

TEDDY BEAR

Story by Hillel F. Damron

Screenplay by
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Inspired by the song *Teddy Bear* by Red Sovine

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"TEDDY BEAR"

FADE IN:

EXT. MIDWESTERN INTERSTATE HIGHWAY - DAY

Against the b.g. of country music and the idle chatter of an open CB radio, the powerful throb of diesel engines reverberates over a montage of big rigs on the move as they speed down the Interstates, pull away from loading docks, cross over bridges, weigh in at truck scales and pass through toll booths.

MONTAGE: CABS OF BIG RIGS

Strong arms adeptly turn steering wheels, down shift gears. The cabs reflect the diversity of the drivers: some funky and comfortable, others high-tech and streamlined, most functional and businesslike.

INT. BIG RED'S CAB - DAY

Dashboard of a worn, but comfortable cab. A young boy's VOICE breaks into the idle chatter on the CB radio.

BOY'S VOICE
Breaker one nine. Anybody there?

A strong HAND reaches out, picks up the mike and keys in the CB. RODERICK 'ROD' McCALL, 38, a beat-up cowboy hat tipped back on his head, reveals a rugged face accustomed to sunshine.

ROD
(West Texas drawl)
Big Red here. Who we got on
that end?

BOY'S VOICE
My handle's Teddy Bear. I'm not
supposed to bother you guys,
mom says you're busy, but...

ROD
Keep talking Teddy Bear, I hear
ya.

INT. BOY'S ROOM - DAY

The small room is cluttered with photos of big rigs, autographed pictures of Cincinnati Reds' players, and country music stars.

ANTHONY "TONY" GRAHAM, 12, sits in a wheelchair before his CB, his unruly hair partly covers a face unaccustomed to the sun. He is

thin, but with strong arms. He wears a worn baseball cap and looks longingly out the window.

TONY

This was my Dad's C.B., but I guess it's mine and mom's now. He was a truck driver, too.

Silence. Rod tries to cover with--

ROD (V.O.)

What kind of rig did he have?

TONY

He had a Peterbilt.

ROD (V.O.)

Doggone! That's what I have, too.

TONY

He carried everything from cattle to coffee beans.

ROD (V.O.)

How 'bout that. Got me a load of Georgia peanuts, today.

TONY

He used to take me for lots of rides, 'cause I can't walk.

On the desk in front of him is a picture of a younger Tony and his Dad, wearing the same worn baseball cap. Both waving and smiling from the window of a big rig.

TONY

Don't suppose I'll ever get to ride in one now.

INT. ROD'S CAB - DAY

Rod swallows the lump in his throat.

TONY (V.O.)

I better back on out. You guys got work to do and my mom's due any minute.

ROD

Before you go, CB friend, what's your ten twenty?

TONY (V.O.)
Oh...229 Jackson Street,
Springfield.

ROD
Ten Four, Teddy Bear.

Rod checks his watch.

ROD
What the hell.

EXT. ROD'S TRUCK, INTERSTATE 70, OHIO - DAY

Rod slows, stops abruptly on the soft shoulder, raising a cloud of dust. He swings his rig around, recklessly crosses the divider, and heads back, blowing black smoke into the air.

EXT. SPRINGFIELD, JACKSON ST. - DAY

Rod's truck turns off Main street and on to Jackson. He brakes suddenly to see a number of BIG RIGS lining the narrow street in front of Tony's house.

A group of neighbors stand on the sidewalk watching the commotion, as the drivers of each truck take turns carrying Tony to their rigs, and driving off.

Rod smiles and watches through the windshield of his truck. He pushes his hat back and pours himself a cup of coffee from a thermos as he waits his turn.

EXT. BIG RIG CAFE, OUTSKIRTS SPRINGFIELD - DAY

A WAITRESS, slim, attractive, exits the cafe and hurries toward a bus stop. She catches the bus just before it pulls out.

INT. ROD'S CAB - DAY

While Rod waits his turn, he draws a worn wallet from his jeans and flips it open. He searches through it until he comes upon a dog-eared photo of a young woman holding a baby. He stares at it deep in thought.

EXT. JACKSON STREET - DAY

A horn HONKS in the b.g. as Tony exits the last truck. The trucker places him in the wheelchair on the sidewalk, shakes Tony's hand and waves his goodbye.

Rod pulls up in front of the small house. Tony looks up into his cab. "The Big Red" is splashed across the driver's door.

TONY
So you're Big Red?

ROD
You got it, son. Rod's the name.

Rod climbs down and approaches the boy. They shake.

TONY
I'm Tony. Thanks for talking back.

ROD
Pleasure. Care for another ride?

TONY
I'm beat, honest. Had enough for the day.

ROD
No sweat. I'm beat too.

He turns the wheelchair and pushes Tony toward the house, he stops at the steps.

ROD
No ramp?

TONY
My mom doesn't allow me off the porch when she's not home.

ROD
So much for the rules, huh?

TONY
(half smiles)
Well, she works. And the lady who looks after me went to the store.

Rod smiles knowingly, lifts his chair up the steps onto the porch.

He pulls down the boy's Cincinnati Red's baseball cap, playfully.

ROD
So, who's gonna win the series?

TONY
No contest. The Reds.

ROD
Right on!

They high five.

EXT. MAIN STREET, SPRINGFIELD - DAY

Bus #8 loaded with passengers comes down the street. The waitress gazes out the window, irritated by the delay caused by so many trucks in town.

EXT. TONY'S HOUSE - DAY

Tony sits in his chair. Rod sits on the steps next to him, holding his cowboy hat.

TONY
Ya know...one of these days,
I'm going to Nashville to see
the the Grand Ol' Opry.

ROD
That so. Who do you want to see?

TONY
I like Clint Black a lot, but
Garth is my favorite.

ROD
I like the old timers, myself.
Merl Haggard...Red Sovine...

TONY
Red Who?

ROD
(grins)
That's way before your time,
boy.

They both laugh.

EXT. CORNER OF JACKSON ST. - DAY

Bus #8 pulls to a stop on the corner and passengers climb out. Our waitress, GAIL GRAHAM, 32, worry etched on her face, steps off the bus, shifts the groceries to her other arm and begins the walk home.

EXT. TONY'S HOUSE - DAY

Rod puts his hat on, taps Tony on the shoulder.

ROD
Gotta get back on line, Cowboy.
It's been fun talkin' to ya.
Call me anytime.

TONY
Sure will, Trucker.

Rod turns to go.

TONY
(hesitates)
S'pose you could come visit
me again sometime?

Rod stops and turns back, studies him.

ROD
Think that will be all right
with your mom?

TONY
Sure, I'm in charge around here.

ROD
Til next time then.

Rod gives a thumbs up and rushes down the steps to his truck,
waves and pulls away.

Tony waves, watches him depart.

EXT. JACKSON ST. SIDEWALK - DAY

Gail, lost in thought, walks the last block toward home. The
sudden blast of an air horn jars her back to reality. She watches
a noisy diesel semi drive off down the street.

Gail frowns when she sees Tony sitting on the porch. He is
flushed and excited and smiles awkwardly as she walks up to him.

TONY
Hi mom. You're early.

GAIL
No, I'm not.
(beat)
What are you up to?

TONY
Nothing.

She shoots him a penetrating look.

GAIL
You can't fool me, Tony.
What's going on.

He shrugs and looks off.

TONY
It's nothing.

She turns him around and wheels him into the house.

INT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

She wheels him through the sparsely furnished house as she wheels him to his room.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

An open channel CRACKLES from the CB radio on Tony's desk. Intermittent VOICES fade in and out.

Gail looks sternly at the CB and the microphone sitting before it. She steps over to the desk to turn it off, when Rod's clear voice is heard. She stops momentarily.

ROD (V.O.)
Big Red here. Catch you again
real soon, Teddy Bear.

She looks at Tony, surprised, then snaps off the radio.

GAIL
Now, young man, either you
tell me what this is all about,
or this CB is off to the pawn
shop, understand?

He nods, eyes down.

GAIL
Who, may I ask, is Big Red?

TONY
He's just a trucker.

GAIL
You broke in on them, is that
it? You promised me you'd
just listen.

He avoids her eyes.

GAIL
(almost to herself)
I shouldn't be surprised,
should I...

She disconnects the CB and picks it up.

TONY
So, some Truckers came over and
took me for rides. What's the
big deal?

She's shocked, looks at him in disbelief.

GAIL
What?...

TONY
It's lonely around here, I just
wanted to talk to...somebody,
that's all.

GAIL
(exasperated)
Then go back to school. You'll
have plenty of company there.

TONY
I don't know anybody there.
Why'd we move here, anyhow?

GAIL
You know why. The job is here.

She picks up a textbook from his desk.

TONY
If I had that guitar you
promised me, I'd be too busy
to bother with the CB.

GAIL
It wasn't me who promised you that.
And I can't afford it right now.

She hands him the book. Frustrated, he tosses it back on his desk.

GAIL
You chased away every tutor
that came through this door, and
I'm going to put an end to this
once and for all. You're going
back to school, and that's final!

She heads for the door.

He wheels himself to the window and stares out. He pulls an old harmonica from his pocket. His lips slide skillfully over the notes as he plays a grating tune.

She exits and slams the door.

Tony's energy wanes, his music slows and deepens into a lonesome, mournful sound. He stops playing abruptly, moves to his desk, grabs a piece of paper and begins to write.

EXT. TRUCK STOP - NIGHT

The lights of the city are visible in the b.g. as Rod's truck pulls into a parking lot crowded with big rigs. The hissing of air brakes and rumble of truck engines reverberate in the evening air.

Rod stretches as he climbs down. He checks his tires and cargo, then strolls toward the nearby bar: "Ramblin' Rose."

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Western style, crowded with truck drivers in dirty jeans; some with handle-bar mustaches, unruly beards, tattooed arms and gaudy belt buckles. There's a sign above the bar that reads: The Four Saddest Words Ever Composed-- The Bar Is Closed.

Rod grabs a bar stool, orders a beer and looks around. A sad country love song plays on the jukebox. He takes a long pull on his bottle of beer.

He stares at his somber reflection in the mirror. Then looks at his drink.

HE FLASHES BACK to another time and another place. A street is blocked by ambulances, fire engines, hoses and confusion, in the midst of which stands a burning apartment building. A younger Rod jumps from his truck, runs in panic onto the scene to discover the last ambulance pulling away.

END FLASH BACK

He covers his face as the words, "Sorry, we did all we could," echo in his ears.

BARMAID
(cuts in)
Another beer?

Rod lifts his head, and looks at her sadly.

ROD
No thanks.

He straightens his hat, pays for the beer and heads for the door.

INT. ROD'S CAB - NIGHT

Rod closes the door, dials a country music station, grabs a pillow from behind the seat and lays it on the wheel. He drops his head down on the pillow and closes his eyes. Moonlight illuminates his weary face.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Same moonlight illuminates Tony, asleep in his wheelchair by the window.

Gail enters the room and turns on the light. She sees the plateful of food, untouched, and beside it an envelope. She picks it up.

The address reads, "KIDS' CORNER" SPRINGFIELD GAZETTE. She examines it a moment, then puts it in her pocket. She lifts Tony to the bed, and dressed as he is, covers him with a blanket. She removes his baseball cap and hangs it on the bedpost.

She looks down at him. Her expression softens. She brushes the hair from his forehead and kisses him. He doesn't stir.

She moves to the desk, reconnects the CB, her one hand fingers the frame of the picture of Tony and his Dad in happier times. She reaches for the mike and presses the Speak Button.

INT. ROD'S CAB - NIGHT

He can't sleep, shifts the pillow to the back of his head, pushes his hat down over his eyes and tries again.

The CB crackles in the b.g., as Gail's VOICE comes faintly through. His eyes snap open. He sits up, turns up the volume.

GAIL (V.O.)

Mamma Bear here. Just wanted to pass the word on to those truckers who showed up on Jackson street today...

(softly)

Thanks a lot, you made my boy very happy. Drive safely. Ten four.

Rod is touched, sits deep in thought.

EXT. WEIGH STATION, INTERSTATE 70 - DAY

Shiny metal glistens in the bright morning sun, as a column of big rigs wait at a truck scale. A Department of Transportation vehicle waits at the front of the line.

A few of the drivers stand or lean against their trucks, talk, smoke, soak up the sun.

We zero in on Rod, who pours himself a cup of coffee from his thermos, takes a sip.

Rod spills his coffee as a rebel YELL breaks the calm.

CHUCK (O.S.)
EE HA! Big Red!

Trucker CHUCK "DIXIE REB" RILEY, 35, dressed in an Associated Markets uniform, slaps Rod on the back.

ROD
Well I'll be damned, if it ain't the Dixie Reb himself!

They give each other "the" handshake.

ROD
Thought you were snappin' broncs in Texas.

CHUCK
These ol' bones couldn't take much of that...came back to doing what I do best...

ROD
Yeah...breakin' the speed limit?

CHUCK
(laughs)
Got the fastest 'fuzz buster' on the road.

Rod pours more coffee, hands the cup to Chuck.

ROD
What's this uniform bit? You gone Company on me?

CHUCK
(embarrassed)
Money's good 'n don't have to hustle for loads.

ROD
Never thought you'd sell your
soul.

CHUCK
(shrugs)
Well, I got mouths to feed now.

ROD
You do!

CHUCK
(nods)
You want to see 'em?

ROD
(surprised)
You got 'em with you?...

Rod follows him to his rig.

Compared to Rod's old and battered rig, Chuck's shiny new silver truck glows in the morning sun, highlighted by the polished chrome "sitting lady" mud flaps.

Chuck opens the cab door.

CHUCK
Meet Rocky and Smokey.

There in the back lay two puppies looking up at him. Rod grins, gives Chuck a shove.

CHURCK
Found them abandoned beside
the road.
(beat)
Want one?

Engines rev up, the line starts to move.

ROD
Now, what would I do with
a puppy?

EXT. JACKSON ST., OUTSKIRTS OF SPRINGFIELD - DAY

LOUISE "LOU" JOHNSON, 11, black, tomboy in overalls, runs to the Graham house, book bag over her shoulder and waving a newspaper. She flies up the steps and into the house.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Tony listens to the "Reds" game on the radio as he chins himself from the wheelchair on an exercise bar across the closet doorway. A crucial play is taking place when Lou bursts into the room.

LOU
Tony macaroni, is this you?

She waves the local paper in his face. He misses hearing the play. He drops back into his wheelchair. He is mad.

TONY
Quiet! I'm trying to listen.

He turns his attention back to the radio. She sits Indian style on the bed with the paper spread before her.

LOU
Okay then, I'll read this
"Teddy Bear" poem by myself.
What'ya know...written by
the one and only famous poet:
T.G. I wonder who that is?

He stares at her in disbelief. She begins to read aloud:

LOU
"Breaker one nine,
is anyone there?
Come on back truckers,
and talk to Teddy Bear."

She giggles while he, in a surprise quick move, scoots his wheelchair toward the bed and tries to grab the paper.

But she is faster, jumps off the bed and reads on the run...

LOU
(reading)
"...But you see I get lonely
and it helps to talk,
that's about all I can do
'cause I sure can't--"

TONY
(shouts)
You're dead, Lou...Stop it!
Give me the paper!

LOU
Say pretty please.

TONY
Give it!.

He snatches the paper and reads silently, stunned to see his words in print. She stands behind him, reading over his shoulder.

LOU
(aloud)
"Dad had a rack
about a year ago,
trying to get home
in a blinding snow.
Mom has to work now
To make ends meet,
And I'm not much help
with my two useless feet."

He gives her a look, she stops reading. He reads on silently, a smile creases his lips.

EXT. BIG RIG CAFE - DAY

Rod's truck pulls into the dusty parking lot. He climbs down and checks his rig over, kicks the tires and tightens the ropes. Satisfied, he enters the Cafe.

INT. BIG RIG CAFE

Rod sits down at the counter, surveys the crowded cafe, tips his hat as Gail steps up. She fills his cup with coffee and hands him a menu. He takes a sip.

GAIL
Strong enough for you?

He nods, taken with her wholesome good looks. She's rushed, brushes a strand of hair from her forehead.

GAIL
What'll you have?

He pretends to study the menu, then looks up at her.

ROD
What's good, Honey?

GAIL
I've got a name, Mister,
and it's sure ain't honey.

He looks at her, squints at her name tag.

ROD
Uh... just how do you pronounce
that, exactly?

GAIL
Gail. Just like it's spelled.

ROD
(embarrassed)
So, Gail, what do you recommend?

She sighs wearily.

GAIL
I don't recommend. I just take
orders.

ROD
Just the way I like my women.

She gives him a withering look and starts to walk away. He calls to her.

ROD
I'll take number nine, if it's
all the same to you.

She shrugs and walks away.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Tony guides a planer over the angled end of a two by four, placed on top of a footlocker. He brushes away the curls of wood and fits that piece of wood onto another just like it.

Lou sits at his desk, stares at the chessboard before her.

TONY
Don't tell me you forgot
the nails?

Without looking up, she says...

LOU
In the pocket of my bookbag,
dummy.

He fishes through the bag and takes out a box of nails, then begins to nail the wood pieces together to fit snugly at right angles.

LOU
Stop that racket, Tony, I
can't think.

TONY

You can't think period. Told
you, it wasn't a game for girls.

LOU

I can beat you anytime...just
let me concentrate.

TONY

Can't stop now, gotta finish
this.

LOU

What are you making, anyway?

He stops working and looks at her a moment.

TONY

Can you keep a secret?

A loud BLAST from an air horn sounds outside, leaves the question hanging. Tony quickly rolls himself to the window as we hear the HISSING of air brakes.

TONY'S POV:

Rod climbs down from his rig, carrying a large box. He walks to the house.

TONY (O.S.)

Quick Lou, it's my trucker
friend. Go let him in.

BACK TO SCENE

Tony opens the footlocker, puts the wood angles, tools, wood shavings into it. He snaps the combination lock closed and spins the dial.

The doorbell RINGS.

INT. GRAHAM HOUSE, LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lou opens the door. Rod takes his hat off.

ROD

Is Tony home, son?

LOU

Son yourself!

ROD

Sorry...

She shows him in.

LOU
His majesty is in his room,
Sir, follow me.

He smiles as he closes the door, then follows her in.

ROD
So, are you his girlfriend?

LOU
I'd die first. I'm his next
door neighbor, Lou.

ROD
Howdy, I'm Rod.

She nods, they walk into Tony's room.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Tony sits in the middle of the room, happy to see Rod, who stops at the doorway.

TONY
Hi Trucker, come on in.

Rod puts the box down on the floor. He exchanges high fives with Tony who eyes the box.

ROD
How you doin', Tony?

TONY
All right I guess.

NOISES come from the box.

TONY
What's in the box?

ROD
Go ahead, open it.

Tony opens it, and a puppy with a new collar and leash jumps out. Lou picks him up.

LOU
Whoa...how cute!

Tony's eyes light up. Lou thrusts it into his arms, and he hugs and pets it. The puppy licks Tony's face.

TONY
Cool. What's his name?

ROD
That's up to you, he's all yours.

Tony looks at him in disbelief, overwhelmed.

LOU'S MOM (O.S.)
(calls)
Lou. Dinner time! Come on home!

LOU
(calls out window)
In a minute, Mom.

LOU'S MOM (O.S.)
Right now. You haven't done
your homework, yet!

Reluctantly, Lou gives a parting pat to the puppy, picks up her book bag and heads for the door.

ROD
Goodbye Lou. You'll help Tony
take care of his dog, won't you?

LOU
Sure will!
(beat)
See ya.

She exits.

For a moment there's quiet, as the puppy jumps off Tony's lap and explores the room.

Rod looks around, too. He sees the picture of Tony and his Dad on the desk. His eyes move from the cap his Dad wears, to the same one the boy wears.

Tony watches the puppy, his smile gradually fades.

ROD
What's the matter?

TONY
My mom will never let me have a
puppy. I know her.

ROD
Aw, she'll come around. Moms
always do.

TONY
Not my mom.

Rod draws an envelope from his pocket and sets it on the desk.

ROD
In fact, the truckers chipped
in some money for its care.

TONY
(hopeful)
Really? Gee, thanks.

INT. CAFE LOCKER ROOM - DAY

Gail opens her locker, slips her shoes off and rubs one foot against the other. She reaches into her apron, takes out the day's tips and starts to count the bills. Pleased, she takes her purse from the shelf, puts the money inside and snaps her purse closed.

She grabs her coat from the hanger, slams her locker door and hurries out.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Rod sits on the bed and looks at the Gazette, impressed.

ROD
A poem...printed and all?

Tony nods, shyly.

ROD
Your name, too...?

TONY
I used my initials: T.G.

ROD
Why is that?

TONY
(embarrassed)
Hmmm...I don't know.
(beat)
It's about what happened with
you truckers the other day.

Rod shifts uncomfortably, and looks at the paper.

TONY
Not there...
up here in the Kid's Corner.

Rod shifts his eyes to the corner, stares at the paper, then too quickly says:

ROD
Well, I'll be...Ain't that somethin'.
(beat)
Where'd you learn to write like that?

TONY
I don't know. It just rolls out, like when I play my harmonica.
(beat)
Can you keep a secret?

Rod nods.

TONY
Some day I'd like...when I grow up I mean... to be one of those country singers, like at the Grand Ol' Opry.

ROD
Is that so...?

Tony nods, shyly.

TONY
Only I don't know how to play the guitar, yet.

Rod looks at him fondly, touched by the boy's big dreams.

ROD
Tell you what, Cowboy. I'm not much of a writer myself, but I can pick a tune on the guitar.

TONY
(impressed)
You can...!

ROD
(nods)
I bet if we put a note to every one of those words in your poem, we'd have us a song you could sing.

Tony is excited, then crestfallen says:

TONY
But what's the use, I don't have a guitar.

ROD
I still have my old one,
somewhere around.

TONY
(ecstatic)
You do?
(beat)
Would you bring it along,
next time?

ROD
Alright. We'll give it a shot.

TONY
Wow!

They high five. Rod gets up.

ROD
Gotta go, now. I'm running late.

He heads for the door. Tony follows.

TONY
Could I fix you something to eat?

ROD
Thanks, but I ate at the Big Rig
Cafe before coming over, in spite
of this waitress. A real bit....
sorry, witch on wheels.

Tony thinks it over as Rod walks out.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD GROCERY STORE - DAY

Gail exits the store with a bag of groceries in her arms and starts down the street. She hums to herself.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Rod stands on the porch next to Tony who holds the puppy on the leash. Tony looks admiringly at Rod's truck.

TONY
What year is your rig?

ROD
'77. Twenty years on the road.

TONY
Wow...and still going?

ROD

...and going. These 400 horses
can pull 75,000 pounds. I
wouldn't give it up for a new
one.

He pets the puppy.

ROD

Take good care of him, Tony.

TONY

I will, Trucker. Remember your
promise.

Rod smiles and raises his thumb, then hurries to his truck, still
running. He climbs in.

The boy waves, as the truck drives off down the street. The puppy
barks and whines, then looks at Tony and wags his tail. Tony
looks down at him, thoughtfully, and pats his head.

TONY

It's okay, Pal. He'll be back.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Gail walks to the house, drags the empty trash can by the street
to the steps next to the back door. She walks up the steps and
enters the kitchen.

INT. GRAHAM KITCHEN - DAY

Gail kicks off her shoes as she enters, sets the groceries by the
refrigerator, unloads them.

GAIL

(cheerfully)

Tony!

In response, the muffled SOUND of a puppy's bark comes from Tony's
room, and then a mysterious silence.

She looks at the empty doorway, puzzled, then walks out.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

As she enters, he's at his desk, busy writing. He raises his head
and looks at her innocently.

TONY

Hi, Mom.

GAIL

Why didn't you answer me?

TONY
I...uh...was busy.

The sound of scratching and whining comes from the closet. Tony looks away, while she walks over and opens it.

The puppy, tail wagging, springs out and runs over to Tony, who tries to ignore him. Gail looks at Tony.

TONY
What?

GAIL
What!
(incredulous)
What's that?

TONY
(matter-of-factly)
Oh...that's Homer, one of those
Truckers stopped by again and
gave him to me.

GAIL
He did, did he? And just who
does he think is going to
feed him?

Tony, controlled excitement, reaches for the envelope Rod gave him and hands it to her.

TONY
Here, he said the drivers
chipped in for his expenses.

She opens the envelope, sees the money inside.

TONY
(excited)
Lou will help me look after him.
We'll take him for walks and stuff.

She's not convinced. He looks for a distraction.

TONY
By the way, Mom, read this.

He thrusts the newspaper at her.

TONY
In the "Kid's Corner."

She reads his poem. A smile gradually spreads across her face. She gives him a big hug.

GAIL
Oh...that's wonderful, Tony!
(beat)
I'll send a copy to Grandma.

She heads for the door, the puppy follows her. She stops, the puppy licks her feet. She picks him up.

GAIL
Did Homer eat anything?

Tony shrugs.

GAIL
Well, guess we can scrounge
something up for him.
(beat)
Finish up, Tony, supper will be
ready soon.

She exits.

Tony joyously pumps his fist in the air.

He thinks a moment, then picks up his pencil and jots something down on his paper.

EXT. HIGHWAY, SOMEWHERE IN KENTUCKY - DAY

It is a crisp fall morning, colorful autumn trees line the highway. Rod's truck speeds along in the fast lane.

A Motorcycle OFFICER follows him, his lights flashing and siren BLARING. Rod pulls his truck to the side of the road. The officer pulls in behind him, gets off and approaches the truck. Rod stays put.

OFFICER
Good morning, sir.

ROD
It was, until a minute ago.

OFFICER
Your license and papers please.

Rod hands him the papers and the Officer examines them carefully.

ROD
Could we hurry this up, Officer?
I have to be in Columbus in two
hours.

OFFICER
That's just the problem.

ROD
C'mon, I swear I wasn't going a mile over 65.

OFFICER
You better check your speedometer, then. My radar gun showed 75 plus.

The officer reads through the papers.

OFFICER
Hmm, I see your insurance expired a few days ago.

ROD
What? Oh, no!
(sighs)
When you're alone in this cruel world those damn dates can sneak up on you.

OFFICER
A citation has a way of joggin' the memory, real good.

The Officer opens his book and begins to write. Rod exhales in disgust, stares at the gray sky, impatient and frustrated.

EXT. JACKSON ST. - DAY

Tony and Lou play catch with a baseball on the sidewalk. Lou misses the catch and the ball rolls down the street.

TONY
Get it, Homer!

The puppy, who's grown bigger, chases the ball and brings it back.

Tony, in spite of being in a wheelchair, catches and throws well.

MRS. BEVERLY JOHNSON, Lou's mother, a heavy-set black woman, an apron around her waist appears on a neighboring porch in the b.g.

MRS. JOHNSON
Come on, Lou, the bus is here.

A yellow school bus approaches and comes to a stop nearby.

LOU
Tony isn't going to school, why
should I go?

MRS. JOHNSON
You know why, Louise Ann Johnson.
Now get along, on the double.

Upset, Lou throws the ball over to Tony, and runs toward her house. Her mother gives Lou her school bag and she hurries to board the bus.

Tony remains on the sidewalk, Homer at his side. He watches pensively as the bus drives away. The kids peer back at him.

Just as Mrs. Johnson starts over to him from her house, Tony suddenly swings his chair around and takes off in the opposite direction.

His arms spin the wheels faster and faster as he wildly flies down the street. He smiles, enjoying the speed and freedom. The Mailman jumps out of his way, then another pedestrian.

Mrs. Johnson chases after him, calling, waving her arms in the air. He races on as though caught up in some desperate struggle. He approaches a dangerous intersection. The light turns to red. He has no intention of stopping.

Mrs. Johnson calls frantically. He is about to plunge into the street when a Passerby grabs his chair and stops it. Tony looks up at him, his smile vanishes.

A breathless Mrs. Johnson catches up, nods her thanks to the man, then turns to Tony who is soaked in sweat and gasping for breath.

MRS. JOHNSON
What in the world got into you,
boy? You could've gotten
yourself hurt.

TONY
Aw...there wasn't anything coming.
(smiles)
I could've made it, easy.

She turns his wheelchair around.

MRS. JOHNSON
Well, don't you ever pull a stunt
like that on me again. You hear?

He nods.

MRS. JOHNSON
Your momma is hoppin' mad at me
already, for letting you get
tangled up with them truckers.
Wait til she hears about this!

TONY
It's no big deal.

MRS. JOHNSON
It is to me, I've got strict
rules now.

She pushes him toward home.

TONY
With a little oil on my wheels,
I coulda hit 20 miles an hour.

She pulls his ear half-jokingly.

INT. MADISON SECONDARY SCHOOL, CONFERENCE ROOM, - DAY

Several BOARD MEMBERS line one side of the table. The Principal, MRS. EAGANS, well-dressed, 40ish, sits unsmiling at the head. There is one empty chair.

Gail, dressed in her uniform, sits before them.

GAIL
...they'd leave assignments
and he wouldn't--

JOHN MORRIS, 36, steps into the room and interrupts her. He is tall and handsome, dressed in a suit and tie, slightly harried. He carries a folder and some papers under his arm.

JOHN
Sorry. The Mayor called at
the last minute.

PRINCIPAL
We understand, John, just have
a seat. Please continue Mrs.
Graham.

John takes the empty seat.

Gail, not exactly in her element here, clears her throat.

GAIL
As I was saying, the tutors just
didn't work out for Tony. He
needs structure. He needs
(MORE)

GAIL (CONT'D)
discipline and to be with other
children. He must be in school!

PRINCIPAL
Can he use crutches at all?

GAIL
No. He's a double paraplegic.
He'll never walk.

Silence.

PRINCIPAL
As you know, we have no handicapped
facilities at Madison, Mrs. Graham.

GAIL
But you told me those facilities
would be installed months ago.
(beat)
That's the law, isn't it?

An awkward moment, as the board members exchange glances. MR. POPEJOY, heavy and bald, takes his glasses off and cleans them with his handkerchief.

MR. POPEJOY
Yes, of course, and we're aware
of the law, Mrs. Graham. The
welfare of our children is of
paramount importance to us.
However, budgeting school funds--

JOHN
(interrupts)
Excuse me, Mr. Popejoy. Are we
talking about Tony Graham, here?
(to Gail)
Are you Tony's mother?

Gail nods, suspiciously.

JOHN
Well now, this young boy shows
quite a talent for writing. If
he's not in school, we better get
him there, one way or another.
It's our duty as school board
members.

Quiet prevails. He gets some nasty looks from Mrs. Eagans and Mr. Popejoy, who were caught off guard by his remarks.

Gail smiles her gratitude. John smiles back.

EXT. MADISON SECONDARY SCHOOL - DAY

Gail hurries down the steps and toward the gate. John rushes to catch up to her.

JOHN
Excuse me, Mrs. Graham, a moment please.

She stops and turns around.

GAIL
Yes?

JOHN
I'm John Morris, editor of the Springfield Gazette.

GAIL
Oh, yes. Thank you very much. I couldn't have convinced them on my own.

JOHN
Don't mention it, it's the right thing to do. Do you think we could talk more about Tony's future?

Gail hesitates.

JOHN
Perhaps we can grab a bite somewhere, a cup of coffee maybe?

GAIL
I'm already late for work.

JOHN
You must get a lunch break.

GAIL
Yes, at two. I work at the Big Rig Cafe.

JOHN
Excellent, I'll meet you there. At two then, Mrs....

GAIL
Please call me Gail. I'll see you then. Goodbye.

She turns to go.

JOHN
Goodbye, Gail.

He stands there a moment longer, watches her approvingly, as she walks toward the bus stop.

INT. GRAHAM BATHROOM - DAY

Tony, still damp from a shower, sits partially dressed before the dresser mirror. He combs his wet hair, a towel around his neck, sings a popular country song.

Mrs. Johnson pokes her head into the room.

MRS. JOHNSON
Hey, "Billy Ray," your lunch is
in the fridge.

TONY
Billy Ray? He's nowhere.

MRS. JOHNSON
Garth then. Anything else I
can get you before I go?

TONY
Now you're talkin', Mrs. J!
Would you see if the Gazette
has come yet.

MRS. JOHNSON
I'll have a look.

She exits.

Tony resumes his singing before the mirror.

INT. BIG RIG CAFE - AFTERNOON

Rod enters and sits at the counter. He picks up a menu, studies it, then looks around.

His eyes lock on Gail as she sits opposite John at the corner table.

ANGLE ON:

Gail and John, as he hands her the "Gazette."

JOHN

This is his second poem. I placed it in the "About Town" section this time, with a few words about him.

Gail, surprised, looks up from the paper.

GAIL

I don't know what to say, really. All of this is so out of the blue.

JOHN

It's a great human interest angle. He's got potential, Gail. It would be a pity to waste it.

GAIL

What do you mean by that?

JOHN

I mean, encourage him to keep writing. In fact, I'm willing to pay him something for future work.

Gail looks at him amazed, and speechless.

ANGLE ON:

Rod at the counter. A hard-looking waitress, IDA MAE, 40, stops in front of him.

IDA MAE

Are you ready to order, sir...?

ROD

Uh, give me a minute.

He looks over to where Gail sits.

IDA MAE

Will coffee help you decide?

ROD

Yeah.

She pours him a cup of coffee, and moves on to other customers. Rod's eyes stay fixed on Gail and John.

ANGLE ON

Gail and John as they stand and shake hands.

GAIL
Thanks for everything.

JOHN
My pleasure. We'll keep in touch.

GAIL
Fine. Goodbye.

He heads for the exit. She resumes her waitressing duties.

Rod motions Gail over to him.

ROD
So, Gail, I see you're into recommending today.

He nods toward the door as John leaves.

GAIL
Oh, that was personal business.

ROD
Just how can someone get in on that personal level?

She gives him a second look, recognizes him.

GAIL
My business with truck drivers is limited to the "Blue Plate Special."

ROD
Who says I'm a truck driver?

GAIL
I smelled diesel number 5 the minute you walked in. Call me when you're ready to order.

She walks off. He sighs in frustration and drinks his coffee.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Tony smiles as reads the Gazette spread out on the desk before him. He takes the scissors and cuts out the article.

EXT. JACKSON ST. - DAY

Rod's truck pulls up in front of the Graham's house. He releases the air brakes with a great SWOOSH and turns off the engine. He climbs down, a guitar is slung over his shoulder.

Homer greets him in the yard and follows him to the house. Tony watches from the window of his room.

TONY
(calling)
Come on in, Trucker. The door's open.

Rod waves his hand and enters the house, Homer follows.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Rod enters, removes the guitar and hands it to Tony, whose eyes are wide with excitement.

TONY
You didn't forget, did ya?

ROD
No way would I forget, Cowboy.

Tony takes the guitar in his hands as though caressing the Holy Grail.

Rod pats Homer, who looks healthy and well fed.

ROD
Our friend here is doing all right, I can see. No problems with your Mom?

TONY
(shakes his head)
Piece of cake.
(beat)
Can I strum it?

ROD
That's why I brought it.

Rod tosses his hat in the chair and sits down on the edge of the bed, as Tony timidly strums the guitar.

TONY
You bring me luck, you know.

ROD
How's that?

Tony reaches over and hands Rod the article.

TONY
Look, my second poem. About the puppy you gave me.

Rod holds the article, looks at it for a moment, as though reading, then looks squarely at Tony.

ROD
(ill at ease)
Tony, I have a confession to make...something that's not so easy to say straight out.

TONY
What is it?
(beat)
You can tell me, 'cause I'm your buddy.

ROD
(smiles)
Right.
(beat)
Well, I'll be honest with you, I pretended to read your poem that day. Truth is...I can't read.

He hands the article back to Tony, who's very surprised.

TONY
How come?
ROD
It's a long story. I had to help tend crops, bring in the harvest, when everybody else was in school.
(beat)
Then I got booted out on my own kinda early and never did get back to school.

TONY
How can you read maps and stuff?

ROD
I know this country like the back of my hand, I don't need maps much. I fudge a lot and have a bag full of tricks.

Tony thinks about it a moment, then...

TONY
I can teach you how to read, if you like.

Rod smiles and ruffles Tony's hair.

TONY
Seriously, I will. And you
can teach me how to play the
guitar. What do you say?

ROD
(hesitates)
I don't know. I'm always
on the road somewhere.
(beat)
What about your mom, anyhow?

TONY
She's cool, I'll take care of
her. Let's shake on it.

Tony extends his hand. Rod hesitates again, but cannot resist the boy's beaming face. They shake hands.

EXT. JACKSON ST. - DAY

Gail walks home from the bus stop. She stops with a start, and stares at the truck standing in front of her house. She bites her lip.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)
I'd do anything for you, Babe,
but I can't give up my truck.
(beat)
Don't worry so much, you know
I drive carefully. This storm
is nothing, I've seen worse.

Gail shakes the memories from her head and walks purposefully to the house.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Rod sits on the chair, holding the guitar. Tony sits in his wheelchair, looking over his shoulder.

ROD
Now, watch my fingers carefully.
Press hard just above the fret.

Rod plays slowly, and sings:

ROD
How many roads must a man walk down,
Before you call him a man;
How many seas must a white dog sail,
Before she sleeps in the sand;
The answer my friend, is--

The door bursts open and Gail appears.

The room falls silent. Everyone eyes each other. Tony sees a flash of recognition cross their faces.

ROD
That's your mother?

GAIL
(furious)
Yes, I'm his mother. And just who the hell are you?

A flustered Rod stands up, puts his hat on, then awkwardly removes it again.

ROD
(politely)
We've never been formally introduced, Gail...ma'am.
I'm Roderick McCall. My friends call me Rod.

He extends his hand. She ignores it.

GAIL
So, Mr. McCall, just what are you doing in my house?

ROD
I didn't know this was your house...Tony and I....we--

GAIL
(controlling anger)
Well, now that we've formally met, you can get out and take that red beast parked at the curb with you!

Rod looks at Tony. Picks up his guitar.

TONY
(calmly)
Rod's my buddy, Mom. I invited him to supper.

GAIL
You what?

Tony shrugs. Rod hides a smile, looks at Gail, who's about to explode. But she gets hold of herself.

GAIL
(controlled)
Tony, we aren't prepared for guests
right now! You should have checked
with me first.

TONY
That's all right, Mom, Rod's used
to lousy food. Anything'll do.

Rod waits expectantly. Tony stares at her. She has no recourse.

GAIL
Very well. In half an hour, sharp!

She turns abruptly and slams the door.

Rod strums a closing cord on his guitar, as he looks at Tony.

TONY
(smiles mischievously)
Is that the "...witch on wheels"
you met at the cafe?

ROD
(nods)
Alive and kicking!

INT. KITCHEN, DINNING ROOM - NIGHT

The three of them are seated at the table in the small, open
kitchen/dining room area.

Rod stares at a plate loaded with meat and potatoes and an extra
large portion of spinach. He bravely dives into it.

TONY
(sighs)
What's with the spinach, Mom,
you know I hate it.

GAIL
(sarcastically)
Really? It's good for you,
eat it up.

Tony groans, but tries it anyhow. Homer sits at his side, waiting
for scraps.

GAIL
I guess we have Mr. McCall here,
to thank for your four-legged
friend.

TONY

Yeah, and he's gonna teach me
to play the guitar, too.

GAIL

Is that so?...

ROD

Of course, with your permission,
ma'am.

They level a look at each other. Tony pushes himself away from
the table.

TONY

In fact, Mom, I'm not even
hungry. I want to start
practicing right now. Can
I be excused?

She looks at his half-full plate, then at him.

GAIL

All right. But only because
Mr. McCall is leaving soon.

She and Rod watch him wheel himself away. Rod picks at his
spinach.

ROD

A fine meal, ma'am. Much
better than the "Blue Plate
Special."

She studies him now with quiet contempt and anger building.

GAIL

You know, I've had men hit on
me before, but they never went
to these disgusting lengths.
Befriending my son to get to
me is contemptible.

ROD

Now, wait a minute, you got it
all wrong. I didn't know you
were Tony's Mom. How could I?

GAIL

You expect me to believe this
is all a coincidence?

ROD
(offended)

Of course it is. I was one of
the drivers who stopped by to
give him a ride, a few weeks
ago. In fact, I answered his
call on the CB.

(beat)

We hit it off. He seemed to need
a friend.

They look at each other straight in the eye for a moment, then she gets up and starts clearing the table. He gets up and helps.

ROD

You got a mighty fine boy there.
It can't be easy raising him alone.

She doesn't respond. Rod forces conversation.

ROD

He takes to music like a duck
to water.

GAIL

How long have you been on the
road, Mr. McCall?

ROD

Logged enough miles to drive
to the moon and back.

GAIL

(not impressed)
Very impressive. You like
driving?

ROD

Reckon so. The road is honest,
shows no hate. You just head
on down it 'til you get there.

She turns toward him, and studies him while drying her hands on a towel.

ROD

Why do I have the feeling that
you got something against truckers?

GAIL

I spent 14 years married to one.
I decided to steer clear of them
from here on out.

ROD
(dejectedly)
I see.
(beat)
I really did impose on you,
I'm sorry.

He heads for the door, stops, turns.

ROD
Thanks again for your hospitality..

She watches him go.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DUSK

Tony stops strumming as Rod enters the room.

TONY
How'd things go?

ROD
Fine. Just fine.

TONY
I guess you have to leave,
huh?

Rod nods, puts on his hat. Tony hands him the guitar.

TONY
When's my next lesson?

ROD
(after a beat)
I don't know. You better talk
it over with your mom.

TONY
Okay. But no matter what,
Trucker, we got a deal. Remember...?

ROD
It's fine with me, buddy.

He lightly punches his shoulder, then exits. Tony wheels himself to the window.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - NIGHT

Gail opens the front door, and Rod steps out onto the porch, his guitar over his shoulder. She has a drink in her hand.

ROD
If there is anything I can
do to help Tony, please let
me know.

He watches her take a swallow of her drink.

GAIL
I will, Mr. McCall.

He tips his hat.

ROD
So long then, Mrs. Graham.

He walks to his truck, climbs in and starts the engine.

Gail leans against the doorjamb, glass in hand. Tony sits by his window. Both watch Rod drive away.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Tony is still by the window when Gail enters. He draws his harmonica out and starts playing.

She steps closer, sets her almost empty glass down hard on his desk.

GAIL
Put that thing down, Anthony
Graham, I want to talk to you.

He keeps playing faster and louder. She swings his wheelchair around, to face her.

GAIL
Do you hear me...?

He puts the harmonica down.

GAIL
How dare you invite a stranger
into our house without asking
me first?
(beat)
I work all day long waiting on
people. I sure as hell don't
want to come home at night and
cook dinner for some lonesome
trucker!

He looks her straight in the eye.

TONY
You call that cooking...?
(beat)
You don't cook, you just drink
this stuff all the time.

He sweeps his arm across the desk, knocking her glass to the floor. It BREAKS into pieces.

She raises her hand to hit him, but he looks defiantly at her. Slowly, she lets her hand drop.

TONY
Rod is my buddy. He was my guest, and you treated him like...like dirt.

Gail is taken aback by his words and depth of emotion.

TONY
He's helping me. I'm learning the guitar from him.

GAIL
You need to learn all right, young man, but not the guitar and not from him. You're going back to school whether you like it or not!

TONY
(shouts)
I won't go. You can't make me!

GAIL
(firmly)
I can, and I will!

She kneels down and picks up the pieces of the glass. He watches her as he contemplates her words. She cuts herself on the glass and sucks the blood away, then starts for the door.

TONY
Wait, Mom.

She stops and looks back at him.

TONY
(emotionally)
I'll go back to school, but please...let him teach me the guitar.

She stands motionless for a moment, looking at him, then exits.

He sits motionless for a long moment, then turns himself back to the window. He looks out at a single star in the sky.

EXT. AN OHIO HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Rod's big rig passes through a small town. Lights go out as the town beds down for the night.

He drives out of town, onto a long, lonely stretch of highway.

INT. ROD'S CAB - NIGHT

Soulful country music drifts from the radio, as the dashboard illuminates the cab and Rod's thoughtful face. He tries to shake off his drowsiness, reaches for his thermos of coffee, shakes it, finds it's empty.

EXT. HIGHWAY, OHIO - NIGHT

The highway is deserted. Rod pulls his rig over onto the shoulder. He stops and climbs out, leaving the engine running.

He walks along the road a piece, then out into the field. He climbs up a small rise and looks up into the dark sky. One star shines brighter than the others. He takes a deep breath, overwhelmed by the glorious sight.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. JACKSON STREET, GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

The morning skies are overcast. Tony sits in his wheelchair on the sidewalk, dressed warmly. His breath is frosty in the cold morning air. He anxiously looks up the empty street.

Gail steps out, pulling on a heavy sweater over her uniform. She hands Tony a brand new school bag and a lunch box.

GAIL

There you are, Tony. You're all set and ready to go.

TONY

I'm ready, but no one's coming. It's cold sitting out here, I'm freezing.

Gail looks at the cloudy skies.

GAIL

I'll get the umbrella.

Tony watches her walk back to the house, then looks up the empty street. Nervously, his hands grasp the wheels of his chair as his face fills with worry.

He edges his wheels forward, then moves faster down the sidewalk.

Gail exits the house with Tony's jacket just as the van pulls into the driveway. The driver, MR. KIRBY, black, 50, waves to her.

GAIL
Good morning, Mr. Kirby.

KIRBY
Ma'am.

She looks around, Tony is gone.

GAIL
Oh no.
(beat)
Would you mind driving on down
the street.

She climbs into the van with Kirby.

They drive along the street and come abreast of Tony, wheeling fast, blowing steam into the cold air. Kirby pulls into a driveway cutting him off. Tony screeches to a stop.

Kirby and Gail climb out. She glares at him

TONY
What? Just out for my morning
jog.

Kirby and Gail exchange a look.

He opens the side door and a hydraulic ramp unfolds. Tony watches with dread.

EXT. MADISON SECONDARY SCHOOL - DAY

A light rain begins to fall. Noisy clusters of kids hurry to school. They're laughing, running and tagging one another, as late comers converge on the school.

The van comes to a stop at the front gate.

Mr. Kirby exits, slides open the side door. The ramp glides to the ground with Tony aboard.

The kids freeze in place and stare at the newcomer. Among them are JAY and CHRIS, both 12, and a group of rowdy boys, who look over at Tony and talk among themselves, then burst into laughter.

Tony looks at Gail, his eyes searching for a way out. Gail lays her hand on his shoulder, reassuringly.

GAIL
It's all right, Tony.

MR. KIRBY
You'll do fine, son. I'll see you at three o'clock.

He drives off as Lou suddenly runs toward them, happy to see Tony.

LOU
Hi T.G. I know where the new ramp is. Let me take you to your first class.

TONY
(relieved)
Okay, if you want to.

She positions herself behind him, looks up at Gail.

GAIL
Thank you, Lou, I'll follow. There are some registration forms I still need to sign.

JOHN (O.S.)
Everything has been taken care of, you needn't bother. You go on ahead, Tony.

Tony looks back solemnly at John, who stops beside Gail, holding an umbrella over her.

GAIL
Are you sure, John? No more paper work?

JOHN
Positive.

Gail worriedly watches Lou leads Tony away.

JOHN
He'll be fine, don't worry.

She looks at him, not yet convinced.

JOHN
May I drive you to work.

GAIL
Why, yes, thank you.

They turn and walk toward his car, huddled together under the umbrella.

EXT. INTERSTATE 35, TEXAS - DAY

Traffic is heavy, a sign announces TRUCK SCALE AHEAD. Rod's big rig comes into view driving fast. It slows suddenly, maneuvers into the slow lane, hangs a quick right down the off-ramp.

INT. ROD'S CAB - DAY

He shifts gears, concentrating on the difficult turn. It's a bumpy ride. He wipes the sweat off his face with his arm.

EXT. INTERSTATE 35, TEXAS - DAY

Rod's truck comes out of the barren desert, on an almost invisible frontage road, raising dust and stacks of black smoke. He merges back onto the Interstate. The truck scale is now behind him.

EXT. BIG RIG CAFE, SPRINGFIELD - DAY

John's car drives into the restaurant's parking lot. It's raining harder now. He parks the car.

INT. JOHN'S CAR - DAY

Gail lays her hand on the door handle.

GAIL
I really don't know how to thank you, John, for everything you've done for us.

JOHN
Join me for dinner tonight,
that's how.

GAIL
I can't leave Tony at night.

JOHN
A quick drink then, after work.

Her eyes move from the rain drops on the windshield to him. She studies him a moment.

JOHN
Then I'll drive you home, I promise.

GAIL
All right, one drink. I get off
at four.

She opens the door and gets out.

He watches her through the windshield, as she walks toward the restaurant. She doesn't rush, in spite of the rain.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

The math TEACHER, 40ish, wears glasses, writes figures and a formula on the board.

TEACHER
Well, class, any idea how this formula works?

No one raises a hand. Tony sits in the front row by a window and looks out, daydreams.

TEACHER (O.S.)
Tony, no one will find the answer to this equation looking out the window.

Tony looks back at the teacher. He is irritated.

TONY
Or on the board, either.

Muffled laughter comes from the boys at the back.

TEACHER
(sternly)
Then perhaps we should begin again with everyone's full attention.

He turns back to the board, erases the equation. One of the boys at the back floats a paper airplane toward Tony. It misses him but lands near the blackboard, almost hitting the teacher.

The teacher, glasses down on his nose, turns around angrily and looks at the class.

TEACHER
Who did that...?

CHRIS
(points to Tony)
He did.

Teacher looks at Tony, then back at Chris. Tony remains silent.

INT. UNION 76 TRUCK STOP - DAY

Rod stares at the the electronic broker boards. Other truckers mill about studying the bank of gray-screened monitors. He turns to a TRUCKER who wears a baseball cap that says, DONT' MESS WITH TEXAS.

ROD
Ah...damn, I forgot my glasses.
Can you read Tuesday's list
to me?

TRUCKER
Sure man.

He scans the lists of cargo to be shipped as they scroll down the screen.

TRUCKER
23,000 lbs of paper products
at a \$1.10 per mile, minus fuel,
leaves Tuesday at 6AM for New
Orleans.
(beat)
42 pallets of dog food out of
the stock yards at 7AM on Tuesday
to Atlanta for \$35 grand.

Rod looks at him, then at the screen.

TRUCKER
...A load of Christmas trees
from Colorado... 30,000 pounds
of coffee, three stops in Ohio--

ROD
What's that code number?

TRUCKER
CRS-887-4356

Rod jots it down.

ROD
Thanks buddy.

The Trucker nods, as Rod quickly moves to one of the many tables, sits down and picks up the phone.

INT. COCKTAIL LOUNGE, SPRINGFIELD - DAY

Gail and John are seated at a table in a corner. They raise wine glasses, clink them and drink. He leans over to tell her something. She laughs.

INT. UNION 76 TRUCK STOP - DAY

Chuck, coffee cup in hand, moves to Rod's table and sits across from him. Rod slams the receiver down.

ROD

Damn. I just missed that load of coffee. I'm always too late.

CHUCK

Well, I hate to tell ya, buddy, but if you had the communication equipment we have in our trucks, you would've had that load two days ago.

ROD

You big outfits don't make it easy for us independents.

Chuck takes a sip of coffee, becomes thoughtful.

CHUCK

But at least you're in charge of your own destiny, and that counts for something. I sure ain't looking forward to being on the road another Christmas Eve.

Chuck lights a cigarette, and offers one to Rod. He declines.

CHUCK

How's the puppy doing, by the way?

ROD

He's a dog now and he's havin' a ball. I gave it to Tony, my young friend.

Rod reaches in his shirt pocket, and takes out a piece of paper.

ROD

Which reminds me.

He punches a number and waits a minute.

ROD

(into phone)

Hi, Cowboy, it's Rod here... How was your first day at school?... The longest day of your life?

ROD
(laughs)
You'll survive, don't worry...
I'm not sure...I'm scheduled
right up to the holidays...
Wait a minute, Christmas Eve...?
You sure...? With your mother's
permission?
(beat)
Well, I'd like that, Tony, I'll
see what I can do... Take care.

He hangs up. A smile creeps across his face.

ROD
(to Chuck)
Gee, I wonder if that load of
Christmas trees in Colorado,
is taken yet?

Rod punches the number.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

It is late in the afternoon. The footlocker is open, the wood angles and tools as seen earlier, lay on Tony's desk as he fits a wooden brace between the two angles and nails them together.

He hears a car PULL UP, rolls to the window and looks out.

TONY'S POV:

John's car is parked in front of the house. Inside, John and Gail talk.

INT. THE CAR - DAY

John leans closer to her. His arm rests on the back of her seat.

JOHN
Think about it, it's better
than being a waitress.

GAIL
As a matter of fact, I've just
signed up for a computer class
at the library.

JOHN
That's terrific. I might be
able to find you a job at the
paper when you finish.

GAIL
Are you serious?

He nods, gets even closer to her.

JOHN
We're always on the lookout
for bright, attractive people.

GAIL
That would be wonderful, John.

He toys with her hair.

GAIL
I really should go in now.
Thanks again for the drinks.

JOHN
Don't mention it. The pleasure
was all mine.

Their eyes hold for a moment longer, she puts her hand on the door handle.

EXT. TONY'S WINDOW - DAY

He doesn't like what he sees. He pushes himself abruptly away from the window.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Tony rolls into the living room, just as Gail enters the house.

TONY
Hi Mom. Kind of late for you.

GAIL
I called, didn't I?

He nods. She kicks her shoes off, throws her handbag down.

GAIL
How was school?

TONY
All right, I guess.

GAIL
Just all right. Was the work
hard for you?

TONY
Not really.

GAIL
You'll catch up, I'm sure.
Any homework?

TONY
All done.

GAIL
Good boy, let's eat then.

She walks to the kitchen. He follows her.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

She opens the refrigerator, looks over her options.

GAIL
I feel like cooking something
real special, this evening.

TONY
Why?

GAIL
Well...this is your first
day at school, isn't it?
That calls for a celebration.

He thinks it over, as she takes out some meat.

TONY
Speaking of celebrations,
Mom, this year you don't even
have to worry about a tree.

GAIL
Tree, what tree...?

TONY
A Christmas tree.

A moment. She stops what she's doing and looks at him.

GAIL
I don't know, Tony. I'm not
sure I'm ready to celebrate
Christmas this year.

TONY
But Mom, we didn't celebrate
it last year.

GAIL

So, what makes this year any different?

TONY

I'm different. I'm going to school now, and I want to have Christmas like everybody else.

She thinks about it for a moment.

GAIL

Well...we'll see.

(beat)

There is someone I would like to invite over, as a matter of fact.

TONY

That's okay, but I already invited my trucker friend, Rod.

She looks at him -- dumbfounded.

GAIL

You did what...?

TONY

I invited Mr. McCall. He's going to bring the biggest tree ever.

She's ready to explode, but composes herself.

GAIL

Celebrating Christmas is one thing, but having that cowboy is something else, I--

TONY

He's going to bring his guitar with him, too, and give me another lesson. That was our agreement about going back to school, remember...?

She's seething with frustration, but realizes that there's no way out. She tosses the meat back in the refrigerator.

TONY

Don't worry, Mom, I'm not hungry anyhow.

He wheels himself away.

She automatically opens the kitchen cabinet, takes out a glass and reaches for a bottle of bourbon. Just as she's about to pour she hesitates momentarily, thinks better of it and puts the bottle back in the cabinet.

A SERIES OF SHOTS:

Rod's truck parked at a snowy Rocky Mountain lumber camp. His cowboy hat is pulled down on his head and the collar of his fleece-lined, buckskin jacket is turned up against the cold morning air. Western music plays in the b.g. while lumberjacks load Christmas trees onto his truck.

Tony and Lou sit alone as they eat lunch in the school cafeteria. Tony watches a group of boys he longs to be a part of decorating the room for the holidays.

The Big Rig Cafe is decorated for the holidays. Gail waits table in the background while Ida flashes her battery-operated Christmas earrings at customers.

EXT. MAIN ST., SPRINGFIELD - NIGHT

The center of town is decorated for Christmas, music flows from the crowded shops.

We zero in on Gail among the crowd, as something catches her eye in one of the shop windows. She enters the shop.

INT. LOCAL SHOP - NIGHT

Gail walks over to the sport section, searches through a stack of team sweat shirts.

EXT. MAIN ST. - NIGHT

Gail exits the shop with a bag under her arm, and looks around.

GAIL'S POV:

Across the street at a Christmas tree lot, John carries a tree from the lot towards his car.

ANGLE ON GAIL:

She starts to raise her hand to wave to him, but stops suddenly. Her mouth falls open.

GAIL'S POV:

A Woman and two little Kids follow John to the car. They get inside, while he ties the tree onto the car.

ANGLE GAIL:

She hurries away, angry and humiliated.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Tony looks fondly at a worn-out teddy bear he holds in his hands. He wraps it in Christmas paper.

The SOUND of a truck coming to a stop distracts him, and he quickly rolls himself to the window.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Rod parks his big rig in front of the house, then turns off the engine and climbs down. He opens the trailer and pulls out a large Christmas tree, and a bunch of mistletoe.

INT. THE HOUSE - DAY

Tony rolls himself into the hallway, Homer, full grown, follows him.

TONY
Rod's here, Mom, come on!

He wheels himself to the door.

Gail comes from the kitchen, unconsciously removes her apron.

GAIL
(muttering to herself)
Oh well, let's make the best
of it.

She stops in the doorway next to Tony, as Rod steps onto the porch, the tree over his shoulder and the mistletoe under his arm. He's dressed in his western best, string tie and boots polished. He smiles at Tony but addresses Gail.

ROD
Merry Christmas, everybody.
Where do you want this?

She looks him over, approvingly.

GAIL
Wherever you can squeeze it in.

She steps aside for him to pass.

TONY
(enthusiastically)
Wow, Trucker, that's the
biggest tree I've ever seen.

ROD
Direct from the Rockies,
Tony boy, especially for you.

He manages to squeeze it through the doorway, and steps in.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Rod looks for the best place for the tree.

TONY
By the window. Then everyone
can see it.

ROD
You got it.

He puts it down by the window, positions and secures it. He hangs the mistletoe in the entrance to the dining room.

Gail moves to the sideboard, pours him a glass of hot cider and holds it out to him.

GAIL
Here, to put you in the
Christmas spirit.

ROD
(takes it)
Thanks. I've got plenty of
that this year.

She eyes him again, then Tony.

GAIL
Now, you two stay clear
of my kitchen until six
o'clock.

TONY
Okay, Mom.

She exits.

TONY
(anxiously)
Where's your guitar?

ROD
In my cab.

Tony's face falls. Rod sips the cider, then lays a hand on Tony's shoulder and leans toward him.

ROD
Don't worry, you'll get your lesson...when I get mine.

TONY
Yours?

ROD
(quietly)
Remember our deal...?

TONY
(nods)
Oh, right. Let's go to my room. We'll decorate the tree later.

He leads the way.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

As they enter, Tony looks about the room, searching for something. Rod fingers the rim of his hat, uncomfortable.

ROD
Tony...don't forget, this is just between you and me.
Right?

TONY
Don't worry. I won't tell Mom about it.

Rod relaxes, as Tony rummages through a box he pulls from a closet.

TONY
I still have some of my old phonics flash cards. Once you know the basic sounds we can put words together.

ROD
Like music and notes?

TONY
Yeah, just like that.

Rod ponders that thought, smiles, as Tony organizes the cards.

TONY
Every word has a vowel in it.
(holds them up)
A, E, I, O, U and sometimes...

A baseball card has gotten mixed in.

ROD
The White Sox?

They laugh.

INT. KITCHEN, DINING ROOM - DAY

Gail sets a Poinsettia on the table and places candles at each side. She steps back to view the effect. She's pleased.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Tony pulls a tie out of the bureau drawer and turns to Rod.

TONY
Do you know how to tie this?

ROD
Well, I wore one of these a
time or two. I think I can
manage.

He stands behind Tony, as they both look into the mirror. Rod turns up the collar on Tony's white shirt, puts the tie around his neck and begins the process.

ROD
By the way, Tony, how did you
manage to pull this Christmas
invite off?

TONY
I told her that you were what
I really wanted for Christmas.

He smiles mischievously at Rod in the mirror. Rod smiles too, and gives the tie a final tug.

ROD
How did she react...?

TONY
She threw the dinner back
into the refrigerator.

He laughs, while Rod is not as amused.

ROD
I hope that won't happen
again tonight.

Tony laughs again. Rod sees the humor and laughs, too.

ROD
Let's be on our best behavior.

INT. KITCHEN/DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The clock strikes six. Rod wheels Tony into the candle lit room, and positions him by the table, though he himself remains standing.

Gail is not present. Steaming plates of food surround the roast turkey. They are impressed by the sight.

TONY
Gee. The table looks real nice.

ROD
I haven't seen such a pretty
sight in a long, long time.

TONY
Boy, this sure smells good.

ROD
She can't throw this one back
into the fridge, can she...?

TONY
No way. I get the drumstick!

GAIL (O.S.)
I'm glad to hear you're
hungry for a change.

She stands in the doorway putting on an earring and looking as we've never seen her before. Her hair is swept up and she wears an attractive red velvet dress.

TONY
Wow, Mom...you look cool!

GAIL
Thank you, Tony.

ROD
Beautiful might be a better
word.

She glances at him. Rod pulls out her chair and she sits down. He pushes her chair in and takes a seat himself.

Christmas carols come from outside. They listen a moment.

GAIL
Will you carve the turkey,
Mr. McCall?

ROD
I'd be honored, ma'am.

He carves, lays the meat on a plate. Tony starts to take the plate, but with a signal from Rod passes it instead to his mother. Once everyone has his plate.

GAIL
Would you also give the
blessing?

Flustered, Rod hesitates. Tony peeks at him from partially closed eyes, snickers. Rod darts him a look, assumes a solemn look and forges ahead.

ROD
(improvises)
We thank You kindly, Lord, for
this fine meal spread before us.
(beat)
For good friends and the warm
feeling inside us tonight.

ALL
Amen.

Gail glances at him, touched. They start to eat.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

The dog is curled up in front of the fireplace, as embers burn in the hearth.

Gail puts a present under the tree, steps back to look at it.

Rod reenters the house carrying a brand new guitar in his hand, with a big red bow tied around it.

GAIL
Oh, Rod, he'll be thrilled!

Rod places the guitar under the tree, then takes a small box from his pocket and hands it to Gail.

ROD
This is for you.

She opens the box and pulls a single strand of pearls from it.
Her breath catches. She hesitates, then puts them back in the box.

GAIL
I can't accept this.

ROD
Why not?

GAIL
It's much too...

ROD
Lost the receipt. Can't give
'em back.

She smiles, takes them out again and moves to the mirror.

GAIL
Are you a ladies' man,
Roderick? Tell me before
I put them on.

ROD
I used to be. But when I
find the right one, I'm a
one woman man.

GAIL
Did you ever find the right
one?

ROD
Once, but that was long ago.

He fastens the pearls around her neck, as she admires them in the mirror. She then turns and gives him a casual thank you kiss. He pulls her under the mistletoe in the dining room doorway and gathers her close to him.

ROD
We can't ignore an age-old
tradition, can we...?

He kisses her long and tenderly, caught momentarily in a deeper feeling of emotion. She breaks away, breathlessly, composes herself. She looks at him a moment and smiles.

GAIL
One woman man, my eye!

He grins.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Christmas music plays on the radio in the darkened room. Tony lies in his bed, eyes open, content.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Gail and Rod drink the last of the cider, as they sit before the fire watching the flames burn down.

Rod's eyes are fixed on the mantle, where there is an array of pictures of Gail, her late husband and Tony in happier days.

ROD

You know, I was very glad to hear that Tony's back in school. How's it going?

GAIL

Pretty well, thanks. Your relationship with him and even this silly dog have made quite a difference in his life.

ROD

In what way?

GAIL

Well...he's more active now, more involved, happier.

ROD

...and my relationship with his mother...?

She lets his question hang in the air a moment. His arm inches along the back of the sofa toward her. She gets up.

GAIL

It's been a long day. Time to turn in.

He gets up, too.

ROD

It has.

(beat)

Where do I sleep?

He gives her a long look.

GAIL
Right here on the couch.

ROD
Hmmm...This being Christmas
and all...I was hoping for
something more--

GAIL
More what?

ROD
...more comfortable.

GAIL
Don't worry, I'll make it
comfortable for you.

She walks away, he watches her. She returns carrying a pillow and a blanket and hands it to him.

GAIL
You're used to this, Trucker,
aren't you?

He smiles, wistfully.

ROD
Unfortunately, yes.

GAIL
Goodnight then.

ROD
Goodnight.

He watches her as she walks upstairs.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - NIGHT

A gentle snow begins to fall on the house, on the pecan tree and front yard, and on the red truck. All is quiet.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Rod is sleepless and restless, tossing and turning on the small couch.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GAIL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

She lies awake in her bed, and stares at the ceiling.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Tony eyes open as morning breaks, and he drowsily gazes out the window at the falling snow.

He shakes himself awake, pulls on a robe over his pajamas and slides into his chair. He picks up the wrapped teddy bear and an envelope, and rolls out of his room.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Tony wheels himself straight to the Christmas tree, then stops. With disbelief he looks at the shiny guitar.

He hurriedly puts his presents under the tree and picks up the guitar.

His hands hold and caress it. He rolls closer to the window, and watches the falling snow as he softly strums a tune.

ROD (O.S.)
Whatd'ya know. I'm a better
teacher than I thought...But
you need to use the C cord
for the refrain.

Surprised, Tony stops playing, turns and looks at Rod who is still on the couch.

TONY
Is it really mine?

ROD
All yours.

Tony holds the guitar up with one hand and spins his chair around.

TONY
This is the best present
I ever got!

ROD
I'm glad. But on school days,
it comes after homework.

Rod, in his same rumpled clothes, sits up and pulls on his cowboy boots.

GAIL (O.S.)
Merry Christmas, everybody.

She stands at the bottom of the stairs, dressed casually.

TONY
Mom, Look! Can you believe
it!

She steps forward and gives him a kiss on his forehead.

GAIL
It's wonderful. I hope you
thanked Rod.

Tony nods. She turns to Rod.

GAIL
How did you sleep?

ROD
Like a baby. Woke up every
three hours crying.

She and Tony laugh.

GAIL
Let's open the rest of the
presents.

Tony puts the guitar down carefully. He hands the envelope to Gail who unfolds a piece of paper and begins to read..

Clearly touched, she folds the paper, slips it back into the envelope.

GAIL
(misty-eyed)
It's wonderful, dear, thank
you.
(kisses his head)
Now open your presents.

He unwraps a box, and finds among the underwear, socks and shirts, a Garth Brooks tape.

TONY
Wow, Mom, all right! Wait
'til Lou hears this.

Rod unwraps his package from Tony and sees the teddy bear.

ROD

Well now, what do we have here?

TONY

It's my old teddy bear. I got it when I was born, Mom says.

ROD

Now that's really something, Tony, but this is much too valuable to give away.

(beat)

The greatest present for me, you know, is just being here with you guys.

TONY

(pensively)

I want you to have it. To keep it in your truck, for good luck.

(beat)

I'd planned to give it to my dad, but...

He swallows. Rod is touched.

ROD

As long as I'm driving a truck, son, this teddy bear's going to be right there with me

(beat)

Come on, let's go hang it up.

Rod bundles him up, hoists him over his shoulder and they go out the door.

Gail watches them through the window, takes the poem from the envelope and reads it.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

The snow falls harder, and has covered the top of the truck and the yard with a thin blanket of white.

Tony, held high on Rod's shoulder, scoops up a handful of snow from the top of the cab and shoves it down Rod's neck. He cringes and shoves Tony into his truck.

GAIL (V.O.)

In my dreams
I sing the songs,
I play the notes
And right the wrongs.

INT. ROD'S CAB - DAY

Tony smiles as Rod ties the teddy bear to the rear view mirror with some Christmas ribbon.

GAIL (V.O.)
I can drive a truck
and run a mile,
But I can never
make Mom smile.

They both look at the bear, pleased.

GAIL (V.O.)
Dreams can't help
Takes more than me,
For those I love
To be a family.

Rod then tries starting up the engine, it won't turn over. He tries again and again, it grinds and finally coughs to life. The two cheer.

Rod grabs his old guitar and gets out. Tony climbs on his back. The motor's left running.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Tony's small fingers stretch to finger a cord on his guitar.

Rod stokes the fire, then picks up his guitar, settles down across from Tony and begins to strum.

Tony stops playing and watches him.

ROD
Give it a shot, Tony,
play along.

Tony tries to imitate Rod's playing, and picks up the same tune. He tries too hard, hits a number of wrong notes.

ROD
Easy does it, son, don't
rush it.

Gail stands in the doorway, leaning on the doorjamb, a hot cup of coffee in her hand. She watches them, thoughtfully.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - EVENING

It is almost dark. The snow falls harder. The house and its surroundings are all white, only the smoke that spirals up from the truck's exhaust is black. The engine hums.

INT. THE HOUSE - EVENING

Rod is dressed in warm, work clothes. He pulls on his fleece-lined buckskin jacket. Gail and Tony watch him, very uneasy.

GAIL

Why don't you stay until
the weather breaks?

Rod notices that she wears the strand of pearls.

ROD

Wish I could, Gail, but
the load's due in Abilene
on Tuesday. If I don't start
now I won't make it.

TONY

(worried)

But the roads will be slippery,
how can you drive?

Rod realizes how concerned his young friend is. He leans over, puts his hand on Tony's shoulder.

ROD

I've driven through hurricanes
and dust storms, my friend, and
a few snow flakes aren't going
to bother the best driver this
side of the Rockies. Right..?

TONY

(not convinced)

If you say so.

ROD

And besides, I've got your
little teddy bear to keep an
eye on me.

He shakes Tony's hand warmly.

ROD

Keep practicing your guitar.
We'll play together again
next time.

He turns to Gail, kisses her goodbye. She responds, much to Tony's delight.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - EVENING

As Rod comes out, Tony stops at the doorway, Gail behind him.

Rod walks through the snow, the dog runs after him. He chases it back. He climbs into the cab and raises his thumb to Tony and Gail and drives away.

Tony and Gail wave back as they watch apprehensively from the doorway.

A SERIES OF TRANSITION SHOTS, OVER COUNTRY MUSIC:

Highway conditions are bad, visibility poor. Headlights try to penetrate the sheets of snow as traffic creeps along.

Tony is in his room, by the window, guitar in hand. But he's not playing. He looks outside at the storm, worried.

On the interstate, several cars have skidded to a stop, snarling traffic both ways. Flares warn other drivers of the danger. A snow-covered figure directs the cars, waving a few on at a time until the traffic flows again.

The figure walks to his semi parked on the shoulder and climbs in. Grateful drivers honk their thanks as Rod waves back.

Gail watches Tony and Lou through the window, as they build a snowman. The dog is with them, destroying their work.

Rod stands at a pay phone talking. The sun shines as workers unload cargo from his truck.

Gail at the Cafe, is perfectly groomed in a starched, fresh uniform. Gail smiles as she talks on the phone.

EXT. MADISON SCHOOL - DAY

A bright spring afternoon outside Madison Secondary School. The trees are in full bloom, and all seems peaceful and quiet.

INT. CLASS ROOM - DAY

Tony and his classmates struggle to complete a test when the silence is interrupted by the sudden RING of the bell.

TEACHER
Time's up. I need all the tests on my desk.

The kids rush to turn in their papers and make a beeline for the door. Tony does his best to keep pace, but it's not easy.

TONY
Wait for me, Jay.

JAY
Can't. Got baseball practice.

JAY, and the other boys rush out into the hall. Tony is disappointed, as he puts his books in the pocket behind his wheelchair and rolls out as fast as he can.

EXT. BIG RIG CAFE - DAY

John helps Gail into his car.

INT. JOHN'S CAR - DAY

As John settles in, Gail turns to him.

GAIL

I feel guilty, John, taking
you away from your work.

JOHN

Don't worry. It's nice to
be needed.

He starts the engine.

GAIL

...and from your family, too.

He takes a deep breath, then turns off the engine.

GAIL

Why didn't you tell me you
were married?

JOHN

It didn't seem important at
the time, that's why. And
as I got to know you, I was
afraid it would interfere
with our friendship.

GAIL

Yes, your wife would be unhappy
if she knew you had a female
friend. I know I would.

JOHN

Look. There's been nothing
between us for years.

GAIL

Why do you stay, then?

JOHN

For the kids' sake. I want
them to grow up first.

Gail studies him intently. He starts up the car.

EXT. MADISON SECONDARY SCHOOL - AFTERNOON

A baseball practice is in progress on the school grounds. Tony watches from the sidelines, envious, a glove in hand. He spots Jay, who stands alone, and wheels himself over to him.

TONY
I could help you warm up,
Jay, if you want me to.

He holds up his glove.

JAY
What can you do?

TONY
I can throw and I can catch.

Chris whom we met earlier, comes up beside Jay. He laughs.

CHRIS
Naw, go write poems with the
girls. Baseball is for boys!

He puts his arm around Jay, they turn around and walk away.

Tony hides his dejection.

TONY
(shouts)
Who needs you! I can throw
rings around both of you!

They stop and turn around, surprised.

CHRIS
Yeah? Show me your fast ball.

Without any warning, he throws his ball forcefully at Tony, who barely manages to catch it. Tony fires a fast ball back at Chris, who misses it. Jay does a double take.

EXT. INTERSTATE 75 - DAY

Rod's big rig speeds down the highway, in the fast lane.

INT. ROD'S CAB - DAY

Rod drives, as a country love song plays on the radio. Tony's old teddy bear swings on the rear view mirror. When Rod glances at it, he spots a trooper in the mirror, moving up fast.

He slows down, and breathes a sigh of relief when the trooper passes him without stopping. He sees a sign for the turnoff to Springfield. He checks the time.

EXT. THE SCHOOL GROUNDS - DAY

Tony plays catch with Jay. It's not easy for him, but he enjoys it, and holds his ground.

GAIL (O.S.)
(calls)
Tony...come along.

Gail stands by the fence. John stands beside her. Tony turns and looks at her.

TONY
Aw, right now?

GAIL
Yes, now. We're late already.

Disappointed, Tony throws the ball to Jay.

TONY
Sorry, gotta go. See ya.

JAY
See ya.

He wheels himself around to the gate, where Gail stands, and she guides him down the walkway to John's waiting car.

JOHN
Hi, Tony. Nice throw.

TONY
Thanks.

JOHN
I've heard good things about
you at school.

TONY
That's funny. I haven't.

JOHN
You will, don't worry.
(beat)
Now, when am I going to get
your next poem?

Tony shrugs, doesn't answer. John helps Tony out of his chair and into the back seat, then folds the chair and puts it in the trunk. They drive off.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE AND ST. - DAY

Rod blasts the air horn as his big rig approaches the house and stops in front of it. Rod jumps down, and leaves the engine running as he walks to the house.

Homer greets him on the porch, but no one answers the door. He slumps into a chair, props his scruffy cowboy boots on the railing and pulls his hat down over his eyes.

EXT. GOOD SHEPHERD CEMETERY - DAY

Gail lays flowers on a grave, as Tony sits beside her in his wheelchair, watching solemnly.

The simple metal marker in the grass reads: Jacob Anthony Graham. Beloved husband and father. 1963-1996.

John leans against his car a short distance away and watches them.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Rod snaps awake when John's car pulls up in front of the house, and parks behind his truck.

John exits the car, takes the wheelchair out of the trunk. Gail looks up at Rod, who walks over to help.

GAIL
What a surprise.

ROD
(looks at John)
I guess so.

He opens the car door and lifts Tony out, just as John brings the wheelchair around.

TONY
(excited)
Hey Trucker, you made it.

ROD
Can't stay long, though.
Spoiled tomatoes ain't a
pretty sight.

Rod settles him in his wheelchair. John looks at Rod.

Tony shrugs, doesn't answer. John helps Tony out of his chair and into the back seat, then folds the chair and puts it in the trunk. They drive off.

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pretty sight.

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GAIL
John Morris, this is Rod
McCall.

JOHN
Nice to meet you, Mr. McCall.

ROD
(cooly)
Same here.

They shake hands briefly. John checks his watch.

JOHN
I've got to get back to the
office, Gail.

GAIL
Sorry, it took longer than I
expected. Thanks for everything.

JOHN
Don't mention it, I'll see you
soon.

He opens the door to his car, nods to Rod, then looks at Tony.

JOHN
Keep up the good work, Tony.

TONY
I will.

John slides into his seat and drives off.

Gail walks briskly past Rod as he wheels Tony toward the house.

INT. THE HOUSE - DAY

Rod pushes Tony into the living room.

TONY
Come on, to my room. You
won't believe how my strummin's
improved.

GAIL
Not now, Tony. You go do your
homework. Rod and I have some
personal business to talk over.

TONY
But mom, I want Rod to...

GAIL
(sternly)
Now.

Rod is puzzled by her tone.

TONY
Oh, grown-up stuff. All right,
I'll be in my room.

He wheels himself to his room, but leaves the door ajar.

Rod turns to face Gail in all her fury.

GAIL
Who do you think you are,
anyway. You come here, today
of all days, uninvited, after
weeks of not hearing from
you.

ROD
Hold on a minute, I..

GAIL
You're all the same, always
dropping in at your convenience.
You have no regard for--

ROD
--Tony asked me to come. I
didn't know it was anything
special.

Gail stares at him in disbelief.

GAIL
That's it! I've had it with
that boy. He's going to get
it now or my name--

He catches her as she turns toward Tony's room. He holds her
firmly.

ROD
Calm down, Gail.
(beat)
We're the grownups here. Let's
sort things out before you do
something you'll regret later.

She holds back tears, covers her face with her hands and slumps to
the couch.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

He sits at his desk, his fingers caress his dad's picture. His eyes are misty. He buries his head in his arms.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Rod sits beside Gail.

ROD
Is that guy, John, the something special?

She shakes her head.

GAIL
No. He's just a friend, trying to help out.

Rod's relieved, but not convinced.

ROD
There's no such thing as just a friend, when it comes to a pretty gal like you.

GAIL
(angry again)
Maybe, just maybe, there are a few trustworthy men around, who just want to be helpful.

He holds his hands up in resignation.

ROD
You're right, I guess.
I'm sorry.

GAIL
He's married anyway. Has kids.

ROD
That just proves ...

GAIL
Proves what!

ROD
That he has other reasons to hang around.

GAIL
You're blowing this all out of proportion.

Rod stands, hesitates.

ROD
Then you're not serious about
him?

GAIL
No. I'm not serious about anyone.

ROD
Does that include...me?

Gail looks away, doesn't respond.

ROD
You must know, Gail, I haven't
thought about anything else, but
you since we met.
(beat)
I was hoping you felt the same.

He moves toward her.

ROD
Tony is like a son to me.
I thought maybe we could
all throw in together,
make this family whole again.

She's uneasy, takes her time.

GAIL
It's a nice thought, but...
(beat)
I tried to tell you from the
start that I'd never get
involved again with...

ROD
...A trucker?
Never's a long time.

GAIL
It's just that I know what
life on the road can do to
a family and... so do you.

He moves to the window.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Tony listens quietly by the door.

ROD (O.S.)
We could make it work.

GAIL
I'm sorry. A million
worried nights and one dead
husband is enough for me.

Tony fights tears.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Rod stands at the window, moves toward her.

ROD
So life's been tough. I've
had my share, believe me.
(beat - sad looking)
But it goes on, and we need
each other.

She shakes her head.

GAIL
When you left that evening
in the snow storm, I started
worrying all over again. I
remembered how it was. I
don't want that.

ROD
Trucking is my life. I could
never leave it.

GAIL
Well, I could never go back to
it. I need a full-time husband.
Tony needs a full-time father.

ROD
(takes a moment)
That's it then?

GAIL
I suppose so.

He gets up and puts on his cowboy hat.

ROD
I didn't mean to upset your
day. Don't blame Tony, it
was my fault.

She nods.

ROD
I'll say goodbye to him.

He heads for Tony's room. She stares after him.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Rod enters. Tony stops pretending to play the guitar and looks up at him, tries to put a happy face.

TONY

My guitar lesson, at last.

ROD

Not today.

TONY

Why? Where're you heading?

ROD

A cannery in Chattanooga.

Rod lays his hand on Tony's shoulder.

ROD

Whatd'ya say we go for a ride?
I still owe you one.

TONY

Cool.

He puts the guitar down and Rod wheels him out.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Rod lifts Tony into the cab of his truck and climbs in after him.

Gail watches them from her bedroom window. The truck engine thunders to life.

EXT. STREETS OF SPRINGFIELD - DUSK

Rod drives his rig through traffic, as street lights come on.

INT. CAB OF TRUCK - DUSK

Tony helps to handle the big steering wheel as he sits beside Rod. With the trucker's strong hand over Tony's, they move the throttle through all ten gears.

TONY

Wow, that's fun!

ROD

And work, too. Remember,
Tony boy, if you own it,
a truck delivered it.

Tony blows the air horn.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF SPRINGFIELD - NIGHT

The truck comes to a stop on the shoulder of the road. Stars fill the sky.

INT. TRUCK'S CAB - NIGHT

Tony sits beside Rod and looks up at him.

TONY
What's the matter?

Rod hesitates.

ROD
Uh..Why was today so special,
Tony?

TONY
It was the day my dad died.

Rod takes a deep breath and lets it out.

ROD
You should have told me.

TONY
I wanted you around. I was
afraid you wouldn't come.

ROD
(a beat)
Well, your mother's a part of
this, it was wrong to leave her
out of it.

TONY
I guess you're right.

Rod fidgets with the CB dial.

ROD
Things have gotten a little
out of hand, son, your mom
and I talked things over, and...
it might be better that I
not come around for awhile.

TONY
Why?

ROD

Well,...this old truck is
more than just my work, it's
my life. I've been drivin'
since I was sixteen. Don't
know nothin' else.

TONY

Yeah, I know. I've heard it
all before...from my dad. Mom
hates trucks. She's too scared,
ain't she?

ROD

Don't blame her. She's just
doin' what she thinks best.

It's difficult for Rod. They sit silently together.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - NIGHT

The rig stops in front of the house, but remains with lights on
and engine running.

Rod climbs down and carries Tony toward his chair. Tony's arms go
around Rod's neck and he buries his head in his shoulder. Rod
holds him tightly for a long moment, then sits him in his chair.

The window upstairs is dark, but the curtain moves slightly as Rod
lifts Tony's chair onto the porch. They shake hands.

TONY

You're never coming back,
are you?

ROD

Sure I am, whenever you call
me on the old CB.

(beat)

I expect big things from you,
Teddy Bear.

He turns quickly and walks away. His face is dark and pained.

TONY

(eyes brimming)
So long, Big Red, I'll catch
ya again. Ten Four.

Rod hurries back into his truck and drives off.

Gail appears on the porch behind Tony, about to wheel him in.

TONY
(angrily)
He was my friend, not yours!
Why did you have to send him
away?

GAIL
It's more complicated than
that, Tony.

TONY
Everyone I love goes away,
that's complicated enough.

GAIL
I'm sorry, I really am. But
he needs more than I can give
him right now.

TONY
No! You did it! You made him
go! You want everyone to do
what you want them to do.

He turns his wheelchair around sharply, directs it into the house and slams the door. Stunned, Gail stares into the dark night.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Gail gets off the bus and walks home, carrying a shopping bag. She steps onto the porch, reaches for the doorknob and is surprised to find the door locked. She sets the bag down, fishes in her purse for the keys.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

She enters and begins unloading the shopping bag.

GAIL
Tony! Come see what I got
for dinner.

There is no answer. The house is quiet. Gail puts food in the refrigerator. She fills the dog's bowl with kibble.

GAIL
(to herself)
Where is that silly dog?

She sits the ice cream on the counter.

GAIL
(enticingly)
I bought dessert, Tony...

Still no answer. The house is silent. She exits.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - DAY

Gail enters and is surprised to find his books stacked on the desk, the room orderly, but empty.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Gail sits at the table with the phone pressed to her ear.

GAIL
He's not? Where do you
think he could be, Lou?
(beat)
Thanks, I try him.

She hangs up, then dials another number.

GAIL
This is Gail, Mr. Kirby.
What time did you bring
Tony home today?...
(beat)
Hmm. Talky, you say...in
a good mood.
(beat)
No, it's just that I don't
allow him to go off by himself.

She hangs up and thinks a moment, then dashes out the door.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE, STREET - DAY

Gail hurries to the street, looks right and left. Tony is nowhere to be seen

Gail runs next door. Mrs. Johnson appears in the doorway.

GAIL
Dottie, I can't find Tony anywhere.

Gail is distraught. Mrs. Johnson opens the screen door for her, calls over her shoulder.

MRS. JOHNSON
Lou, get in here!

Lou appears at her side, a pencil in her hand.

MRS. JOHNSON
When did you last see Tony?

LOU
Afternoon recess.

MRS. JOHNSON
Do you know where he could be?

Lou shakes her head, eyes down.

MRS. JOHNSON
Well, get lookin' for him.

Lou lingers a moment longer.

MRS. JOHNSON
You got somethin' to say, girl?

Lou shakes her head, goes outside.

MRS. JOHNSON
Maybe, we should call the
police, dear.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Tony wheels himself along the main highway that leads out of town. His guitar is slung over the back of his wheelchair. Homer trails on the leash.

Ahead a sign points to INTERSTATE 75, SOUTH TO CINCINNATTI. Tony stops on the shoulder, hesitates a moment, readjusts his father's baseball cap on his head, then with new resolve wheels himself in that direction.

INT. INTERSTATE 75, INCLINE - DAY

Tony strains to wheel himself up the incline.

A big rig passes by on the northbound side of the Interstate and honks at him. Tony stops and waves.

EXT. JACKSON STREET - DAY

A police car is parked in front of the Graham house, its lights flashing. A few neighbors have gathered around it.

OFFICER
...he's your buddy, right?

Lou nods, eyes down.

OFFICER

When I was a kid, my buddies
and I always knew what each
one was up to. I bet you
and Tony do, too.

She nods again.

OFFICER

Well, it'll soon be dark.
We don't want anything bad
to happen to him, do we?

She shakes her head, but remains quiet. Gail leans on the bannister for support.

OFFICER

I think you better tell us
what you know...

Lou looks at her mother.

MRS. JOHNSON

Listen, girl, if you know
what's good for you, you
better tell the man what you
know.

Lou looks up at the officer.

LOU

All I know is, he said that
one day he was going to "hit
the road."

OFFICER

Hit the road...?

Gail's knees begin to buckle. Mrs. Johnson reaches to support her.

LOU

He was always building this
thing. I didn't know what
it was, until...

EXT. INTERSTATE 75 - DAY

The sun is low on the horizon. Near exhaustion, Tony wearily pulls on his wheels as he rolls along the shoulder of the highway. His face is flushed and sweaty, but full of excitement.

He stops to rest. The wind from the passing traffic whips his hat off and he watches worriedly as it rolls out of reach. He watches

the traffic and waves to each big rig that passes. A tired Homer lies down beside him.

Tony pulls out his harmonica and begins to play. His eyes gaze at the setting sun.

EXT. GRAHAM KITCHEN DOOR - DAY

The Police Officer, Lou, her mother and Gail stand beside the primitive-looking, wooden ramp that Tony was seen making earlier that leads from the kitchen door, down the steps to the ground.

The two women stare at each other. The officer keys in his mike.

OFFICER

Looks like we got a runaway here.

EXT. JACKSON ST. - DAY

A police car, lights flashing, drives around the neighborhood searching for Tony. Lou sits beside the officer.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Another police car with Gail in the back, drives slowly along the stretch of highway where Tony wheeled himself earlier on.

EXT. INTERSTATE 75 - DAY

A Trucker, DUKE, pulls his rig to a stop on the shoulder just ahead of Tony and calls back to him.

DUKE

Hey, young fellow, can I give you a lift.

TONY

(yells back)

Sure can.

He rolls quickly to the side of the truck. Duke lifts Tony into the cab and puts his chair into the empty bed in the back. Homer jumps in and off they go.

INT. POLICE CAR - NIGHT

Headlights come on. Gail sits in the back scanning the roadsides.

GAIL

Could you circle round again.

POLICE OFFICER #2
Sure thing ma'am. But I can't
imagine that he could've
gotten much farther than
the Mill Road turnoff, given
the time and all.

Gail's lips quiver, she spots something caught on a shrub along
the shoulder and yells.

GAIL
Wait! Stop!

EXT. INTERSTATE 75 - NIGHT

The police car pulls over, they climb out. The headlights
illuminate Tony's cap where it was snagged on a bush. She holds
out the cap and looks fearfully at the officer.

INT. DUKE'S CAB - NIGHT

He smiles down at Tony.

DUKE
Wha'dya doin' out here, little
buddy?

TONY
It may seem funny, under the
circumstances and all, but...my
dad's a trucker, too.

DUKE
Is that right?

TONY
Yeah, he's dropping off a load
of tomatoes at a cannery in
Chattanooga. My mom gave me
permission to meet him there.

DUKE
(disbelieving)
She did?

Tony digs into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled school field
trip permission slip and passes it briefly before the trucker.

TONY
Yeah, I do this all the time.

DUKE
Is that a fact.
(MORE)

DUKE (CONT'D)
What's your dad's name?

TONY
Rod McCall. His handle is
Big Red.
(proudly)
He drives a '77 Peterbilt...

DUKE
Big Red. Yeah, I heard of him.
(beat)
...Well, I can get ya as far
as Cincinnati, then I go east..
Maybe I can hook ya up with
someone heading south.

Tony's face beams. Duke hands him a sandwich from his lunch box.
Tony eagerly accepts it.

TONY
Much obliged, sir.

DUKE
Drop that sir bit or you're
outta here. Call me Duke

Tony grins with his mouth full. He looks at the road ahead and
sighs with relief.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Gail sits at Tony's desk with the CB radio before her. An open
channel CRACKLES as she listens to the chit chat.

EXT. SERVICE STATION, TRUCK STOP - NIGHT

A weary Tony and homer are ensconced in another cab of a semi.
The name on the side reads BUCKET OF BOLTS. Duke talks to JAKE
BOLTON, another trucker.

JAKE
Yeah, I go through Lexington
and on to Nashville.

DUKE
He's trying to hook up with
his dad, Big Red. Would you
see to it that he gets a ride
to Chattanooga?

JAKE
Sure thing.

INT. GRAHAM KITCHEN - NIGHT

Gail goes to a cabinet, starts to reach for some crackers. She sees the ice cream container melting on the counter. She looks at it, dazed, and suddenly breaks into sobs.

EXT. CANNERY, CHATTANOOGA - NIGHT

Rod pulls his truck into a loading dock, parks and shuts down his engine.

The cannery is closed. Rod glances at his watch and heads for the all night diner across the street.

INT. JAKE'S CAB - NIGHT

The CB is alive with talk about the missing boy. Jake picks up on it. Glances over at Tony asleep on the seat, then reaches for his mike.

JAKE

Jumpin' Jake here....say again
"Sweet William." Over.

SWEET WILLIAM (V.O)

..12-year-old kid in a wheel
chair is missing. Last seen
heading south on 75. Over.

JAKE

Well, wha'dya know. I got him
right beside me!

A number of VOICES CHEER in the b.g. on the CB.

INT. DINER - NIGHT

A few Truckers sit about the room as Rod takes a seat at the counter. The WAITRESS approaches.

ROD

Steak and eggs, please,
coffee too.

WAITRESS

That your red truck across
the street?

ROD

Yeah. Did I park in your
space?

WAITRESS
Does your handle happen to
be Big Red?

ROD
That's me.

WAITRESS
(solemnly)
Come with me.

He shrugs, follows her.

INT. DINER KITCHEN - NIGHT

Red stands next to the waitress who holds a mike in her hand as they listen to the CB that sits on a shelf. In the b.g. the Cook prepares food, a Kitchen Helper stacks plates.

WAITRESS
...say again, Jumpin' Jake.

JAKE (V.O.)
(filtered)
...Teddy Bear en route with
me to Knoxville...trying to
hook up with Big Red.

Rod's mouth drops open. He takes the mike.

ROD
Big Red here. What's your
ETA in Knoxville, Jake?

JAKE
Lookin' at 0300. The Ten
twenty there is the Union 76
Station Center, on Telegraph Rd.

ROD
I'll meet you there. Big
Red out. Ten Four.

Rod turns to the waitress.

ROD
Where's your phone, Angel?

She nods to the wall. He rushes to it, punches, and waits.

ROD
Gail? It's Rod.

GAIL (V.O.)
(choked)
Oh, Rod, you'll never guess
what's happened.

ROD
I know all about it. I'll be
picking him up before you can
say Jack Robinson.

GAIL (V.O.)
(a relieved sob)
Thank God. Do you know if he's
all right? I'll come. Where
are you?

ROD
He's fine. You sit tight.
I'll bring him home, safe
and sound.

He hangs up, starts to rush out, turns to the waitress and gives
her a big kiss on the cheek.

INT. ROD'S CAB, ON THE ROAD - NIGHT

Passing headlights illuminate his worried face as he speeds down
the highway.

EXT. ROD'S TRUCK - NIGHT

Rod carries a sleeping Tony in his arms as he walks from Jake's
truck. Homer follows. Jake leads the way, rolling Tony's
wheelchair with guitar in it. He holds the truck door open.

INT. ROD'S CAB - NIGHT

Rod lifts Tony gently into the bed behind the seat. Homer jumps
in beside him and curls up at his feet. Rod stares a moment at
the sleeping boy, then covers him with his jacket.

He turns to Jake, shakes his hand gratefully.

ROD
Thanks pal. I owe you.

JAKE
You owe me nothin', buddy.

Rod closes the door, climbs into his seat.

JAKE
Ten four, Teddy Bear.

Jake waves the truck away. A popular country song FADES IN in b.g..

A SERIES OF SHOTS WITH THE SONG IN THE B.G.:

As dawn breaks, Tony wakes up to see Rod in the driver's seat. After a moment, they laugh and nudge each other playfully.

The truck travels down the highway. The two sing at the top of their voices while Tony strums the guitar.

Rod and Tony drive down Nashville's main street and stare at the sights. Tony points to The Grand Ol' Opry as they pass. A major Country Singer's name is on the marquee.

Rod studies the marquee, then starts to sound out the name of the headliner.

ROD
Guh...ah...Garth!

Tony cheers.

Rod stands talking at a pay phone.
Gail, dressed for work, talks on the other end of the line.

Rod looks on while Tony tries on a cowboy hat in a western shop.

Inside a famous Nashville Restaurant, Tony and Rod dine on barbecue ribs.

The house lights are dimmed as a popular country singer performs on the stage of the Grand Ol' Opry. Rod looks at Tony, who beams with excitement.

INT. ROD'S TRUCK CAB - DAY

The mood is somber as they near Jackson Street.

ROD
What you did was wrong, Tony.
Your mom's been scared to death.

TONY
I know.

ROD
She loves you more than anything
else in the world.
(beat)
You've gotta remember, no matter
how bad you want things to be
(MORE)

ROD (CONT'D)
different, you can't always
change things. And you can't
scare people into doing what
you want them to do.

Tony's eyes are lowered.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Rod's truck pulls up in front of the Graham house. Neighbors
watch from their houses. Mrs. Johnson waves from the porch.

Tony realizes what he is about to face as Gail rushes from the
house and hurries to the truck.

She opens the door and lifts Tony into her arms. She hugs him and
cries as Homer circles them barking. Rod takes out the chair and
she puts Tony into it.

Rod puts his arm around her shoulders and she leans against him
trying to compose herself. Tony watches guiltily. They all move
toward the house.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Tony rolls from room to room glad to be home. Rod and Gail watch
him.

ROD
This is one load I didn't
mind getting rid of. Boy,
that kid's a pain in the neck!

Gail cries and laughs, alternately. Tony laughs.

TONY
Naw, Mom. We had fun.

GAIL
(sarcastically)
I'm glad somebody had fun.

Rod gives Tony a sign.

TONY
(heartfelt)
I'm sorry, Mom, I know what
I did was wrong. I'll never
do it again.

GAIL
I sure hope not.

She kneels beside him, they hug.

ROD

I'm in the way here. You and our fugitive have some catching up to do. I'll just head on down the road.

She stands, turns to Rod.

GAIL

Rod, how can I thank you?

TONY

He's awful tired, Mom, can't he stay over?

GAIL

Of course, he can. Please stay.

ROD

(smiles)

Sounds tempting. But I'll have to take a rain check. Got to get this load of tomatoes delivered before they turn to ketchup.

He starts to go but Gail stops him, gives him a hug and a heartfelt kiss. Tony watches, pleased.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HIGHWAY 70 - DAY

Rod's truck drives fast, blowing black smoke into the air. Gusty winds swirl across the rain-slick highway.

INT. ROD'S CAB - DAY

He is tired and unshaven, talks to Chuck on the CB as he drives. His wipers beat a rhythm on the windshield.

ROD

... trying to make up some time. What kind of weather you having around Columbus?

CHUCK (V.O.)

Wet. And if you're traveling light, watch those winds in the pass. You'll think you're
(MORE)

CHUCK (CONT'D)
drivin' a Tonka truck if they
get hold of you.

ROD
Will do, Buddy. Ten Four.

He hangs up. His hand brushes against the teddy bear hanging from the mirror.

EXT. GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Tony sits on the porch, absentmindedly petting Homer and watching the rain. The dog whines and fidgets. Tony looks down and pets him, he looks up the street, then into the cloudy sky.

EXT. HIGHWAY 70 - DAY

An old RV tailgates Rod's big rig along the slick highway. Unexpectedly, the RV darts out to pass Rod when a sudden gust of wind blows it across Rod's path.

INT. ROD'S CAB

Rod pumps the brakes while trying to control the steering wheel.

EXT. ROD'S TRUCK

The brakes SCREECH as the truck maneuvers to avoid hitting the RV while protecting a school bus on his right.

Rod tries to bring the fish-tailing truck under control as it skids down the highway, jackknifes and flips on its side. Brakes SCREECH as other cars slam into it.

INT. ROD'S CAB - DAY

Rod is pitched forward, his head is cushioned by the teddy bear as he hits the windshield full force and sinks into unconsciousness.

INT. CHUCK'S CAB, OUTSKIRTS OF COLUMBUS- DAY

Chuck drives down another highway. VOICES on the open CB channel talk in the b.g.

TRUCKER A (V.O.)
Steer clear of I-70, just east
of Springfield. Bad pile up.

TUCKER B (V.O.)
I just passed it going west
bound. Looks like Big Red
racked up.

Chuck grabs his CB mike.

CHUCK
Breaker one eight, did you
say Big Red? Over.

TRUCKER B (V.O.)
That's affirmative. Didn't
look good.

Chuck tunes in the AM radio, alarmed.

EXT. INTERSTATE 70 - NIGHT

A helicopter hovers over the scene of the accident, while paramedics tend to the victims. Ambulances arrive and depart with sirens blaring. Police cars with lights flashing form a line beside the road as officers direct traffic around the pileup.

INT. A HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Rod lies unconscious and bloody on a gurney. An IV held by PARMEDIC drips into his arm as he is rushed down a hospital corridor and through a door marked E.R.

INT. E.R. - NIGHT

An Anesthesiologist sits at Rod's head watching a monitor bleep lines across the screen.

Doctors and nurses work over Rod, prepping him for surgery.

INT. TONY'S ROOM - NEXT DAY

Tony plays his guitar, trying to put words to music. He searches for the right note and sings. His clear voice slides easily from one note to the next.

TONY
On the road,
Free as a bird.
Straight down the highway
Where ...

LOU (O.S.)
What's all the racket over
here?

She pokes her head in the window. Annoyed, Tony stops abruptly.

TONY
Quiet!..don't you see I'm
rehearsing?

LOU
Who do you think you are,
Willie Nelson or someone?

TONY
No. I'm Tony Graham someone!

LOU
So, let's go shoot some
baskets.

TONY
Forget it, I'm too busy now.

LOU
So am I, big head!

She sticks out her tongue and runs off. Tony goes back to
practicing.

INT. JOHN'S CAR, GRAHAM HOUSE - DAY

Gail reaches for the handle of the passenger door. John lays his
hand on hers, stopping her. He smiles, opens the glove
compartment, takes out an envelope and hands it to her.

GAIL
What's this?

JOHN
Open it.

She opens it, takes out two airline tickets. She looks at John,
puzzled.

JOHN
Two tickets to Las Vegas.
Hotel included.

GAIL
For whom?

JOHN
You and I.

She looks away, puts the tickets back in the envelope.

JOHN
Wait now, hear me out.
It's not what you think.

GAIL
Oh, it isn't?

JOHN
I have a couple of weeks
off this summer. I can't
think of anyone I'd rather
spend some time with.

GAIL
(sarcastically)
And your family, will they
be joining us?

JOHN
They'll be off visiting
relatives in Kentucky.
(beat)
We need space. Just like
you need a break from all
of this.

His arm goes around the back of her seat.

JOHN
It's no big deal. We'll take
in some shows...lounge around
the pool...go dancing.

GAIL
And?

JOHN
That's all. We'll roll the dice
and see, maybe we'll get lucky.

His arm slips around her shoulders.

GAIL
I couldn't even consider such
a thing...there's Tony...

JOHN
Surely there's someone who can
look after him.
(beat)
I'll take care of all the rest.

A moment, she thinks about it.

GAIL
I can't remember the last
time I went dancing.
(beat)
No, it's not right.

JOHN

Come on, it'll be fun. Nothing will happen, trust me, unless... you want it to.

GAIL

I've got to go...

She gives him back the envelope, opens the door and hurries from the car. He calls after her.

JOHN

Let me know. The sooner the better.

ANGLE ON TONY:

Who sits out of sight on the porch, watching them. Gail doesn't notice him as she enters the house.

He frowns and slaps the baseball hard into his mitt as the car starts to pull away. Suddenly he throws the ball at the car. It misses. Homer runs after it.

INT. HOSPITAL, RADIOLOGY LAB - NIGHT

Rod lays on a table that moves him through an MRI tunnel.

INT. BIG RIG CAFE - DAY

Next morning, Gail moves from table to table refilling coffee cups. She overhears TWO TRUCKERS talking.

TRUCKER C

....haven't seen a pileup like that since '94.

TRUCKER D

A combination of rain and wind can jackknife the best of us.

TRUCKER C

Any word on the trucker?

TRUCKER D

(shrugs)

Not yet.

Gail hesitates, then interrupts.

GAIL

Do you know the Trucker's handle?

TRUCKER C
I think it was...Red, yeah,
that was it, Big Red.

Gail's face fills with alarm. She puts down the coffee and rushes to the locker room.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR, OUTSIDE ICU - DAY

Gail approaches a NURSE about to enter a door marked ICU.

GAIL
I understand Rod McCall is
here.

NURSE
The trucker? Yes, he was
brought in last night.

GAIL
(anxious)
How is he?

NURSE
You a member of the family?

GAIL
Sort of.

NURSE
Hold on a minute.

She walks over to a counter and reaches for something. She returns to Gail.

NURSE
He's in bed four. Give this
to him, it saved his life.

She hands Gail the teddy bear. Gail bites her lip and clutches the teddy bear to her. The nurse holds the door open.

INT. ICU - DAY

Rod lies in a bed, a cast on his arm and his head is bandaged. His eyes are closed. An IV drips into his other arm. In the b.g. other patients are closely monitored by the ICU staff.

Gail stands by the foot of his bed, looks at him, then moves to his side.

GAIL
(softly)
Rod. Rod.

She touches his hand, it closes on hers.

ROD
(whispers)
I must be dreaming. Can't be...
Gail?

He opens his eyes.

GAIL
Yes, it's me.

ROD
(with effort)
Chuck told me those winds were
killers. I should've listened.

GAIL
What happened?

ROD
Can't remember much...just
hitting the brakes, then
seeing stars.
(beat)
How did I come out of
it alive?

GAIL
You can thank this little
guy for your miracle.

She presses the teddy bear against his chest. Rod smiles.

ROD
Whatd'ya know! I owe ya
one, teddy bear.

GAIL
My boy must have wanted you
to have it for a reason.

ROD
How's Tony doing?

GAIL
He's fine now. But he misses
you terribly.

ROD
And his mother, does she miss
me, too?

She looks at him, then away.

GAIL

He graduates soon. He
wants you to come.

ROD

With your approval?

GAIL

Definitely.

ROD

I'll be there, with the Doc's
permission or without it.

The nurse nods for her to go.

ROD

Please, Gail, don't tell Tony
about all this.

GAIL

Don't worry, my lips are sealed.

She leans over and kisses him gently.

INT. ICU CORRIDOR - DAY

Chuck approaches from down the hall, a small bunch of flowers in
his hand. He looks back at Gail, as she passes by on her way out.

INT. ICU - DAY

Chuck stands by the bed. Rod still holds the teddy bear.

ROD

(weakly)

...And the Big Red...how'd
she look?

CHUCK

She'll be up and running
before you. She needs some
body work, a couple of new
tires, but her engine's okay.

ROD

I was late with my insurance
payment. My load broker
is on my tail.

CHUCK

Well, I saved some money
for a rainy day.

Rod looks over at him.

ROD
I'm not a charity case, yet.

CHUCK
Consider it an investment.
You won't be able to drive
for awhile, and I've been
itchin' to go back to being
an independent again.

Rod ponders the thought, too weak to argue.

ROD
You'd leave Associated for that?
(sighs)
Let me think about it, Pal.

The Nurse puts a vase by the bed. Chuck plops the flowers into the vase.

EXT. MADISON SECONDARY SCHOOL, WEEKS LATER - DAY

The parking lot outside the school is packed with cars. A few late comers hurry into the auditorium. The school choir sings in the b.g.

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

The Music Teacher, bespectacled and animated, directs the choir in the rousing final verse of the School Song.

Lou is among the choir members. She concentrates less on singing and more on seeking out someone at the other side of the stage where the graduating class sits in robes and mortarboards.

Lou's eyes fall on Tony, who sits in his wheelchair among the graduates, looking detached and scanning the audience.

A proud Gail sits up front, dressed in her best. Beside her sits Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Kirby, the driver of the handicapped van.

Across the aisle, among other teachers and board members, sits John with eyes fixed on Gail. He catches her attention for a brief second, smiles at her.

The auditorium is filled with students, parents and friends, but Rod is nowhere to be seen.

EXT. MADISON SECONDARY SCHOOL - DAY

Rod's rig, shiny with a new red paint job, drives up the street searching for a place to park. It dwarfs the small cars, comes to a stop in a loading zone just as the music fades, in the b.g.

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

The music teacher takes a deep bow as the audience applauds the choir.

Mrs. Eagans steps to the mike.

MRS. EAGANS
Thank you Mrs. Reston, and
the choir for the singing of
our school anthem.

The Principal nods to her and she leads the choir from the stage.

MRS. EAGANS
Now for the part of the
ceremony that always gives
me special pleasure. Each
year we at Madison, take
great pride in acknowledging
the outstanding students of
the graduating class.

A ripple of excitement goes through the graduates. Tony still searches the audience. Mrs. Eagans looks at the first certificate.

INT. SCHOOL CORRIDOR - DAY

Rod walks toward the sound of the celebration through the empty corridor. He is well-dressed with a western cut to his suit and tie. He carries a package under his arm.

MRS. EAGANS (V.O.)
And The Student of the Year
Award goes to Clara Denson.

Applause rises in the b.g. and echoes in the empty corridor as Rod walks toward the auditorium. He limps slightly and carries one arm at an odd angle.

MRS. EAGANS (V.O.)
Would you care to say a few
words, Clara?

CLARA (V.O.)
Yes, thank you. Oh, my Gosh...
I still don't believe it.
(MORE)

CLARA (V.O. - CONT'D)
I would like to thank my
mom and dad....and yes, my
little brother for staying
out of my room while I studied.

The audience laughs. Rod stops outside the auditorium. He shifts the package to the other arm, takes a deep breath and enters.

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

CLARA
Thank you all for this
wonderful honor.

The Principal stands at the podium waiting for the applause to die down. Rod finds a place to stand at the back.

MRS. EAGANS
Now for the outstanding athlete
of the year. Will Jay Swanson
please come forward.

Jay moves into the spotlight midst whistles and applause.

JAY
Thank you for the athlete of
the year award...just want
to say "Let's beat Southgate
tonight!"

A ROAR of approval goes up from the audience. The Principal quiets them and adds.

MRS. EAGANS
Spoken like a true sportsman.

Jay makes his way to his seat as friends good-naturedly slap and punch him along the way. The audience applauds.

MRS. EAGANS
Boys and Girls, Ladies and
Gentlemen, this year we have
a new award category...The
Creative Arts Award for
outstanding achievement in
the arts.

(beat)
I am proud to announce our
winner....Tony Graham, for
his Ballad "Hitting the Road."

Tony rolls his wheelchair toward her, midst polite applause. Chris and the other rowdy boys barely restrain their laughter. Jay tries to shush them.

MRS. EAGANS
How about reciting that ballad
for us, Tony?

TONY
I rather sing it, if you don't
mind.

The Principal shrugs, adjusts the microphone for him, then moves aside. He reaches for his guitar that hangs on the back of his wheelchair and strums a few cords. He takes a deep breath.

TONY
(shyly)
I dedicate this poem to my
Dad, who was a truck driver,
and to my trucker buddy Rod,
who taught me how to play
the guitar.

ANGLE ON:

Rod leans against the wall, attentively.

BACK TO STAGE:

The lights dim and the spotlight is on Tony. He's scared to death, but begins to play the guitar, hesitantly. He starts to sing, shyly.

The audience is restless. Some students nudge one another and giggle in embarrassment. The laughter from the rowdy boys is now unrestrained. Lou covers her eyes.

A nervous Gail looks over at John, who looks back reassuringly, but Tony has lost the audience's attention.

Suddenly, his voice gathers strength and slips easily from note to note. Tony ignores the audience as he plays and sings the story of his adventure on the road.

EXT. INTERSTATE 70 - TONY'S FLASHBACK - DAY

The sun is low on the horizon, near exhaustion, Tony wearily pulls at his wheels on the shoulder of the highway. His face is flushed and sweaty, but full of excitement.

The SOUND of his young voice fills the screen as he sings about how he desperately tried to connect with the memory of his late father and mourned the loss of his new trucker friend.

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

The audience falls silent, restless kids sit in rapt attention. Lou removes her hands from her eyes. Jay listens intently, the other rowdy boys do, too. Soon the room is captivated by the clear voice, simple tune and profound message.

Rod, arms folded across his chest, listens in the darkness. He smiles proudly, eyes glisten.

The audience is completely captivated.

The song ends. Tony sits alone and unsure on the stage midst a profound silence.

The audience, stunned at first, goes wild with whistles and applause. The rowdy boys cheer the loudest and shout his name repeatedly.

Tony smiles shyly, then grins.

As the lights come on Rod, moved, sees Gail also wipe tears from her eyes. She is congratulated by those about her. John steps across the aisle and gives her a hug and whispers something in her ear. His arm lingers a bit too long, about her waist.

Rod watches them a moment, disheartened. He turns to go. Lou sees him and runs after him.

INT. AUDITORIUM LOBBY- DAY

Rod hesitates, looks out through the lobby doors. The sun reflects off his big rig parked in front of the school.

LOU
(calls)
Mr. McCall, Tony's getting
his diploma, what are you
doing out here?

ROD
Do me a favor, Lou. Give
this to Tony.

He hands her the small package.

LOU
(sadly)
All right, but he really
wants to see you.
(beat)
Did you hear him sing?

ROD
Yes, he was great!

He turns to go, she runs back into the auditorium.

INT. AUDITORIUM - AFTERNOON

The ceremony has ended. The graduating class mills about with their families.

Tony is surrounded by Gail, John, Mr. Kirby, Mrs. Johnson and other well-wishers. Gail reads Tony's diploma proudly. Lou runs up, hands Tony the package.

TONY
What is it, Lou?

LOU
It's suppose to be a surprise.

He unwraps it hurriedly, and finds the teddy bear he gave Rod.

TONY
Where'd you get this?

LOU
Your friend gave it to me.

TONY
(excited)
He's here! Where?

LOU
Outside.

He wheels himself up the aisle, she pushes him faster. Gail and John follow them.

EXT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

They rush outside to see Rod's big rig driving off into the sunset. Black smoke swirls into the air.

Lou and Tony hurry after it, yelling.

TONY
Stop...wait, Trucker...where
are you going? Stop!

The big rig drives on down the street, as Tony's face falls.

Tony turns back to Gail who rushes up to him. John follows. Tony is crestfallen. So is Gail. He slumps in his chair, dejected,

clutching the teddy bear in his hands. Gail stares after the truck as it drives out of view.

ROD (O.S.)
Hey, Cowboy, mighty fine
tune you played there.

Tony and Gail turn to see Rod walking toward them. John and Lou watch them.

TONY
Trucker! But I swear to God
I saw your truck leaving!

ROD
Yeah, with my partner at
the wheel.

Rod high fives Tony, who notices the cast on his arm.

GAIL
Did you say...partner?

He smiles at Gail and tips his hat, revealing a bandage on his forehead.

ROD
Tore up a piece of I-70.
Can't drive for awhile,
Chuck's taken over for me.

Tony looks surprised. Rod takes the teddy bear from him, looks fondly at it.

ROD
If it hadn't been for this
teddy bear, I wouldn't be
here today.

TONY
I knew it would bring you
luck, I knew it.
(beat)
But why are you giving it
back to me?

ROD
It did its job. It should
stay with you from now on.
After all, your father
wanted you to have the luck.

TONY
But drivin's your life...
What will you do now?

Rod looks at Gail, hesitates, then shrugs.

ROD
I can't even see straight
lately, but I still own the
truck. Got to keep it busy.

Gail steps closer to him, leaving John standing by.

GAIL
Were you just going to leave
without saying a word to us?

ROD
I thought it might be best,
considering.

GAIL
What do you mean...considering?
You came to see Tony graduate,
didn't you?

Rod looks deeply into her eyes.

ROD
Among other things...yes.
(beat)
And to ask you if you'd let me
take Tony on a little vacation.

Tony's breath catches and his smile spreads. He waits anxiously
for his mother to respond.

ROD
I have a little cabin in the
mountains, where I hole up
now and then.

John moves into the circle and stops behind Gail, very close--
almost touching her. He's all smiles.

JOHN
That would be great...for
Tony. Don't you think, Gail?

Gail shifts uncomfortably. Rod sees a dark, guilty look flash
across her face.

ROD
(threateningly)
Stand back, "friend." The
lady can make up her own mind.

JOHN
Relax, okay.

ROD
Why don't you go home and
relax yourself, what do you
say? With your wife and kids.

John straightens, glares at Rod who glares back.

Lou breaks the tension.

LOU
I'm suppose to be bat girl at
the game tonight. I better go.

She runs off.

TONY
Let's all go to the game.

He pulls on Rod's sleeve. Rod looks at Gail.

ROD
No, you go ahead. I don't
want to interfere with your
plans.
(to Tony)
I've got lots to do if your
mom decides to let you go.

Gail hesitates.

TONY
Can I, mom?

GAIL
Of course you can, Tony. But
only if Rod promises to get
glasses...so he can start
seeing straight again.

A hint of a smile crosses Rod's lips.

TONY
Okay, Trucker?

ROD
Alright. Now you get
yourself ready, son, I'll
be in touch.

He tips his hat to Gail, turns and walks away, tall and straight.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN FOREST - DAY

A spiral of white smoke snakes up from the chimney of a wooden cabin, nestled amongst a stand of pine trees that borders a crystal-clear lake.

On the bank of the lake sits Tony's empty wheelchair. Next to it sits Homer.

Tony drifts comfortably near the shore in a pair of floaters composed of an inner tube attached to hip boots. He holds a fishing rod in one hand. Rod, in hip boots, instructs him.

TONY
I just can't get the hang
of it. I'll never catch
a fish.

ROD
Fly fishing takes practice,
you can't learn it in a
couple of days.

Rod casts and recasts expertly.

ROD
...Just as the fly hits the
water, you snap it back and
cast again. It's all in the
wrist. Watch.

He shows Tony again. Tony tries it again.

Suddenly, the tranquility of the scene is shattered by two LOUD BLASTS from an air horn.

Surprised, Tony and Rod look back toward the cabin.

Rod's Big Red Machine comes into view, winding slowly down the dirt road that leads to the cabin.

It pulls to a stop, Chuck climbs down out of the cab. Homer rushes to him, barking and wagging his tail.

Rod wades ashore, shouting:

ROD
What are you doing here?

CHUCK
I got this hot load to deliver
that just couldn't wait.
(beat)
Something about droppin' it off
here instead of Las Vegas.
Beats me.

Rod is puzzled as he approaches him.

ROD
What the hell are you talking
about?

Chuck looks back at the truck, and as though on cue, Gail jumps down from the cab. She's cute in tight jeans and a sweater. She carries a duffel bag.

GAIL
Hi guys, catch any fish lately?
I cook a mean trout.

Rod is speechless. Then his grin spreads, he rushes to her and swings her around in an embrace. They kiss.

TONY
(shouts)
Mom!

Just then, there's a tug on Tony's line and a hefty rainbow trout careens out of the water splashing Tony in the face. He's shocked, then beams with excitement. The hook is set.

FREEZE FRAME

The original "Teddy Bear" song by Red Sovine fades in as credits roll.

FADE OUT:

THE END