

CHAPTER ONE

Hi, I'm Brandon. And I'm excited to tell you about this movie. My movie.

Why does it excite me? Because each time I get to share this I discover something new about the characters, about the story. My story.

My story in that I created it, not necessarily lived it. Or maybe I have ... "Write what you know" is what they say; "they" being those who advise others how to write. Sure, my experiences inform the situations and circumstances present in my movie. But ... I wouldn't want to be the characters in my movie, live their lives, do the things they do, regardless of how much I might admire them.

Maybe that advice is more about knowing your story and the characters within. Not likely that Adams ever rode in a spaceship that used an Improbability Drive; King hadn't survived being possessed by The Overlook Hotel. But both writers knew their concepts well enough to write about characters who did have such experiences.

Maybe some of the fun in telling you my story is piecing together how my own experiences connect to the experiences of my movie's characters. I have plenty of anecdotes to sprinkle throughout this ... this ... well, let's call it a movie pitch; a rather thorough movie pitch.

But before I get too wrapped up in how the movie came to me, the story behind the movie, let's draw back the curtain, dim the lights and roll the opening credits ...

CHAPTER TWO

The film opens with a series of graceful slow-motion aerial shots featuring stark white hills and valleys glistening in the afternoon sunlight.

The Aphex Twin song “Avril 14th” plays during the film’s opening title sequence.

The texture of the terrain doesn’t appear natural, more resembling a crusted layer of salt with a subtle crosshatching of ridges. Opening credits fade in and out while the terrain slowly moves by.

As the last opening credit line, *Directed by...* fades in and away, a gigantic fly slowly descends into the frame. The arrival of the insect provides perspective on both the title sequence’s excruciatingly slow-motion frame rate and the extreme close-up camera focus revealing a vast plaster landscape. The fly’s flight path leads it toward landing on the white surface, but the screen fades to complete black just as its legs are about to touch down.

A new title card appears ...

PART ONE:
JOEL & JUSTINE

San Francisco - 1998

A muffled sound awoke Joel.

His drowsy assumption was that a turboprop plane was passing through the area. The sound didn't decay as expected though. It got louder, closer, and ... *smaller*.

He shifted his sight to tune his focus. His view was a vignette bordered by a grey mass; humid, restraining his neck from moving. These features reminded Joel that he had only a small window in which to visually experience the world. He was sealed inside a full-body plaster cast.

His immediate situation became clear; a fly was persistently buzzing next to his plaster sealed ear. He chuckled over his insect entrapment.

The fly landed, and Joel was sure he could hear it walking towards the eye-opening to his body cast. All he could do was watch and wait.

The door to the hospital room opened, its air current sending the fly fleeing from Joel's face.

His relief was brief. He didn't recognize the footsteps walking into the room. He attempted to see who had entered, but his body cast kept his guest out of view.

He focused his eyes forward, his sight falling upon the pitted surface of the ceiling, and waited patiently for the source of the footsteps to formally announce them-self.

Joel thirsted for the rare treat of a visitor kindly greeting him through his plaster viewport. He caught a subtle change

in the ambient light of the room. His guest was near. Joel noticed the soft labored breathing of the male visitor. His guest's assumed gender was based on the heaviness of his footsteps.

"I didn't realize how many stairs there were between the lobby and the fourth floor."

Joel didn't recognize the voice and realized that his visitor hadn't been to this hospital before. He took in a deep breath, agitating the dull pain inside his chest.

"The orderly warned you about how slow the elevator is," Joel said, exhaling.

"She did," The stranger chuckled. "So she was telling me the truth? I thought directing me to the stairs was her commentary on how out of shape I look."

"I haven't used the elevators, so I guess it's possible she's having a laugh at your expense."

"Yeah? Well, I doubt they carried you up here using those stairs."

They shared a light laugh.

Joel listened as the man settled into the vinyl chair at the foot of his bed. A metal clasp clicked open, followed by the sound of pages being leafed through. *A notepad?* Joel swallowed his disappointment at not having an introductory glance at his guest's face.

"They tell you I was coming to visit you today, Joel?"

"You're the reporter?"

The guest let out a long exhale as he replied, "Yes, from the city."

"Yeah. Amanda mentioned that you were coming to talk with me."

A pen clicked, then writing scratched across soft paper. Joel heard a new sound; a tape recorder being turned on.

“Amanda’s your nurse?”

“Yes. She’s been great. A true angel.”

A cool breeze slipped passed the mouth opening of Joel’s cast. He drew in a long inhale to capture the fresh air. He puzzled over how these little pleasures highlighted the stale discomfort of being locked inside his plaster prison. What did his body feel like before the accident? Was the texture of clothing against his skin imagined or genuine recollection?

“Thank you for allowing me to come here and listen to your story. I can only imagine that this must be hard for you, to basically relive—”

“No, no. It’s not a bother. This probably sounds strange, but I need to keep ... telling our story about what happened. It helps me try to make sense of it all. Most importantly, it allows me to remember her while she’s still clear in my mind. So beautifully clear.”

Joel’s eyes made short, deliberate travels across the ceiling’s terrain above him. The contours merged to portray a woman’s face.

“Well, if at any time you wish to stop or need to take a break, please don’t hesitate to let me know, okay?”

Joel assented with a nod, but the cast prevented his expression from forming. With an amused snort, he replied, “Thank you.”

“So, I thought we would just start at the beginning?”

Joel’s eyes froze on a textured pattern directly above him. He felt his mouth smile but doubted the reporter noticed.

“Okay. Well, I suppose the obvious place to start is The Gemini Party at Harrison’s place. I had just moved to San

Francisco from Portland, and Harrison, who's an old college housemate of mine, was throwing a huge party at his flat ...”

CHAPTER THREE

There were so many people. It was impossible to tell who already knew each other and who was meeting for the first time. The hum and rumble of voices and footsteps made the city-soaked Victorian apartment building feel as though it was itself a living thing.

Joel sat on the couch, dizzy from trying to keep track of all the names. Or was it the cocktail? As soon as he had a handle on the identities of a group of partygoers, they were swiftly replaced by a carousel of new faces.

Even the music had lost cohesion as multiple sources competed to entertain. Joel made a game of catching the moments when the sonic streams would synch together, creating a mega-remix of music.

The prolific and varied forms of entertainment left Joel overwhelmed. He couldn't remember ever being at a party this big. Should this have even been referred to as a party? This was an event. Joel took in the experience from his seat in the living room and wondered how often events like this happened in San Francisco. Lost in a storm of stimulation, he tried to formulate how he could even describe what it was like attending The Gemini Party.

Whenever caught in unfamiliar social situations such as he was this night, Joel would rely on a mental habit he had developed to hone his creativity as an illustrator. He would people watch; study people's physical features, place which

celebrity they looked similar to, and catalog those features to represent caricature traits for his illustrations. He knew better than to reveal this habit to anyone. Society was becoming aware of discriminative forms of speech, political correctness was becoming a hot topic in the media, and this particular aspect of his creativity could be seen as reinforcing false stereotypes. But Joel believed that comedy, no matter the form, was correct to cross sensitive boundaries as long as the effort revealed some truth about ourselves.

His current circumstance provided him with a ton of nuanced material. His only concern was keeping his observations clear and intact long enough to survive the night.

The majority of the people at the party appeared to be close to his age. And the average assessment of his caricature study was that tonight's crowd was a mix of edgy boutique hairdressers, auto-mechanics, local bar rock band members, coffee shop baristas, and a diverse slew of retail employees. One of the two women sitting on the couch across from him stood out as a yoga instructor; or possibly a ballerina. The profile Joel's mind conjured up painted her as Uma Thurman with a pixie haircut. Her friend was Jennifer Aniston (pun not intended, but, there it is), her face adorned with a soft veil of freckles. Over by the doorway, platinum-haired Joshua Jackson was sharing a genuine laugh with a bohemian Kyle MacLachlan poet. It was too much for Joel to take in.

A look of relief lit up his face as his friend, Harrison, slipped through the crowded room and sat down next to him. A couple of beers were clutched in Harrison's hand. Joel always saw Harrison as bearing a distracting resemblance to

a young Jack Nicholson; a resemblance Harrison couldn't be too proud to own.

"Here you go, sir," Harrison said as he handed a beer to Joel.

"Thanks."

The two friends toasted, settling deep into the couch.

"Fucking nuts, isn't it?" Harrison asked while gesturing to the rest of the room.

"It's pretty impressive. And you know all these people?"

"Uh, maybe half? I'd say at least half. The whole building plans this out every year, so I'm recognizing a lot of faces from last year." Harrison looked around. "I think."

"Well, it's an impressive way to be introduced to the city. Thanks for inviting me."

"Shit, man. Don't mention it. Least I could do. Plus, what a way to mark your first full week in fucking San Francisco!"

Harrison proudly toasted Joel's drink. "Fuck Portland. Fuck Nicole. Fuck working for that sycophantic, third-rate 'news' paper."

Joel flashed an unimpressed smile.

Harrison responded, "But hey, they did give you a start. Looks great on your resume. And nobody here knows how shitty that agency was anyway, so ..."

"Most of my best illustrations came from working there."

"Oh, hell yeah. No fucking doubt." Harrison habitually toasted Joel's bottle again. "*You* were the best thing they had going." He finished off his beer and asked, "So how does it feel, being one week in?"

Joel laughed, “Christ, it is only one week in. So, I’ve got nothing for ya.”

“Well, at least *nothing* is better than cold feet, right?”

Joel laughed again.

“Listen, you’re either gonna rock San Francisco or San Francisco’s gonna rock you. Either way, this is a good place to be.” Harrison paused. “But I better not hear you say Nicole’s coming to visit, talk things out because that will really piss me off.”

Joel shook his head.

They both took a long look around the room.

“Listen, you can’t just sit on the couch all night.”

Harrison stood up and grabbed Joel’s arm, partially spilling some of Joel’s beer.

“Whoa, look out,” Joel said with alarm.

“Don’t sweat it; there’s so much more downstairs. Seriously.”

Harrison put his arm around Joel and led him into the hallway.

“Or if you’re feeling adventurous, there’re plenty of medicinals to enjoy.”

Laughing, Joel shook his head. “I better not. My first day is tomorrow, remember?”

“Ah fuck, that’s right. I have to be there too.” Harrison contemplated. “Shit. I should set a good example for you and pace myself.” He started giggling. “F that! This shit here only happens once a year. My hangovers only last a day anyway. Plus, it’s a goddamned video store. No better place to ride out a hangover, right?”

Joel and Harrison navigated through the crowded hallway, then the crowded kitchen, then the crowded deck outside.

Joel swore that with each step farther into the party, the space between people kept shrinking. Yet, the closing proximity between guests never seemed to bother anyone. If you couldn't share a word with someone, you could at least share in a firm brush-by.

The two friends descended the backyard wooden staircase, careful to avoid knocking into any of the seated guests they passed. When their feet finally hit solid ground, Harrison and Joel were immediately placed in a congested line leading up to a makeshift bar.

“So, I'm going to introduce you to some kick-ass friends of mine tonight.”

Joel flashed an overwhelmed look.

“No seriously. These are the cats you need to know. They're solid people. A few of them work at the video store, and I already told them about you, to treat you like one of the family.”

“Sounds helpful. I'll try to remember their names then.” Joel gestured his hand out across the mass of party patrons. “I'll just push out all the other names and faces I've met so far to make room.”

Harrison flashed a concerned look around at all the faces in the backyard. “Humph. Maybe only a tenth of the people here. I am drunk, so ...”

They grabbed a couple more beers, and Harrison led them into the basement apartment.

At first, Joel only took note of the smaller rooms and lower ceiling. He then started paying attention to the other guests and realized that the mood of the crowd on this floor was distinctly altered.

“We call this area the Hurt Chamber. All the serious altered states fun stays down here.”

They paused in the doorway to a room featuring two occupied massage beds. In addition to the masseuses, a woman dressed in a vinyl nurse’s gown and wearing a vintage gas mask held a hose connected to a large gas tank in the corner of the room.

Harrison nudged Joel and pointed to the tank. Then he started to cry, “Mommy. Mommy,” a reference to one of his favorite movies, *Blue Velvet*.

“What, nitrous?”

“Yup”

“Are you kidding?”

“I’m not shitting you. It’s the craziest massage you’ll ever get.”

“Jesus.”

“Now come check out this other room.”

Harrison led Joel down a short hallway into an abbreviated connecting room. The walls were painted black, and a group of young friends was using sidewalk chalk to create intricate and fantastical illustrations. Joel thought the chorus of clacking and scrapping was rhythmically surreal and enchanting.

Harrison flipped off a light switch as they passed through. The room went dark revealing an iridescent glow from a black lamp sitting on the floor. The chalk art glowed with vivid intensity.

“Oh wow,” whispered Joel.

The chalkers took steps away from the walls, nodding their heads in psychedelic approval.

One artist turned to Joel. “Almost there, I’d say.”

She stepped over and turned the overhead light back on. The group returned to their vivid renderings.

Harrison next led Joel into the last room of the apartment. Seven people with dilated pupils sat on a mountain of pillows, the only ambient light in the room radiated from a medium sized TV. The Scarecrow scene from *Wizard Of Oz* danced across the screen. Joel realized that the movie's sound was turned off. A stereo boom box was placed directly below the TV. "Brain Damage" from Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side Of The Moon* was providing a surrogate soundtrack.

One of the movie watchers softly called over to Harrison, challenging him to recite the whole movie in each character's voice.

Harrison let out an amused snort. One of the other movie watchers waved her hand in the air as a gesture to quiet everyone down. "You're killing it."

Joel stood there, absorbing the experience.

Later, Joel and Harrison walked through the crowded backyard and were joined by a woman named Christine. Joel estimated her age to be in the early twenties, and Harrison made a point of introducing her as part of his close circle of friends. This was reinforced by her continually correcting all of Harrison's indictments on her personality and their shared experiences. This banter carried on as the three made their way back up the outside staircase.

Returning to the third floor flat, they entered the back porch leading into the kitchen while still sparring vocal jabs at one another.

“*Harrison*? I didn’t know your name was *Harrison*,” Christine said with mild bewilderment.

“Yup,” Harrison replied.

“I just can’t picture you being a *Harrison*.”

“I know. That’s why I don’t use the name.”

“Sounds so distinguished,” she returned with a dose of sarcasm.

Joel added, “But you hated being called *Harry* in college.”

“Well, there were like a hundred other *Harrys* on campus. Plus, and I’m only stating a fact here, *Harrison* worked better with charming the younger coeds.”

“Bold statement, Harry. So why change it then? You’re like the most girl-crazy guy I know,” Christine criticized.

Pressing his point, he said, “*Harrison*’s too pretentious sounding now. Especially here in SF. I get laughed at enough as it is when talking to girls. No need to give them another reason.”

They entered the kitchen, and Joel noticed a nearby stereo was playing a familiar song, Blur’s “Beetlebum”.

His attention shifted to a commotion brewing at the kitchen table. Several people gathered around, cheering on as two women faced off in an arm wrestling match.

Christine did a double take, her eyes landing on one of the strength-bearing contestants. She started to shake her head. “Why? Like anyone needs to get her started.”

Harrison patted her on the back and replied, “She kicks ass, that’s why.”

He strolled over to the table.

Christine leaned in toward Joel. “The girl on the left is my sister, Justine. When you get a couple drinks in her, she likes to arm wrestle.”

Joel cracked a smile. “I take it she has a reputation?”

“Yup. More so with our lesbian friends. She frustrates the hell out of some of them.”

“In what way?”

“Well, I may be biased, but wouldn’t you say she’s got looks?”

Joel started to take in Justine visually; her body type, her fashion, her face . . . her face. A flurry of caricature ideas rushed through his mind, but none of them stuck. The lingering profile was of an 80’s high fashion model, but somehow, not as polished. Justine just didn’t fit into any visual type Joel could recognize, almost as if she could be any, all and none at the same time.

Christine couldn’t help but notice Joel smile. “Classic porcelain Lauren Bacall beauty, dark Betty Page sensuality, potent tom-boy charm, yet she’s straight. A wicked ‘hard-to-get’ combination.”

Joel realized how telling his smile was and chuckled. “If that’s all it takes.”

Justine and her opponent, Charlee, were locked hand in hand. Charlee, a young, butch lesbian, stared down Justine.

“If I win this, you owe me a date,” Charlee ordered.

Justine laughed but didn’t lose her concentration.

Harrison stepped up to the table, leaned over their grappling hands and landed a kiss across both girls’ knuckles. The onlooking crowd jeered in response.

Charlee threatened, “Try it again, Harry, and I’ll clock you in the face. That’s a promise.”

Harrison looked up to see Christine laughing and Joel's puzzled expression.

He then turned to Justine and whispered into her ear. Justine shot Charlee a whimsically sinister scowl. Then, with a smooth, even motion, she overcame Charlee's strength and won the wrestling match.

The onlookers sounded off with a mixture of cheers and boos. Charlee sat back in her chair, shaking her head.

Justine got up and walked over to her, leaning in to give her a consolation hug.

"Being beat by you is always worth it," said Charlee, clearly enamored.

Justine straightened back up.

"But one of these days, you're going to be my date, clit teaser," warned Charlee.

The kitchen filled with laughter.

Justine held out her hand in front of Charlee, waving her fingers to hand over something. Charlee growled as she removed a wide leather wristband from her right arm. Once again, the onlookers laughed as Charlee dropped the wristband into Justine's hand.

Charlee stood up and aimed her attention toward Harrison.

"And you, motherfucker, cost me this time. Tell me what you said to her."

Harrison and Charlee started mock sparring as Harrison began to impersonate Bruce Lee. "What was that, an exhibition? We need emotional content. Don't think. *Feel.*"

Justine buckled her newly won wristband onto her left arm as she walked over to her sister and Joel. Joel took a half step back as the sisters embraced.

“You better retire soon, or you’ll end up on the back of Charlee’s motorcycle.”

“She treats her women well. She certainly has more balls than most of the guys I keep meeting.” She turned to Joel with a mischievous grin and winked. “You must be Joel.”

Sensing castration, Joel raised his beer bottle and politely nodded.

Christine nudged her sister. “I plan to mine him on all the college dirt he has on *Harrison*. Did you know Harry’s full name is Harrison?”

“I knew.”

“Wait, what?”

“It’s labeled on the schedule at work. Francine always addresses him as Harrison. It’s pretty funny. It’s like her way of mothering him, keeping him ‘in line’.”

Justine turned back to Joel. “So what’s your take on San Francisco so far? Harry said you’ve been in town for, what, a week?”

“Yeah, today’s one full week. I dig it. Obviously, it’ll take a little while to find my legs, but I think Frisco—” the sisters shot him a glare “—San Francisco is an amazing city.”

Justine grabbed Christine’s beer and took a long drink.

Then she explained to Joel, “Harry’ll take care of you. And everyone at the store is friendly. Most of us get together for dinner, dancing, drinking.”

“Yeah, they definitely like to drink,” Christine subtly criticized.

Justine thumbed at her sister. “The prude of the family.” In protest, Christine hard pinched Justine’s ass.

Back in the living room, Joel sat in a large reclining chair tucked in one of the room's bay windows. He spied through the window a group of people leaving the front door. They playfully staggered down the street.

A third of the guests remained at the party, and the mood was relaxed. Joel took a long look around the living room, listening in on the group's conversation.

Two men stood in the doorway, drinks in hand, passing a joint between them. It took Joel a few seconds to recall their names, Loren and Ben.

Harrison sat on the couch with his arm around a woman on his left. If Joel was correct, her name was Vanessa. Justine completed the trio as she sat half lounging on the couch's armrest.

Joel's gaze lingered on Justine as she joined in the group's laughter. Everyone's voices started to elevate, and Joel realized that his attention on Justine had been filtering out all outlier sensory information. It took him a second to catch up on where the conversation was centered. It was on Harrison.

Several of Harrison's friends pleaded with him to perform some character impersonations. Harrison was resistant, but when Vanessa joined in egging him on, he shifted his responses to using appropriately timed movie quotes. Joel smiled as he recalled his college days with Harrison. A ghost of that personality started shining through as Harrison escalated his performances. Or was it a ghost within himself?

Then a voice called out, "Jack!" and the room suddenly fell silent.

"Jack!"

Harrison shook his head in refusal.

The group collectively started to chant, “Jack, Jack, Jack!”

Leaning in the doorway, Ben requested, “Come on, Jessup, I want the truth!”

“You can’t handle the truth. Son, we live in a world that has walls, and those walls have to be guarded by men with guns ...”

The refreshed energy of the room impressed Joel. With each Jack Nicholson character called out, Harrison’s impersonations kept outdoing the one before. Joel realized that if he hadn’t already known Harrison, he would be outright disturbed by Harrison’s apparent obsession with Jack Nicholson.

The energy of the room hit a fevered pitch and, “That’s it!” shouted Harrison. “My single goal, as of this moment, right now, is to meet that man. I’m talking sitting down and having a fucking drink with Jack Nicholson.”

Vanessa grabbed Harrison’s head and lovingly patted him like a mother would a child. The room erupted with laughter.

Harrison turned to her and continued, “You think I’m joking, but I’m fucking serious.”

Thoroughly entertained, Joel closed his eyes, and the party faded into foginess then into darkness.

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Joel opened his eyes to discover the early morning sunlight spilling into the living room. He was still lying in

the chair from last night but was now fully reclined. He slowly sat up and stretched out his back.

A heavy musk of evaporated beer and stale marijuana smoke weighted the dank air.

He counted six other people asleep in the room, although he didn't recognize any of them. He noticed that the girl sleeping on the nearby sofa was wearing a watch. He was leaning over to check the time when he heard the sound of a door closing down the hall.

Joel looked up and caught sight of Harrison slinging a weathered-looking messenger bag over his shoulder. Harrison walked away down the hall and paused next to the stairwell leading down to the front door. He looked up to catch Joel watching him. A slow smile extended across Harrison's face as he offered a short nod and hand salute.

Joel nodded back, catching a glimpse of the stack of flyers clutched in Harrison's hand. Harrison then disappeared down the stairs.

Joel took a moment as he listened to the front door open and close.

He leaned back over to check the girl's watch. He then energized with a long inhale and rocked himself out of the chair.

The Gemini Party was an actual annual event where the residents of an entire apartment building on Lower Haight Street hosted a blowout costume party. It was by invite only, and with Gemini being the theme, you were required to arrive dressed as your own doppelgänger.

The first time I went, I was invited that evening by a group of musicians I was starting to run around with. I was new to the city and eager to find a scene to be a part of. Based solely on my friends' description of previous Gemini, this was an event I could not miss. Only one problem, I didn't have a costume.

So when I showed up dressed as myself, I told the guy at the door that I was normally a cross-dresser. He rolled his eyes and was about to let me in when a woman stopped me. She was the person taking "donations" at the door.

"Prove it," she said.

If I hesitated, I wasn't getting in. If I didn't speak with confidence, I wasn't getting in. So ...

"The secret to applying foundation is not to match the skin tone of your T-zone or your cheeks, but to match the color of your forehead and your neck. That way you don't make your whole face look redder than the rest of your body. Always contour your face as though there's a soft light above you. Highlight above your face's bone structure, and shadow below, especially when you're trying to reduce your jawline."

"You're in," she replied with a laugh; although I doubt she was convinced.

I've wanted to make movies since I was seven years old. And I swear I watched every "Movie Magic" and "Behind the Scenes" special that aired on television. Special effects fascinated me the most and were a popular topic with these types of TV programs. So I taught myself how to be an FX makeup artist.

Never would I have imagined learning how to apply character makeup would be my ticket into a popular underground San Francisco party though.