

CALIFORNIA ANTE

an original screenplay by

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OVER BLACK:

We hear POKER CHIPS splashing across felt. Under the sound of the riffling clay discs, we hear the sound of someone blowing smoke.

PLAYER #1 (V.O.)
Half the pot. Two hundred.

CUT TO:

INT. POKER CLUB - NIGHT

A basement hideaway. Of the six poker tables in the large room, only one poker table is lit. It's high stakes.

JOHN RODRIGUEZ, a burly Hispanic in his thirties, stares down the FIRST PLAYER, as two other seated players protect their cards. He tosses in chips, without a beat.

One of the other two players mucks their hand, as the OTHER PLAYER reaches for his chips.

OTHER PLAYER
Raise your two hundred. Eight.

The Other Player flashes two stacks of four and pushes them to the center of the felt.

John turns to him.

JOHN
(to the Other Player;
indignantly)
Well, look at you, Mister Calling
Station. Did your balls arrive, via
FedEx, last night?

This "other player" is RAY: dress clothes, slim, and confident. He sports a fresh bruise on his right cheek, but he doesn't care. He's cool under fire. Tonight is his night.

John thinks of hitching, but decides to ride along. Calls the eight hundred.

JOHN (CONT'D)
Well, you know what they say:
Paralysis by Analysis.

The initial bettor groans and folds, which leaves Ray and John.

JOHN (CONT'D)

(turning to Ray)
I guess it's just me and daddy's
inheritance, right?

Ray's hand SHAKES, but only for an instant. John sees it.

John plays dealer, as he burns a card and then deals the
community cards ("the Flop").

The flop comes -- King, Jack, Four

ANGLE ON Ray's cards -- Ace, Jack.

Ray reaches for his chips.

RAY

(out for blood)
Two thousand, John.

John looks at Ray.

JOHN

Death by a Thousand Cuts, it is.
(beat)
Call.

He splashes the pot and then reaches for a card.

The next card comes, Ace. Ray now has two pair.

Ray eyes his stack. He has two tall stacks of chips. He
reaches for one of them.

RAY

Six Thousand.

John sits back. His eyes never leaving him.

JOHN

(Re: Ray's chips)
Are you sure you don't want to use
that money for what you already owe
us?

Ray just stares at the cards. Tune him out.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Y'know, my friends talk a lotta 'bout
you. Running from game to game across
L.A. Not rolling up a stake, like
the rest of these guys...

Motioning to the railbirds in the room, corporate-types,
whom chuckle.

JOHN (CONT'D)
 (turning back to Ray)
 My friends think you have a score to settle...Me, personally? I think you're just out to lose. You a spy or something?

Ray finally looks at him.

RAY
 Just a guy, John.
 (beat)
 And *he's* betting six thousand.

John leans in close to his face.

JOHN
 (ignoring his beckoning)
 Well, I have to wonder, Guy: did you leave yourself any outs? Because, we're now five hands in and you're riding in hot like John McClane or something.
 (beat)
 Wrong place, wrong time...

John pushes his second-to-last stack into the pot.

JOHN (CONT'D)
 Possible straight gets a...
 (deals the river)
 A lovely little four. Action's to Bruce Willis.

Ray's hands SHAKE, again, as he reaches for his last stack. Beads of sweat accumulate on his forehead, as he looks up.

John smiles.

CUT TO:

EXT. PALOS VERDES - DAWN

Beach City landscape. Night-black turning into light-blue. Affluent Southern California suburbs.

UP-SCALE SUBURBAN BLOCK

seen closer now, as Ray shuffles across the yard of a contemporary home.

Ray looks bleakly at the row of BMWs and Teslas, parked idly before him, while walking along the suburban street.

He finally comes to a stop at his car: A rattle-trap '87 Chevy. He enters.

INT. CHEVY - CONTINUOUS

Ray burrows the cigarette and settles in. He pulls on the seatbelt strap behind him, but it doesn't give.

He pulls harder. Then gives the strap a final tug.

RAY

(spent)

Fuck!

Ray hunches over the steering wheel. Stunned. Guttled. Staring into the Palos Verdes Mountains...

He picks up a SMALL BLACK BOOK from the passenger seat and rifles through it.

ANGLE ON:

PAGES: GROUPS OF MAILING ADDRESSES AND POKER TOURNAMENT BUY-IN AMOUNTS, HAND-SCROLLED ON THE PAGES, EACH CROSSED OUT.

He flips a page and sees a single address that isn't marked. After a beat, he crosses out the last address and throws the book aside.

He grabs his car keys from his pocket. He shuffles them and they fall to the ground. He bends down to pick them up, when...

...Like a flash of lightning, he POUNDS his steering wheel with his fist and thrashes around the car violently.

RAY (CONT'D)

FUCK! FUCK! FUCKKKKKK!

His knuckles are now bloody. His hand is already in motion to smash the steering wheel again, but he manages to restrain himself before impact.

He calmly parts his blond hair, assembles himself back together, and puts the Chevy in drive.

EXT. PALOS VERDES - DAWN

He starts the truck and pulls out of the line of parked cars.

CREDITS

INT./EXT. CHEVY - DAWN

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD --

A SIGN reads:

YOU ARE NOW LEAVING
RANCHO PALOS VERDES

PAN TO RAY, attempting to light a cigarette with a Bic lighter, to no avail. He tosses the lighter on the ground and puts on his aviators.

EXT. PALOS VERDES - MORNING

First light. The Chevy speeding past large estates tucked back in the fog.

EXT. GAS STATION - MORNING

A small gas station/mini-mart just off the highway. The sun just starting to rise atop the Palos Verdes Hills.

The Chevy rattles alongside a pump, coughing up recycled asphalt. Ray cuts the engine. Ponders.

It's morning. He's alive. The storm is over.

Or so he thinks...

He pushes open the door, takes off his blazer, and walks around to the back of his trunk.

He lifts open a large storage box which contains neatly-folded button-up shirts, trousers, and some blazers. He peels off his business clothes and stuffs them into the container.

He puts on a V-neck, jeans, and Longhorns hat; and walks unsteadily towards the mart, shoulders sagging.

EXT. GAS STATION - MOMENTS LATER

Ray stops short, as he looks down at his boots, just before the front door.

CLOSE ON:

A TEN DOLLAR BILL, submerged inside a small water drain.

He checks over his shoulder, scans the parking lot.

INT. MINI-MART - MOMENTS LATER

Ray bellies up to the front counter.

RAY
Howdy, Merrill.

The PROPRIETOR, "Merrill" on his nametag, rotund and cheerful, is sitting on a stool, watching a baseball game.

MERRILL
 (smiling)
 Hey, Ray! ...Ouch!

Merrill eyes the bruise on Ray's cheek.

MERRILL (CONT'D)
 (re: the bruise)
 What'd you get into a fight?

Ray blinks.

CUT TO:

INT. BASEMENT HIDEAWAY - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Ray gets shoved down onto a seat, blindfolded, as he pants heavily.

RAY
 Look, tell John I'll get him his
 money. I'll get it! I just need
 some --

POW! A right haymaker to the jaw.

GOON #1 (O.S.)
 You remind me of my friend, Mattie,
 who sold me a bag of oregano in high
 school. Guess how I reacted when I
 found out?

Another punch to the rib-cage, as Ray wails.

GOON #1 (CONT'D)
 You say you have it? Good. You have
 Twenty-four hours to place it in my
 hands. Ten o'clock tomorrow night.
 All ten thousand.

Ray tries to stand, but then sways back to a sitting position. He spits out a mouthful of blood.

INT. GAS STATION - MOMENTS LATER - END FLASHBACK

He probes around the swollen part of his face and then presses a hand to his ribs.

RAY
 Basketball. Ball got me on the
 rebound after a fast break.

MERRILL
 Yeah, looks like it.
 (beat)
 You want the usual?

RAY
 Gimme two of 'em and pack'a matches.

Merrill shoots up off his stool and grabs two packs of Winstons.

Ray eyes the T.V.

BASEBALL ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*Two on, two out, for Aaron Judge, as
 he locks into position at the plate-*

MERRILL
 You want gas, today, Buster?

RAY
 Yeah.

Ray, fatigued after an all-nighter, glances at the busy freeway. Cars passing. He turns back and notices a PROMINENT SIGN hanging from atop the counter. A winning lottery ticket.

Ray studies it.

CLOSE ON: THE SIGN

The winning ticket: sold at this location for \$20,000, just a week prior.

Ray continues staring at the display. Forces roiling inside him.

MERRILL
 Ray?

Ray snaps out of his daze.

MERRILL (CONT'D)
 (nonplussed)
 I said, what type of gas, man?

Ray doesn't answer. He looks down at his crumbled ten-dollar bill and decides.

INT. CHEVY - MORNING

Ray enters his truck and starts the engine. Somber.

Still holding his wallet, he secures his newly-purchased LOTTERY TICKET, by tucking it into his billfold.

He then eyes the truck's fuel meter, which hovers over EMPTY.

He masks his concern by striking a match and lighting up a cigarette. He takes a long drag then releases, with shaky hands.

The truck exits the gas station.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - EARLY AFTERNOON

Ray stops at a red light and glances towards the front of his apartment building. TWO GUYS peer into the window of the front lobby. Ray studies them.

One of them, sporting a leather jacket and a military haircut, glances back and forth down the sidewalk. Ray blinks.

INT. BASEMENT HIDEAWAY - PREVIOUS NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Through the side of his blindfold, Ray's POV is blurred, but he does make out the Goon who has been wailing on him. The Goon's face: clean-shaved and sporting a military hair cut.

Ray's visible eye widens as another punch is delivered.

INT. CHEVY - MOMENTS LATER - END FLASHBACK

Ray darkens. It's him!

He bends down to hide. He peers at his watch: 11:02AM. Eleven hours to deadline. He starts to think.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

The light turns green and car horns start to blare. The two goons react to the sound of the horns.

INT. CHEVY - CONTINUOUS

Ray puts the truck in Drive and accelerates past the two goons.

Ray looks back as panic starts to envelop his entire being.

He sees the two goons run to their car, immediately in pursuit.

Ray driving madly, death-grip on the steering wheel, skids behind a UPS truck, sitting idly, and puts the truck in Park.

He watches as the Goons drive by without noticing. Ray looks worn, on edge.

PLAYER #1 (O.S.)

Here! Here!

Ray looks to his right and sees a pick-up, full court basketball game going on. It's between two young guys. It is a competitive, but friendly game.

Ray ponders and then hops out of the truck.

He stands next to his truck and crosses his arms.

EXT. BASKETBALL COURT - DAY

RAY

Hey!

The players turn towards him, but then continue playing.

The UPS truck drives off, as Ray checks his 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock. All clear.

Ray turns back towards the players.

RAY (CONT'D)

Which one of y'all is the better player?

This gets their attention and they stop dribbling.

PLAYER #1

(looking Ray over)

What, are you on your sushi break?

Ray reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet.

RAY

(holding up wallet)

Five hundred bucks. First to ten.

The two players look at the wallet and then at each other.

PLAYER #2

Get the fuck outta here, man.

The two players walk away.

RAY

Aren't you curious?

PLAYER #2

Nope.

PLAYER #2 starts dribbling the ball and proceeds to do a lay-up.

Ray, growing uneasy, checks back towards the street again.

Player #1 is staring at Ray; sizing him up.

PLAYER #1
Five hundred?

RAY
That's what I said.

PLAYER #1
Show me the money.

Ray opens his wallet. Only the lottery ticket lies in the billfold.

RAY
I'm short, but I got my truck.

PLAYER #1
I don't want your shitty truck.

Ray proceeds to walk onto the court. He takes the ball from Player #2 and proceeds to dribble across to the net.

PLAYER #2
Play him, play him!

Player #1 swoops in front of Ray and snatches the ball from him.

He lays it in.

PLAYER #1
That's two.

RAY
What, they didn't teach you the numbering system in the back alley over there? You have nine to go.

PLAYER #1 laughs. *Who is this guy?*

PLAYER #1
Bet your ass I can count to five hundred, though, white boy.

Player #1 sweeps to the left of Ray and banks another one in.

ON THE STREET

The Goons' car creeps by. Inside, the two Goons look on, as the one driving is on the phone.

GOON #1
We found him. Burbank Boulevard, playing street hoops. Probably losing more money.

FROM THIS ANGLE

The driver can glimpse Ray, sweat-soaked, dribbling the ball. He shoots a three, but goes wide.

EXT. BASKETBALL COURT - MOMENTS LATER

PLAYER #1
Here's the big one!

The player steps in front of Ray, knocking him down, and shoots from downtown.

Nothing but...

Ray hobbles back to his feet. He looks at the basket and then back at the two players.

PLAYER #1 (CONT'D)
So, where's my money?

RAY
(winded)
In my truck.

Ray heads to his truck, but gets intercepted by the driver who's following him.

GOON #1
Enough's enough, Ray. Take your truck and follow us.

PLAYER #1 (O.S.)
It's my truck now, homey.

Ray looks back. The players trail him.

GOON #1
(to the Player)
This doesn't concern you. Go back to playing paddy cakes over there.

PLAYER #1
You fools stepped on my court! You back off and let us finish our deal.

The Goon steps in front of Ray as he rolls up his sleeves. The other Goon enters the court.

GOON #1
You have five seconds.

The second player steps up.

PLAYER #2
YOU got five seconds, or I'll slap
all of y'all's silly.

Ray watches on as the scene before him starts to escalate.

RAY
Fuck this.

Ray darts down the sidewalk at a high rate of speed. The two players look at each other and then back at the two goons.

EXT. CITY NEIGHBORHOOD STREETS - DAY

Ray guns down a back alley, and stops before a dumpster. He waits.

A goon runs past the mouth of the alley.

Ray begins to walk discreetly down the alleyway, cautiously minding the sound of his footsteps, when --

PLAYER #1 (O.S.)
Yo, white boy...

Ray turns.

Player #1 hits Ray in the mouth. Ray, in a daze, looks back at him.

PLAYER #1 (CONT'D)
Thanks for the workout.

PLAYER #1 hits him again and Ray crashes down in the muck of the alleyway.

PLAYER #1 strides down the alley and disappears around the corner. Ray rises slowly and reaches to lean on the dumpster, but then collapses.

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN:

EXT. CITY NEIGHBORHOOD STREETS - DAY

Ray stirs on the ground and comes to. His eyes are blackened and lips are cracked.

The alleyway is empty. He groans as he sits up.

He checks his watch: 4:15pm

EXT. BASKETBALL COURT - AFTERNOON

Ray hobbles to his truck. No players or goons, in sight.

His face turns to rock as his attention is drawn to broken glass on the street beside his truck. His driver's side window is bust.

He peers inside, dreading the inevitable, but sees the keys hanging from the ignition slot.

After a moment, he enters the truck.

INT. CHEVY - CONTINUOUS

He sits for a moment, padding his face wounds, and then turns the keys into the ignition.

Click.

The fuel gauge, on the dashboard, lights up. EMPTY.

Ray, barely keeping it together, spots a desolate gas station, just up ahead.

EXT. GAS STATION - MOMENTS LATER

He stumbles across the parking lot.

INT. FOOD MART - MOMENTS LATER

He walks up to the clerk with an empty gas canteen.

RAY
How much for the canteen?

CLERK
\$9.99.

Ray half-heartedly pats his pocket and pulls out his wallet.

RAY
Please. I-I don't have any money.

The clerk awkwardly stands there. Doesn't know what to say.

He takes the lottery ticket out of his wallet and allows the slenderest of hopes for a clean break, *crumble* between his fingers.

He chucks the ticket at the clerk.

RAY (CONT'D)
Just take it, man. I fold.

The ticket comes to a rest, in a ball, on the counter.

Ray picks up the gas canteen and places it back on the shelf.

The clerk eyes the ticket and unfurls it.

Ray sit-slumps in the corner of the gas station. Defeated.

BEEP

What sounds like a barcode being scanned, at a grocery store line, doesn't stir Ray.

CLERK (O.S.)

Uh...you won.

Ray blinks.

RAY

What?

He sits up.

CLERK

You just won the daily jackpot.

Ray attempts to process what he just heard.

RAY

I won...?

Ray grabs the bar code scanner and scans the lottery ticket himself. He stares at the O.S. display.

RAY (CONT'D)

I can't...

Ray is still contemplating the fact that he may have found himself out of this black hole...

Ray turns immediately from the gas station and begins walking out of the area: out of everything. All that chaos in Ray's demeanor is suddenly replaced with steel. He should be dead. He is not.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

EXT. PALOS VERDES - NIGHT

Ray's Chevy pulls up to the same poker den, we saw in the beginning.

Now dusk: Some ambient light left over, but headlights are visible, beaming in front of the den.

The Chevy is filled with luggage and loose belongings.

He exits his truck, holding a thick manila envelope.

JOHN RODRIGUEZ stands with the two goons as Ray approaches.

JOHN
It appears you had an out, after
all, hey, Ray?

Ray's bandaged face is hit from front and back with the high beams.

RAY
I guess so.

John smirks.

JOHN
(to one of the Goons)
Count it.

Goon #1 steps forward and gently takes the envelope from Ray.

GOON #1
(to Ray)
Nice to see you again.

RAY
You too, Mattie.

The Goon gives him a look.

John, appearing displeased, now that he doesn't get to kill Ray; finally loses the staring contest.

JOHN
(to Goon #1)
We good?

Goon #1 finishes counting the last bill.

GOON #1
All there, boss.

John bites his lip, as he finally relinquishes his stronghold on Ray more and more.

RAY
Well, if you gentleman don't mind...

Ray power walks to his truck. At this height, he feels like he can do twelve victory laps around John and Goon #1 all night.

JOHN
(As a matter of fact)
Of course...

Ray stops in his tracks. He's not having anymore of this.

John steps forward.

JOHN (CONT'D)
You could let it ride?

Ray turns back to face him.

JOHN (CONT'D)
I doubt you have enough surplus remaining from those winnings, to really start anew, am I right?

Ray doesn't blink.

RAY
I have enough.

John smiles.

JOHN
Maybe...maybe you'll finally settle... find a wife...adopt a fuckin' dog, perhaps?

Ray is not amused.

JOHN (CONT'D)
But, you know, there'll always be games, Ray. Just up the street from wherever you are; there'll be a horde of amateurs and tourists ripe for the picking. And maybe...just maybe...I'll be there hosting...and allowing the best player I've ever faced, have a pass at all of the glory.

John steps back to face his home. Ray follows his gaze to an open threshold of bursting yellow light: THE POKER DEN. The place, at the beginning of the story, where stacks of chips dwindle and rise, and where fortunes change.

Ray turns back towards his truck...

He takes in the view of THE MOON, as it breaks the rim of the Palos Verdes Mountains.

He puts a cigarette in his mouth and clicks on a lighter. He lights it, with visibly shaky hands, and shuts the lighter.

CUT TO BLACK

THE END