bale, I nearly hit you.

The devastated emissary sighs. It's as if the whole universe were going to hell in a handbag.

39. INT. HOTEL RESTAURANT. EVENING

The two guitar notes die softly during this scene.

The German couple is silent again. They eat serenely, their eyes never meeting.

The hippy mountaineer looks dejected, as if all his hopes have been dashed as he steals glances at Lena, sitting with Fred and Mick. She doesn't even notice him.

Jimmy Tree is dining with Mark Kozelek and other friends. They're laughing at Jimmy's perfect imitation of Marlon Brando.

Sushi tonight. Everyone's using chopsticks.

Fred, Mick, and Lena dine in silence.

Lena says routinely.

LENA

The French called again. They really want to do that book with you... your memoirs, everything about your work, your life. What shall I tell them?

FRED BALLINGER

(reflects) Tell them...

He doesn't know what else to say. Silence. Lena and Mick wait.

LENA

What?

FRED BALLINGER

To forget me! Tell them that. I'm retired! I'm done! With work and life.

Mick raises his eyes heavenward, as if he knew this "song" all too well and can't stand it anymore.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)

I have nothing to say, and what's more, I'm not interested.

MICK BOYLE

Will you cut the crap? Your music conveyed surprising, new emotions.

FRED BALLINGER

But emotions are overrated too, Mick.

Mick throws his chopsticks onto the table. He's really pissed off.

MICK BOYLE

You're really unbearable when you play the depressed cynic, Fred. It's a mystery how I managed to be your friend all these years.

FRED BALLINGER

You're a man of much patience, Mick.

MICK BOYLE
And you're an idiot.

FRED BALLINGER
That's for sure!

Lena is about to say something but Mick cuts her off.

MICK BOYLE
A book about your work, life your experiences - it would last forever. It would be a help to young musicians, to everyone. It's important...

FRED BALLINGER
(interrupts him) Important!... Preserve your memory for posterity, pass on your knowledge. I've been hearing the same old tune for years now, but it's just an excuse, Mick, a way of ignoring the real problem.

MICK BOYLE
And what's the real problem, Fred?

FRED BALLINGER
Death, Mick! Death, it's so close.

LENA
So, instead of living you're thinking about death coming closer. Even though you're still alive.

Mick nods vigorously. He addresses Lena.

MICK BOYLE
Do you see why it pisses me off?

FRED BALLINGER
Yes, Lena sees.

LENA
But doesn't the idea of reliving your life, your work, fascinate you?

FRED BALLINGER
No. It only hurts me. Can't you see that? And besides, there's nothing more to say. Stravinsky already said it all. He composed simple music and everyone attacked him. "He's abandoned modernism! He's not respecting tradition!" the critics thundered. But he was merely rediscovering the past, his mirror.
(MORE)

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)

That's when he uttered that beautiful phrase: "You may respect, but I love." What more can I add?

Lena and Mick have nothing else to say. Fred picks up his chopsticks and holds them in the air, not eating. Lena stares at him.

Out of the blue, the boy violinist comes over. Fred doesn't even notice him.

The child gently adjusts Fred's hand - the one holding the chopsticks - raising it an inch. As if correcting his position.

Fred gazes at the boy and smiles sadly.

The boy simply smiles back at him, and then runs off, the way children do. Always running, they are.

40. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. NIGHT

A fakir is lying on a bed of nails on the stage.

Lena, Fred, Mick, and Jimmy Tree are sitting together at one of the tables, impassively watching the show.

JIMMY TREE

These shows are really pathetic. All that's missing is a mime.

FRED BALLINGER

We usually get one of those by the end of the summer as well.

The fakir levitates, rising above the bed of nails.

The audience applauds.

The fakir's back is very red. He spits fire from his mouth and says.

FAKIR

Thank you, everyone. And now, I hope you will enjoy some traditional horn music, played by a local ensemble.

Eight old men carrying long horns come onto the stage. They begin a gloomy litany.

A man whom we assume to be the hotel manager comes over to our characters' table. He addresses Jimmy Tree, but Fred, Mick, and Lena listen in as well.

HOTEL MANAGER

Excuse me, Mr. Tree, but a new guest has arrived. Her name is Joyce Owens, she has just won the Miss Universe pageant. She's a great admirer of yours and would like to meet you.

JIMMY TREE

Ok, here I am.

The manager gestures, and Miss Universe appears from a dark corner of the garden.

Our characters wait for her to arrive, their hearts aflutter. But Miss Universe turns out to be an unbelievable disappointment. She's wearing a cheap, oversize track suit that ruins her figure and makes her look plump, and - even though it's dark - a pair of violet-tinted sunglasses with vulgar frames that are too big for her face. Her skin is bad, her hair stringy and dirty. What's more, she has an awful voice, which we hear when she shakes Jimmy's hand.

MISS UNIVERSE

It's such a pleasure to meet you.
I'm a huge fan of yours. I
literally went crazy when you
played Mister Q.

Jimmy Tree raises his eyes heavenward. He's had more than enough of Mister Q.

MISS UNIVERSE (CONT'D)

I never miss a robot movie, but
that one's my favorite.

JIMMY TREE

(teasing) Thank you. And do you
ever watch any other kinds of
movie, other than robot movies?

MISS UNIVERSE

Of course! I've got my whole life
ahead of me, and I want to be an
actress. I don't want to just rely
on my beauty.

JIMMY TREE

(chuckles) What else do you watch?
Cartoons?

Miss Universe stiffens a little.

MISS UNIVERSE

Whatever I want.

JIMMY TREE

Brava, Miss Universe!

MISS UNIVERSE
(now very serious) You know
something, Mr. Tree?

JIMMY TREE
What?

MISS UNIVERSE
I appreciate irony, but when it is
drenched in poison, it is drained
of its force and reveals something
else.

JIMMY TREE
What does it reveal? Tell me.

MISS UNIVERSE
Frustration. Yours, in this case,
not mine.

JIMMY TREE
(leaning forward, nervous) I'm
frustrated, Miss Universe?

MISS UNIVERSE
I'm happy I took part in the Miss
Universe pageant. Are you happy you
played Mister Q?

Jimmy Tree has no answer for her.

Embarrassment washes over the whole group.

Jimmy extends a hand to Miss Universe, as if to acknowledge
defeat. But Miss Universe doesn't shake it. She walks away.

Mick smooths his hair with the palm of his hand as Jimmy
looks on.

Watching Miss Universe as she quickly disappears, Mick, to
break the chill that has descended...

MICK BOYLE
How unbearable the insolent
ostentation of youth is.

FRED BALLINGER
In particular if the person
listening is no longer young.

MICK BOYLE
(laughing) That woman should be
stabbed to death, I mean stabbed!

Fred turns to look at Jimmy who has gone back to watching the
horn ensemble. And he says a touch of irony.

FRED BALLINGER
She's not at all stupid, Miss
Universe.

Jimmy, without looking at him, replies immediately.

JIMMY TREE
Not at all!

They both break out in big smiles.

Lena watches Miss Universe walk across the garden, that peculiar look in her eye that women have when watching another woman. And when Miss Universe disappears from view, Lena does something: she turns ninety degrees and looks squarely at the mountaineer, who, naturally, is looking at her. His eyes are sparkling like never before.

41. EXT./INT. (MUSIC VIDEO) CAR. DAY.

(The whole scene is shot and edited in the style of a music video).

Music so funky it would make a corpse dance: "Can't rely on you."

A luxury car - a Maserati - races along a sun-kissed mountain road. Julian is driving. A splendidly made-up Paloma Faith appears in the backseat. She is the one who is singing. She's wearing sexy lingerie and moving her body in the most sinuous, sensual manner. A totally different Paloma from the dull, anonymous woman we saw earlier. She flicks her tongue in Julian's ear and he howls with pleasure. Down on all fours, she moves like a panther in the back seat, upping the eroticism with every gesture. Slithering like a snake, she slips out the open window and climbs gracefully onto the roof, singing the whole time. She gets to her feet and dances on top of the car, as sensual and sexy as before.

The only reason she doesn't fall off the roof of the moving car is because we are very clearly in the unreal world of music video.

Julian leans out of the window and watches her from below, turned on and moaning like a fool. He leans so far out of the car trying to grab her that he has to hold the steering wheel with his foot.

The car swerves, but there's no danger: we're in a music video.

Julian climbs back into the driver's seat to avoid an accident.

He fixes his eyes on the road, but is not for long: Paloma now appears on the front windshield.

Slowly, she slithers down the windshield onto the hood. Pressing her body against the glass, she winks at him, makes eyes at him, shows him her tongue and everything else as she rolls onto the hood, the car still tearing along at 120mph, the wind in her hair.

With an acrobatic move, Paloma finally climbs through the window again and is back in the car.

She sits next to Julian. He wants to touch her, but she coyly prevents him, increasing his desire. She's been singing the whole time, but now she pauses the song for a moment and says.

PALOMA FAITH

Now watch what I'm going to do for you!

She opens the glove compartment and produces a sex toy the likes of which has never been seen before.

A huge black rubber ball studded with menacing metal, luminescent stingers. It's impossible even to imagine what you could do with it.

PALOMA FAITH (CONT'D)

Watch this, honey.

And the spiked, luminescent ball slowly disappears beneath her body, but just then...

JULIAN

Holy shit!

42. INT. FRED BALLINGER'S SUITE. NIGHT

... DARKNESS.

A woman's scream shatters the music and everything else.

Alarmed, Fred Ballinger switches on the lamp on the night stand. Lena awakens with a start, as if from a nightmare. She's sweating, panicked. She can't breathe.

FRED BALLINGER

Lena, what's wrong?

Lena is gasping for breath. She slowly comes back to reality, her breath returning to normal. She reassures her father.

LENA

Nothing, nothing. It was just a dream.

FRED BALLINGER

A nightmare?

LENA

Let's say somewhere between the two. It's over now.

Fred turns off the light. Half-light. Lena slowly settles down, but she can't fall asleep. They have their backs to each other. After a while she asks.

LENA (CONT'D)

As a man, how did Miss Universe seem to you?

FRED BALLINGER

An unbelievable disappointment.

Lena is greatly cheered by her father's remark. Then, after a pause.

LENA

Daddy, I have to tell you something... personal.

FRED BALLINGER

Tell me, Lena.

LENA

Julian's an ass. Because I'm really good in bed.

FRED BALLINGER

I know.

LENA

What do you mean... you know?

FRED BALLINGER

You're my daughter. And, in all modesty, I was a wonder between the sheets myself.

Slowly but surely, once their embarrassment has faded, they start sniggering in the dark, each on his own side of the bed.

43. INT. CRAFT SHOP. DAY

A shop full of souvenirs and local crafts made of wood.

Fred roams around, glancing at the stuff on the shelves, but without much interest.

Jimmy Tree goes over to the cash register and - proud at having found it - presents a briarwood walking stick, very similar to the one we saw the South American using. The sales clerk starts wrapping it.

Jimmy is waiting when the pale, thirteen-year-old girl from the hotel appears at his side. Pink circles around her eyes, making her seem not scary exactly, but vaguely pained.

She bites her nails nervously as she stares at Jimmy, who senses her presence and so turns to her.

She stares unabashed at him, long and hard enough to make Jimmy feel embarrassed, and then says confidently.

PALE GIRL

I saw you in a film once.

JIMMY TREE

So you liked Mister Q as well?

PALE GIRL

No, I saw you in that film where you play a father who never knew his son and meets him for the first time in a highway diner when the son's already fourteen.

Jimmy turns to stone. He mutters.

JIMMY TREE

But nobody saw that movie!

PALE GIRL

There was a bit of dialog I really liked, when your son says, "Why weren't you a father to me?" and you say, "I didn't think I was up to it." At that moment I understood something really important.

JIMMY TREE

What?

PALE GIRL

That no one in the whole world feels up to it. And so there's no reason to worry. Bye. See you at the hotel.

And the girl walks away, her stride natural and easy.

Jimmy just stands there, immobile, at the counter, staring into space. He's stunned. Instinctively, he puts on his sunglasses.

Fred, standing still behind him among the shelves, must have heard everything, because he merely stares at Jimmy's back.

He is as overcome as Jimmy is, and doesn't say a word. He just looks at back of the actor who is probably deeply moved right now.

44. EXT. COUNTRY LANE. DAY

Jimmy and Fred walk along the beautiful lane that skirts the mountain village.

They walk in silence, wrapped in perfect sounds: cicadas and distant cowbells.

JIMMY TREE

What do you do all day, Fred?

FRED BALLINGER

They tell me I'm apathetic. So I don't do anything.

JIMMY TREE

Don't you miss your work?

FRED BALLINGER

Not at all. I worked far too much.

JIMMY TREE

So what do you miss?

FRED BALLINGER

My wife. I miss my wife Melanie.

JIMMY TREE

I read on Wikipedia that you hung out with Stravinsky for a while when you were young.

FRED BALLINGER

True.

JIMMY TREE

What was he like?

FRED BALLINGER

He was a very placid man.

JIMMY TREE

Placid? That's all? Be generous with me, Fred. I need a generous friend. Tell me about Stravinsky.

FRED BALLINGER

One day he said to me, "Intellectuals don't have any taste." So from that day on, I did everything I could not to be an intellectual. And I succeeded.

Jimmy doesn't say anything. They walk on in silence.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)

And you? What do you miss?

JIMMY TREE

Nothing, I'd say. Luckily.

FRED BALLINGER

Be generous with me, Jimmy.

Jimmy smiles, as if caught red-handed.

JIMMY TREE

What I missed I discovered four months ago reading Novalis.

Fred is surprised.

FRED BALLINGER

You read Novalis?

JIMMY TREE

(playful) Even actors from California, when they're not getting drunk, snorting coke, or hanging out with anorexic models, occasionally read Novalis.

FRED BALLINGER

You're right, sorry. I'm an old man and full of prejudices. And what does Novalis say?

JIMMY TREE

"I'm always going home, always going to my father's house."

45. EXT. GARDEN HOTEL. NIGHT

Mark Kozelek presses play on an iPod, and the sweet notes of a synthesizer float out the speakers. It's a slow, hypnotic track. The camera moves slowly around the room; it takes in Kozelek and Jimmy Tree's friends, who are listening seriously, attentively to the music. The camera glides out onto the terrace and takes in Jimmy Tree, lying on a chaise lounge and listening very intently to the music. He smokes a cigarette, which he then puts out in a cup of herbal tea. Mark Kozelek comes out and joins him. He lies down on the chaise lounge next to Jimmy's.

MARK KOZELEK

How do you like it? I wrote it yesterday. It's called "Ceiling Gazing."

Jimmy listens and then says sincerely.

JIMMY TREE

It's fabulous, Mark.

On the track, Mark's voice joins in and blends with the synthesizer. A voice so romantic it gives you the chills.

46. INT/EXT. REAR GARDEN HOTEL/ MASSEUSE'S ROOM. NIGHT

The beautiful music continues, extra-diegetic now. It's really moving.

Softly, as if in slow motion, the tiny, timid masseuse comes into the camera's eye. In close-up now, she's dancing. She's playing with Kinect again, but a different dance now.

47. INT./EXT. SOUTH AMERICAN'S SUITE/REAR GARDEN HOTEL. NIGHT

The beautiful music can be heard here as well.

The South American is on the terrace, in his underwear. He's half-reclining on a chaise lounge. His wife is at the foot of the lounge, massaging his massive, aching legs.

He stares out across the valley. And then, suddenly, it's like he has a vision. Bright lights come on, like the floodlights at a soccer stadium, and he sees twenty-two men, divided into two rows of eleven. One row is wearing the Argentina national team jersey, and the other that of England. The twenty-two players clamber up the steep field and arrive at the hotel garden. They merge into a single row and wave to a crowd that is not there. It seems like the lead up to an important soccer match.

Overcome with emotion, the South American stares at this vision.

His wife looks up at him sadly. She sees he is moved and asks in Spanish.

SOUTH AMERICAN'S WIFE
What are you thinking about?

The stadium floodlights suddenly go out.

SOUTH AMERICAN
The future.

48. INT. FRED BALLINGER'S SUITE. NIGHT

Kozelek's music dies down here. It's instrumental now, which makes it seem remote and discreet.

Lena is asleep in the bed. Half-light.

Fred is in the little living room, sitting in the middle of the couch. From here he can see Lena asleep in the distance. He looks away, and stares into space.

He's thinking, his thumb and index finger rubbing a candy wrapper imperceptibly at irregular intervals, creating a beautiful, elementary melody.

And that slight sound is what awakens Lena. She opens an eye. Without moving, she studies her father from the bed as he sits motionless on the couch.

49. INT. HOTEL RECEPTION. NIGHT

The lights are dimmed for the night. Two concierges are checking in a group of six guests who have just arrived. They're all about forty years old, four women and two men, normal faces. But they have some unusual baggage: rigid metal suitcases. Two other women arrive, wheeling metal racks from which hang dozens of outfits, covered in garment bags.

They all seem really tired. Kozelek's music caresses them...

50. INT. SALINE GROTTTO. NIGHT

... and flows here.

A fake underground grotto with papier-mâché walls made to look like the Alps.

A long spiral staircase in the center goes down and down, finishing right in a large round pool full of dark water with so much salt that you can do the dead man's float without the least effort.

And in fact, Mick Boyle and his five screenwriters are floating naked on their backs in a studied darkness.

They're brainstorming about the ending of "Life's Last Day."

FUNNY SCREENWRITER

He's on his deathbed, and murmurs to her, "I should have devoted myself to you, and to our love, instead of wasting my life trying to become the king of insurance policies."

SCREENWRITER IN LOVE

Or maybe he just says something banal to her, real simple, like "Take care of yourself."

INTELLECTUAL SCREENWRITER

No, we have to stay with the physical pain right up to the end. How about if he says, "Not even morphine can help me now."

FEMALE SCREENWRITER

What if he focuses on some insignificant detail? If he said something like, "I wonder whatever happened to that key ring you gave me twenty-five years ago, the one shaped like a horseshoe?"

MICK BOYLE

No. He doesn't say anything on his deathbed.

Silence on the part of the screenwriters. They're waiting.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

She's the one who talks. Brenda. She says, "I lost so much time because of you, Michael. I lost the best years of my life."

Silence. Then the shy screenwriter.

SHY SCREENWRITER

He's lying on his deathbed, and she slaps him, just like that.

An icy stare from Mick and the others. The shy screenwriter tries to make eat his words.

SHY SCREENWRITER (CONT'D)

I was just kidding!

51. INT. HOTEL CORRIDOR. NIGHT

Kozelek's sweet music follows us here, in the stillness of the hallway of this mountain hotel. The group of people who recently checked in are coming toward us, wheeling their metal racks and cumbersome metal suitcases.

The group passes a room, the door slightly ajar, without even noticing it.

But the camera notices and peeks inside. On the bed sits a elderly, bare-chested man, exhausted and sweaty. He stares at the floor and drinks a glass of water. The unattractive, plump hooker is putting on her overcoat. She exits the room and makes her way awkwardly and gracelessly to the elevator.

52. INT. PANORAMA HALL. NIGHT

The Ipod again, Mark Kozelek's music again, diegetic now.

A man gently combs Jimmy's hair and pulls it back, as Jimmy looks at himself in the mirror, a serious expression on his face. One of those dressing room mirrors, with all those little lights around it.

The hairdresser uses a razor to layer the hair on the back of Jimmy's head. He cuts it really short. A tense, somber mood. The other members of the group are watching Jimmy and his hairdresser.

Then, with a quick, expert move, the hairdresser moves a lock of Jimmy's hair to the right.

He sticks his fingers in a jar of brilliantine.

A middle-aged woman carefully unzips one of the garment bags and we get a glimpse of a green outfit.

53. EXT. HOTEL POOL. DAWN

Kozelek's music swells slightly, moving us even more.

The lights in the pool are on, creating a marvelous blue glow.

We see Jimmy Tree from the back, his hair quite short. He's slowly doing the breaststroke. He gets out, his movements tired, limited, like an old man's. He dries himself off and starts getting dressed. We still haven't seen his face.

In the distance, behind the mountains, dawn is breaking.

Kozelek's music vanishes.

54. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. DAY

Adolf Hitler, in military uniform, is attempting to strut across the garden, beneath a long canopy. He manages in part thanks to the briarwood cane. His steps are short, uncertain: in other words, an older Hitler, in his sixties, full of aches and pains.

He marches past the camera. It's not Hitler, it's Jimmy Tree, in a perfect character reconstruction.

He walks slowly, almost prudently, but with an austere, dictatorial demeanor that erases the distinction between Jimmy's character and the real Hitler. He looks around, but no one's there.

Then, all of a sudden, Hitler stops. He puts his palm on his forehead to smooth down his hair, just as Mick Boyle does all the time, and then, with a certain pomposity, gives the Nazi salute.

He has saluted Frances, the pale thirteen-year-old girl who stands before him. Jimmy keeps his arm raised, waiting for a reaction. She merely looks calmly at him and smiles, not in the least frightened by this unusual performance.

55. INT. COVERED POOL. DAY

Mick Boyle is lying on a chaise lounge near the pool, wrapped in a robe.

Lena swims languidly, without much effort.

Other than Mick and Lena, there's no one there.

MICK BOYLE

I've never told you how sorry I am about how things ended between you and Julian.

Lena stops near the edge of the pool.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

I mean, I want to apologize for his behavior.

LENA

"Apologize?" What do you have to do with it?

MICK BOYLE

Let's face it, as a father, I could have done more.

LENA

Julian did what he wanted to, without worrying about the consequences. He picked up the scent. I'm starting to smell it as well.

MICK BOYLE

What scent?

LENA

(smiling) The dizzying scent of freedom.

MICK BOYLE

(smiles) Oh right, I know that scent.

LENA

But Daddy really didn't tell you anything about the Queen, about the Simple Songs he was supposed to conduct in London, and how he refused?

MICK BOYLE

No. He didn't tell me a thing.

LENA

What a strange friendship you two have.

MICK BOYLE

Strange? No, it's a good friendship. And in a good friendship, you only tell each other the good things. He must have thought that the Queen's concert wasn't one of them.

LENA

He says he can't conduct his "Simple Songs" because the only person who could sing them was my mother.

MICK BOYLE

(surprised) He said that?

LENA

Yes, that's what he told the Queen's emissary.

MICK BOYLE

It took him eighty years to finally say something romantic, and who does he go and say it to? The Queen's emissary.

Lena smiles. And so does Mick.

LENA

He watches me at night, while I sleep. And tonight, for the first time in my life, he caressed me as I was asleep. Only I wasn't asleep, I was pretending.

MICK BOYLE

Parents know when their children are pretending to be asleep.

Lena's eyes are bright now, and she turns her back to Mick so he can't see how touched she is.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

Are you worried about him?

LENA

No, I'm not worried about him.

56. INT. HOTEL DINING ROOM. DAY

We're well aware that this hotel is a quiet place, but it has never been this silent before.

Everyone is looking in the same direction: at the table where Adolf Hitler, indifferent to all those around him, is digging in to a hearty breakfast.

And the astounding thing is that they're all looking at him deferentially, in awe, as if this were actually the real Hitler, sixty years later. So much so that some of them, passing by him on their way out of the dining room, end up bowing ever so slightly, respectfully, to the fuhrer and saying "Good morning."

Hitler returns their greeting with the hint of a haughty salute.

Then Jimmy/Hitler takes a handkerchief out of his pocket, blows his nose, rubs the tip quickly four times, just as he had always seen Fred do, folds it, and puts it back in his pocket.

Fred Ballinger observes Jimmy from his table and, on seeing his own habitual gesture reinterpreted by Hitler, smiles strangely.

Then the silent German couple stop in front of Hitler and the woman stares severely at Jimmy/Hitler. In a serious voice, she orders him.

GERMAN WOMAN

Don't you ever dare to do that again.

57. INT. SKI LIFT. DAY

Fred and Mick, all decked out for trekking (hats, sunglasses, the latest backpacks, formfitting, orange synthetic T-shirts, Bermuda shorts, colorful Solomon hiking shoes, and poles) sit next to each other on the ski lift, suspended in mid-air as they climb up to 10,000 feet. They look up at the vertiginous peaks and the jagged rock face of the mountains as they sail silently upward.

After a while.

MICK BOYLE

I talked with Lena a bit this morning. She's worried about you.

Fred stares at the mountain peak, impassive. Mick waits, but Fred doesn't respond.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

It's years since you went to see Melanie. Why don't you go? Venice is so close.

Fred is impassive. He doesn't say a word. Mick turns to look at him, but Fred keeps staring straight ahead, his eyes on the mountain. Mick tries again.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

Lena told me about this story with Queen Elizabeth. You didn't breathe a word to me about it. Well, it could be pretty nice, no? I'd be so happy to hear Simple Song No. 3 played live one last time.

FRED BALLINGER

I wouldn't.

MICK BOYLE

You don't want to betray the memory of Melanie, but sometimes, in order to remain faithful, you have to have the courage to betray. Don't you agree?

Fred, after a silence, as he looks at the mountain.

FRED BALLINGER

Mick, there's something that I just can't get out of my head.

MICK BOYLE

What?

FRED BALLINGER

What it would have been like to sleep with Gilda Black!

MICK BOYLE

(embarrassed) Yeah! I wonder too!

Fred turns to scrutinize Mick, because he doesn't trust the truth of his words. In a hiss halfway between serious and humorous, he says.

FRED BALLINGER

Liar!

Mick avoids his friend's gaze.

58. EXT. MOUNTAIN. DAY

It's so beautiful here, the silence and the pure air of the mountains at 10,000 feet.

Fred and Mick are sitting on a grassy slope that gives on to a valley far below. There's no one there, only the two of them and all this nature and silence. Fred unwraps a candy and pops it in his mouth.

After a sizeable silence, Fred pierces the soft mountain breeze.

FRED BALLINGER
Hey Mick.

MICK BOYLE
Yeah?

FRED BALLINGER
Why are we dressed like this?

Mick sniggers.

There in that immense silence, Fred starts rubbing the candy wrapper in time to some inner music. Mick casts a sidelong glance at his friend's fingers.

MICK BOYLE
That's not so great.

FRED BALLINGER
What?

MICK BOYLE
The piece you're playing with that candy wrapper. You've done a lot better than that in your lifetime.

Now it's Fred who sniggers a bit. Then he turns serious.

58A. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. NIGHT

The hooker's tiny mother, hand in hand with her plump, clumsy daughter. They walk under the long canopy that runs through the garden. The neon "Hotel" sign looms above them.

They arrive at the hotel entrance. As always, the mother kisses her daughter and then tells her.

HOOKER'S MOTHER
Do good things.

The daughter enters the hotel. The mother gives her one last look.

59. INT. PRIVATE SAUNA POOL. DAY

Mick and Fred are the only ones sitting on the boiling wooden benches. Skinny little towels cover their private parts. They're sweating like pigs. It seems as if they could die at any moment.

They sit in silence, exhausted from the infernal heat, when a vision brings them back to the spectacle of life.

A statuesque woman appears, wrapped in a robe. She takes it off. Naked. Her beauty and corporeal perfection are the epitome of sensational. With utmost elegance and femininity, this creature - for that is what she is - places a towel on the wooden bench and gently reclines. Indifferent to her own nakedness and to the two old men, she closes her eyes and relaxes.

Not only is this woman completely comfortable, but she seems to have been created to make the rest of world uncomfortable.

Fred and Mick, ill at ease, stare at her the way one stares at those paranormal - and therefore inexplicable - phenomena in nature.

It takes them an unreasonable amount of time to regain any semblance of rational thought. They begin whispering to each other, so as not to be overheard by that perfect creature.

FRED BALLINGER

Who is she?

MICK BOYLE

What do you mean, who is she? Miss Universe.

FRED BALLINGER

She looks completely different, unrecognizable.

MICK BOYLE

She's been transformed, from watching all those robot movies.

Fred doesn't laugh. He can't. He has to gaze dizzily at Miss Universe, whose beauty drains him.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

You know something, Fred? By dint of all our piss talk, we've forgotten that that organ is also made to fulfill other functions.

FRED BALLINGER

Take it easy with those illusions, Mick.

MICK BOYLE

Illusions? You know they make these little pills now...

FRED BALLINGER

Yeah, but it distorts the reality of the situation.

MICK BOYLE

And so? And what have I been doing my whole life making films?

Miss Universe languidly shifts her legs a few inches, just enough to inflict further despair on our two old men.

FRED BALLINGER

Anyway, she's not interested, Mick,
She's interested in a body that
corresponds to hers. Sex is like
music, it wants harmony. And
rightly so. We're no longer in any
condition to harmonize with anyone,
Mick.

They could cry at this point, and they might have, if an attendant hadn't come into the sauna just then.

ATTENDANT

Excuse me, Mr. Boyle, there's
someone here to see you.

MICK BOYLE

(snorts) Can't you see that we're
living the last great idyll of our
lives? Well, who's the pain in the
neck?

ATTENDANT

Brenda Morel.

60. INT. PANORAMA HALL/ BALLROOM. DAY

Here she is, the genius, Brenda Morel. Who was once a deeply mysterious *femme fatale*. Impeccable, sitting up straight in a small armchair. Over eighty years old. Numerous face lifts. A delicate diamond choker sparkles among her wrinkles, which are more obstinate than her plastic surgeon. A cascade of blond hair that make us wonder about her hairdresser.

While she waits, she expertly runs her tongue over her entire dental arch, making sure that her lipstick hasn't stained her perfect dentures.

Mick enters, sparking an orgy of joy and affectation. But not Brenda. She is serious. Aloof.

MICK BOYLE

Brenda! What a fabulous, marvelous
surprise!

BRENDA

Hi, Mick.

They kiss each other on the cheek.

MICK BOYLE

You look fabulous, Brenda. The very
picture of radiance and sex appeal.

BRENDA

You're getting mixed up with last millennium, Mick.

Mick laughs theatrically.

MICK BOYLE

What, you just couldn't wait any longer? We just finished the latest version, you know. We were having trouble with the ending, but then yesterday, eureka! it came to us. So now that you're here in the flesh, we can hand it to you. But didn't you tell me you were going to be in Los Angeles? What are you doing in Europe?

Brenda looks Mick in the eyes.

BRENDA

How long have we known each other, Mick?

MICK BOYLE

Jesus, you're putting me on the spot! Let me count...

BRENDA

Fifty-three years. And how many films have we made together?

MICK BOYLE

Nine, ten...

BRENDA

Eleven. And do you really think that after fifty-three years of friendship and eleven films together that now I'm going to start bullshitting you, of all people?

MICK BOYLE

(bewildered) No, no I don't... I wouldn't deserve that.

BRENDA

Right, you don't deserve it. You deserve me to call a spade a spade. Which is why I dragged my ass here from LA. To talk to you in person.

Brenda's seriousness, her severity, makes Mick anxious.

MICK BOYLE

I see. Look, Brenda, if it's about scene 21, where you're described as "ugly, feeble, a pale shadow of your former beauty," well, please realize that that's just poetic license, but on set, naturally, we'll proceed in a totally different way. I want you to be extraordinary. You still preserve intact - you have to - that mystery, that allure that made you a diva in the first place.

BRENDA

Don't go licking my ass, Mick, it just breaks my balls even more, especially given what I came here to tell you.

MICK BOYLE

Why? What did you come to tell me?

BRENDA

I'm not doing the film, Mick.

MICK BOYLE

What?

BRENDA

They offered me a TV series in New Mexico. A three year contract. An alcoholic grandmother who's had a serious stroke. A character with real balls. With the money I'll be able to pay for Jack's drug rehab, my niece Angelica's film school tuition, pay off my idiotic husband's debts, and still have enough money left over for a house in Miami, which I've been wanting for fourteen years. That's what I came to tell you.

Mick objects, raising his voice.

MICK BOYLE

But this is cinema, Brenda! That's just television. Television's shit.

BRENDA

Television's the future, Mick. To tell you the truth, it's also the present. So let's be frank, Mick, because nobody speaks frankly in this fucking film world.

(MORE)

BRENDA (CONT'D)

You're going on eighty, and like most of your colleagues, you've gotten worse with age. The last three films you made were shit, Mick. I'm telling you, according to me and according to everybody, they were real shit!

Mick Boyle is practically having a heart attack. He's shouting in a way he shouldn't, given his age and his high blood pressure.

MICK BOYLE

How dare you! How dare you! How dare you! So you want to be frank, do you? Fine, let's be frank. Fifty-three years ago, if it weren't for me, who was, is, and always will be a gentleman, you would still be crouching under some producer's desk. I pulled you out of all those fat producers' underpants and made you into an actress.

Brenda is fuming, her eyes ablaze. She screams at him.

BRENDA

What a little shit you are! I was just fine in those producers' underpants. And you know why? Because I wanted to be there. I don't owe anybody anything. I did it all myself. I paid my way at the Actors Studio by cleaning toilets all over Brooklyn, my mother went into debt for me. And in Hollywood I walked through the front door, all by myself. Marilyn, Rita, Grace, they'd all shit in their pants when they saw me coming. It's all written down, right there in my autobiography, don't tell me you haven't read it?

MICK BOYLE

Unfortunately I have. Except you didn't write it. And it was a piece of shit, your autobiography, just like this TV series you're going to do, real shit.

Brenda sighs, as if she needed air, but then, surprisingly, she stops shouting. She calms down and starts speaking in a quiet voice that makes her seem even more ruthless than when she was yelling.

BRENDA

The real shit is this film of yours, Mick. I understand cinema, you know I do. You're the one who doesn't understand it any more. Because you're old, you're tired, you don't know how to see the world any more, all you know how to see is your own death, which is waiting right around the corner for you. Your career's over, Mick. I'm telling you flat out because I love you. No one's interested in your testament, as you call it, and you risk nullifying all the beautiful films you've already made. And that would be unforgivable. It was only because of me that they were even going to let you make it. So by pulling out, I'm saving your life. And your dignity.

Mick is devastated. Completely drained. His words are cutting.

MICK BOYLE

You're an ingrate. And ingrate and an idiot. Which is why you got ahead.

But Brenda doesn't hear his insults any more. Or maybe she just doesn't believe them. Regardless, she stretches out her diamond-encrusted hand and does something extraordinary: she caresses Mick's cheek. Mick is on the verge of tears.

BRENDA

You're right, Mick, that's exactly right.

Mick hisses between his teeth, his words full of hatred and revenge.

MICK BOYLE

I'm going to make this film anyway. Even without you.

Mick is crying. Brenda is still caressing his cheek.

BRENDA

Come on, Mick, life goes on. Even without all this cinema bullshit.

Mick buries his face in his hands, destroyed.

Brenda, like the last of the great movie stars, stands up, smooths out her dress, which has gotten a few creases in it, grabs her thirty-thousand dollar purse, and with a regal, dignified gait, makes her exit.

61. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. NIGHT

Spring must be coming to an end, because it's the mime tonight. The whole nine yards: tails, whiteface, that perfect melancholy expression.

In a corner, the man we saw earlier, all covered in mud, approaches Miss Universe.

MUD MAN

Do you know you are the paragon of human beauty?

MISS UNIVERSE

Do you know I was just thinking the same thing?

The man walks away without uttering another word.

The mime pretends to climb over an imaginary wall, but without success.

Mick and Jimmy Tree, who has changed back in his own clothes, are watching the performance. They're sitting next to each other, with Fred and Lena.

Mick is catatonic. He looks but doesn't see, staring off into space with a monotonous expression.

MICK BOYLE

Do you know how many actresses I've worked with in my carrier?

JIMMY TREE

Lots... I guess.

MICK BOYLE

(venting) More than fifty. I launched at least fifty actresses. And they've always been grateful to me. I... I'm a a great women's director.

Fred and Lena turn to look at Mick, but they can't find the right words or the right expression.

Jimmy Tree stares into Mick's eyes and play acts.

JIMMY TREE

"That way, Frank, that way you'll never forget me." Do you remember, Mr. Boyle?

MICK BOYLE

Of course I remember. I remember everything I ever shot.

JIMMY TREE

Mr. Boyle, you're not a great women's director. You're a great director, period.

The mime, exhausted from not being able to climb over the wall, crumbles to the ground and pretends to fall asleep.

Fred Ballinger is looking at the mime.

Lena is looking at her father.

The hippy mountaineer is looking at Lena.

There is a brief round of applause for the mime.

The audience begins to disperse. The evening is over. Mick, Fred, and Lena are heading off when the voice of the boy violinist calls out loudly, making them stop.

BOY

Mr. Ballinger.

They turn around. The boy has ascended the stage and, violin in hand, plays the first, simple chords of Simple Song No. 3. All he can play are the first two chords, but he's gotten a lot better. He plays them well and, even though he can only repeat them, their sweetness has the power to move anyone who listens.

Everyone is hypnotized by the child's simple playing. Jimmy Tree, Mark Kozelek and his friends, the mountaineer, Lena, the South American and his wife, the German couple, all the elderly guests and their caretakers, the vulgar Russians, and the black family, Frances and her mother, the waiters and the doctor, the hotel manager and the cooks: it's as if time were standing still, like in a fairy tale where every, stars and extras, join together.

But only one person is truly moved by those simple violin notes. And it's not Fred Ballinger, it's Mick Boyle. He has tears in his eyes.

And only Fred Ballinger, of all the people there, has noticed that Mick is moved. Fred looks at him impassively.

61A. INT. HOTEL GYM. NIGHT

Lena, in a beautiful evening dress, stands at the foot of the free-climbing wall, scrutinizing the height of the fake rock face.

The mountaineer must have followed her because he's coming up behind her now. He approaches warily, intimidated, he's almost reached her.

A bundle of nerves and embarrassment, he adjusts his shirt, surreptitiously straightens his hair, and then appears at her side. Lena doesn't even look at him, as if he didn't exist. He delivers an awkward opener.

MOUNTAINEER

Would you like to try to climb?

Only at this point does Lena suddenly turn toward him. She pierces him with a look that could not be more sensual, and then addresses him in a serious, husky voice.

LENA

Do you know that I can make a man
go wild in bed if I want?

The mountaineer, as though it were the only natural thing to do, looks up, goes white as milk, and falls to the ground in a faint. A loud thud.

Lena immediately abandons the role of the "femme fatale" and becomes the apprehensive friend. She exclaims to herself.

LENA (CONT'D)

Oh, fucking hell!

She leans over the mountaineer lying on the floor. She slaps his cheeks to revive him. She's scared.

LENA (CONT'D)

Sir, sir! Wake up, fuck!

Slowly the mountaineer comes to. He opens his eyes and sees Lena's worried face a few inches from his.

In a faint voice, the mountaineer says.

MOUNTAINEER

It takes a lot less for you to make
a man go wild.

Lena smiles, relieved.

61B. INT. HOTEL LOBBY. NIGHT

The chubby hooker sits alone on a couch, looking sad. The lobby is deserted. Mick appears behind her and, without mincing his words, says.

MICK BOYLE

Okay, I've made up my mind, I went
to the ATM.

The hooker turns to look at him.

HOOKER

And what would you want to do?

MICK BOYLE
(serious) Go for a walk.

61C. EXT. HOTEL GARDEN. NIGHT

Mick Boyle and the unattractive hooker stroll hand in hand, like new lovers, through the garden with its centuries-old trees.

That's all they do. They don't even look at each other as they walk slowly, hand in hand.

While on a secluded bench, the two screenwriters suspected of falling in love are, in fact, in love. They kiss with that intensity of first kisses. Endless, exhausting kisses. All of a sudden, the female screenwriter, without stopping kissing, sees Mick and the young lady out of the corner of her eye.

62. EXT. MOUNTAIN VILLAGE. TRAIN STATION. DAY

The small train station in this mountain village.

Mick Boyle and the five screenwriters, all of them blue, sit side by side on a bench on the platform, waiting for the train. The two lovers are holding hands.

After a silence, Mick breaks the ice.

MICK BOYLE
Come on, kids, what's with the long faces? Hitches, delays in screening, these things are constants in our line of work. Get used to it. I've already talked with the producer, we just need a little time to come up with another actress and then the shooting starts. It's just a matter of waiting a few more months.

INTELLECTUAL SCREENWRITER
What a bitch that Brenda Morel is.

MICK BOYLE
Don't talk like that about Brenda Morel.

SCREENWRITER IN LOVE
She goes where the wind blows.

MICK BOYLE
Which is what we all do. And it's what you all will do, in order to survive in this jungle.

SHY SCREENWRITER

It's not true that she came to Europe specially to meet you, Mick. I read that she's going to Cannes, some charity ball at the Film Festival.

The other screenwriters throw him dirty looks.

MICK BOYLE

Let's not get carried away with all this truth, now. Remember that fiction is our passion.

FUNNY SCREENWRITER

Your film-testament is worth a whole lot more than one more TV series, Mick.

MICK BOYLE

My film-testament!? Let's not overrate things. Most men die not only without a testament, but without anyone even noticing.

INTELLECTUAL SCREENWRITER

Most men aren't great artists like you.

MICK BOYLE

It makes no difference. Men, artists, animals, plants - we're all just extras.

The train has arrived. The doors open. The screenwriters grab their backpacks and start boarding the train. The last to climb aboard is the female screenwriter who hasn't yet said a word. Mick stays on the platform, watching them. Just before the door closes, she turns to Mick and, with a beautiful smile, says.

FEMALE SCREENWRITER

He's on his deathbed, and he dies. Only then does she say - and for the first time - "I love you, Michael."

Mick smiles, moved.

MICK BOYLE

Perfect!

The door closes. The train pulls away and disappears around a bend. Mick, sad now, turns and leaves the station.

63. EXT. COUNTRY LANE. DAY

Mick, alone and disappointed, shuffles along the same country lane. He's all alone. It's a glorious day. Brilliant sun. Blue sky. Crisp air. Chirping cicadas. A paradise.

A woman's voice, as if it were coming from nowhere, calls him.

WOMAN'S VOICE

Mick.

Mick turns to his left, where there is an immense uncultivated field, the grass three feet high. He looks, but can't see anyone. But then, a woman dressed like a 1950s stewardess materializes out of the grass. It was she who called him, and now she adds anxiously.

STEWARDESS

How am I supposed to say this line,
Mick? I don't get it.

Mick doesn't even have time to respond before another woman - she looks like a young Jean Seberg - pops up from the grass, wearing a bikini. She sounds as if she is reciting a line from a film, in an ostentatious, snobby voice.

GIRL IN BIKINI

You may not know, James, that I
never even step foot on a yacht
that is less than 80 feet.

Next a ditsy blond with abundant curves, 1960s style, appears out of the grass, and starts reciting.

DITSY BLOND

Come on, guys, where did you hide
my lilac slippers? Enough already.

Mick watches and smiles radiantly.

Now a pious looking, middle-aged woman pops up and recites emotionally, on the verge of tears.

PIOUS WOMAN

Oh Albert, if only you knew how
much it has cost me to guard my
virginity all these years, until
today, until I met you!

A magnificent countess in a nineteenth-century gown rises up out of the grass.

COUNTESS

Prince, I am the owner of six castles and twenty carriages, but there is only one thing I can declare with certainty: life is so tiresome.

And now a woman in the militant dress of 1968.

1968ER

Sure, we all want a revolution, as long as it doesn't tire us out too much.

Mick looks happily at all his actresses, one by one, as they recite lines from his films.

Another woman appears, about thirty-five, her back to us, long, flowing red hair and bare shoulders. She turns to the camera: a fabulous, authentic diva, dripping with allure. She gives a sensual, nostalgic performance.

DIVA

Okay, you win, I'll go to bed with you, but on one condition. That you don't come. That way, Frank, that way you'll never forget me.

One after another all of Mick's actresses appear, popping up out of the grass. Each one recites a line. The ones that have been standing for a while just keep repeating the same line, in a quieter voice.

In short, that field becomes a garden of actresses - all types, all ages and eras, in all sorts of costumes (a soldier, a little old lady, a drag queen, a vamp, a singer, a gymnast, a ballerina with a tutu, etc.), all reciting their lines for Mick.

The whining stewardess again.

STEWARDESS

How do you want it, Mick? Sincere, smug, wicked? And my walk? How's my character supposed to move?

Mick is about to reply when yet another actress pops up and steals his attention. More than all the others, this one really shakes him up. He blurts out.

MICK BOYLE

Mommy.

All the other actresses fall silent, leaving the stage to this last actress.

It's Brenda Morel, in costume: a cheap, ugly dressing gown, decrepit, a pale shadow of her former beauty. She recites in a neutral voice.

BRENDA

You were so cute when you were little, my boy. But what's so disgraceful is that you're still cute. A cute, useless man.

Mick's eyes are shining. The silence of the empty field. There's no one there. The vision is over.

64. INT. FRED BALLINGER'S SUITE. DAY

Fred and Mick are in Fred's bedroom.

Fred in the armchair, Mick on the edge of the bed. Mick is looking out the window. Calm and disappointed. Fred eyes him, knowing what a difficult moment this is for his friend.

FRED BALLINGER

So you talked to the producer?

Mick turns and looks at Fred.

MICK BOYLE

I've been in this business too long not to know that without Brenda, this film is never going to be made.

Silence. Mick reflects.

Then Mick turns his gaze to Fred's night stand. He looks at the photograph of Fred and his wife hugging ten years earlier. Old, but happy. And beautiful.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

Melanie is so beautiful in that picture.

FRED BALLINGER

You're right, she is beautiful.

MICK BOYLE

You know, I've come to realize something, Fred. People are either beautiful or ugly. The ones in between are merely cute.

Fred smiles bitterly. So does Mick.

MICK BOYLE (CONT'D)

So... another vacation almost over. What will you do next, Fred?

FRED BALLINGER

What am I supposed to do? I'll go home, the usual routine.

MICK BOYLE

Not me. I don't do routine. You know what I'm going to do, Fred? I'm going to start on another film. You say that emotions are overrated, but that's bullshit. Emotions are all we have.

Then Mick gets up, goes over to the glass door, opens it, steps onto the balcony, and, with remarkable simplicity, puts one foot on the wicker chair, the other on the railing, and lets himself fall from the fifth floor.

Fred barely has time to stand up. Mick was so swift and so unpredictable, he didn't give his friend time to do anything to save him.

65. INT. AIRPLANE. DAY

The Boeing sits on the runway. In the background, the mountains.

In a LONG SHOT from the back of the plane, we watch the entire take off. The plane is full. We can see the back of everybody's necks from this angle.

A stewardess strolls down the aisle. She turns politely to a distinguished looking man.

STEWARDESS

Excuse me, sir, but you'll have to switch off your cell phone.

The LONG SHOT continues.

All of a sudden, from the other end of the plane - from business class, which is separated by a little curtain from where we are - comes a hoarse, monstrous cry. It goes on and on, a broken, bloodcurdling sound.

All the passengers stretch their necks toward the little curtain, surprised. The stewardess dashes at full speed toward business class.

The camera begins a long, slow tracking shot down the aisle toward business class.

As the dolly moves, the monstrous, deranged screams, which seem to be those of a woman, echo throughout the cabin. More female cries, and the sound of a scuffle.

The camera has arrived at the little curtain. It makes its way under it and enters business class.

The screams still persist, but they're fading now.

By now all the passengers are on their feet, gawking.

The camera elbows its way to the passageway in front of the cockpit and the exit door.

We hear a jumble of confused voices, a muffled moan, and an incomprehensible commotion.

The camera has arrived at the center of the action: five stewardesses, done in by the physical strain, are literally immobilizing someone on the floor. One of them has a bloody lip.

The camera goes to find out who it is, moaning and shaking feebly.

It's Brenda Morel stretched out there on the floor of the plane, deranged, her torn dress riding up, revealing an old lady's flesh-colored slip, her make-up smudged, her face barely recognizable, disfigured by pain and tears, her words fragmented and incomprehensible, frightening.

She is bald. Her wig must have fallen off in the scuffle with the stewardesses.

A close-up of Brenda's face. We now realize what she is saying. Exhausted but determined, she keeps mumbling to the stewardesses who are holding her down.

BRENDA

Let me off, you fucking bitches,
let me off this damn plane
immediately.

The pilot comes out of the cockpit, breathless. He speaks to Brenda.

PILOT

Okay, lady, you win. I just got
clearance from the control tower.
We're going to let you off now.

66. EXT. HILL. DAY

Scattered across the hill, the usual cows with their bells ringing randomly.

Fred is sitting on a rock facing them. He watches the animals, his face blank.

Then he closes his eyes. The camera zooms in slowly. Fred moves his arm, as if directing an orchestra, but this time nothing happens.

The cowbells keep ringing in random, anarchic fashion.

Fred, his eyes still closed, makes a vexed gesture. He moves his arm more energetically this time, but still nothing. He can't seem to concentrate and compose in his mind.

He is in need of music, but music no longer has need of him.

He opens his eyes. The cows are still there, in front of him. And in a loud voice he issues a command, a pretty stupid thing to say to a bunch of cows.

FRED BALLINGER

Be quiet.

But the cows and their cowbells ignore him.

Fred drops his head slightly. He's exhausted. His eyes shine with grief.

Then, something surprising happens. Without any warning, a parachutist lands silently in the middle of the cows.

Fred looks at him. The parachute collapses on top of the man, covering him completely.

He struggles to free himself, then looks around in surprise and realizes he has landed in the wrong place, right in the middle of a herd of cows.

He looks at Fred and says calmly.

PARACHUTIST

I don't think this was where I was supposed to land.

And, without waiting for a reply, he heads off across the hill.

As Fred watches him, his eyes still wet with tears, he smiles.

67. INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE. DAY

A magnificent bow window that looks out onto the mountains, with an antique wooden birdcage. It's a gorgeous, round structure, with a magnificent blackbird inside.

The bird is chirping a simple, perfect song.

We are in the office of the sixty-year-old doctor. He is standing behind his desk, staring with dismay and concern at Fred Ballinger, who is sitting on the other side of the desk, ecstatically contemplating the singing blackbird.

The doctor begins in a tactful voice.

DOCTOR
Will you be going to Los Angeles
for the funer--

Fred interrupts him.

FRED BALLINGER
Ssshhhh!

The doctor falls silent.

Fred, his face vacant, stands up and shuffles over to the window, to hear the bird's song up close.

The doctor too turns and looks at the bird, which suddenly - and for no apparent reason - stops singing.

Fred turns to the doctor and says, all in one go.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
Birds are such artists! No, I'm not going to Los Angeles. I'm not going to Mick Boyle's funeral. And I won't come back here on holiday either. Because it's absolutely pointless to return to the places where you have been happy. Because you have to learn how to look everything else in the face.

The doctor nods sadly.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)
Why exactly did you call me in here, doctor? What is it you wanted to tell me?

The doctor sits on his desk. He picks up a medical file and opens it.

DOCTOR
I have the results of all the check-ups you've been doing during your holiday.

FRED BALLINGER
And what do they say?

DOCTOR
You're as healthy as a horse, Mr. Ballinger.

Fred, hopeful almost, asks.

FRED BALLINGER
My prostate at least?

The doctor is surprised.

DOCTOR

Your prostate? You've never had a problem with your prostate. And if you haven't had any problems so far, you're certainly not going to start having them now.

Fred looks up at the doctor. Completely unexpectedly, he smiles. And says.

FRED BALLINGER

So I've grown old, but without understanding how I got here.

The doctor gives him a sad smile.

Fred turns and looks out the window. In the distance, he spots the young masseuse who is quickly crossing the hotel garden in her white work smock. She moves quickly and gracefully, and Fred watches her with that same tinge of melancholy, while the doctor says to him.

DOCTOR

So... do you know what awaits you outside of here?

FRED BALLINGER

No, doctor, what?

DOCTOR

(smiles) Youth.

The doctor reflects for a moment, growing sad.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Mick Boyle used to come by pretty often for a chat.

Fred watches the masseuse disappear behind a row of trees and jump into the pool. Then he asks the doctor.

FRED BALLINGER

By any chance, did he ever tell you anything about Gilda Black?

DOCTOR

He never talked about anything else.

Fred's ears perk up. He's consumed by curiosity. But he tries to hide it, in order to get the answers he is after.

FRED BALLINGER

Was she his girlfriend?

DOCTOR

"Girlfriend" is way too much. The only thing that ever happened was one time, when they were kids, they held hands and walked together for a few yards in some park.

Fred smiles to himself.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

He used to call it "The moment I learned to ride a bike." Didn't he ever tell you about it?

FRED BALLINGER

No. We only ever told each other the good things.

68. EXT. VENICE. (VARIOUS SETTINGS). NIGHT

Venice is so beautiful. And mysterious. And unique.

Especially at night, when the city is still, deserted, abandoned seeming, when even the most diehard tourists have fallen into the arms of Morpheus.

Canals, narrow streets, Saint Mark's Square. Everything unmoving and statuesque.

But then he appears. In the distance, small and vulnerable, with that tiny, old-man shuffle of his. And flowers, he's carrying flowers. It's Fred Ballinger. He's walking all by himself through this mysterious city. He crosses a small bridge. A motorboat glides underneath, not making a sound.

68A. EXT. CEMETERY. DAWN

A speedboat-taxi skirts the walls of the cemetery. Fred Ballinger sits onboard, serious and tired, staring into the void, the flowers in his lap.

In the cemetery, he crosses the long avenues dotted with tombs. He's looking for someone. He approaches a few tombs, but can't remember. And besides, he doesn't have much of a sense of direction.

There, he's finally found it. He stands in front of the tomb of Igor Stravinsky. But he keeps holding the flowers firmly in his hands.

68B. EXT. VENICE. (VARIOUS SETTINGS). DAY

Fred knows the way now. He shuffles along a narrow street that borders a canal. He turns a corner and stops. He looks up sadly and sees the sign for a private clinic.

69. INT. CLINIC. PRIVATE ROOM. DAY

Fred, flowers in hand, stands in a room of the clinic. A sober, private room. And he looks. He's looking at a bed near the window where we see from behind an elderly woman, motionless, her hair loose, her forehead leaning against the window.

Fred plucks up his courage and arranges the flowers in a small plastic vase on the night stand. Then he pulls the photo he had in the hotel out of his pocket and places it next to the flowers. He sits down near her, his back to her.

He looks at the floor and, filled with an unusual shyness, he says.

FRED BALLINGER

I waited till it was visiting hours
to come see you.

Fred stares at the woman's back under the sheet.

Fred is expressionless.

There is no noise.

Then, without emotion, without any intonation, Fred begins to talk, in a simple, unhurried manner.

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)

They don't know, Melanie. Children can't know their parents' ordeals. Sure, they know certain details, the most striking elements, those they know. They know what they need to know in order to side with one or the other. They need to simplify things. And they're right. But they don't know. They can't know. They don't know how I trembled the first time I saw you on that stage. And the orchestra laughing behind my back at my falling in love, at my unexpected fragility. They don't know that you sold your mother's jewelry so I could finish my second piece, when everyone was turning me down and saying I was a presumptuous, inelegant musician. They don't know that you too - and you were right - thought at the time that I was a presumptuous, inelegant musician, and you cried nonstop, not because you had sold your mother's jewels but because you had sold your mother. They don't know how you loved me, and how I loved you. Only we know that.

(MORE)

FRED BALLINGER (CONT'D)

They don't know what we were together, you and I, despite everything. And that "despite everything" that was so exhausting, so painful, so hard. Melanie, they can never know that we two, despite everything, liked to think of ourselves as a simple song.

He's done. He gets up from his chair and stands on his toes, as if trying to see his wife's face, but he gives up immediately. He can't handle it emotionally. So he simply stretches out his hand and moves his wife's arm few inches, so that it is in what he hopes is a more comfortable position.

70. EXT. VENICE. HOSPITAL. NIGHT

Fred leaves the hospital. He walks toward the camera until we have a close up of his face. Behind him, on the mezzanine, we glimpse Fred's wife, her forehead leaning against the glass and her mouth open.

But only a glimpse, because from here she seems so far away.

Fred stands still and reflects. He starts to turn around, to look back at his wife, but he can't bring himself to. He desists and looks straight ahead again. Then he takes a candy from his pocket, unwraps it, and pops it in his mouth.

He tries again to turn toward his wife, who is still there, far away, behind the glass, as if she were watching him instead of merely staring at nothing. But once again, Fred doesn't have the courage to look her in the face. He holds the candy wrapper between his fingers, but this time he doesn't rub it. He throws it in the canal in front of him.

Tired and tested, Fred reflects. And as he does so, in a close up shot, the violin from "Simple Song No.3" begins to sound, but this time, we sense right away, it is played by a violin virtuoso, not a boy just starting out.

71. INT. THEATER. EVENING

Absolute silence, two empty chairs with gold trim.

An elegantly dressed audience has filled the theater.

Without warning, without any signal, the entire audience rises to its feet in eerie silence. Two individuals have entered the theater. We catch a glimpse of them through the backdrop of people. Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip.

They sit in the gold trimmed chairs. We see their royal outlines backlit by the lights of the stage.

The audience can sit down again.

A violin virtuoso plays the opening bars of "Simple Song No.3". Adagio, moderate volume.

Prince Philip, in a backlit shot, his eyes full of joy, expectant and excited. The eyes of a child.

On the stage, the great South Korean soprano, Sumi Jo, swallows secretly, overcome with panic and emotion. She gets ready to sing.

Backlit, Queen Elizabeth glances at her consort and is happy.

The Queen's emissary, in the back of a box, observes from afar the happy Queen and Prince Philip, but he is still a ball of tension.

Sumi Jo opens her mouth wide and practically knocks the house down when she breaks into a perfect, heart-rending love song.

The large audience of extremely elegant guests jumps out of their chairs slightly, as if hypnotized by the soprano's voice.

Sumi Jo's high note is over. It didn't last long.

Fred Ballinger, concentrating intensely, in perfect control of himself, gracefully waves his baton, and the entire orchestra joins in. Strings and wind instruments play in unison, the music rises, and the whole audience gets goose bumps.

Jimmy Tree is there, alone, without any of his friends. He leans forward slowly on his chair; his eyes shine with childlike excitement.

It's beautiful, this plaintive Simple Song No.3 as it unfolds...

72. EXT. MOUNTAIN CLIFF. DAY

... close ups of Lena and the hippy mountaineer. Very close together. Close enough to kiss, if she weren't trembling so much.

He laughs, like a moron. They're so close. Then he stops laughing. He looks at her. He holds her close. She stops trembling. She looks at him.

We know they will kiss, but not now.

The camera zooms out.

Lena and the mountaineer are hanging in mid-air at ten thousand feet. Nothing below them. She clinging to him. Kept alive by a rope and some carabiners.

73. INT. THEATER. EVENING

Fred waves his arm and the strings and winds grow fainter, until they finally disappear. Just the violin now.

Fred looks at Sumi Jo. He signals with his eyes for her to come in.

Sumi Jo opens her mouth again, another clamorous, long, perfect high note.

Fred can't help but stare at the Japanese soprano as she delivers that extraordinary sound.

And she looks at him.

Fred keeps looking at her, but it's as if he is seeing someone else...

74. EXT. VENICE. HOSPITAL. DAY

... as if he's seeing her. His wife Melanie.

Sumi Jo's high note continues in this scene.

The camera zooms in slowly on the hospital mezzanine. A close up of Melanie. Her loose white hair, her face ravaged by disease, her eyes lost in an abyss, and her mouth open, as if she were singing.

75. INT. THEATER. EVENING

A close-up of Sumi Jo, mouth open, still hitting that high note.

Fred Ballinger looks at her, skillfully hiding any emotion.

Sumi Jo looks at Fred Ballinger. She waits. And, at the crisp closing of his hand, she suddenly, skillfully, ends that crazy high note.

The orchestra moves to the conclusion.

With a sharp, clear movement of his wand, Fred Ballinger brings the music to a close.

The orchestra stops.

Absolute silence. The world has stopped spinning.

The Queen's emissary lets out a huge sigh of relief. It's over.

Jimmy Tree is sitting upright in his chair, his mouth half-open, as if suspended in astonishment and excitement. He waits to see what will happen next.

Slowly, with learned gestures, Fred Ballinger turns toward the audience. No self-satisfaction, at least not now.

He is impassive, a sphinx, a professional. Yes, that's what he is, a professional.

The members of the audience fan out below him. Their eyes wet, deeply moved.

Fred Ballinger, imperturbable, waits for them to recover from the emotion. He knows that they need a few more seconds for emotion to give way to applause.

We know they will applaud, but not now. Not yet.

And in the silence, FADE TO BLACK.

Slowly, calmly, the closing credits begin.

Paolo Sorrentino

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