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The Sweet Hereafter

By Atom Egoyan

FADE IN:

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- DAY

A young family together in bed. It is a bright summer morning. Father, mother, and a three year old girl are still asleep. They are naked. A light breeze drifts into the room. The scene is serene and softly suspended. Head credits appear over this idyllic image. The little girl turns in her sleep. A dog barks outside.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

From the peaceful tableau of the sleeping family, the scene shifts to a vehicle entering a car wash. The image is shot through the windshield, from the driver's point of view. The car enters the lathered world of spinning felt wheels and gushing water.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

Inside the car MITCHELL STEPHENS, a man in his mid-fifties, listens to a stirring piece of music. The sound of the car wash is filtered out by the strains of music.

CUT TO:

EXT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

The phone booth is located in a rundown area of a large city. A young woman, ZOE, enters the booth and lifts the receiver.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL STEPHENS is going through the wash. The automatic mops and buffers embrace his car with water and suds. The cellular phone in the car rings. MITCHELL picks it up.

MITCHELL:

Yes? Yes, I'll accept the charges.

CUT TO:

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE is on the phone. There's a figure outside the booth waiting for her.

ZOE:

Daddy, it's me...How are you doing?
That's great...Where are you?
What's that sound?

CUT TO:

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL in his car, playing with the volume on his radio.

MITCHELL:

I'm in a car wash.

CUT TO:

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE:

A car wash! Wow, I've never talked
to you when you've been in a car
wash. Make sure you've got the
windows closed.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

ZOE:

(over the phone)
Remember that time we were having
the car washed and I started playing
with the automatic window? How old
was I, Daddy? Five or six? I got
absolutely soaked, remember?

MITCHELL:

Why are you calling me, Zoe?

CUT TO:

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE:

Why am I calling you? You're my
father. I'm not supposed to call
you? What's the matter with wanting
to talk to you, Daddy?

CUT TO:

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL:

Nothing's wrong with trying to talk to me, Zoe.

ZOE:

(over the phone)

So what's the problem?

MITCHELL:

The problem is I have no idea who I'm talking to right now.

ZOE:

(over the phone)

'Cause you think I'm stoned, Daddy?

'Cause you think I've got a needle stuck in my arm? Is that what you're thinking, Daddy?

Pause. MITCHELL doesn't respond.

CUT TO:

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE:

Are you wondering if I scored, Daddy, and I'm calling you for money? That I'm begging? God, I don't fucking believe it!

CUT TO:

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is emotionally stunned by ZOE'S voice. She is heard over the phone.

ZOE:

(over the phone)

Daddy! Are you listening to me, Daddy?!

The music that MITCHELL has been listening to becomes louder

as he stares at the spinning felt wheels of the car wash.

ZOE (CONT'D)

DADDY!!!

MITCHELL:

Yes.

ZOE:

Why can't you talk to me?

MITCHELL:

I...I just need to know what state
you're in so I know...how to talk to
you...how to act...

MITCHELL is in pain. He closes his eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

The phone booth is deserted. ZOE is nowhere to be seen.
Over this image, the sounds of a band playing a blues
number.

CUT TO:

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

The blues number continues as the camera cranes down to the
bandstand of a country fair. A local band is rehearsing.
Around the practising band, various carpenters and
technicians are making final preparations for that evening's
big event.

One of the people watching the band is SAM BURNELL, a man in
his early forties. He watches his daughter, NICOLE, as she
sings into the microphone. NICOLE is sixteen.

NICOLE stares at her father as she sings.

ANGLE ON:

SAM looking back at his daughter. He is intensely proud of
her. SAM is a carpenter, working on at the fair site. He
gets back to his work, hammering a supporting beam into the
grandstand.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPORT. WASHROOM -- AFTERNOON

CLOSE UP of a three year old girl, staring up into the lens.

Her face is full of sweetness and trust.

ANGLE ON:

MITCHELL STEPHENS in a crowded airport washroom, watching a young father, PETER, trying to change the diaper on his three year old daughter.

MITCHELL stares at the little girl, his face registering a wistful smile. PETER is having a hard time trying to find the towel from the toddler's bag and keeping an eye on her at the same time.

MITCHELL:

Need a hand?

PETER:

Sure, if you could find a towel in this bag. I know my wife packed one in there...

MITCHELL comes forward and searches through the toddler's bag.

MITCHELL:

You always think you're prepared for these things.

PETER:

Tell me about it.

MITCHELL:

How old is she?

PETER:

Almost three.

MITCHELL:

(finding a towel)

Is this it?

PETER:

Perfect.

MITCHELL:

Here we go.

PETER:

Thanks.

PETER lays the towel across the counter, and dries the little girl. MITCHELL watches as PETER puts a new diaper on her. The toddler stares up at MITCHELL, her eyes are playful.

MITCHELL stares at the girl's face.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

TIME CUT back to MITCHELL honking the horn of his car, trying to get someone's attention. No response. MITCHELL picks up his cell phone, and dials the operator.

MITCHELL:

Yes, operator, I'm in a strange situation. I'm calling from my car, and I appear to be stuck in a car wash...A car wash, yes...Is there anyway you could...Hello?...Hello?...

The line has died.

MITCHELL searches for an umbrella, finds one, and tries to get out of the car without getting soaked.

ANGLE ON:

MITCHELL as he leaves the car, trying to protect himself from the onslaught of water with his umbrella. He is immediately soaked by a large mop. The camera watches MITCHELL as he makes his way towards light at the end of the wash.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL walks into the office of the car wash. No one is there. There is an ominous buzz coming from another room. MITCHELL moves towards the garage of the car wash/auto repair establishment. He moves into a larger room, full of discarded auto parts. The buzzing noise is coming from an electric guitar, which has been left on, and is on the verge of screeching feedback.

Someone was just here. They are nowhere to be seen.

MITCHELL:

Hello?

No response. MITCHELL picks up the guitar, which begins to produce a terrifying electronic feedback.

CUT TO:

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE wander through the fairground. Various rides and concession stands are being set up. SAM has his arm around NICOLE.

SAM:

That was great.

NICOLE:

Really?

SAM:

You're going to blow everyone away.

NICOLE:

You mean it?

SAM:

Of course.

NICOLE:

You don't sound like one hundred percent absolutely sure.

SAM:

I am. Really. It was awesome.

NICOLE assesses SAM. Sensing his sincerity, she throws her arms around him in a gesture of unabashed excitement.

NICOLE:

I'm so happy, Daddy.

CUT TO:

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

MITCHELL STEPHEN'S car pulls into the parking lot of this run-down roadside motel. In the fading light, a magnificent

mountain range is seen in the background.

CUT TO:

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

MITCHELL enters the reception area, and rings a bell on the desk. After a few moments RISA WALKER appears. She is an exhausted looking woman in her mid-thirties, once attractive but very run-down. RISA stares at MITCHELL'S soaked clothes.

MITCHELL:

Hello.

RISA:

Is it raining outside?

MITCHELL:

No, I...had an accident.

Pause. RISA stares at MITCHELL, her expression somewhere else.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

Do you have a room?

RISA:

Will you be spending more than a night?

MITCHELL:

Hard to say. I might have...some business here.

A voice is heard from the darkness beyond the desk.

WENDELL:

Are you a reporter?

MITCHELL:

No.

WENDELL WALKER, RISA'S husband, appears from the darkness.

WENDELL:

You here about the accident?

MITCHELL stares at WENDELL'S haunted eyes, then looks back at RISA. He immediately knows their story.

MITCHELL:

Yes. I'm a lawyer. I realize this is an awful time, but it's important that we talk.

CUT TO:

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

A group of men are setting up the ferris wheel for the country fair. SAM and NICOLE walk into the shot, eating ice cream cones. SAM waves at someone he recognizes in the distance.

SAM:

Let's sit down.
NICOLE nods, her mind elsewhere.

CUT TO:

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE are sitting at an outside table, finishing their cones.
A school bus pulls up into the fairground. NICOLE watches as young children spill out of the bus and gather outside. NICOLE smiles at this scene. SAM notices, turns around to see the children, then turns back to NICOLE.

SAM:

What's so funny?

NICOLE:

Just the way Dolores gets so excited about bringing the kids to check out the animals. It's like the biggest thing in her life.

ANGLE ON:

DOLORES DRISCOLL, a warm and cheery woman in her forties, leading the young children into the large exhibition barn on the fair site.

DOLORES:

Alright, kids. I want you all to listen to me. Rule number one No

one is allowed to stick their fingers into the cages. I don't care how cute some of these animals may be, the fact is they don't like being here, no matter how many ribbons some of them have won...

CUT TO:

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING
MITCHELL STEPHENS is having a meeting with WENDELL and RISA WALKER in their livingroom behind the reception area.
MITCHELL has a pad of paper and is taking notes.

WENDELL:

Kyle Lambston's a drunk. Nobody likes him. He's a nasty piece of work.

MITCHELL:

In what way?

WENDELL:

Been drinking since high school. Fucked himself up. Used to be smart enough.

MITCHELL:

Any criminal record?

WENDELL:

Probably half a dozen traffic convictions. Drunk driving. Lost his licence. That's why he don't work no more.

WENDELL:

Can't get off that shitty dump they live on. What little money comes in goes to booze.

MITCHELL:

How does the family survive?

WENDELL:

Don't know. Food banks, welfare,
church charity. They scrape by.
MITCHELL looks at RISA, who has remained silent.

MITCHELL:

What about Doreen?

RISA:

She...she was a friend of mine.

MITCHELL:

When?

RISA:

At school. She fell for Kyle just
before we graduated. Got pregnant,
and...went to live in a trailer up
on a woodlot Kyle's dad used to own.
Kyle started spending more and more
time at the Spread Eagle...

MITCHELL:

That's the local bar?

RISA:

(nodding)
...coming home drunk and I guess
feeling trapped by his life and
blaming her for that...and...

RISA hesitates.

WENDELL:

Taking it out on her.
MITCHELL stops taking notes, and looks at the WALKERS.

MITCHELL:

He beat her?
RISA nods. MITCHELL crosses the LAMBSTONS off of his list.
He looks up at RISA and WENDELL.
MITCHELL (CONT'D)
You see, to do this right, to
actually have a chance at winning -

of getting some money to compensate you for the loss of your boy - we need folks like you. Sensitive, loving parents. People with no criminal background or history of trouble in town. Do you understand? The WALKERS nod.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

Now, of all these parents you've told me about whose kids were killed, who would you consider to be good upstanding neighbors?

RISA stares hard at MITCHELL.

RISA:

What do you mean?

MITCHELL:

People who will help our cause.
Pause.

RISA:

Well, there's the Hamiltons. Joe and Shelly Hamilton.

WENDELL:

(caustically)

Yeah, right.

Beat. MITCHELL looks at WENDELL, waiting for an explanation.

WENDELL (CONT'D)

I mean, everyone knows Joey steals antiques from summer cottages.

Resells them to dealers in the city.

He's been doing that for years.

MITCHELL regards WENDELL with a slight smile of admiration.

MITCHELL:

That's great, Wendell. That's the sort of thing I need to know. So it doesn't come back to haunt our case later on.

RISA:

There's the Prescots...

WENDELL:

That sonofabitch owes thousands to the bank and half the businesses in town. He's about to lose his house and car.

RISA:

But Charlene...

WENDELL:

Charlene's over at the Spread Eagle every other night. Sleeps with whatever she can get her hands on. She'll go down for a pat on the head and a fistful of peanuts. MITCHELL is taking notes.

WENDELL (CONT'D)

Don't even think of the Bilodeaus or the Atwaters. They're all inbred.

RISA:

The Ottos.

Pause. MITCHELL waits. No response from WENDELL.

MITCHELL:

Tell me about the Ottos.

RISA:

Wanda and Hartley. They lost Bear. He was their adopted son. A beautiful boy. Indian.

MITCHELL:

Indian?

RISA:

Yes.

MITCHELL:

That's good. Judges like adopted

Indian boys. Tell me more about the Ottos.

As RISA talks, MITCHELL takes notes.

RISA:

They're smart. Been to college. They moved here from the city about a dozen years ago.

MITCHELL:

What do they do?

RISA:

Crafts.

MITCHELL:

Crafts?

RISA:

Wanda does these photographic things. That's one of her pictures on the wall.

WENDELL:

Yeah, well, they probably smoke weed.

RISA:

You don't know that.

MITCHELL:

Have they ever been busted?

RISA:

No.

WENDELL:

You don't know is what you mean.

MITCHELL regards the tension between RISA and WENDELL as he continues to make notes.

MITCHELL'S cell phone rings. He answers it.

MITCHELL:

Yes, I'll accept the charges.

MITCHELL stands up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

Do you mind if I step outside for a moment? It's a private call.

The WALKERS nod as MITCHELL moves outside.

CUT TO:

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

MITCHELL speaks into his cellular phone.

MITCHELL:

Zoe...Zoe, where are you?

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

A newscaster is giving a report on the television screen of a first class airplane cabin. The image is silent.

This scene takes place two years after the accident.

MITCHELL STEPHENS is playing with his headset, which doesn't seem to be working. He summons a STEWARDESS over.

MITCHELL:

I'm not getting any sound.

The STEWARDESS checks the headset and confirms the problem.

STEWARDESS:

I'll find you another pair.

The STEWARDESS leaves.

A young woman seated beside MITCHELL hands him her headset.

ALISON:

You can have mine.

MITCHELL takes ALISON'S headset. Their eyes lock for a moment.

ALISON (CONT'D)

Yes, we do know each other. I'm

Alison Jones.

MITCHELL:

Alison Jones.

ALISON:

I was a friend of Zoe's. We went to school together. I used to come to your house.

MITCHELL:

(pretending to remember)

Yes.

ALISON:

Ally. That was my nickname.

MITCHELL:

Ally. That's right.

ALISON:

How are you?

MITCHELL:

I'm just fine, Ally. What about you?

ALISON:

I'm fine. Still working with my father.

MITCHELL:

And what does he do again?

ALISON:

He used to work with you. Until you found out he was having an affair with your wife.

Pause. MITCHELL finally remembers ALISON JONES.

MITCHELL:

Ally Jones.

ALISON:

How is Mrs. Stephens?

MITCHELL:

We're...not together.

ALISON:

I'd heard that. But she's well?

MITCHELL:

Yes...fine.

ALISON:

And Zoe? How's Zoe?

Pause. The STEWARDESS comes back with a new headset. She notices the set that ALISON has given him.

STEWARDESS:

Oh, you've beaten me to it.

The STEWARDESS hands the headset to ALISON.

STEWARDESS (CONT'D)

Here.

The camera has remained fixed on MITCHELL'S face.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROADSIDE -- MORNING

WANDA and HARTLEY OTTO are waiting for the school bus with their adopted son BEAR.

The bus arrives, and the door opens to reveal DOLORES DRISCOLL, who is driving.

DOLORES:

Good morning, Wanda. Hi, Hartley.

WANDA:

Hi, Dolores.

DOLORES watches as WANDA and HARTLEY OTTO affectionately say goodbye to their boy. WANDA gives BEAR a photograph, which has strong psychedelic influences. BEAR shows it proudly to DOLORES.

WANDA (CONT'D)

What do you think?

DOLORES:

Well, it's certainly what you'd call interesting.

WANDA:

(laughing)

You hate it.

DOLORES:

I didn't say that.

WANDA:

I could wrap it up. Protect the other kids.

DOLORES:

I'll just strap it on the roof.

WANDA:

It's for the school bazaar.

DOLORES:

Oh, it's bizarre alright. C'mon Bear. Let's get you out of here.

WANDA:

Away from your crazy Mom.

DOLORES:

(voice over)

The Ottos always waited for the bus with Bear. They were the only parents who did that, together like that. I guess they're what you might call hippies.

MITCHELL:

(voice over)

What do you mean by that, Mrs. Driscoll?

CUT TO:

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES and MITCHELL are in the modest livingroom of DOLORES'S house. The conversation continues from the previous voice over.

In the corner of the room sits ABBOTT, DOLORES'S husband. ABBOTT has suffered a massive stroke, and seems to be completely paralyzed. His presence, however, is intense and

powerful.

MITCHELL frequently looks over to ABBOTT during his conversations with DOLORES. ABBOTT is always watching him like a hawk, making MITCHELL uneasy.

DOLORES:

Dolores. No one calls me 'Mrs. Driscoll'.

MITCHELL:

What do you mean by that, Dolores?

DOLORES:

About the Ottos?

MITCHELL:

Yes. What do you mean by 'hippies'?

DOLORES:

I mean, the way they look. Their hair and clothing...

MITCHELL:

Do they have any reputation for drugs?

DOLORES:

No, nothing like that. The Ottos are what I'd call model citizens. They're regular at town meetings. They give their opinions in a respectful way. They always help out at various fund-raising bazaars in town, though they aren't church goers.

MITCHELL:

And they loved Bear.

DOLORES:

Oh yes. Like I said, they always came out together to see him off to school. It's like he was their

little treasure. He was such a beautiful boy. That's a picture of him on the wall there, behind Abbott.

MITCHELL turns around to find the picture of BEAR. It is right behind ABBOTT'S head, so MITCHELL has to divide his attention between the cute PHOTOGRAPH of BEAR clutching a prize rabbit at last year's county fair, and ABBOTT'S glaring eyes.

ANGLE ON:

The PHOTOGRAPHS of various children with their pets. Some have ribbons.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

(voice over)

Those are all from the fair last year. Abbott and me were judges at the pet show.

MITCHELL:

For rabbits?

DOLORES:

(nodding)

Abbott used to breed them 'til he had the stroke. Bear won first prize. Just look at the smile on his face.

DOLORES:

He was one of those children that bring out the best in people. He would have been a wonderful man.

ANGLE ON:

MITCHELL as he stares at the photo of BEAR.

CUT TO:

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

The camera is outside the bus, looking at BEAR as he finishes waving to his parents.

ANGLE ON:

BEAR'S P.O.V. of WANDA and HARTLEY disappearing as the bus pulls away.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

The camera moves inside the crowded bus, peering at the childrens' activity as they play with each other in the bus.

ANGLE ON:

JESSICA and MASON ANSEL are seated at the back of the bus, looking out the rear window, waving at someone.

CUT TO:

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

JESSICA and MASON are seen waving at...

BILLY ANSEL, driving behind them in his pick up truck. He waves back at his children.

DOLORES:

(voice over)

Billy Ansel started honking at us up around Upper Hat Creek. He always started to do that when he caught up to the bus. He'd wave at his kids, Jessica and Mason, who always sat at

the back. Normally, he followed us the whole distance over the ridge towards the school.

CUT TO:

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

The conversation between MITCHELL and DOLORES continues from the previous scene.

MITCHELL:

So Billy was driving behind the bus at the time of the accident?

DOLORES nods. Her expression is distant.

DOLORES:

Billy loved to see his kids in the bus. They always sat in the back, so they could wave to each other.

It comforted him.

MITCHELL:

From what?

DOLORES:

(confused)

From what?

MITCHELL:

Did he have any particular problems that you knew of? Financial pressures...run-ins with the law...

DOLORES:

No, nothing like that. Billy's wife, Lydia, died of cancer a few years ago. He took over raising the children by himself. It was obvious how much he missed Lydia.

MITCHELL:

You talked about it?

DOLORES:

No.

(beat)

I saw it on his face.

Pause. DOLORES stares at MITCHELL.

CUT TO:

EXT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

Through the windshield, the camera fixes on BILLY'S face as he stares at his children.

ANGLE ON:

Inside the cab of his pick up, BILLY dials a number on his cell phone. He continues to wave at his children as he speaks into the phone.

BILLY:

(into the phone)

Hi...Can you talk? I'm on my way to

work...I'm waving at them
now...What's that noise?

CUT TO:

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

RISA is on a cordless phone. She has just finished cleaning a room. WENDELL is hammering in the background.

RISA:

Wendell's working on the roof. He thinks he's fixing a leak. As far as I'm concerned he's just punching in a few new holes.

CUT TO:

INT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

BILLY smiles as he continues the conversation.

BILLY:

Nicole's coming over to look after the kids tonight. She'll be there around six.

RISA:

Billy, that's too early.

BILLY:

She said she's got to be home by nine.

RISA:

Can't you make it later?

BILLY:

Look, I'll be waiting in the room. You get over as soon as you can. Okay?

RISA:

I guess.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

HELICOPTER AERIAL SHOT

The bus and the pick-up are travelling through a beautiful mountain pass.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

MITCHELL continues his conversation with ALISON as they eat dinner.

ALISON:

I'm glad to hear that Zoe's okay.

MITCHELL:

Are you still in touch?

ALISON:

Not really. The last time I saw her was at that clinic. That was a long time ago.

MITCHELL:

Which one?

ALISON:

Which one?

MITCHELL:

Which clinic?

ALISON:

I don't remember the name. It was near a beach.

MITCHELL:

Sunnyridge. That was a long time ago.

Beat. ALISON proceeds cautiously.

ALISON:

So there were others?

MITCHELL:

(as he eats)

Other clinics? Oh sure. Clinics,
half-way houses, treatment centers,
detox units...

ALISON:

Then...when did she get better?

MITCHELL:

She didn't.

ALISON:

But you said...

MITCHELL:

That's where I'm going. To see her.

ALISON:

She's in trouble?

MITCHELL:

Yes.

(beat)

Do you find there's something
strange about this meat?

ALISON stares at her plate. MITCHELL summons the
STEWARDESS.

STEWARDESS:

Some more wine?

MITCHELL:

I'm afraid this meat is overdone.

STEWARDESS:

I'm sorry about that, Mr. Stephens.
Would you like to try the fish?

MITCHELL:

What is it?

STEWARDESS:

Poached salmon.

MITCHELL considers this. He is polite, but slightly edgy.

MITCHELL:

Do you have a cold plate?

STEWARDESS:

We do.

MITCHELL:

Is there shrimp on it?

STEWARDESS:

Yes.

MITCHELL:

If you could pick the shrimp off, as well as anything that touches the shrimp...

STEWARDESS:

(smiling)

I'm not sure if that will leave much on the plate.

MITCHELL:

Well, let's see what we get.

The STEWARDESS leaves with MITCHELL'S food. MITCHELL gets up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

(to ALISON)

If you could excuse me for a moment.

ALISON nods. MITCHELL leaves. ALISON picks at her meat undecidedly.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

In the mirror of the tiny washroom of the plane, MITCHELL washes some water on his face. He stares at his reflection in the mirror.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY

MITCHELL approaches the house of HARTLEY and WANDA OTTO. He gets out of his car and knocks on the door.

WANDA OTTO answers. She has been crying. The two stare at

each other.

MITCHELL:

Mrs. Otto, my name is Mitchell Stephens. The Walkers told me you might be willing to talk to me.

Pause.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

I'm sorry for coming over unannounced like this, Mrs. Otto, but the Walkers said you would understand. I know it's an awful time, but it's important that we talk.

WANDA:

Who are you?

MITCHELL:

I'm a lawyer.

WANDA:

You can't come here.

MITCHELL:

Please, let me explain. I'll only take a moment of your time.

WANDA:

No.

MITCHELL:

Please.

WANDA pauses, stares at MITCHELL, then lets him in.

CUT TO:

INT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY

MITCHELL walks into the OTTO residence. It is a large two-storey space divided into several smaller chambers with sheets of brightly colored cloth - tie-dyes and Indian madras - that hang from wires.

On a low brick platform in the centre of the main chamber is a large wood-burning stove. A few feet from the stove,

sitting on an overstuffed cushion, is HARTLEY OTTO.
HARTLEY is listening to music on his headphones. He is very stoned. WANDA moves over, and pulls the headphones off her husband's head.

WANDA:

We have a guest. What did you say your name was?

MITCHELL:

Mitchell Stephens.

MITCHELL hands them a card. HARTLEY reads it with deliberation.

WANDA:

The Walkers sent him by.

HARTLEY rises up. He stares at MITCHELL. A tense pause.

HARTLEY:

You want a cup of tea or something?

MITCHELL:

A cup of tea would be nice.

(beat)

Would it be alright if I sit down for a few minutes, Mrs. Otto? I want to talk to you.

WANDA stares at MITCHELL. No response. MITCHELL waits a beat, then seats himself rather uncomfortably on a large pillow. He is unsure whether to cross his legs, or fold them under his chin.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

The Walkers spoke very highly of you.

WANDA:

You've been retained?

MITCHELL:

Yes.

WANDA:

Their child died, and they got a

lawyer.

Pause. MITCHELL assesses WANDA'S energy.

MITCHELL:

It should be said that my task is to represent the Walkers only in their anger. Not their grief.

WANDA:

Who did they get for that?

MITCHELL:

You are angry, aren't you, Mrs. Otto? That's why I'm here. To give your anger a voice. To be your

weapon against whoever caused that bus to go off the road.

WANDA:

Dolores?

MITCHELL:

It's my belief that Dolores was doing exactly what she'd been doing for years. Besides, the school board's insurance on Dolores is minimal. A few million at the very most. The really deep pockets are to be found in the town, or in the company that made the bus.

WANDA:

You think someone else caused the accident?

MITCHELL:

Mrs. Otto, there is no such thing as an accident. The word doesn't mean anything to me. As far as I'm concerned, somebody somewhere made a decision to cut a corner. Some corrupt agency or corporation accounted the cost variance between

a ten-cent bolt and a million dollar out-of-court settlement. They decided to sacrifice a few lives for the difference. That's what's done, Mrs. Otto. I've seen it happen so many times before.

HARTLEY returns with the tea.

HARTLEY:

But Dolores said she saw a dog and tried to...

MITCHELL:

How long has Dolores been driving that bus, Mr. Otto? How many times has she steered clear of danger?

What went wrong that morning?

MITCHELL takes the cup of tea.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

Someone calculated ahead of time what it would cost to sacrifice safety. It's the darkest, most cynical thing to imagine, but it's

absolutely true. And now, it's up to me to make them build that bus with an extra bolt, or add an extra yard of guard rail. It's the only way we can ensure moral responsibility in this society. By what I do.

Pause.

WANDA:

So you're just the thing we need.

MITCHELL:

Excuse me?

WANDA:

Isn't that what you want us to believe? That we're completely defenseless? That you know what's best?

MITCHELL:

Listen to me, Mrs Otto. Listen very carefully. I do know what's best. As we're sitting here the town or the school board or the manufacturer of that bus are lining up a battery of their own lawyers to negotiate with people as grief-stricken as yourselves. And this makes me very, very mad. It's why I came all the way up here. If everyone had done their job with integrity your son would be alive this morning and safely in school. I promise you that I will pursue and reveal who it was that did not do their job.

MITCHELL:

Who is responsible for this tragedy. Then, in your name and the Walkers' name and the name of whoever decides to join us, I shall sue. I shall sue for negligence until they bleed. Pause.

WANDA:

I want that person to go to jail. For the rest of his life. I want him to die there. I don't want his money.

MITCHELL nods sympathetically.

MITCHELL:

It's unlikely that anyone will go to prison, Mrs. Otto. But he or his company will pay in other ways. And we must make them pay. Not for the money or to compensate you for the loss of your son. That can't be done. But to protect other innocent children. You see, I'm not just here to speak for your anger, but

for the future as well.

(beat)

What we're talking about is an ongoing relationship to time.

Pause. HARTLEY looks at MITCHELL'S teacup.

HARTLEY:

I didn't ask if you wanted milk.

MITCHELL:

No. A little sugar though.

HARTLEY:

We've only got honey.

MITCHELL:

I'll...take it straight.

MITCHELL maintains his eye contact with WANDA.

WANDA:

Are you expensive?

MITCHELL:

No.

MITCHELL:

If you agree to have me represent you in this suit, I will require no payment until after the case is won, when I will require one third of the awarded amount. If there is no award made, then my services will cost you nothing. It's a standard agreement.

WANDA:

Do you have this agreement with you?

MITCHELL:

It's in my car.

MITCHELL gets up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

I'll just be a minute. Anyhow, you

should discuss this all without me
before you make any decision.
MITCHELL moves to the door.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY
MITCHELL leaves the house and moves to his car. He gets
inside and closes the door.
Once inside, MITCHELL opens his briefcase and takes out an
agreement for the OTTOS. Something inside the briefcase
catches his attention.

ANGLE ON:

A photograph of ZOE.
MITCHELL stares at this photograph.

MITCHELL:

(voice over)
I've done everything the loving
father of a drug addict is supposed
to do...

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- EVENING
MITCHELL and ALISON have finished dinner. MITCHELL is
drinking a triple scotch.

MITCHELL:

(continuing from
voice over)
...I've sent her to the best
hospitals, she's seen all the best
doctors. It doesn't matter. Two
weeks later she's on the street.
New York, Vancouver, Pittsburgh,
Toronto, L.A. The next time I hear
from her, it's a phone call scamming
for money. Money for school, or
money for a new kind of therapist,

or money for a plane ticket home.
'Oh Daddy, just let me come
home...Please, Daddy, I have to see
you...' But she never comes home.

I'm always at the airport, but she's never there. Ten years of this, ten years of these lies, of imagining what happens if I don't send the money, of kicking down doors and dragging her out of rat-infested apartments, of explaining why that couldn't be my daughter in a porn flick someone saw...well, enough rage and helplessness, and your love turns to something else.

ALISON:

(soft)

What...does it turn to?

MITCHELL:

It turns to steaming piss.

Pause. ALISON is shocked by MITCHELL'S intensity. He collects himself.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

I'm...so sorry.

ALISON:

That's okay.

CUT TO:

EXT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- LATE DAY

BILLY is chasing his kids around the yard of their house. NICOLE appears, and watching BILLY play with JESSICA and MASON. BILLY notices her, and runs up breathlessly,

BILLY:

Hi, Nicole.

NICOLE:

Hi, Mr. Ansel. Hi, Jessica,
Mason...

BILLY:

They just finished supper.

NICOLE:

(to the kids)

Was it good?

The children shake their heads. NICOLE and BILLY laugh.

BILLY:

I'll be back around nine.

NICOLE:

Okay.

CUT TO:

INT. GAS STATION -- DUSK

BILLY is playing his electric guitar in the same garage that MITCHELL walked into at the beginning of the film.

This is the gas station/repair shop/car wash that BILLY runs.

BILLY checks his watch, and takes his guitar off. He leaves the garage.

CUT TO:

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

BILLY is walking along a path behind the hotel, making sure that he is not seen. He sneaks into Room 11.

CUT TO:

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

BILLY is sitting in a chair in Room 11, smoking a cigarette. The room is dark. After a while, RISA enters through the door and slips inside.

RISA:

Have you been waiting long?

BILLY:

A while.

RISA:

Billy, do you have to smoke?

Wendell can smell if someone's been smoking.

BILLY gets up to put out his cigarette in the toilet. He notices some work tools in the washroom.

BILLY:

What's all this?

RISA:

Wendell put some fresh enamel on that break in the tub.

BILLY:

Does this mean I can't take a shower?

RISA:

No. It should be dry by now.

BILLY nods. He turns around, looks at RISA, and begins to unbutton her shirt. RISA stops him, smiles, and kisses BILLY. After a moment, she pulls away, unbuckles her belt, and slips off her jeans. She moves to the bed.

BILLY:

What time's he coming home?

RISA:

When the game's over, I guess.

BILLY moves to the radio and turns it on, tuning into a hockey game. RISA laughs. He lowers the volume. RISA takes off her shirt, and moves behind BILLY, kissing his neck. BILLY closes his eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- EVENING

JESSICA and MASON, BILLY'S children, are being read to sleep by NICOLE. She reads from Robert Browning's THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN.

NICOLE:

The Pied Piper of Hamelin.
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern
side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied;
But, when begins my ditty...

MASON:

What's a ditty again?

NICOLE:

It's like a song.

MASON:

Oh.

NICOLE:

When begins my ditty,
Almost five hundred years ago,
To see the townsfolk suffer so
From vermin, was a pity...

MASON:

What's vermin again?

NICOLE:

Rats!
They fought the dogs and killed the
cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of vats.
And licked the soup from the cook's
own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted
sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and
flats...

MASON:

Nicole?

NICOLE:

Yes.

MASON:

Can I sit beside you on the bus
tomorrow?

NICOLE:

Don't you usually like to sit at the back? To wave at your Dad?

MASON:

I want to sit beside you tomorrow.

NICOLE:

Okay.

NICOLE covers JESSICA, and gets up to leave.

MASON:

Nicole?

NICOLE:

What, Mason?

MASON:

Did the Pied Piper take the children away because he was mad that the town didn't pay him?

NICOLE:

That's right.

MASON:

Well, if he knew magic - if he could get the kids into the mountain - why couldn't he use his pipe to make the people pay him for getting rid of the rats?

NICOLE:

Because...he wanted to them to be punished.

MASON:

The people in the town?

NICOLE:

Yes.

MASON:

So he was mean?

NICOLE:

No. Not mean. Just...very angry.

MASON:

Oh.

NICOLE:

Should I keep reading?

MASON:

Okay.

NICOLE smiles at MASON. JESSICA is already asleep.

CUT TO:

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

Room 11 at the Bide-A-Wile. RISA is naked, sitting cross-legged on the bed. BILLY has just gotten into the shower. RISA stares at BILLY through the semi-transparent curtain. RISA stands up and walks to the window. She looks across the parking lot.

ANGLE ON:

RISA'S P.O.V. of the rain-glistened concrete.

CUT TO:

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- NIGHT

NICOLE is in BILLY'S bedroom. She has some womens' clothing laid out on the bed, and is staring at the selection of blouses and summer dresses. The camera slowly glides to a picture that BILLY has beside his bed.

ANGLE ON:

The photograph. It shows BILLY and his deceased wife, LYDIA.

Back to NICOLE, selecting various items of LYDIA'S clothing, and placing them over her body, seeing how she looks in the mirror.

CUT TO:

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DAY

RISA'S DAYDREAM. A montage of various events, watched from the window in Room 11. RISA is seen talking to BILLY on her cordless phone (Scene 34), as well as going through various activities. Finally, RISA is seen putting her son, SEAN, into the schoolbus. As the bus pulls away, RISA waves goodbye. RISA turns around and walks to the camera. She stops in front of the lens and stares into it, her expression calm and serene.

CUT TO:

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

Present time. Night. RISA is sitting on the bed, naked, her legs crossed. She looks to the side, lost in thought. BILLY is behind her, putting on his clothes.

BILLY:

What are you thinking?

RISA:

Tomorrow I'm going to put Sean on the bus. He won't want to go. He never does. He'll cry and want to hold on to me.

BILLY:

That's because he misses you.

RISA:

Yes.

BILLY:

It's natural.

RISA:

Your kids never cry.

BILLY:

Well, maybe that's because they know I'm going to follow them. Behind the bus.

RISA:

They can look forward to that.

BILLY:

Sure.

RISA:

Just like we look forward to this.

BILLY looks at RISA and smiles at her with affection. He moves to the door.

RISA (CONT'D)

You're leaving.

BILLY:

I better get back.

RISA nods.

RISA:

Good night, Billy.

BILLY:

Good night.

BILLY leaves. RISA, still naked, moves to the washroom.

She stares into the tub, noticing that the white enamel that WENDELL has applied has been washed away from BILLY'S shower.

RISA picks up a tube of the enamel, and begins to re-apply it.

CUT TO:

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- EVENING

NICOLE shows BILLY the clothes she has chosen. BILLY stares at the selection.

NICOLE:

Are you sure?

BILLY:

Yeah.

NICOLE:

It just seems...kind of weird.

BILLY:

Why?

NICOLE:

I don't know.

BILLY:

Nicole, I'm just going to pack all this stuff and give it to the church for charity. Don't feel bad. Unless you feel strange about wearing it.

NICOLE:

No. I mean, I remember Mrs. Ansel wearing some of this stuff, but...I don't feel funny about that. I really liked her.

BILLY:

And she really liked you. She would've given you all this if she'd outgrown it, or...
BILLY trails off, suddenly consumed with sadness.

NICOLE:

What do you mean 'outgrown it'?

BILLY:

I'm not sure.

NICOLE:

Oh.
(beat)
Right.
NICOLE turns to leave, taking the clothes with her.
NICOLE (CONT'D)
Goodnight, Mr. Ansel.

BILLY:

Goodnight, Nicole.

NICOLE leaves the house and walks towards the car where her father is waiting.

CUT TO:

INT. SAM'S CAR. -- DUSK

NICOLE gets into the car beside her father.

SAM:

What took so long?

NICOLE:

Nothing.

SAM stares at the bundle of clothes on NICOLE's lap.

SAM:

What's that?

NICOLE:

Mrs. Ansel's clothing.

SAM:

Does it fit?

NICOLE nods, staring ahead, as SAM starts the car and drives away.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

SAM drives up the driveway to the Burnell home. He opens the door, and takes a blanket from the back. NICOLE gets out as well. The two walk towards the barn.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

Once more he stept into the street,

And to his lips again

Laid his long pipe of smooth
straight cane;

And ere he blew three notes

such sweet soft notes as yet

musician's cunning

Never gave the enraptured air -

There was a rustling, seemed like a
bustling

Of merry crowds justling at pitching
and hustling,

Small feet were pattering, wooden
shoes clattering,

Little hands clapping and little
tongues chattering,
And, like fowls in a farm-yard when
the barley is scattering,
Out came the children running.
All the little boys and girls,
With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,
And sparkling eyes and teeth like
pearls.
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily
after
The wonderful music with shouting
and laughter...

Inside the barn, SAM and NICOLE are engaged in a sexual
embrace. The camera glides past them as NICOLE's voice
continues to read from the poem.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

When, lo, as they reached the
mountain-side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly
hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the
children followed,
And when all were in to the very
last,
The door in the mountain-side shut
fast...

CUT TO:

INT. BUS -- DAY

CLOSE-UP of NICOLE in the bus as it makes it's way to
school. She seems to be listening to her own voice as it
reads from the poem.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

Did I say, all? No! One was lame,
And could not dance the whole of
the way;
And in after years, if you would
blame
His sadness, he was used to say,-

'It's dull in the town since my

playmates left!

I can't forget that I'm bereft
Of all the pleasant sights they see,
Which the Piper also promised me.
For me led us, he said, to a joyous
land,
Joining the town and just at hand,
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees
grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and
new...

On this last line, NICOLE's lips begin to move, as she
repeats the line out loud to herself.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Everything was strange and new.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

A HELICOPTER shot of the schoolbus making its way through
the winter terrain. DOLORES' voice is heard over this
sweeping panoramic shot.

DOLORES:

(voice over)

By the time I reached the bottom of
Bartlett Hill Road, I had half my
load, over twenty kids, aboard.

CUT TO:

EXT. WINTER ROAD -- MORNING

The bus comes to a stop where a couple of children in bright
snow suits are waiting by the side of the road. DOLORES
opens the door and the kids climb in.

OMITTED:

DOLORES:

(voice over)

They had walked to their places on
the main road from the smaller lanes

DOLORES:

and private roadways that run off it. Bright little clusters of three and four children - like berries waiting to be plucked.

CUT TO:

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES is continuing her conversation with MITCHELL.

DOLORES:

(smiling to herself)

That's the way I thought of them sometimes.

MITCHELL:

Berries.

DOLORES:

Yes. Like I was putting them into my big basket. Clearing the hillside of its children.

Pause. MITCHELL stares at DOLORES, disturbed by this image. DOLORES looks back at him.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

Abbott and I used to do a lot of that in the spring.

MITCHELL:

Berry-picking.

DOLORES:

Yes. The old-fashioned way.

MITCHELL:

And what's that?

DOLORES:

With our hands.

MITCHELL nods, stealing a glance ABBOTT, who stares at him intensely.

CUT TO:

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

The bus pulls up across the road from the Bide-A-Wile Motel. DOLORES watches as RISA walks her little boy, SEAN, across the road to the bus.

DOLORES:

(voice over)

Anyhow, my next stop was across from the Bide-A-Wile, which is owned and operated by Risa and Wendell Walker.

Risa walked her little boy, Sean, across the road, which was customary. Sean had some kind of learning disability.

DOLORES:

He was behind all the other kids his age in school and was too fragile and nervous to play sports.

CUT TO:

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES continues to talk to MITCHELL, who takes notes.

DOLORES:

(smiling)

A strange little fellow, but you couldn't help liking him. He was close to ten but seemed more like a frightened five or six.

MITCHELL:

Were his parents...attentive to him?

DOLORES:

What do you mean?

MITCHELL:

You mentioned that he had a learning disability.

DOLORES:

That's right.

MITCHELL:

Did his parents attend to that?

DOLORES:

What do you mean?

MITCHELL:

Did they give him special care?

DOLORES:

The Walkers loved Sean. He was their only child...the object of all their attention. I mean, Wendell's a withdrawn sort of man. That's his nature. But Risa, she's still got dreams.

CUT TO:

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

DOLORES opens the door for SEAN. RISA is wearing a down parka over her nightgown and bathrobe and is wearing slippers.

RISA:

Morning, Dolores.

DOLORES:

Hi, Risa. Aren't your feet freezing?

RISA looks down at her slippers.

RISA:

I guess they are.

SEAN gets to the landing of the bus, then turns around and looks at his mother. He extends his hands like a baby wanting to be hugged.

SEAN:

I want to stay with you.

Pause. RISA stares at her son with great intensity and feeling.

RISA:

Go on now, Sean. Go on.

SEAN turns away and looks into the bus full of children.

NICOLE:

C'mon, Sean. Sit next to me.

MASON is sitting beside NICOLE. NICOLE whispers something to him, and he makes his way for SEAN.

MASON goes to the back of the bus and sits beside his sister, JESSICA. SEAN moves tentatively towards NICOLE.

ANGLE ON:

Back on DOLORES and RISA.

DOLORES:

Is he okay?

RISA:

I don't know.

DOLORES:

Temperature?

RISA:

No. He's not sick or anything.

It's just one of those mornings, I guess.

CUT TO:

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES continues her conversation with MITCHELL STEPHENS.

DOLORES:

But I never had 'those mornings' myself. Not so long as I had the schoolbus to drive. Not so long as I had my kids.

DOLORES is lost in this memory, realizing she will never drive the children again. A tear runs down her cheek.

ABBOTT, sensing his wife's mood, activates his electric wheelchair and maneuvers himself towards DOLORES.

MITCHELL watches as DOLORES grasps ABBOTT'S hand.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

NICOLE is seated in the bus next to SEAN. She is staring at the large speedometer on the front panel.

ANGLE ON:

The speedometer reads 51 miles an hour.

CUT TO:

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

JESSICA and MASON, BILLY'S children, wave at their father from the back of the bus.

CUT TO:

EXT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

BILLY waving back at his children. His expression suddenly changes as he sees...

CUT TO:

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

From BILLY'S point of view, the schoolbus smashes through the guardrail and the snowbank. It plummets down the embankment to the frozen-over pond.

Still upright, the bus slides across the ice to the far side. The ice lets go and the rear half of the yellow bus is swallowed at once by the freezing water. The sound of the ice breaking is terrifying.

DOLORES:

(voice over)

It emerged from the blowing snow on the right side of the road. It might have been a dog or a small deer or maybe even a lost child. It might have been an optical illusion or a mirage. Whatever it was, for the rest of my life I will remember that red-brown blur...

An eerie silence as the camera stares at the scene of the accident.

CUT TO:

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- MORNING

The camera is high above the bed, looking down on a sleeping family.

This is the same image as from the beginning of the film.
A FATHER, a MOTHER, and a THREE YEAR OLD GIRL, naked in bed.

MITCHELL:

(voice over)

Every time I get on one of these flights to rescue Zoe, I remember the summer we almost lost her. She was three years old. It happened in the morning, at this cottage we used to rent. We were all sleeping together in bed. It was a wonderful time in our lives. We still thought we had a future together, the three of us. Did you ever visit the cottage?

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is telling the story to ALISON.

ALISON:

I...don't think so.

MITCHELL:

I woke to the sound of Zoe's breathing. It was laboured. I looked over and noticed she was sweating and all swollen. I grabbed her, rushed to the kitchen, and splashed water on her face.

ALISON:

What happened?

MITCHELL:

I didn't know. I was in a panic. I guessed she'd been bitten by an insect, but there was no doctor. The nearest hospital was forty miles away, and Zoe was continuing to

swell. Klara took her in her arms and tried to breast-feed her, while I dialed the hospital. I finally got a doctor on the line. He sounded young, but cool. He was confident, but there was a nervousness. He have been an intern. This was the first time he ever had to deal with anything like this. He wanted to seem like he knew what he was doing, but he was just as scared as I was.

ALISON stares at MITCHELL, taken by his need to chronicle and detail this irrelevant stranger.

CUT TO:

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- MORNING

FATHER (YOUNG MITCHELL) is on the phone. The camera is behind his head.

In front of him, MOTHER (KLARA) is breast-feeding the THREE YEAR OLD GIRL (ZOE).

MITCHELL:

(voice over)

He surmised that there was a nest of baby black widow spiders in the mattress. He told me they had to be babies, or else with Zoe's body

weight she'd be dead. He told me I had to rush her to the hospital. He was alone. There was no ambulance available. 'Now you listen', he said, 'There's a good chance you can get her to me before her throat closes, but the important thing is to keep her calm.' He asked if there was one of us she was more relaxed with than the other. I said, 'Yes, with me.'

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL continues telling the story to ALISON.

MITCHELL:

Which was true enough, especially at that moment. Klara was wild-eyed with fear, and her fear was contagious. I was a better actor than she was, that's all. Zoe loved us equally then. Just like she hates us both equally now.

(beat)

The doctor told me that I should hold her in my lap, and let Klara drive to the hospital. He asked me to bring a small, sharp knife. It had to be clean. There was no time to sterilize properly. He explained how to perform an emergency tracheotomy. How to cut into my daughter's throat and windpipe without causing her to bleed to death. He told me there'd be a lot of blood. I said I didn't think I could do it. 'If her throat closes up and stops her breathing, you'll have to, Mr. Stephens. You'll have a minute and a half, two minutes maybe, and she'll probably be unconscious when you do it. But if you can keep her calm and relaxed, if you don't let her little heart beat too fast and spread the poison around, then you might just make it over here first. You get going now', and he hung up.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR -- MORNING

A little girl staring innocently into the lens as a male voice sings a lullaby to her.

It is now recognized as MITCHELL'S voice, singing to his daughter as she is driven to the hospital.

MITCHELL:

(voice over)

It was an unforgettable drive. I was divided into two people. One part of me was Daddy, singing a lullaby to his little girl.

MITCHELL:

The other part was a surgeon, ready to cut into her throat. I waited for the second that Zoe's breath stopped to make that incision.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT
ALISON stares at MITCHELL as he finishes his story.

ALISON:

What happened?

MITCHELL:

Nothing. We made it to the hospital. I didn't have to go as far as I was prepared to. But I was prepared to go all the way.

CUT TO:

EXT. ACCIDENT SITE -- DAY
An open sky. BILLY ANSEL'S face appears in the frame, looking down at the camera.

ANGLE ON:

The camera is staring down at BILLY as he identifies the bodies of his two children.
The camera is at a great height.
As BILLY walks away, the camera floats down, slowly moving on his face.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS -- DAY
BILLY'S P.O.V. of his wife, LYDIA, tugging a sled through the snow. JESSICA and MASON are on either side of her. The three figures are seen from behind, trudging their way through the winter landscape.

This image has a ghostly quality to it. It is filmed in slow motion.

Suddenly, a snowball enters the frame and hits LYDIA on the back of the head. She turns around, laughing into the camera.

CUT TO:

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

EXTREME-CLOSE-UP

BILLY in his chair in Room 11 of the Bide-A-Wile. He is alone, smoking a cigarette. A slight faraway smile on his lips.

After a moment, the door opens. It is RISA. They stare at each other. Silence.

RISA:

I knew you'd be here.

RISA sits on the bed. Pause.

RISA (CONT'D)

Are you going to the funeral?

Pause.

BILLY:

I stopped by the station a while ago. I stared at the bus. I could almost hear the kids inside. There was a lawyer there. He told me he'd gotten you signed up. Is that true?

RISA:

Something made this happen, Billy.

Mr. Stephens is going to find out what it was.

BILLY:

What are you talking about? It was an accident.

RISA:

Mr. Stephens says that someone didn't put a right bolt in the bus...

BILLY:

Risa, I serviced that bus. At the garage. There's nothing wrong with it.

RISA:

...or that the guardrail wasn't strong enough.

BILLY:

You believe that?

RISA:

I have to.

BILLY:

Why?

RISA:

Because I have to.

BILLY:

Well I don't.

BILLY gets up to leave.

RISA:

Is it true that you gave Nicole one of Lydia's dresses? That she was wearing it when the bus crashed?

BILLY:

Yes.

RISA:

Why did you do that, Billy?

BILLY:

You think that caused the accident, Risa? That it brought bad luck? Christ, it sounds to me you're looking for a witch doctor, not a lawyer. Or maybe they're the same thing.

RISA is crying. BILLY opens the door.

BILLY (CONT'D)

You know what I'm going to miss?
More than making love? It's the
nights you couldn't get away from
Wendell. It's the nights I'd sit in
that chair for an hour. Smoking
cigarettes and remembering my life
before...

BILLY stares at RISA painfully, then leaves.

CUT TO:

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is videotaping the bus with a portable camcorder.
The bus is badly damaged, though essentially intact. Most
of the windows in the rear have gone. There is a ghostly
quality to this image, as though the video light is
searching through the remains of an ancient shipwreck.

MITCHELL turns off the camcorder and stands in the silent
night, absorbing the disturbing energy of the bus. He hears
a truck approaching the garage from the distance. It's
BILLY ANSEL. MITCHELL retreats to his parked car as BILLY
stops his truck in front of the bus and steps out of the
truck.

BILLY leaves his headlights on, and they cast dark shadows
over the inside passenger seats. BILLY stares at the bus a
long time. MITCHELL approaches him.

MITCHELL:

I'm here about your children, Mr.
Ansel.

BILLY takes a moment, then turns around to face MITCHELL.
The two men stare at each other.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

My name is...

BILLY:

Mister, I don't want to know your
name.

MITCHELL:

I understand.

BILLY:

No you don't.

MITCHELL:

I can help you.

BILLY:

Not unless you can raise the dead.

MITCHELL hands BILLY a card.

MITCHELL:

Here. You may change your mind.

BILLY looks at the card.

BILLY:

Mr. Mitchell Stephens, Esquire,
would you be likely to sue me if I
was to beat you right now? Beat you
so bad that you pissed blood and
couldn't walk for a month. Because
that's what I'm about to do.

MITCHELL:

No, Mr. Ansel. I wouldn't sue you.

BILLY:

Leave us alone, Stephens. Leave the
people of this town alone. You
can't help.

MITCHELL:

You can help each other. Several
people have agreed to let me
represent them in a negligence suit.
Your case as an individual will be
stronger if I'm allowed to represent
you together as a group.

BILLY:

Case?

MITCHELL:

The Walkers have agreed. The Ottos.
Nicole Burnell's parents. It's

important to initiate proceedings
right away. Things get covered up.
People lie. That's why we have to
begin our investigation quickly.
Before the evidence disappears.
That's why I'm out here tonight.

BILLY:

I know Risa and Wendell Walker.
They wouldn't hire a goddamned
lawyer. And the Ottos wouldn't deal

with you. We're not country
bumpkins you can put a big city
hustle on. You're trying to use us.

MITCHELL:

You're angry, Mr. Ansel. You owe it
to yourself to feel that way. All
I'm saying is let me direct your
rage.

BILLY stares at MITCHELL with a cold intensity. The cell
phone in MITCHELL'S car begins to ring.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

That's my daughter. Or it may be
the police to tell me that they've
found her dead. She's a drug
addict.

BILLY:

Why are you telling me this?

MITCHELL:

I'm telling you this because...
we've all lost our children, Mr.
Ansel.

MITCHELL:

They're dead to us. They kill each
other in the streets. They wander
comatose in shopping malls. They're
paralyzed in front of televisions.
Something terrible has happened
that's taken our children away.

It's too late. They're gone.
The phone continues to ring, as BILLY stares at MITCHELL.
MITCHELL turns to look at the ringing phone.

CUT TO:

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY
MITCHELL is getting ready to leave. DOLORES is still
grasping onto ABBOTT'S hand.

DOLORES:

I have a question for you, Mr.
Stephens.

MITCHELL:

What's that, Dolores?

DOLORES:

I told you that I was doing fifty
miles an hour when the accident
happened. That's how I remembered
it. But the truth is, I might have
been doing sixty. Or sixty five.
And if that's true, that I was over
the limit when the bus went over,
what would happen then?

MITCHELL:

That would complicate things.

DOLORES:

Because I'd be to blame, right?

MITCHELL:

Billy Ansel will insist that you
were driving fifty-one miles an
hour. Just like you've done every
morning for the past fifteen years.

DOLORES:

He knows that? Billy?

MITCHELL:

Yes. He does.

DOLORES:

Billy said that?

MITCHELL nods.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

You've talked to Billy?

MITCHELL:

I did.

DOLORES:

And Billy told you that he'll tell that to...

MITCHELL:

Mrs. Driscoll, if Billy Ansel does not volunteer to say so in court, I will subpoena him and oblige him to testify to that effect.

Pause. MITCHELL plans his next step.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

But in order to do that, you must let me bring a suit in your name

charging negligent infliction of emotional harm. That's what I'm now asking you to consider.

Pause. DOLORES is lost.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

It's clear to me and other people that you have suffered significantly from this event.

DOLORES:

What other people?

MITCHELL:

Excuse me?

DOLORES:

Who's been talking to you about what I'm feeling? Who should care about what I'm feeling?

MITCHELL stares at DOLORES.

MITCHELL:

Dolores, people have to know that you've suffered too.

MITCHELL:

And they won't understand until you let me clear your name - your good name - once and for all. Will you let me do that? Will you let me do my duty?

Suddenly, ABBOTT says something. He twists his face around his mouth, purses his lips on the left side and emits a string of broken syllables and sounds. After this outburst, DOLORES looks at MITCHELL, a comforted smile on her face.

DOLORES:

You heard what Abbott said?

MITCHELL:

Yes.

DOLORES:

Anything you didn't understand?

MITCHELL:

There might have been a word or two that slipped by. Maybe you could clarify it for me, just to be absolutely sure.

DOLORES:

Abbott said that the true jury of a person's peers is the people of her town. Only they, the people who have known her all her life, and not twelve strangers, can decide her guilt or innocence. And if I have committed a crime, then it's a crime against them, so they are the ones who must decide my punishment. MITCHELL stares at ABBOTT, who stares back.

MITCHELL:

That's what he said, is it?

DOLORES:

Yes. Abbot understands these things.

CUT TO:

EXT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

MITCHELL leaves the DRISCOLL house, watched by DOLORES.

INT. HOSPITAL -- MORNING

NICOLE BURNELL is in bed. A doctor, DR. ROBESON, is touching her forehead. NICOLE'S family (SAM, her mother MARY, and her little sister JENNY)

DR. ROBESON

The mind is kind.

The camera fixes on NICOLE'S expression as she stares ahead.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

They say I'm lucky because I can't remember the accident.

SAM:

Don't even try to remember.

MARY:

You just think about getting well, Nicole, that's all.

The camera is always fixed on NICOLE'S face when her voice over is heard.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

I know I'm as well as I ever can be again. So shut up, Mom. To stay like this, to live like a slug, I'm going to have to work like someone trying to get into the Olympics.

SAM:

Just wait till you see what we've got waiting for you at home.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL -- DAY

NICOLE, in a wheelchair, is being led down a hallway with her family.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

It's an incredible relief to be leaving the hospital. I'm so sick of looking at my doctor, listening to Frankenstein ask me stupid questions about what I was feeling...

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL. LOBBY. -- DAY

NICOLE is being wheeled to the front door of the hospital.

NICOLE:

(voice over,
continuing)

He thought it was cute when I called him Frankenstein. It wasn't. I feel like his monster.

MARY:

Isn't it a lovely day?

NICOLE:

What happened to summer?

MARY:

Summer's over. It's fall.

NICOLE:

And winter?

MARY:

Well, winter's far behind us now.

NICOLE:

How was it?

MARY:

We had a terrible winter last year,
didn't we, Sam?
SAM nods.

NICOLE:

Good thing I was in Florida.
MARY doesn't know quite what to make of NICOLE'S joke. SAM
flashes NICOLE a smile. She doesn't return it.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

NICOLE arrives at home. The car pulls up in front of the
modest house.

SAM opens the door and puts the wheelchair up next to it.
He points out the ramp he has built for NICOLE.
The ramp is painted green.

SAM:

How do you like it, Nicole?

NICOLE:

The ramp?

SAM:

Pretty slick, eh?

NICOLE:

Very slick.

SAM:

Do you like the colour?

NICOLE:

It's okay.

SAM:

And I had to widen a few doors.
You'll see.

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

Inside the house. The interior of the house is dark and somewhat tawdry. The BURNELL'S are almost poor. But SAM then leads NICOLE into the special room he has built for her. It seems like another world. Every detail has been lovingly attended to. No expense has been spared to make this room as attractive and inviting as possible. A room that a guilty, abusive father might dream up for his crippled daughter.

SAM:

What do you think?

Pause. NICOLE wheels around, trying to control her emotions as she inspects the room. A phone rings in the background.

MARY goes to answer it.

NICOLE fixes her gaze at the back of the door.

NICOLE:

The door needs a lock.

SAM:

(taken aback)

Sure. I'll fix it right away.

SAM goes to get his tools. JENNY stares at NICOLE.

JENNY:

Can I come and visit you here?

NICOLE:

You better. And you can sleep in my new bed with me too.

NICOLE grabs her sister's hand, and JENNY moves in close to her. SAM comes back with the tools. He starts to screw in the hook.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

That's too high. I'll never reach it.

SAM:

(nervous)

Oh. I better get some spackle.

SAM leaves again.

JENNY:

Mommy says you need to lock the boys

out.

NICOLE:

What boys?

JENNY:

I don't know.

NICOLE stares at JENNY, as MARY comes back into the room.

MARY:

So do you like your new room?

NICOLE:

It's interesting.

MARY:

Your Dad spent all his spare time in here. He wanted to make it absolutely perfect.

NICOLE:

I feel like a princess.

SAM comes back and begins to work on the door. NICOLE watches him. She notices a new computer on a desk.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Is this mine?

MARY:

Yes. It's a present.

NICOLE:

From you?

MARY:

No. From Mr. Stephens. That was him on the phone just now. He was calling to see how you were.

NICOLE:

Who's Mr. Stephens?

SAM:

He's a lawyer. He's our lawyer.

NICOLE:

You and Mom have a lawyer?

SAM:

Well, yes. He's your lawyer too.

NICOLE:

My lawyer? Why do I need a lawyer?

MARY:

Maybe we shouldn't be talking about this just now, with you barely home. Aren't you hungry, honey? Want me to fix you something?

NICOLE:

No. What's this lawyer business?

MARY turns to JENNY.

MARY:

Jenny, why don't you go and play outside?

JENNY looks at NICOLE.

JENNY:

He's given me some stuff too. Toys, and some books...

MARY:

Jenny.

JENNY turns to leave. When she's outside, MARY continues.

MARY (CONT'D)

He's a very kind man. And he knew that you'd need a computer for doing schoolwork.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURNELL HOME. PORCH -- DAY

NICOLE wheels her chair to the exterior porch, where she watches her sister climb a tree. SAM follows her outside.

SAM:

It's because of the accident,
Nicole. Most people in this town
whose kids were on the bus have got
lawyers. A lot of people...well,
people in this town are very angry.
Us included.

NICOLE:

But you didn't lose me.

MARY:

No, honey. And we will thank the
Lord for that every day and night

for the rest of our lives. But you
almost died, and you were badly
injured, and you won't be...you
can't...

NICOLE:

I can't walk anymore.

ANGLE ON:

NICOLE'S P.O.V. of JENNY playing on a tree branch.

SAM:

You're going to need special care
for a long time to come. It's not
going to be easy. Not for you, not
for any of us. Because we love you
so much. And it's going to cost
money. More than we can imagine.

NICOLE:

What about insurance? Doesn't
insurance pay for these things?

SAM:

Partly. But there's a lot the
insurance doesn't cover. That's one
of the reasons we have a lawyer. To
make sure the insurance gets paid
and to help us look after the rest.

NICOLE:

How will he do that?

SAM:

Well, Mr. Stephens is representing several families. The Ottos, the Walkers, us, and I think a couple more. Mr. Stephens is suing the town for negligence. He's sure that the accident could have been avoided if they had done their jobs right. He's a very smart man.

NICOLE stares at her sister who's at the top of the tree.

JENNY turns to look back at NICOLE.

There's a tension, as it seems as though JENNY is going to let herself fall.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

That's the first thing I heard about you. That you were a smart man.

That you were so smart that you were going to sue the town, then make us all feel better...

CUT TO:

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

FLASHBACK to the scene outside the gas station between MITCHELL and BILLY.

The cell phone in MITCHELL'S car has begun to ring. The two men stare at each other.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

You're good at that. Good at getting people to believe you could do something for them. Something they could never do for themselves. MITCHELL breaks the silence.

MITCHELL:

That's my daughter. Or it may be the police to tell me that they've

found her dead. She's a drug addict.

BILLY:

Why are you telling me this?

MITCHELL:

I'm telling you this because we've all lost our children, Mr. Ansel...

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL stares at the sleeping figure of ALISON.

MITCHELL:

(voice over)

They're dead to us.

CUT TO:

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

Back to the scene between BILLY and MITCHELL. The cellular phone is ringing. MITCHELL breaks the stare with BILLY and moves to his car.

The camera follows him, as BILLY moves back to his truck in the background. MITCHELL gets in his car and picks up the phone.

MITCHELL:

Yes, I'll accept the charges.

ZOE:

Daddy?

CUT TO:

EXT. PHONE BOOTH -- AFTERNOON

MITCHELL:

Yes.

ZOE:

I'm calling because I've got some news for you, Daddy. Some big news.

MITCHELL:

News?

ZOE:

Don't you want to hear?

MITCHELL:

Yes. Give me your news, Zoe.

ZOE:

You always think you know what I'm going to say, don't you? You always think you're two steps ahead of me. The lawyer.

MITCHELL:

Tell me your news, Zoe.

ZOE:

Okay. I went to sell blood yesterday. That's how it is. I'm in this fucking city where my father is a hot shit lawyer, and I'm selling my blood.

MITCHELL:

That's not news, Zoe.

ZOE:

No. But this is. They wouldn't take my blood.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR -- DAY

Image of ZOE as a little girl in MITCHELL'S lap. Her face is swollen. She is being driven to the hospital.

MITCHELL is singing her a lullaby.

MITCHELL'S conversation with ZOE continues over this image.

ZOE:

Do you know what that means, Daddy?

Does it register?

MITCHELL:

Yes.

ZOE:

I tested positive.

MITCHELL:

Yes.

ZOE:

Welcome to hard times, Daddy.

Pause.

MITCHELL:

What do you want me to do, Zoe?

I'll do whatever you want.

ZOE:

I need money.

MITCHELL:

What for?

ZOE:

You can't ask me that! Not anymore!

You asked me what I wanted. Not
what I wanted it for. I want money.

MITCHELL:

Do you have the blood test?

ZOE:

You don't believe me? You don't
fucking believe me?

MITCHELL:

Of...course I do. I just
thought...I could get you another

test. In case the one you got...was
wrong.

ZOE:

I like it when you don't believe me,

Daddy. It's better you don't believe me but have to act like you do.

Pause.

ZOE (CONT'D)

I can hear you breathing, Daddy.

MITCHELL:

Yes. I can hear you breathing too.

ZOE begins to cry over the phone.

ZOE:

Oh God, I'm scared.

MITCHELL:

I love you, Zoe. I'll be there soon, and I'll take care of you. No matter what happens. I'll take care of you.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is still staring at the sleeping figure of ALISON. ALISON'S blanket has fallen to the side.

MITCHELL lifts the blanket, and covers the sleeping figure of the young woman.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

MITCHELL drives up to the BURNELL home. He gets out of his car and walks to the front door.

SAM has repainted the ramp.

It is now red.

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN -- DAY

MITCHELL meets NICOLE. SAM and MARY are also seated at the table.

The meeting takes place in the kitchen/diningroom.

MITCHELL:

Well, Nicole, I've been wanting to meet you for a long time now. Not

just because I've heard so many good things about you, but because, as you know, I'm the guy representing you and your mom and dad and some other folks here in town. We're trying to generate some compensation, however meager, for what you have suffered, and at the same time see that an accident like this never happens again. You're central to the case I'm trying to build, Nicole. But you'd probably just as soon let the whole thing lie. Just get on with your life as quickly and smoothly as possible. NICOLE nods. Pause, as MITCHELL waits for her to go on.

NICOLE:

I don't like thinking about the accident. I don't even remember it happening. Besides, it just makes people feel sorry for me, and...

MITCHELL:

You hate that.
NICOLE nods.

SAM:

What she means, Mitch...
MITCHELL silences SAM with a gesture of his hand.

MITCHELL:

People can't help it, you know. They really can't. When they see you in this wheelchair, knowing what your life was like eight months ago, people are going to feel sorry for you. There's no way around it, Nicole. You and I just met, and already I admire you. Who wouldn't? You're a brave tough smart kid. That's obvious. And I didn't know you, know how exciting and promising

your life was before the accident.
But listen, even I feel sorry for
you.

NICOLE:

You can only feel lucky that you
didn't die for so long. Then you
start to feel...unlucky.

MITCHELL:

That you didn't die? Like the other
children?

NICOLE:

Yes. Like Bear and the Ansel twins
and Sean and...

MARY:

Nicole!

NICOLE:

It's the truth.

MITCHELL regards MARY with calm authority, as though he's
telling her the time.

MITCHELL:

It is the truth.

Pause. MITCHELL looks back at NICOLE.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

It would be strange if you didn't
feel that way.

NICOLE:

(after a slight
pause)

What do you want me to do for you,
Mr. Stephens?

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME. LIVINGROOM. -- DAY

TIME CUT fifteen minutes forward. The scene shifts to the
livingroom.

MITCHELL and NICOLE are alone in the room. SAM comes back
from another room, as MARY appears from the kitchen with a

plate of cookies.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

That got you talking about depositions and lawyers. By the time Daddy came back from the washroom and Mom came in with her tea and cookies, you were going on about how tough it would be for me to answer some of the questions those other lawyers would ask .

MITCHELL:

They work for the people we're trying to sue. Their job is to try to minimize damages. Our job, Nicole, is to try to maximize them. You have to think of it that way. As people doing their jobs. No good guys or bad guys. Just our side and their side.

NICOLE:

I won't lie.

MITCHELL:

I don't want you to lie.

NICOLE:

The truth is that it was an accident, and no one's to blame.

MITCHELL:

There's no such thing as an accident, Nicole. Not in a situation like this.

NICOLE:

You seem very sure about that.

MITCHELL:

I'm absolutely positive.

NICOLE turns to face SAM. She stares at him.

NICOLE:

No matter what I'm asked, I'll tell the truth.

SAM looks back, expressionless.

MITCHELL:

That's fine. I want you to be absolutely truthful. And I'll be right there to advise and help you. And there'll be a court stenographer there to make a record of it, and

that's what'll go to the judge, before the trial is set. It'll be the same for everybody. They'll be deposing the Ottos and the Walkers, the bus driver...

NICOLE:

Dolores.

MITCHELL:

Yes. Dolores...and even your mom and dad. But I'll make sure you go last.

NICOLE:

Why?

MITCHELL:

So you can keep on getting well before you have to go and do this. It's not going to be easy, Nicole. Do you understand that?

NICOLE nods.

SAM:

When do they award damages?

MITCHELL:

Depends. This could drag on for quite a while. But we'll be there

at the end, Sam. Don't you worry.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

At that moment, I hated my parents -
Daddy for what he knew and had done,

NICOLE:

and even Mom for what she didn't
know and hadn't done. You told me
it wasn't going to be easy. But as
I sat there, staring at Daddy, I
knew it was going to be the easiest
thing in my life.

CUT TO:

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

REPLAY of the scene of SEAN WALKER entering the bus. He
turns around to face his mother.

SEAN:

I want to stay with you.

RISA:

Go on now. Go on.

SEAN hesitantly turns to face the inside of the bus. He
sees NICOLE BURNELL, who pats the seat beside her.
MASON leaves his place beside NICOLE to make way for SEAN.

NICOLE:

C'mon, Sean, sit next to me.

ANGLE ON:

DOLORES as she watches SEAN move towards NICOLE.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

DOLORES gives her deposition. A stenographer takes notes.
MITCHELL listens, along with SCHWARTZ, the opposing lawyer.

DOLORES:

He never took his eyes off his
mother, even as he moved to sit

beside Nicole. He looked
frightened.

MITCHELL:

Why would he be frightened?

DOLORES:

I don't know. But it was weird in
terms of what happened next. Sean
was still watching his mother.

DOLORES:

I shut the door with one hand, and
released the brake with the other,
and waited for a second for Risa to
cross in front of the bus. There
was a sixteen wheeler behind me, and
I heard his air brakes hiss as the
driver chunked into gear. I looked
into the side view mirror, and saw
him move into line behind me. Then
suddenly Sean shrieked...

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

SEAN leaps to the front of the bus.

SEAN:

Mommy!

MITCHELL:

(voice over, from
the court chamber)
What happened then?

DOLORES:

(voice over)
Sean was all over me, scrambling
across my lap to the window. I
glimpsed Risa off to my left,
leaping out of the way of a red Saab
that seemed to have bolted out of
nowhere.

The scene is horrifying, as SEAN watches his mother just missing a terrible accident with the speeding vehicle.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

Sean! Sit down! Your Mom's okay!

Now sit down!

SEAN sits back down beside NICOLE. DOLORES slides open her window, and speaks to RISA.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

You get his number?

RISA is stunned.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

(voice over)

She was shaken, standing there with her arms wrapped around herself.

DOLORES:

She shook her head, turned away, and walked slowly back to the office. I drew a couple of breaths and checked Sean, who was seated now but still craning and looking after his mother.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition continues.

DOLORES:

I smiled at him, but he only glared back at me, as if I was to blame.

CUT TO:

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

AERIAL VIEW of the bus as it makes its way through the mountains. NICOLE'S voice is heard reading The Pied Piper from the scene with the ANSEL children.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,
Joining the town and just at hand,
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees

grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and
new...

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- DAY

A montage showing the faces of the various children in the bus. These images are intercut with DOLORES'S deposition.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition. DOLORES is trying to control her emotions.

DOLORES:

I remember wrenching the steering wheel to the right and slapping my foot against the brake pedal. I wasn't the driver anymore.

DOLORES:

The bus was like this huge wave about to break over us. Bear Otto, the Lambston kids, the Hamiltons, the Prescotts, the teenaged boys and girls from Bartlett Hill, Sean, Nicole Burnell, Billy Ansel's twins, Jessica and Mason...all the children of my town.

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

SAM and JENNY are watching television. Lumberjack log-rolling.

NICOLE, in her wheelchair, is reading a book off to one corner. MARY comes into the room.

MARY:

That was Billy Ansel on the phone. He wants to come over to talk to us.

SAM:

Did he say what about?

MARY:

No.

SAM:

Was he drinking? Could you tell?

MARY:

Jenny, it's time for you to go to bed.

JENNY:

Mom...

SAM:

Come on, Jen. I let you watch your nature show.

JENNY reluctantly kisses her father goodnight, then NICOLE.

As she leaves the room, MARY starts clearing the table.

SAM (CONT'D)

Is he coming over now? Right away?

MARY:

That's what he said.

SAM is anxious. He looks over to NICOLE.

SAM:

What are you up to, Nicole?

NICOLE:

Nothing.

SAM:

Nothing good on your T.V.?

NICOLE:

As opposed to this T.V.?

NICOLE stares at SAM.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Besides, I'd like to see Billy.

NICOLE stares at the television.

ANGLE ON:

On the television screen, an image of a studio audience applauding. The image is silent. The T.V. is on MUTE.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

That wasn't true. I didn't want to be seen by anyone whose kids had been killed by the accident.

Especially not Billy Ansel.

NICOLE turns her attention back to her parents.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Actually, now that I think about it, I'd just as soon stay in my room.

NICOLE shoves her wheelchair towards her room, as the camera remains on her face.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

I remembered all the times I had tucked Jessica and Mason into bed. How they loved to have me read to them before they slept. There was nothing for me to say to Billy, except I'm sorry. I'm sorry that your children died when my parent's children didn't.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

BILLY pulls up to the BURNELL home. He gets out of his pickup and approaches the house.

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

From her room, NICOLE watches as BILLY approaches the house.

He leaves her view as a knock is heard at the door. NICOLE wheels over to the door and presses her ear to the door so that she can hear the conversation.

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN. -- NIGHT

SAM:

Hey, Billy! What brings you out on a night like this? C'mon in. Take

a load off.

MARY:

Would you like a cup of tea, Billy?
There's a piece of cake left.

BILLY:

No. No, thanks, Mary.

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN/LIVINGROOM -- NIGHT
SAM leads BILLY into the livingroom.

SAM:

So what brings you out tonight?

BILLY:

Well, Sam, I might as well tell you
the truth. It's this lawsuit you've
gotten yourself all involved with.
I want you to drop the damned thing.
Pause.

SAM:

I don't see how that concerns you,
Billy.

BILLY:

It does concern me.

SAM:

Well, I don't know why it should.
There's a whole lot of people in
town involved with lawsuits. We're
hardly unique here, Billy. I mean,
I can understand how you feel.

BILLY:

How?

SAM:

Well, it being so depressing and
all. But it's reality. You can't

just turn this off because you
happen to think it's a bad idea.

BILLY:

Why not?

SAM:

Because it's what we have to do.

BILLY:

Well I don't want a damned thing to
do with it.

SAM:

Okay, fine. So...stay out of it.
Pause. BILLY stares at SAM. Tension.

BILLY:

I've tried to stay out of it. But
it turns out that's not so easy,
Sam. You've gone and got yourself
this lawyer. Mitchell Stephens.
You and Risa and Wendell and the
Ottos.

SAM:

So? I mean, lot's of folks have got
lawyers.

BILLY:

But yours is the one who's going to
subpoena me, Sam. Force me to
testify in court. He came by the
garage this afternoon. Gave me this
piece of paper.
BILLY reaches into his pocket and shows the paper to SAM.

MARY:

Why would he do that? You didn't
have anything to do with the
accident.

BILLY:

Because I was driving behind the

bus, Mary. Because I saw it. I saw it happen...

BILLY is harrowed by this image. SAM and MARY stare at him, frightened by his intensity.

BILLY (CONT'D)

If that bastard does subpoena me, if he forces me to go over this again, then all those other lawyers will line up behind him and try and do the same thing.

SAM:

That won't happen, Billy. Mitch Stephens' case is small, compared to some of those other guys. The way he told me, all he needs is for you to say what you saw that day, driving behind the bus. I know it's a painful thing to do, but it'll only take a few minutes of your time. That'll be the end of it.

BILLY:

That's wrong, Sam. You know that. We'll be tangled up in this thing for the next five years. This is never going to go away...

SAM:

C'mon, you know that won't...

BILLY:

We've got lawyers suing lawyers because some people were stupid enough to sign on with more than one of the bastards. We've got people pointing fingers, making side deals, and dickering over percentages. Yesterday, I heard somebody wants to sue the rescue squad. The rescue squad. Because they didn't act fast enough.

ANGLE ON:

NICOLE listening from her door.

BILLY (CONT'D)

If you two dropped the case, then
the others would come to their
senses

BILLY:

and follow. You're good sensible
parents, you and Mary. People
respect you.

Pause.

SAM:

No, Billy. We can't drop the
lawsuit. You know how much we need
the money.

BILLY:

Why? You got money from Dolores'
insurance with the school board. We
all did.

SAM:

It's not enough. For hospital
bills. For Nicole.

BILLY:

I'll help pay for Nicole, if that's
what you're really talking about.

I'll even give you the money I got
for my kids.

(beat)

That's what we used to do, remember?

Help each other. This was a
community.

SAM:

I'm sorry.

BILLY stares at SAM.

BILLY:

I used to like it here. I used to

care about what happened. Now I think I'll sell my house and move the fuck away.

MARY:

Billy, please. The children.

BILLY:

The children.

BILLY looks at SAM and MARY, s strange smile on his face.

He moves to leave. He pauses at the door of the kitchen.

BILLY (CONT'D)

How is Nicole? Is she around?

MARY:

She's resting. In her room.

BILLY:

Say hello for me.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

BILLY walks to his car. SAM and MARY watch him from the porch/ramp.

SAM:

(calling out)

We're getting on with our lives,

Billy. Maybe it's time you got on

with yours.

BILLY turns around, looks at SAM one final time, then moves to his pick up.

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

NICOLE is watching BILLY from her window. She is crying.

ANGLE ON:

NICOLE'S P.O.V. of BILLY driving away.

CUT TO:

INT. BURNELL HOME. NICOLE'S BEDROOM. -- NIGHT

NICOLE is lying in her bed. A knock at the door. SAM

enters the dark bedroom and sits on the bed beside her.

SAM:

Are you sleeping?

NICOLE:

No.

SAM:

Nicole, tomorrow Mr. Stephens wants you to make your deposition at the courthouse. I thought I'd take you over.

NICOLE:

Great.

SAM:

You seem...I don't know...well, distant, I guess. Hard to talk to.

NICOLE:

We used to talk a lot, didn't we, Daddy. About all the things you were going to do for me.

SAM:

What do you mean?

NICOLE:

I mean I'm a wheelchair girl now. It's hard to pretend I'm a beautiful rock star. Not like you used to tell me. Remember, Daddy? All the people that were going to discover me? Where are they now?

SAM turns away from NICOLE.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

He couldn't look at me. But I looked at him. Right at him. His secret was mine now. We used to share it. But not anymore. Now, I

owned it completely.

SAM:

Well, okay. I'll take you about nine-thirty in the morning. That's okay with you?

NICOLE:

Great.

Silence. SAM gets up to leave the room.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

Before, everything had been so confusing. I never knew who was to blame. But now I know. He's just a thief, a sneaky thief who had robbed his daughter. Robbed me of...whatever it was that my sister still had and I didn't. And then the accident robbed me of my body.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE are driving to town. They don't exchange a word.

CUT TO:

EXT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

SAM is carrying NICOLE up the stairs of the community centre.

There is no ramp, so the wheelchair is left at the bottom. He is having difficulty, because NICOLE is keeping her body stiff and won't hold on to him.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

NICOLE is wheeled across the floor of the community centre to a table where the depositions are being made. MITCHELL, SCHWARTZ, and the STENOGRAPHER are waiting for her.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

The last time I was in the community

hall was for the big Christmas party almost a year ago. It hadn't changed.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition. SAM watches his daughter as she speaks confidently into the microphone. The STENOGRAPHER takes notes.

NICOLE is answering questions from the opposing lawyer. MITCHELL is also taking notes.

SCHWARTZ:

Now on that morning, did there come a time, Nicole, when you left your parents' house?

NICOLE:

Yes.

SCHWARTZ:

What time in the morning was this?

NICOLE:

About eight-thirty in the morning.

SCHWARTZ:

Was anyone waiting for the bus with you?

NICOLE:

No. I was alone. My sister Jenny was sick and stayed home that day.

SCHWARTZ:

Was there anything unusual about the driver, Dolores Driscoll, or the bus that particular morning?

NICOLE:

Like what? I mean, I don't remember a lot.

ANGLE ON MITCHELL

MITCHELL:

I object to the form of that question. Note that.

SCHWARTZ:

Was the bus on time?

NICOLE:

Yes.

SCHWARTZ:

And where did you sit that morning?

NICOLE:

My usual place. On the right side. The first seat.

SCHWARTZ:

And according to your recollection, there was nothing unusual about the drive that morning?

NICOLE:

Until the accident? No.

(beat)

Yes, there was.

ANGLE ON MITCHELL

Worried about this new information.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

It was when Sean Walker got on. He was crying and didn't want to leave his mother. Mason Ansel was sitting beside me. I asked him to move, so I could quiet Sean down. When the bus started up, a car came around

the corner and almost hit Sean's mother. She was okay, but it really scared Sean, because he watched it out the window.

SCHWARTZ:

And was this incident caused in any

way by anything the driver of the bus did?

Pause. MITCHELL is nervous.

NICOLE:

No, she hadn't even started to move the bus. It was the car's fault. MITCHELL is relieved.

SCHWARTZ:

There was nothing reckless in Mrs. Driscoll's behavior?

MITCHELL:

I object to that form of question. Note that.

NICOLE:

(answering the question)
No.

SCHWARTZ:

Did there come a time when all the children had been picked up?

NICOLE:

Yes.

SCHWARTZ:

You remember that much?

NICOLE:

As I'm talking, I'm remembering more about it. MITCHELL is worried.

MITCHELL:

Note my objection. She said, 'As I'm talking.'

SCHWARTZ:

Did there come a time when the bus turned off Staples Mill Road onto

the Marlowe Road at what's called
Wilmot Springs?

NICOLE:

Yes.

NICOLE:

There was a brown dog that ran
across the road up there, right by
the dump, and Dolores slowed down
not to hit him, and he ran into the
woods. And then Dolores drove on
and turned onto the Marlowe road, as
usual. I remember that. I'm
remembering it pretty clearly.

SCHWARTZ:

(eyebrows raised)
You are?

NICOLE:

Yes.

MITCHELL:

(worried)
Note that she said 'pretty clearly'.
Not 'clearly'.

SCHWARTZ:

And what was the weather like at
this time?

NICOLE:

It was snowing.

MITCHELL:

Unless the report from the National
Weather Bureau for the district on
January 23 goes into the record, I
will object to that question.

SCHWARTZ:

I will offer that report. Well,

then, now that your memory seems to be clearing, can you tell us what else you observed at that time?

NICOLE:

Before the actual accident?

SCHWARTZ:

Yes.

NICOLE stares at her father as she responds.

NICOLE:

I was scared.

SCHWARTZ:

Why were you scared?

SCHWARTZ:

This is before the accident, Nicole.

Do you understand what I'm asking?

NICOLE:

Yes, I understand.

SCHWARTZ:

Why were you scared?

NICOLE:

Dolores was driving too fast.

Silence. MITCHELL is watching his entire case crumble.

SCHWARTZ:

Mrs. Driscoll was driving too fast?

What made you think that, Nicole?

NICOLE:

The speedometer. And it was downhill there.

SCHWARTZ:

You could see the speedometer?

NICOLE:

Yes. I looked. I remember clearly now. It seemed we were going too fast down the hill. I was scared. NICOLE looks at MITCHELL, who stares back.

SCHWARTZ:

How fast would you say Mrs. Driscoll was going? To the best of your recollection?

NICOLE:

Seventy-two miles an hour.

SCHWARTZ:

Seventy-two miles an hour? You're sure of this?

NICOLE:

Positive.

SCHWARTZ:

You believe that the bus driven by Mrs. Driscoll was going at seventy-two miles an hour at this time?

NICOLE:

I told you I was positive. The speedometer was large and easy to see from where I was.

ANGLE ON:

The speedometer from NICOLE'S P.O.V. It reads fifty-one miles an hour.

SCHWARTZ:

(voice over)

You saw the speedometer?

NICOLE:

Yes.

SCHWARTZ:

Did you say anything to Mrs.

Driscoll?

NICOLE:

No.

SCHWARTZ:

Why not?

NICOLE:

I was scared. And there wasn't time.

SCHWARTZ:

There wasn't time?

NICOLE:

No. Because the bus went off the road. And crashed.

SCHWARTZ:

You remember this?

NICOLE:

Yes. I do now. Now that I'm telling it.

MITCHELL:

(defeated)

She said, 'Now that I'm telling it'.
Note that.

SCHWARTZ:

What do you remember about the accident?

NICOLE:

I remember the bus swerved, it just suddenly swerved to the right, and it hit the guardrail and the snowbank on the side of the road, and then it went over the embankment there, and everyone was screaming and everything. And that's all. I

guess I was unconscious after that.

That's all. Then I was in the hospital.

SCHWARTZ smiles and makes some notes in his pad. He talks to MITCHELL without looking up.

SCHWARTZ:

Do you have any questions, Mr. Stephens?

MITCHELL stares silently at NICOLE for a long time.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

Daddy was leaning forward in his chair, his mouth half open, as if he wanted to say something. Like what, Daddy? Like 'What about my money?' NICOLE and SAM stare at each other.

MITCHELL:

I have no questions.

SCHWARTZ:

Thank you, Nicole.

NICOLE wheels herself away. She passes MITCHELL.

MITCHELL:

(in a low voice)

You'd make a great poker player, kid.

NICOLE wheels herself over to her father.

NICOLE:

Let's go, Daddy.

EXT. COMMUNITY CENTRE -- DAY

NICOLE is in the car in front of the community centre. She stares at SAM as he argues with MITCHELL on the steps.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

Daddy took a long time. I guess he wanted to have a few words with you. He must have tried to tell you that

I was lying. Then you would tell Daddy that it didn't matter if I was lying or not, the lawsuit is dead. As NICOLE'S words are heard, her point of view of SAM and MITCHELL arguing is seen. The movement of their lips is in sync with NICOLE'S voice over.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

Everyone's lawsuit is dead. Forget it. Tell the others to forget it. It's over. Right now, Sam, the thing you've got to worry about is why she lied. A kid who'd do that to her own father is not normal, Sam.

SAM comes down the stairs and enters the car, sitting down at the driver's seat. NICOLE stares at him as he starts the car.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

But Daddy knows who lied. He knows who the liar is. He knows who's normal.

SAM stares ahead, not knowing what to do next.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(speaking to SAM)

I hope he lets us keep the computer. SAM turns to look at NICOLE.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

I'd like an ice cream.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPORT. -- MORNING

MITCHELL is at the baggage section of the arrival area, waiting for his luggage.

He watches PETER, the man he met in the washroom changing his daughter, playing with the little girl.

PETER is full of love as he swings the little girl into the air as she laughs.

MITCHELL is caught in a daydream, smiling at the happy image of father and daughter. ALISON approaches him.

ALISON:

Well, it was nice meeting you again,
Mr. Stephens.

MITCHELL:

Mitchell. It was nice to see you
again, Ally.

ALISON:

Alison.

MITCHELL:

Alison.

ALISON:

Say hi to Zoe.

MITCHELL:

I will.

ALISON:

I hope she gets better.

MITCHELL:

I'll tell her that.

ALISON shakes MITCHELL'S hand, and leaves.

CUT TO:

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM wheels NICOLE along a path away from the same concession stand that was seen at the beginning of the film. NICOLE is licking an ice-cream cone. Around them, people are setting up the bandstand.

NICOLE:

Daddy, can we come to the fair?

SAM:

Yes.

NICOLE:

How about Sunday night? That's
always the best time.

SAM:

Okay.

NICOLE looks at a team of men constructing a ride. A school bus pulls up, and a group of children spill out. NICOLE watches as the driver tries to form them into a group.

NICOLE:

What's going to happen to Dolores?

SAM:

I don't know.

NICOLE:

Will the police do anything to her?

SAM:

It's too late for that. She can't drive the bus anymore. The school board saw to that right off.

NICOLE:

She'll move away.

SAM:

There's talk of that.

NICOLE:

Someplace where no one knows her.

(beat)

Someplace strange and new.

SAM is frozen. NICOLE smiles to herself.

CUT TO:

EXT. AIRPORT. -- MORNING

At the airport, in the arrivals bay, MITCHELL waits for his limousine.

Across the road, a hotel minibus is parked. The driver is DOLORES. The camera settles on her face as she stares at MITCHELL.

MITCHELL catches her gaze, and the two stare at each other.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

As you see each other, almost two years later, I wonder if you realize something.

MITCHELL'S limo arrives. He gets inside.

CUT TO:

INT. LIMOUSINE -- MORNING

CLOSE-UP of MITCHELL as he stares ahead, lost in thought.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

I wonder if you realize that all of us - Dolores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn't - that we're all citizens of a different town now.

CUT TO:

EXT. GAS STATION -- DAY

BILLY watches as a crane lifts the demolished schoolbus onto a flatbed truck.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

A town of people living in the sweet hereafter.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAR -- AFTERNOON

NICOLE and SAM driving home from the fairground.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

Whether others defend us, protect us, love us or hate us - they do it to meet their own needs, not ours. The camera leaves the car to look up at the sky.

CUT TO:

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DUSK

Sunday night at the fairground. NICOLE is staring at the ferris wheel. In her imagination, the swinging cars of the

slowly turning wheel are full of children. The laughter and noise is haunting.

NICOLE smiles as she stares at this private apparition.

NICOLE:

(voice over)

This is what I learned. This is what I found out.

CUT TO:

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. JESSICA AND MASON'S BEDROOM. -- NIGHT
NICOLE has just finished reading a story to JESSICA and MASON. The children are asleep. NICOLE puts the book down, and kisses the two sleeping children on the cheek. NICOLE gets up to leave the bedroom, leaving the door slightly open.

Light spills in from the hallway.

The End
October, 1996