

UNDERSTANDING ERNEST

Based on a true story

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(Based on a True Story)

FADE IN:

EXT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2000 - DAY

Ernest, 89, a slender 5'10" man, stands in his back yard, in the center of which grows a maple tree. A small picnic table lives in the shade it provides.

Ernest rubs his right shoulder as he watches the autumn leaves fall from the tree. They gently float through the air gliding to the carefully manicured lawn below.

He straightens his glasses.

CUT TO:

INT. ANDREW'S HOUSE - DAY

Terry, 56, graying hair and laugh lines around his eyes, hangs up the phone.

TERRY

Andy.

Andrew, 16, slim, athletic build, sits in front of the television watching CNN.

CNN (O.C.)

And a protest outside the Office of Assisted Transition turned into a riot again today as protestors sought to block Transition Officers from performing their duties...

Terry grabs the TV remote and turns the TV to mute. Andrew scowls.

TERRY

Andy.

Andrew slowly emerges from his screen induced trance.

ANDREW

Yeah?

TERRY
Your Grandfather needs some help
in the yard.

ANDREW
Do I have to?

Terry doesn't answer.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
Come on, I don't want to go over
there.

TERRY
He's your Grandfather.

ANDREW
We never have anything to say to
each other.

TERRY
He's just doesn't know how to take
you.

ANDREW
I threw a chair at him when I was
6. He doesn't like me.

TERRY
I think he got over it.
(beat)
He's not going to be around
forever.

ANDREW
He doesn't even know who I am half
the time.

TERRY
Go.

Andrew sighs.

ANDREW
Aww man. I'm watching T.V.

TERRY
Now.

ANDREW

I'm supposed to get together with
Callie in an hour.

TERRY

Well then you'd better get moving.

Terry watches as his son snatches a jacket and storms
out. He un-mutes the TV.

CNN (O.S.)

The office was created 2 years ago
to ease the burden of caring for
those who had become unable to
contribute to society as a whole.

He frowns, shakes his head and turns the TV off.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - DAY

Ernest drags a plastic tarp full of leaves from the
back yard, down his driveway, to his curb to await
pick-up.

A small pile of leaves already resides there and this
next batch gets dumped on top.

Some leaves spill into the street and he sweeps them
back onto his lawn with his foot.

Ernest works methodically, but only moves small
amounts of leaves at a time.

He takes frequent breaks to catch his breath.

The yard is barely dented when Andrew arrives.

He sports a leather motorcycle jacket and combat
boots as he strides towards his grandfather.

ANDREW

Okay, I'm here.

Ernest looks at blankly.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

It's me... Andrew.

Ernest stares.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
Terry's son. Your grandson.

ERNEST
Where's Terry?

Andrew frowns.

ANDREW
He sent me.

Andrew grabs a rake and starts gathering leaves.

ERNEST
Start back there and work your way
forward.

ANDREW
Let's just get this over with,
okay. I've gotta meet my girl
soon.

He points to the back corner of the yard.

ERNEST
Make piles and I'll drag them to
the front.

ANDREW
You don't have to--

ERNEST
Just don't make them too big.

ANDREW
Go inside and relax, I can get
this done faster by myself.

Ernest ignores him and gets to work.

Andrew sighs and starts raking again, this time
starting at the back of the yard.

MONTAGE:

Andrew rakes leaves into piles.

Ernest lays out the plastic, pushes the leaves onto
it, grabs the corners and drags it to the front.

Andrew rakes the leaves into bigger piles.

Ernest still drags them to the front.

Andrew rakes them into a pile too big for one trip.

Ernest splits the pile and takes two trips.

END MONTAGE:

Ernest takes a break.

Andrew chuckles to himself.

Ernest goes inside and comes back out with a beer. He sets an unopened can on the table

Andrew wanders over, leans on his rake.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

You need a rest. I can finish by myself.

ERNEST

Drink?

Andrew shakes his head no and checks his watch.

ANDREW

Dad wouldn't like it.

Ernest takes a few swallows from his glass and Andrew begins his raking again a bit more vigorously.

Ernest leans on the table and looks up into the branches of the tree.

ERNEST

I planted this tree when your dad was born.

Andrew rolls his eyes and keeps raking.

Ernest rubs his right shoulder again.

Andrew notices the rub.

Ernest continues looking into the tree, as if somehow seeing a reflection of himself.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

I wasn't much older than you then.
Bought this house, moved in, had a
baby, then I left.

FADE TO:

EXT. WILLIAM'S (ERNEST'S FATHER) HOUSE - 1941 - DAY

Ernie, 29, lean with dark hair, picks up the mail and
opens a letter from the U.S. Department of Defense.

ERNEST (V.O.)

I got the letter no one wanted to
get.

He runs his hand through his hair as he reads the
letter. He glances up at the door to his house then
back at the letter.

He gently folds it up, slides it in his pocket and
wanders inside.

INT. WILLIAM'S HOUSE - DAY

Ernest stands just inside the front door.

He takes off his hat and hangs it up.

The sound of meal preparation can be heard coming
from the kitchen.

ELENORE (O.S.)

Ernie?

ERNEST

Yeah.

ELENORE (O.S.)

How was work?

ERNEST

Did you see the mail?

ELENORE (O.S.)

Is it here?

A brief pause ensues as Ernest contemplates what to
say next.

ERNEST
I got the letter.

The sounds of meal preparation stop.

Elenore, 28, 8 months pregnant, appears at the entrance to the kitchen.

They look at each other in silence.

CUT TO:

INT. DRAFT OFFICE - DAY

Ernest waits in LINE for the next available RECRUITER. The Line consists of all types of MEN, young, younger, nervous, brave, and petrified.

FRANK, 26, and CHRIS, 27, wait in line with Ernest.

FRANK
Aren't you too old for this?

ERNEST
Not my choice.

CHRIS
I'm going for the army. You?

Ernest shrugs.

RECRUITER
Next.

Ernest hesitantly approaches the desk.

He stands awkwardly, ringing his hat in his hands as the Recruiter finishes some paper work.

The Recruiter looks up and sees Ernie standing.

RECRUITER (CONT'D)
You can sit.

He slowly settles in the stiff wooden chair.

RECRUITER (CONT'D)
Name?

ERNEST
Ernie... ah, Ernest. Ernest
Kramer.

He hands the Recruiter his draft card.

The Recruiter writes down his information.

RECRUITER
They just barely nicked ya, huh?

ERNEST
Yes sir. I'd be too old soon.

RECRUITER
Anything you want more than the
other?

ERNEST
I just bought a new house I've got
to move into and I've got a baby
coming.

RECRUITER
Congratulations.

Ernie nods.

RECRUITER (CONT'D)
If I put ya in the Navy, you'd
ship out in a week. Army would
give you two.

ERNEST
I've got a kid coming any day now.

RECRUITER
Army or Navy.

ERNEST
Isn't there another--

The Recruiter shakes his head no.

Ernie drops his head and sighs, resigned.

ERNEST (CONT'D)
Army then.

RECRUITER

We'll send someone by in two weeks
to pick you up.

Ernie gets up and starts to leave.

RECRUITER (CONT'D)

Wait. I forgot to ask ya. Any
special skills?

ERNEST

No.
(beat)
Nothing special.

RECRUITER

See ya in two weeks.
(beat)
Next.

Chris strolls up to the desk.

RECRUITER (CONT'D)

Draft card?

CHRIS

I'm volunteering.

Ernest shakes his head and walks out.

CUT TO:

INT. WILLIAM'S HOUSE - DAY

Ernie comes through the door to find Elenore waiting
in the front room amongst boxes and boxes of their
things.

The only things not packed are the couch, on which
she sits, and end tables on which rests a single
planter with red Mums in it.

She looks at him expectantly while he takes off his
coat and hat and hangs them up.

ERNEST

Two weeks.

Elenore gets up, wraps her arms around him, and tears
escape from her eyes.

ELENORE

What are we going to do?

ERNEST

Don't worry.

She pushes away from him so that she can see into his eyes and he can the pain in hers.

ELENORE

Ernie, it's a war. People are dying... We're having a baby.

ERNEST

We have to trust that God knows what he's doing. Even when we don't.

ELENORE

I want it in writing. A letter from God that you're coming back to me... To us.

ERNEST

Me too.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S NEW HOUSE - DAY

Elenore sits in a chair at the kitchen table while Ernie brings boxes in from outside.

ELENORE

Is there much left?

ERNEST

Not much.

ELENORE

Can't I help?

ERNEST

You just sit there and tell me where things go. I'll put them there.

ELENORE

Can't I at least unpack some boxes?

ERNEST

Sure.

He brings over a box and sets it on the table.

She opens it and pulls out an item wrapped in newspaper.

As she slowly unwraps it, it is revealed to be a small flower pot, which tumbles from her hand and onto the table as she is hit by a contraction.

Ernest turns and looks at her to see if she's all right and can tell by her face that she's not.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Ellie?

He rushes to her side.

ELENORE

The baby.

Ernest scrambles around looking for a telephone.

He finds one and lifts the receiver, but gets no dial tone.

He pulls on the cord and finds it's not plugged in and he can't find a phone jack anywhere.

He overturns boxes and moves furniture all to no avail.

ELENORE (CONT'D)

Ernie, we should go to the hospital.

ERNEST

I'm trying to call--

ELENORE

We should go.

ERNEST

Right.

He holds her hand gently to help her up.

He helps guide her down the five stairs that lead from the kitchen out of the side door.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Ernest paces in the waiting room.

Around him pace other EXPECTING FATHERS.

All of the men have worry painted across their faces.

MILT, 32, and slim, bursts through the door and beelines to Ernie.

ERNEST

Hey Milt.

MILT

She have it yet?

Ernie shakes his head no.

ERNEST

You know, I don't understand. Why would God--

A NURSE enters the room and everyone stops pacing to stare at her in anticipation.

NURSE

Mr. Kramer?

ERNEST

Now?

NURSE

Now.

Milt slaps him on the back.

MILT

Go on. We'll talk later.

All of the other men turn away and go back to their worries and pacing.

A muffled GROAN escapes from the crowd of eager parents-to-be.

NURSE
 Congratulations. You have a new
 son.

A grin spreads across Ernie's face, his eyes alive
 with excitement. He looks heavenward and mouths
 "Thank You".

A MAN next to him mumbles.

MAN
 Congratulations.

He shakes Ernest's hand.

NURSE
 If you'll come with me.

ERNEST
 Where's Ellie? I mean... how's my
 wife?

NURSE
 You can see her now. If you'll
 follow me.

ERNEST
 Okay... wait. Is there someplace I
 can get flowers? She loves Mums.

NURSE
 I'll show you.

Ernest is tight on the Nurse's heels as he follows
 her out of the room.

Expecting Fathers pat him on the back or shake his
 hand as he passes them.

He and the Nurse disappear down a long corridor.

FADE TO:

EXT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2000 - DAY

Andrew rakes as Ernest talks.

ANDREW
 Why weren't you in the room with
 her?

ERNEST
Things didn't work that way then.

FADE TO:

INT. ELLIE'S ROOM - DAY

Ernest hesitatingly peeks into the room. Elenore sits with a BABY resting peacefully in her arms.

Ernest walks in with a small bouquet of flowers and puts them in a vase near the bed.

ERNEST
Hi.

ELENORE
Hi.

Ernest reaches towards the infant.

ELENORE (CONT'D)
Do you want to hold him?

Ernest shakes his head no.

He gently strokes his son's face.

ELENORE (CONT'D)
Take him.

She gently pushes the baby into Ernest's arms. He carefully folds him in an arm cradle and a tear escapes from the corner of his eye.

ERNEST
(to the baby)
We have a lot to talk about.
You're going to be the man of the house soon.

EXT. ERNEST'S NEW HOUSE - DAY

Ernest digs a hole in the backyard. Next to him rests a small sapling.

Elenore and the Baby watch from the window.

ERNEST

Lord, make my son like this tree.
Give him deep roots that hold him
up in the worst storms. Make him
flexible enough to bend without
breaking. And help him grow big
and strong so he can provide rest
and comfort for those in his
shade.

FADE TO:

EXT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2000 - DAY

Andrew is nearly finished raking the yard. He drags
the last of the leaves to the curb.

Ernest remains in a slight daze as he stares into the
tree.

He snaps out of his trance.

ERNEST

How much do I owe you?

Ernest gets out his wallet and pulls out a \$20.

ANDREW

Don't worry about it.

ERNEST

Take it.

Andrew shakes his head.

ANDREW

Dad wouldn't like it.

ERNEST

Buy your girlfriend some flowers.

Andrew puts up his hand to stop Ernest.

ANDREW

We're staying in tonight.

He gives Ernest a grin.

Ernest frowns and puts his wallet away.

Andrew folds the tarp and places it in the garage,
next to it he leans his rake.

ERNEST

There's some tomatoes inside. For
your father.

Andrew pops inside and returns a moment later with a
bag.

He walks down the driveway and is gone.

Ernest watches him leave.

He takes the unopened drink inside after Andrew has
gone. As he opens the door, he sees mud footprints
across the floor.

CUT TO:

INT. ANDREW'S HOUSE - DAY

Andrew tosses his jacket onto a chair as he prowls
inside.

He sets the tomatoes on a table.

He spots Terry in the other room watching television.

ANDREW

I'm gonna take a shower.

TERRY

How'd it go?

ANDREW

I told you he didn't know who I
was.

Andrew starts taking off his shirt.

They watch television in silence for a moment.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

He told me about when you were
born.

Terry turns the TV off.

TERRY

Did he tell you about eating out
of garbage cans?

Andrew shakes his head as he tosses his shirt on the
floor.

Terry stares out of the window as leaves fall.

ANDREW

How is it he can remember all of
that, but he can't remember who I
am?

TERRY

Getting old isn't easy.

ANDREW

Why don't you just put him in a
home or something?

TERRY

If we did that then they'd want to
assess him to see if he's a
burden.

Andrew begins taking off his pants.

ANDREW

Isn't he?

TERRY

Not to me.

ANDREW

He always needs your help. For
everything. And sometimes he
doesn't even know who YOU are.

TERRY

One day you'll understand. Every
moment we have together is a
blessing.

ANDREW

Oh come on, not this God stuff
again.

TERRY

Is it so horrible to believe in
God?

ANDREW

If there were a god, I'd have a mother.

TERRY

Andrew...

Andrew looks away.

ANDREW

He was acting like his shoulder hurt.

Terry sighs and looks back at the TV, turning it on again.

TERRY

It's an old war wound. Ask him about it sometime. He loves to talk about the war.

ANDREW

I'm going over Callie's tonight. Can I take the car?

TERRY

Sure.

Andrew rushes off to shower.

The falling leaves turn into snowflakes and Terry goes to the window and looks out.

CUT TO:

INT. CALLIE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Andrew sits next to a pretty girl, CALLIE. They sit on the couch together cuddling as the TV plays.

CALLIE

You're so quiet tonight.

ANDREW

Huh?

CALLIE

Are you okay?

ANDREW
Yeah, fine.

He stares at the TV while she stares at him. They hear a door open and she shoves him away from her.

CALLIE
My parents.

Andrew looks annoyed.

ANDREW
So what?

CALLIE
They would kill me if they saw us like that.

Andrew looks disgusted. He gets up.

ANDREW
I gotta go.

CALLIE
I thought we were going to hang out.

ANDREW
Your parents are home.

CALLIE
So?

ANDREW
I'll see you later.

He turns, grabs his coat and leaves.

CALLIE
Andy, wait.

He's gone and she fumes in her seat with a mixture of shock and anger.

FADE TO:

INT. ANDREW'S HOUSE - DAY - WINTER

A blanket of white covers the ground.

The telephone rings and Terry gets up to answer it.

Terry hangs up the phone.

Andrew goes to the closet and gets his heavy leather coat.

TERRY

Where are you going?

ANDREW

(resigned)

Grandpa needs help with his driveway, right?

TERRY

I was going to--

ANDREW

You always help him. I got this one.

TERRY

Don't you have plans.

ANDREW

I can get this done first. She'll wait.

TERRY

She's a nice girl. You should treat her better.

ANDREW

What do you mean?

TERRY

You take advantage of her caring about you. A relationship goes both ways.

ANDREW

You don't know what you're talking about. Just be grateful I'm gonna help grandpa and let me use the car later.

TERRY

Sure.

Andrew grabs a pair of leather gloves and is out the door.

Terry watches him go.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERNEST'S HOUSE

Andrew, his ears, nose, and cheeks red from the cold, knocks on the side door.

Ernest answers and is surprised to find Andrew there.

ERNEST

What can I do for you young man?

ANDREW

I'm here to shovel your driveway.

ERNEST

Why?

ANDREW

Because it's snowing and you need the help. Where's your shovel.

ERNEST

In the garage.

Andrew walks back to the garage and lifts the heavy wooden door open.

Ernest yells from the house.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Salt it when you finish.

Andrew waves his acknowledgement.

He searches through the rows of neatly organized tools until he finds the shovel sitting next to a bag of rock salt.

He pulls it free and starts shoveling.

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE

Ernie watches from a small kitchen window as Andrew begins clearing the snow from his driveway.

He sits at the table, on which rests a red Mum, and stares into space.

A small table radio sits nearby. Ernest turns it on an oldies station that plays some tunes from the 40s.

He cracks open a drink and slowly pours it into his glass.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - LATER

Ernest's head lays on his kitchen table, his eyes closed and hands clasped as Andrew walks in from outside.

ANDREW

I'm done.

Ernest doesn't stir.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Grandpa, you okay?

Ernest raises his head and looks at Andrew.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Did I wake you?

ERNEST

I was praying.

ANDREW

What for?

ERNEST

You.

ANDREW

Well don't. I don't need a crutch.

ERNEST

It's not a crutch.

ANDREW

Yeah, well, when I need God I'll let Him know.

Ernest glares at Andrew disapprovingly, who notices the glare.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Like I was saying, I'm done. I'll see you later.

Ernest looks at Andrew's boots as the snow melts on his floor.

Andrew looks at his boots and brushes off the snow that lines the bottoms.

Ernest sighs.

ERNEST

There's a towel by the sink.

Andrew marches over and snatches it.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Want something to drink?

Andrew thinks for a second, glancing at the door, his watch, then shrugs.

ANDREW

What do you got?

Ernest climbs up from his seat and walks past Andrew and down some stairs, to the basement.

Andrew removes his leather jacket and hangs it on a door knob.

As he's unlacing his boots, Ernest returns.

He sits back in his chair and sets an unopened beer on the table, in front of an empty seat.

Andrew wanders up the five stairs and plops down in the chair, simultaneously opening the drink.

He looks at Ernest who has a bandage on his arm and a scrape on his face.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

What happened to you?

ERNEST

I slipped.

ANDREW

You okay?

ERNEST

Fine.

ANDREW

Hit your head?

He shakes his head no.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Do you know who I am?

An awkward silence ensues and Ernest looks a little helpless for a moment.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

You ever seen it snow like this?

ERNEST

Once, in Germany.

FADE TO:

EXT. OPEN MARKET - GERMANY - 1916 - DAY

Ernest's Mother, JOANNA, 30, stands shivering next to a fruit cart as snow falls around her. Her threadbare coat barely able to shield her from the harsh winds.

ERNEST (V.O.)

My Father left for America when I was two. He took my oldest brother, Bill. He was going to make enough money that he could send for my Mother, me, and my other brother, Kurt. He just didn't do it in time.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S MOTHER'S HOUSE - DAY

Joanna lays in bed, coughing a wet, thick cough. Ernie, 5, and his brother, KURT, 10, peek around the corner into the bedroom.

A DOCTOR takes her temperature and gently checks her pulse.

DOCTOR
I'm afraid it's not good.

JOANNA
What does that mean?

DOCTOR
You should consider what to do
with the children.

Tears well up in the corners of her eyes, but she
refuses to let them escape.

She spots her boys peering around the corner.

JOANNA
Thank you Doctor.

DOCTOR
I'm sorry--

JOANNA
I'll be fine. Thank you.

The Doctor packs his bags.

He catches a glimpse of the boys as he packs.

His head droops as he leaves them alone with their
dying Mother.

MOTHER
Boys, come here.

Kurt scurries into the room and stands attentively at
bedside.

Ernie stays outside the room.

JOANNA
Ernie, come on.

Slowly he steps inside, next to his brother.

JOANNA (CONT'D)
I'm going to be leaving soon.

KURT
Why?

JOANNA

When I go, I want you to go to the church. They will take care of you.

KURT

Where will you go?

JOANNA

We can still be together. Even when I'm not here. Just go to the church. When you talk to God, I'll be listening.

KURT

I don't want you to go.

JOANNA

You just stay with the church until your Father sends for you. Understand?

Both boys nod.

JOANNA (CONT'D)

I love you both, very much.

They nod again.

JOANNA (CONT'D)

Now, be good boys and get me a glass of water.

Kurt disappears to get the water.

Ernie remains, looking at his mother in silence.

JOANNA (CONT'D)

Take care of your brother.

Ernie nods.

She takes his hand, but has to release it as she's struck by a coughing fit.

FADE TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Ernie stands next to a plywood coffin, just exactly as he stood at bedside.

His Brother stands next to him, equally silent.

PASTOR HAM puts his hand on Ernie's shoulder as the coffin is slowly lowered into the ground.

He escorts the boys back towards a church that looms in the early morning haze.

CUT TO:

INT. ORPHANAGE - DAY

Ernie and Kurt, carrying all that they own in small bags, are escorted by the Pastor into the main hall of the orphanage.

MOTHER DIERDEN, 53, black hair streaked with silver, approaches the boys.

PASTOR HAM

We have some new residents Mother.
This is Kurt and this is Ernest.

He nudges each boy forwards as Dierden bends over to look at them closer.

MOTHER DIERDEN

Hello boys.

KURT

Hello miss.

Ernie stays silent.

MOTHER DIERDEN

Do you say hello?

Ernie shakes his head no.

KURT

He can talk miss. He just doesn't
have much to say.

MOTHER DIERDEN

I can respect that.

(beat)

If you'll follow me.

She turns and strides down the hall.

The boys glance at the Pastor.

PASTOR HAM

Go on.

They hesitantly follow.

CUT TO:

INT. BOY'S DORM - DAY

Ernie and Kurt stop in the door and take in the stacks of beds. It is a small room with just enough space to walk between each bed. The bunks are stacked 2 high and the top bunks nearly touch the ceiling.

Mother Dierden nudges them in.

MOTHER DIERDEN

There's an open bunk on the right.
You can put your things under the bed.

CUT TO:

EXT. ORPHANAGE - DAY

Ernie and Kurt slowly approach a group of BOYS playing war in the snow.

They've built a foxhole and they pretend to be shooting each other with imaginary guns.

KURT

What are you doing?

SVEN, 8, blond hair and blue eyes in a face taken over by freckles, yells at them.

SVEN

Get down. Before the French get you.

Kurt throws himself on the ground and crawls through the snow into the foxhole by Sven.

Ernie simply watches them.

KURT
Ernie, come on.

He shakes his head no.

SVEN
What's wrong with him?

Kurt shrugs and they continue to pretend that they are fighting the French.

Kurt throws a snowball and all the boys duck.

SARAH, 6, a gentle Tom-Boy type and the only girl in the ragtag group, approaches Ernie.

SARAH
You can play with me if you want.

He nods and she takes his hand and walks him over to a small snow garden.

SARAH (CONT'D)
I'm growing tomatoes. Here.

She passes him a watering can and some snowballs.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Make sure they get enough water.

Ernie shrugs and pretends to water the snowballs.

FADE TO:

EXT. ORPHANAGE - DAY - SPRING

The snowballs turn red as the snow turns to real tomato plants covered in morning dew and birds chirp in the crisp spring air.

KURT (O.S.)
Come on. We're gonna be late.

Ernie picks up his small satchel, slings it over his shoulder and runs to catch up to his brother and the others.

Sven, Ernie, Sarah and Kurt walk together.

KURT (CONT'D)

I brought you your lunch.

He hands Ernie a piece of bread with malt on it.

Ernie immediately eats it.

SVEN

You're supposed to save that for school.

SARAH

Maybe he was hungry now. It's not like we get breakfast.

Sarah eats hers too.

Sven shakes his head.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

The school consists of one classroom in which all of the 34 STUDENTS sit.

A lone MALE TEACHER, who carries a thin wooden switch up his sleeve that he fidgets with constantly, tries to educate the mass of children.

Their varying ages contribute to the appearance of disorder in the room.

All of the students read books or are just learning to write the alphabet, like Ernie.

The Male Teacher observes that Ernie is drawing pictures of tomatoes instead of letters of the alphabet.

He scowls and clears his throat.

Ernie looks up at him and hesitantly raises his hand knuckles up waiting for the disciplining.

The teacher fidgets with the switch for a moment.

MALE TEACHER

Everyone put your books down. You may take a break for lunch at this time.

The students immediately drop their books and rush for the door.

MALE TEACHER (CONT'D)

Ernie!

Ernie stops and walks over to him, eyes to the floor.

MALE TEACHER (CONT'D)

I know you're hungry. So are many of the others. Try to focus.

Ernie nods.

MALE TEACHER (CONT'D)

You may go now.

He runs off.

EXT. SCHOOL - DAY

The students pour out of the door and onto the lush grass that encircles the building.

Wooden picnic tables and benches serve as a cafeteria, while two wooden barrels serve as garbage cans.

Kurt and Sven break out their bread and scarf it down.

Ernie and Sarah simply sit and watch with no food of their own.

Many of the OTHER CHILDREN have lunches complete with fruit and sandwiches.

The four of them watch lustily as the other students devour their lunches.

One of the students throws away a half eaten apple.

Ernie gets up and wanders over to the garbage can.

He reaches in, pulls it out and walks back over to sit with the others.

SVEN

What are you gonna do with that?

Ernie looks at it for a moment then takes a huge bite.

Sven, Sarah and Kurt all stare at him in momentary shock.

Then, all at once, the three of them bolt to the garbage and wait for the other kids to throw some food away, which they immediately snatch and eat.

ERNEST (V.O.)

We got a lot of new roommates that year. Because of the war.

MONTAGE:

A NEW BOY walks up to the garbage can and stands fighting for scraps with the others.

A TALL GIRL and SMALL GIRL walk up to the trash can as it starts to drizzle.

The rain stops and leaves start to fall as an OLDER BOY joins the group.

Mother Dierden spots the children waiting by the garbage can.

END MONTAGE:

CUT TO:

INT. ORPHANAGE - NIGHT

Mother Dierden ushers the children to their rooms.

MOTHER DIERDEN

Time for bed children.

Kurt, Ernie, and Sven wander into one room with the other BOYS, Sarah disappears into a room across the hall with the other GIRLS.

After all of the children have gone to their rooms Mother Dierden returns to the dining room of the orphanage.

CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM

She enters and takes her seat at the head of the table. 5 other SISTERS sit in silence staring, heads bowed and hands folded.

In front of each of them sits a bowl of chicken broth and some bread.

MOTHER DIERDEN

Lord, we thank you for the
sustenance you provide in this
time of need. Amen.

SISTERS

Amen.

They all cross themselves then begin eating, dipping bread in their soup.

Ernie peers around the corner and Mother Dierden spots him. His eyes are wide as he stares at the food and his stomach rumbles.

MOTHER DIERDEN

Ernie, what are you doing out of
bed.

ERNIE

Good night, Mother.

All of the Sisters stop eating and slowly turn their heads to stare at Ernie in shock.

Mother Dierden fights back tears.

MOTHER DIERDEN

(barely whispers)
Come here Ernie.

He hesitantly walks over to her and stares at his feet, slightly afraid.

MOTHER DIERDEN (CONT'D)
Would you like some bread?

He nods yes.

She tears off a piece and hands it to him.

ERNIE
Thank you.

MOTHER DIERDEN
Now, off to bed with you.

Ernie scurries out as all of the Sisters watch him go.

After he's gone they all turn and look at Dierden in mutual surprise that Ernie spoke.

MOTHER DIERDEN (CONT'D)
Well, how about that?

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2000 - DAY

Andrew sits in rapt attention as Ernest relays his story.

ERNEST
I got up to the fourth grade.

ANDREW
You really ate out of the garbage?
Dad said you did but I didn't
believe him.

Ernest nods.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
When did you come to America?

ERNEST
I almost didn't make it.

FADE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL - 1922 - DAY

Kurt, 17, pulls Ernie, 11, by the hand up to a NURSE.

Ernie's eyes are sealed shut with dried puss.

KURT
Excuse me, Miss?

The Nurse turns around and sees the boys.

She bends over and looks at Ernie's eyes briefly.

NURSE
Come with me.

She takes them to a small room then leaves.

She returns shortly with a basin of warm water, a rag, and a glass.

NURSE (CONT'D)
What's your name?

ERNIE
Ernie.

NURSE
Okay, Ernie. Take this glass of warm water.

She dips the glass in the basin collecting some water in it.

NURSE (CONT'D)
Hold it over your eye for a few minutes. Then gently wipe it with this rag. When that eye is open, do the same to the other one. I'll be back with a Doctor.

She leaves.

Ernie tips his head back and turns the glass over on his right eye.

ERNIE
Don't worry we'll get there.

KURT
This just had to happen now, you know?

ERNIE
I'm sorry.

KURT

It's not your fault. I've got a few months left to get over there.

The Nurse returns with a Doctor in tow.

DOCTOR

Where are your parents?

Ernie pulls the glass away and wipes his eye with the rag until he can open it.

He overturns the glass on his other eye.

KURT

Our Father is in America. That's where we were going when he got this.

DOCTOR

It's an infection that has been going around, very contagious for children. We'll have to cauterize his eye lids.

Kurt winces at the thought.

ERNIE

What's that?

DOCTOR

Burn the inside of your eyelids with a hot wire.

Ernie swallows hard.

ERNIE

Will it hurt?

DOCTOR

I'm afraid it will.

CUT TO:

INT. OPERATING ROOM - DAY

Ernie lays on a wooden table.

His arms and legs are strapped down.

NURSES hold each limb and a Kurt holds his head.

The Doctor raises a small wand on the end of which is a thin wire that glows red hot.

DOCTOR
Hold him steady.

Kurt tightens his grip.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
Okay Ernie, ready?

Ernest grips the sides of the table until his knuckles turn white.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
Look up.

Ernie's eyes look up and the Doctor slowly moves the wire to his lower eye lid.

The wire touches and singes the flesh.

Every muscle in Ernie's body tenses and he grinds his teeth as smoke rises from his eye.

The Doctor pulls away from the eye.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
You still okay?

ERNIE
Ouch.

Everyone starts to chuckle.

The Nurse grabs a stick and puts it between his teeth so he can bite down on it.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Ernie sits in a small room, alone.

A small glass window in the door allows Kurt to look in, but Ernie is too short to see through it.

The room has an exterior window that gives him a view of the country side.

Kurt stands outside the room, in the hallway, and speaks through the closed door.

KURT

The Doctor says it'll be at least a few months before you can get out.

ERNIE (O.S.)

Six. Then another six if they're not sure it's gone.

KURT

Yeah?

ERNIE (O.S.)

Yeah.

FADE TO:

EXT. ERNIE'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Kurt sits on the floor.

In front of him a checkerboard is laid out.

Every square is numbered and a game is in progress.

He controls the black pieces.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNIE'S HOSPITAL ROOM

Ernie leans against the door with a checkerboard in front of him, numbered identically.

The exact same game in progress.

The red pieces by him.

ERNIE

Ten to seventeen.

Ernie moves the piece on square ten to square seventeen.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERNIE'S HOSPITAL ROOM

Kurt does the same thing.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2000 - DAY

Ernest finishes his drink.

ANDREW

I didn't know you play checkers.

Ernest shrugs.

ERNEST

Some.

Ernest gets up from his chair and grabs a towel from the sink.

He wanders over to the melted snow.

Andrew watches until realization dawns on him.

ANDREW

I'll get that.

Ernest bends over and starts to wipe up the water.

Andrew gets up and hurries over to help wipe up the mess.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

I just forgot.

Ernest stops cleaning and sits back down while Andrew dries the floor.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

What happened next?

FADE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL - 1923

Kurt stands talking to Ernie's Doctor in a busy hallway.

KURT
He's fine. I'm telling you.

DOCTOR
We can't be sure he's no longer
contagious.

KURT
It's been six months. He'll go
crazy in there.

DOCTOR
We can't take the chance.

KURT
You're joking.

DOCTOR
I'm sorry. He stays.

KURT
He has to get out now.

DOCTOR
There's no way.

Kurt storms off down the hallway.

EXT. ERNIE'S HOSPITAL ROOM

Kurt glances through the window and watches Ernie
staring outside longingly.

A tear forms in the corner of Kurt's eye which he
quickly scrubs away.

He knocks on the window.

Ernie turns and sees him.

He gets up and approaches the door.

ERNIE
I have to stay. Don't I?

KURT
Don't worry, I'll still be here.

ERNIE
You turn 18 in a month.

KURT

I know.

ERNIE

Dad's visa is only good for you if you go over before your 18.

KURT

Don't worry about me.

ERNIE

You have to go.

KURT

I can't leave you here.

ERNIE

I can take care of myself.

Ernest gestures at the room around him.

ERNIE (CONT'D)

Besides, what's going to happen to me in here. I'll come over as soon as I get out.

KURT

I'll wait with you.

ERNIE

You can't. You have to go.

KURT

I won't leave you here.

ERNIE

Go.

KURT

I--

ERNIE

I'll be fine. Just go.

KURT

But--

ERNIE

I don't want you here anymore.
Leave.

Ernie walks away from the door and turns his back to Kurt.

He stares out of the window.

Kurt opens his mouth to say something then changes his mind.

He turns and walks away.

Ernie watches as daylight fades into night.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Kurt walks to the area that Ernie can see through his window.

He carries a small bag and looks to Ernie's room.

Ernie stands at the window, arms crossed.

He slowly raises one hand to the glass.

Kurt raises his hand in response to the wave.

They stand like that for a moment then Kurt slowly walks off into the night.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNIE'S HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Tears stain Ernie's cheeks as he watches his brother leave.

FADE TO:

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY - 6 MONTHS LATER

Clutching his checkerboard in one hand, Ernie bursts through the doors and outside at full speed.

He slows down then stops, closes his eyes and breathes deeply the crisp autumn air.

He exhales and his breath fogs in front of him.

He opens his eyes and turns around to look at the hospital.

His nurse stands in the doorway. She smiles at him and waves goodbye.

CUT TO:

INT. AMERICAN EMBASSY - DAY

Ernie, 12, and Pastor Ham stand in front of a large, BALD OFFICIAL, who sits uncomfortably behind a small wooden desk.

His bulk protrudes from each side as the desk cuts into his abdomen

BALD OFFICIAL
Where were you born?

ERNIE
Deutchidle.

BALD OFFICIAL
Mmmhmm...

He looks at his papers, shuffles them and stares at them again.

Ernie and the Pastor exchange bewildered glances.

BALD OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
That's what I thought. We're at our quota of Polaks this year. Maybe next year.

PASTOR HAM
He's not Polish.

BALD OFFICIAL
Where were you born?

ERNIE
Deutchidle.

BALD OFFICIAL
Mmmmmm... Poland.

ERNIE
Germany.

BALD OFFICIAL
Poland.

PASTOR HAM
Not when he was born.

BALD OFFICIAL
When were you born?

ERNIE
1911.

BALD OFFICIAL
Mmhhhmm...

He shuffles his papers, stares at them and shuffles them again.

BALD OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
Hold on.

He wrestles with the desk as he struggles to free his bulk.

After many unsuccessful attempts he achieves freedom and leaves the room.

Ernie looks at Pastor Ham.

ERNIE
They're going to let me go, right?

PASTOR HAM
Have faith Ernie.

ERNIE
I'm not Polish.

PASTOR HAM
I know.

The Bald Official returns.

He wipes sweat off of his brow and tries to sit back down, but then thinks better of it and remains standing.

BALD OFFICIAL
German.

PASTOR HAM

Have you met your quota on Germans
yet?

The Official snorts and chuckles at some private
joke.

BALD OFFICIAL

Not yet.

Ernie's eyes light up with excitement.

BALD OFFICIAL (CONT'D)

A ship leaves tomorrow. You can
catch that one if you've got the
fare. If not...

He shrugs.

PASTOR HAM

Tomorrow will be fine. Thank you.

The Official nods and blows his nose.

He stamps Ernie's visa and waves the two away.

CUT TO:

EXT. DOCK - DAY

FAMILIES line the rails as the ship sets sail.
ONLOOKERS cheer and wave as the ship departs.

Pastor Ham stands solemnly staring as the vessel
pulls away.

Mother Dierden approaches him from behind.

MOTHER DIERDEN

Is he on board?

Pastor Ham nods.

MOTHER DIERDEN (CONT'D)

He'll make it.

They watch as the ship fades into the distance.

CUT TO:

INT. CABIN - DAY

Ernie opens his cabin door to find HENRY, 43, a distinguished man, slightly gray at the temples, the ship's doctor.

HENRY
Hello there.

ERNIE
Hi.

Ernie stands in the doorway, staring.

HENRY
It seems we're room mates.

Henry walks over and takes Ernie's satchel.

HENRY (CONT'D)
You are Ernest Kramer?

ERNIE
Yes... yes sir.

HENRY
I suppose you'll want the upper bunk? It's too much climbing for me anyway.

Ernie stares.

Henry tosses Ernest's bag onto the bunk.

HENRY (CONT'D)
I'll help with your other bags if you want.

Ernie shrugs.

ERNIE
Don't have any.

Henry notices the checkerboard under Ernie's arm.

HENRY
What's that then?

ERNIE
Checkerboard.

HENRY

Do you play Poker as well?

Ernie shakes his head no.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Well, we'll have to remedy that.

(beat)

Make yourself comfortable. I have
to make my rounds. Name's Henry,
I'm the ships doctor.

Henry exits, leaving Ernie alone to digest his
situation.

He takes off his coat, hangs it on a hook, then
climbs up to his bunk and sits, deep in thought.

CUT TO:

EXT. DECK - DAY

Ernie gazes through the rails off into the ocean.

No land is in sight, just a vast sea of blue.

Two rowdy boys, FRANK, 10, and CHRIS, 9, run across
the rail above Ernie's head.

CHRIS

Ernie, come on.

Ernie climbs up onto the rail and glances over the
side and sees the water far below.

He sways briefly before balancing and chasing after
the other boys.

Henry watches Ernie from the deck with JOHAN, the
ships captain.

JOHAN

The boys got nothin'?

HENRY

Just the clothes he wears.

JOHAN

Let's slip him some money then.

HENRY
I'll set it up.

CUT TO:

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Ernie sits at a table with Henry, Johan, and ARNOLD, the cook.

The cabin is lit by a lantern that sways with the rocking of the ship.

The four of them play Poker.

Johan has a Flush, Arnold has a Pair, and Henry has a Full House.

Ernie has 2 Pair. A small pot sits on the table.

Arnold glances at the window behind Ernie and can see his hand.

HENRY
I haven't a thing. I fold.

JOHAN
You're a coward are ya. Well, I'm out as well.

Arnold bites his lip.

ARNOLD
I'm in for 2 dollars.

JOHAN
That's a mighty big bet there.

HENRY
(to Ernie)
Maybe you should sit this one out.

JOHAN
Kid, lady luck is fickle. She likes to run out on ya at the worst times.

ERNIE
I'm in. What do you got?

ARNOLD
A pair of ladies.

Ernie looks at his card and frowns.

ERNIE
All I've got are a Pair of threes
and a Pair of eights.

Arnold drops his cards on the table.

ARNOLD
Tonight is not my night. Two Pair
beats one, kid.

ERNIE
Really?

Ernie scoops up the pot at the center of the table.

ARNOLD
That's it for me fellas, broke.
I'll see you tomorrow night, for a
rematch?

ERNIE
Sure thing.

JOHAN
I should check on the crew.

HENRY
Have a good night Gentlemen.

The two of them leave and close the door behind them.

HENRY (CONT'D)
You're getting pretty good. Be
careful though, if you take all of
their money they might toss you
overboard.

Ernie smiles.

Henry rubs his eyes.

HENRY (CONT'D)
I'm going to bed, you should rest
too. We pull into port tomorrow.

ERNIE
Night.

CUT TO:

INT. CABIN - DAY

The faintest cracks of daylight fight to get through the porthole of the cabin.

Henry shakes Ernie until he wakes.

HENRY
Get up.

ERNIE
Huh?

HENRY
Come with me.

Ernie clambers out of bed.

Henry tosses a jacket at him.

HENRY (CONT'D)
Put that on. Hurry.

He does so.

The jacket is much too large, but he wears it anyway.

Henry exits the cabin and Ernie follows.

CUT TO:

EXT. DECK - DAY

The early morning fog slowly melts as the sun rises.

Johan and Arnold stand at the front of the ship where Henry and Ernie join them.

ERNIE
What are we doing?

HENRY
Watch.

As the fog dissipates the sun reflects off of the Statue of Liberty.

Arnold picks Ernie up and sits him on his shoulders.

JOHAN
Beautiful, isn't she?

The red and orange of the sun breathes fire into the statue and she glows like a beacon.

CUT TO:

INT. ELLIS ISLAND - DAY

Thousands of IMMIGRANTS wait patiently in a number of lines.

The swarms of people create a buzz of indistinct languages and conversations.

Ernie waits, next in line, behind him stretch over 100 People waiting to be admitted to the country.

Henry stands off to the side talking to a PRETTY GIRL.

The VISA OFFICIAL yells for the next in line.

VISA OFFICIAL
Next.

Ernie stands, overwhelmed at the scene.

VISA OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
Next!

The MAN behind Ernie nudges him forwards.

He turns and looks at the Man then moves forwards.

Ernie approaches and slides the Official his Visa.

VISA OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
Do you speak English?

Ernie nods.

VISA OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
Name?

ERNIE
Ernest Herman Kramer.

VISA OFFICIAL
Reason for coming to America?

ERNIE
Family.

The Official looks up from his paper work at Ernie.

VISA OFFICIAL
You alone?

Ernie nods, but the Official's head is buried in papers.

The Official looks up and looks around.

VISA OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
Anyone with this boy?

No reply.

VISA OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Of course not.

Ernie watches him.

VISA OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
Belongings?

The Official points at Ernie's bag.

Ernie opens his satchel and the Official glances inside.

VISA OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
Go over there.

He motions towards a MAN IN A WHITE COAT , checking people out before they cross into the country.

MAN IN A WHITE COAT
Next.

Ernie doesn't move.

MAN IN A WHITE COAT (CONT'D)
Next?

The Official nudges Ernie.

VISA OFFICIAL
He said next.

Ernie walks over.

The Man checks his pulse, makes him stick out his tongue, touch his toes, he listens to his breathing and examines his eyes.

MAN IN A WHITE COAT
Go stand in that line.

Ernie doesn't move.

ERNIE
Everything is okay?

MAN IN A WHITE COAT
Over there!

Henry looks up at the yell and sees Ernie getting pushed towards the line of PEOPLE GETTING SENT BACK.

He walks briskly over and pulls Ernie out of the line and takes him back to the Man in a white coat.

HENRY
What's the problem?

MAN IN A WHITE COAT
Who are you?

HENRY
The ship's doctor.

MAN IN A WHITE COAT
He has an eye infection. He goes back.

HENRY
He has no such thing.

MAN IN A WHITE COAT
Look at his eyes.

Henry looks at Ernie's eyes.

HENRY

Those are scars. He had an eye infection. It's long gone.

MAN IN A WHITE COAT

(sighs)

Let me see.

He looks at Ernie's eyes again.

HENRY

He's perfectly healthy. I should know, he roomed with me the whole voyage.

The Man in a White Coat stares at Henry, who meets his glare eye to eye.

Ernie watches the standoff until--

MAN IN A WHITE COAT

Next.

Henry takes Ernie through the hall and out the other side.

CUT TO:

EXT. ELLIS ISLAND - DAY

Henry and Ernie stop in front of a ferry.

HENRY

He was confused. I straightened it out for him.

ERNIE

Thank you.

Frank strolls by with his family.

FRANK

You coming to Cleveland?

Ernie nods.

FRANK (CONT'D)

See you on board.

HENRY

Take this.

He hands Ernie a few dollars.

ERNIE

I can't.

HENRY

Take it. Now go and catch up to
Frankie and his folks. They'll
take care of you.

He nudges Ernie towards the boat.

Ernie looks over his shoulder, then walks on board
the ferry.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2000 - NIGHT

Andrew sits enthralled in his Grandfather's story.

Ernest straightens his glasses.

ANDREW

Can you still speak German?

ERNEST

A little.

ANDREW

What happened when you got to
Cleveland?

CUT TO:

INT. BUS STATION - 1923 - NIGHT

A CROWD slowly dissipates until the only two people
left are Ernie and WILLIAM, his Father.

ERNEST (V.O.)

I got off the bus and stood there
until everyone else was gone
except for me and a man.

ANDREW (V.O.)

Your Father?

William stands looking at Ernie and Ernie stands looking at him.

WILLIAM
Ernest Kramer?

Ernie nods.

ANDREW (V.O.)
What did you say?

ERNIE AND ERNEST (V.O.)
Hi.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2000

Andrew looks at his grandfather and shakes his head.

ANDREW
That's it?

ERNEST
I never really knew him. It was like meeting him for the first time.

ANDREW
Unreal.

Ernest shrugs.

ERNEST
That's just the way it was.

ANDREW
So when did you met Grandma? I mean did you date and stuff?

ERNEST
We courted.

ANDREW
What?

ERNEST
Yes, we dated.

ANDREW
Did you hook up before you got
married?

ERNEST
Hook up?

ANDREW
You know...

Andrew motions with his pelvis like he's having sex.

Ernest gets to his feet, angry.

ERNEST
You're talking about my wife.

Andrew laughs and puts his hands up to fend off his
grandfather.

ANDREW
Okay, okay. Sorry.
(beat)
Sit down and tell me how you met.

ERNEST
Maybe you should leave.

ANDREW
Come on. I was just kidding.

Ernest stares at him.

ERNEST
You need to show more respect for
women.

ANDREW
Just tell me the story.

FADE TO:

EXT. CLEVELAND 1929 - DAY

The Trolley rolls down the street as CROWDS bustle
by.

ERNEST (V.O.)
I went to school, grew up, and got
a job.

ANDREW (V.O.)
Did you go to college?

KIDS run through the street with a DOG.

ERNEST (V.O.)
Fourth grade.

ANDREW (V.O.)
That's it?

ERNEST (V.O.)
That's it.

ANDREW (V.O.)
Then what?

A MAN walks into Weber's Meats.

CUT TO:

INT. WEBER'S MEATS - DAY

Ernest, 28, works behind the counter of a butcher shop, WEBER'S MEATS.

In the back is MILT WEBER, 28, son of the owner. He sweeps up scraps as Ernest cleans the meat case.

MILT
It's about time you came to work for us Ernie. I've only been offering for three years.

ERNEST
Change takes time Milt.

Milt comes to the front and glances out the window.

MILT
This is the best part.

ERNEST
What?

MILT
The stop.

He nods towards the window. Outside sits a group of LOVELY LADIES. ELENORE, 18, a young beauty, is amongst them.

CUT TO:

EXT. WEBER'S MEATS - DAY

Elenore powders her nose.

In her compact mirror she sees Ernest looking out of the window next to Milt.

ELENORE
Who's that?

KATHY, 32, Elenore's co-worker, looks in the window.

KATHY
Don't know.

ELENORE
Find out.

KATHY
What? You want me to just go in
and ask?

ELENORE
Would you?

KATHY
Not on your life.

The group of Ladies giggle.

The Street car pulls up and they climb on-board.

Elenore takes a last look in Ernie's direction.

Frank and Chris stroll across the street and into the shop.

CUT TO:

INT. WEBER'S MEATS

Frank, 27, and Chris, 26, still looking as they did on the ship but older, peruse the selections as Ernie waits for the tormenting to begin.

FRANK
Hey Milt.

MILT
Frank. Chris.

CHRIS
Ernie.

MILT
You fellas looking for something
specific?

CHRIS
Just some fresh meat.

MILT
We have whatever you want.

Frank sneaks behind the counter.

CHRIS
We want him.

Frank grabs Ernie.

FRANK
Get his feet.

Milt grabs Ernest's legs and they carry him to the
back room.

MILT
It's initiation time.

CUT TO:

INT. WEBER'S MEATS - BACK ROOM

They drag him back to the slaughter area.

Chris picks up a pint of pigs blood and dips his
fingers in then looks over at Ernie half crazed.

ERNIE
What are you doing?

The others laugh.

ERNIE (CONT'D)
Wait, don't!

Chris jumps on him and proceeds to paint a smiley face on Ernie's apron and write's "Ernie" across his chest.

CUT TO:

INT. WEBER'S MEATS - NIGHT

Ernest and Milt play Poker, killing time, as Elenore strolls through the door. The bells chime her arrival.

ELENORE

Hi Milt.

MILT

Ellie.

Ernest jumps to help her. She sees his apron and giggles.

He looks down and then takes the apron off and crumples it up in one hand, hiding it behind his back.

ELENORE

I'm Elenore.

ERNEST

Ernest.

ELENORE

Your apron said Ernie.

ERNEST

My friends call me that.

ELENORE

(flirtatiously)

Hi Ernie.

He blushes.

ELENORE (CONT'D)

It's nice to meet you Ernie.

They shake hands and get lost in each others eyes.

ERNEST

It's a pleasure.

Elenore slowly withdraws her hand.

ERNEST (CONT'D)
Can I get you something?

ELENORE
No thanks. I just wanted to meet
the new boy.

She turns and leaves.

Milt starts laughing and Ernest turns around to see
what's so funny.

MILT
(mockingly)
It's a pleasure.

Ernest throws his apron at him.

CUT TO:

EXT. WEBER'S MEATS - DAY

Elenore waits for the Trolley again.

She spies Ernie in her compact once more.

He's gazing from behind the counter, lost.

Kathy notices both of them.

KATHY
Stop teasing the boy.

ELENORE
What do you mean?

KATHY
You're engaged, remember?

Elenore shrugs.

KATHY (CONT'D)
He is awfully cute though. Maybe
I'll go introduce myself--

ELENORE
Don't you dare.

CUT TO:

INT. WEBER'S MEATS - DAY

Milt catches Ernie staring at the women.

MILT
You're hopeless.

ERNEST
She's beautiful.

MILT
She's getting married.

ERNEST
Why does she wait out there?

MILT
She lives across the street and
works at the dime store, downtown.

Ernest sighs.

MILT (CONT'D)
Pathetic.

CUT TO:

EXT. WEBER'S MEATS - NIGHT

Ernie waits outside the store as the Trolley arrives.
Elenore climbs off with Kathy.

ELENORE
See you tomorrow.

KATHY
Bye.

Ernest follows Elenore across the street until he
catches up to her.

ERNEST
Can I walk you home?

She jumps, startled.

ELENORE
You scared me.

ERNEST
Sorry. Walk you home?

ELENORE
I live... sure.

They stroll down the street.

ERNEST
How was work?

ELENORE
Were you waiting for me?

ERNEST
Maybe. I thought you might like
some company.

Elenore looks away and blushes.

ELENORE
How long were you waiting.

ERNEST
It didn't feel like long once I
saw you again.

ELENORE
I shouldn't let you do this. I
don't want to give you the wrong
idea.

ERNEST
Don't you like me?

ELENORE
That's not the point.

ERNEST
Let's just get to know each other,
friends. Okay?

Elenore nods.

MONTAGE:

EXT. CLEVELAND - DAY

Ernest and Elenore window shop on the street.

EXT. CLEVELAND - NIGHT

They walk together, carrying ice cream cones. The city lights sparkle.

They walk by a window box full of chrysanthemums.

Elenore stops and caresses them lovingly.

INT. ERNEST'S CHEVY - DAY

Frank, Chris and Milt all cram into the back seat.

Ernest drives and Elenore sits beside him in the passenger seat.

They all laugh as the drive through the country side.

INT. DIMESTORE - DAY

Ernest approaches Elenore's register with a Lady's hat.

INT. WEBER'S MEATS - DAY

Elenore enters the store wearing the hat. Milt shakes his head. Ernie smiles.

INT. ERNEST'S FATHER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A party is in progress.

Ernie's brother's Kurt and BILL are there.

Frank and Chris are flirting with TWO LOVELY LADIES.

Kathy sits and chats with Elenore, who only watches Ernie while he gets their drinks.

EXT. ERNEST'S FATHER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ernest's Father walks up the drive. He collapses in front of the door.

END MONTAGE:

INT. WEBER'S MEATS - DAY

Milt works alone, sweeping, as Elenore strolls in.

ELENORE
Is Ernie coming in today?

Milt shakes his head no.

ELENORE (CONT'D)
How is he?

Milt shrugs.

MILT
They said it was a heart attack.

Shock mixes with sympathy.

MILT (CONT'D)
They're having people over.

ELENORE
When?

MILT
Come back in an hour. I'll take
you.

She leaves.

CUT TO:

INT. FATHER'S HOUSE - DAY

Ernest, Kurt, Bill and his WIFE all sit. Pictures of
their Father surround them.

Frank and Chris sit somberly, playing cards.

Milt and Elenore come in.

KURT
Hey Milt.

Milt nods. Ernest rises from his seat.

ERNEST
Thanks for coming.

MILT
Sorry for your loss.

ELENORE
Very sorry.

Ernest nods.

ERNEST
May I talk to you?

ELENORE
Sure.

He takes her outside.

Milt sits down and joins the card game.

CUT TO:

EXT. FATHER'S HOUSE

Ernest and Elenore sit on the porch.

ERNEST
I've been thinking...

He squirms uncomfortably.

ERNEST (CONT'D)
I really like you...

ELENORE
I like you too.

Ernie opens his mouth to speak, but closes it again.

Finally, he gathers his nerve and blurts it out.

ERNEST
I can't wait any longer. Life's
too short.

ELENORE
I... I'm engaged.

ERNEST
I know, but I thought--

ELENORE

I can't.

ERNEST

You never see him.

ELENORE

You don't understand. I can't.

ERNEST

What if--

ELENORE

I'm sorry, I can't. I should go.

ERNEST

Ellie, wait.

She walks away, without looking back.

Ernest hangs his head.

CUT TO:

INT. WEBER'S MEATS - DAY

Milt and Ernie lounge in the empty store.

MILT

I told you.

ERNEST

I just thought--

MILT

You didn't think. That's your problem.

ERNEST

We've been having so much fun together.

MILT

That's it. Fun. It's not serious.

ERNEST

It felt serious.

CUT TO:

EXT. CLEVELAND - DAY

Ernie and Milt walk down the street towards a theater.

In line they spot Elenore and her FIANCÉ.

Ernie grabs Milt's sleeve and they turn around.

CUT TO:

EXT. WEBER'S MEATS - DAY

Elenore waits for the Trolley with the other Ladies.

She looks at Ernie in the mirror again.

He sees her and goes to the back of the store, out of sight.

KATHY

That boy is hopeless.

CUT TO:

INT. WEBER'S MEATS - NIGHT

Elenore comes into the store.

MILT

I'm going home. You close up.

Ernie nods and Milt leaves.

Elenore watches him go.

ELENORE

Ernie, I wanted to apologize--

ERNEST

It's my fault.

Elenore shakes her head no.

ELENORE

I'm not engaged anymore.

Ernie looks confused, but won't look at her.

ELENORE (CONT'D)

He wants to move to California. I
want to stay here--

ERNEST

That's nice.

ELENORE

With you.

Ernie looks up at her.

She nods, biting her lip.

Ernie bolts around the counter and scoops her up into
his arms.

He lets her slowly slide down until they are face to
face and they share their first kiss.

CUT TO:

INT. ELENORE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Elenore's MOTHER and FATHER sit at one end of the
dining room table while Ernie sits at the other.

Her Father gulps from a tumbler filled with scotch.

Ernie sits on the edge of his seat at strict
attention.

FATHER

What, exactly, are your intentions
concerning my daughter.

ERNEST

Well sir, I... uh--

FATHER

She was engaged you know? Not long
ago.

ERNEST

Yes sir--

FATHER

And you will respect her. At all
times.

ERNEST

I would never--

FATHER

Our reputation has already been tarnished once with this, Fiance, business. You understand?

ERNEST

Very clearly sir.

FATHER

Very well then. Do you drink Scotch?

ERNEST

No sir.

He motions to his wife to prepare two glasses of Scotch.

Elenore's Mother moves off into another room.

Her Father leans in close, the stench of liquor already on his breath.

FATHER

Listen here, boy. I know what you really want and if you think my daughter will--

ERNEST

Sir, with all due respect--

FATHER

Don't you interrupt me, boy. Ever.

ERNEST

I think I should go.

FATHER

You just remember. She's MY daughter.

Elenore's Mother returns with the drink in hand.

ERNEST

Good night Ma'am.

MOTHER

It was nice meeting you.

ERNEST

And you.

He leaves.

MOTHER

What did you say?

FATHER

Nothing.

CUT TO:

EXT. CINEMA - DAY

Ernie and Elenore exit the Theater.

ELENORE

Don't mind him. He's a drunk.

ERNEST

I want your family to like me.

ELENORE

He's just out of control
sometimes.

ERNEST

Let's go somewhere. Out of town.
Just you and me.

ELENORE

Are you crazy? My Father--

ERNEST

You said to not worry about him.
Let's just get in my car and go.
Chicago.

ELENORE

Chicago?

ERNEST

Come on. Kurt said we should come
visit him there. I haven't seen my
brother in months and it will give
us a chance to be together, alone.

ELENORE
You can't be serious.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - DAY

Ernie and Elenore drive in his Chevy as the car kicks up dirt behind them.

Elenore whoops with glee.

FADE TO:

INT. FACTORY - DAY

Ernie waits amongst other APPLICANTS in a cramped room.

Each man has an application in hand.

An INTERVIEWER pops his head out of an office door.

INTERVIEWER

Next.

Ernie gets up and wanders to the office.

CUT TO:

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Ernie sits across from a good-old-boy Interviewer.

INTERVIEWER

So, why are you interested in labor of this sort?

ERNEST

Well, I want to get married.

INTERVIEWER

Who doesn't?

ERNEST

I need a job with some security.

INTERVIEWER

This is hard work.

ERNEST

I'm not opposed to hard work. My
life has been nothing but.

The Interviewer chuckles.

CUT TO:

EXT. CLEVELAND - NIGHT

The city lights sparkle as Ernie and Elenore stroll
down the sidewalk.

ELENORE

You're quitting the Weber's?

ERNEST

They already know.

ELENORE

Why?

ERNEST

I need a job with a future. I've
got to be able to make a real
living.

ELENORE

What are you talking about?

Ernie blows out a breath and runs his hand through
his hair.

ERNEST

I love you Ellie. And I want to
marry you.

He gets down on one knee.

She wraps her arms around him and kisses him before
he can say another word.

CUT TO:

INT. ELENORE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ernest sits at the table across from Elenore's Mother
and Father again.

This time Elenore sits beside him, holding his hand.

FATHER

I don't want my daughter with any
worthless German.

ERNEST

I'm an American.

ELENORE

Daddy.

FATHER

The hell you are. I'll bet you
never went to school.

ERNEST

I went for many years.

FATHER

Did you graduate?

ELENORE

That's enough.

He pats her hand to say it's okay.

ERNEST

I had to work. Like everyone else.

FATHER

How are you going to support my
girl with no education?

ERNEST

I have a good job.

FATHER

At a meat market?

ERNEST

At a factory. Full time, good pay.

ELENORE

Leave him alone.

FATHER

You will not marry Elenore. I
forbid it.

Elenore bolts from her seat.

ELENORE

You have no say in who I marry.

FATHER

Sit down.

He rises from his seat as does Ernie in response.

ELENORE

I dare you.

The Father glances at Ernie and the smoldering fire in his eyes.

He spins and storms out of the house.

Elenore's Mother sits calmly at the table.

MOTHER

Congratulations.

ELENORE

Why don't you leave him already?

MOTHER

I can't.

ERNEST

You can come stay with us,
anytime.

MOTHER

You'd better go. Before he comes
back.

ELENORE

Are you going to be okay?

MOTHER

I can handle him.

CUT TO:

INT. FATHER'S HOUSE - DAY

White bows decorate the stairs and chairs line the room. In those chairs sit FRIENDS and FAMILY.

Chris stands next to Ernie, in tuxedos, as they stare at the stairs in nervous anticipation.

Milt and Frank sit on the aisle, smiles from ear to ear.

Kathy stands across from them in a simple dress.

Elenore slowly descends the stairs, alone, in a white wedding gown.

Elenore's Father is conspicuously absent, but her Mother sits in the front.

Tears appear in Ernie's eyes as Elenore makes her way towards him.

A PASTOR, standing behind Ernie opens a Bible.

PASTOR

On this joyous day let us remember those who were not able to be here. And let us invite God to partake in this, most Holy of ceremonies.

Ernie and Elenore turn to face the Pastor.

CUT TO:

EXT. FATHER'S HOUSE - DAY

The Friends and Family line the path to Ernie's car, on which is a sign reading "Just Married".

Ernie and Elenore emerge from the house and are immediately showered with rice as they make their way towards the vehicle.

FRANK

It's about time.

MILT

If it doesn't work out you can always come back to work with me.

CHRIS

Congrats buddy.

He shakes Ernie's hand.

Elenore stops by her Mother.

MOTHER

I'm sorry about your Father.

ELENORE

Don't be.

MOTHER

We're getting a divorce.

Elenore hugs her hard.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

You get going now.

She wipes away some tears.

Elenore and Ernie clamber into the car and drive off as everyone waves goodbye.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2000 - NIGHT

Ernest rises from his seat and wanders over to the window.

Twilight is slowly swallowing the day.

ERNEST

It's getting dark.

Andrew shrugs.

ANDREW

Dad knows where I am.

ERNEST

You should show him more respect.
You don't respect anybody, do you?

ANDREW

I respect him just fine.

ERNEST

He's had a hard road you know,
raising you all by himself.

ANDREW

Yeah, well he's not the only one
who it's been hard on.

Ernest sits back down and looks at Andrew. Andrew looks back.

ERNEST

You've got a lot to learn about
life boy.

Andrew rises to his feet.

ANDREW

You gonna teach me?

ERNEST

I think it's time for you to
leave.

Andrew looks out the window.

ANDREW

Yeah, right. I got better things
to do anyway.

He gets up, snatches his things and stomps out the door.

ERNEST

You need to go somewhere and think
about what you're doing with your
life.

ANDREW

Like you know anything about me.

Ernest nods.

CUT TO:

EXT. ANDREW'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Andrew walks with his hands in his pockets, the cold freezing his breath.

He stares at his house briefly before heading up the driveway and in the door.

He sees his father sitting alone in front at the kitchen table eating a TV dinner.

TERRY

You were gone a while.

ANDREW

It was a lot of snow. Why do you put up with him still? He's such a crazy old man now.

TERRY

I love him.

ANDREW

But you never have time for anything else. You work and take care of him then come home exhausted.

TERRY

We can make time anytime you want.

Silence.

ANDREW

He fell again.

TERRY

Is he all right?

ANDREW

I'm not a doctor, call a hospital.

TERRY

You know we can't do that.

Andrew flops down in a chair across from his father.

ANDREW

You can't hide him forever.

TERRY

I'm not hiding him. The Transition Office would start looking into things if he needs too much attention.

ANDREW

Well maybe they should.

Terry's head snaps up and his eyes are ignited.

TERRY

Don't you ever say that again.

ANDREW

What?

TERRY

Every life has value. You get that through your head. I believe it and your Mother believed it.

ANDREW

And that's why she's dead.

TERRY

Your Mother died giving you life.

ANDREW

Like I killed her, right? You don't have to tell me again.

Tears of rage struggle free from his eyes.

TERRY

Apparently I do. We knew there was a good chance she wouldn't survive. We decided, together, that we couldn't execute an innocent baby in order to preserve our life together. We knew the risks and trusted in a divine plan.

ANDREW

Yeah, well you were wrong.

Terry gets up and walks over to his son. He puts his face to Andrew's ear and whispers.

TERRY

No. We weren't.

He tries to put his arms around his son, but Andrew lurches free and slams off outside.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Andrew walks alone under the harsh streetlights. Tears of rage reflect on his cheeks. He looks at an advertisement for The Office of Assisted Transition. It has an 800 number to "anonymously" report burdens.

He gets out his cell phone and dials.

ANDREW
Office of the Transition?

FADE TO:

EXT. CALLIE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Andrew walks around the side of the house and knocks on a window.

After a moment Callie moves the blinds aside.

CALLIE
You were supposed to be here hours ago. You stood me up. It's too late now.

ANDREW
I know.

CALLIE
We can talk tomorrow. If my dad catches you here this late he'll kill you.

ANDREW
I can handle it. Please?

Callie sighs.

CALLIE
I'll be right out.

Andrew waits outside, shuffling in the cold.

Callie comes out wrapped in a blanket.

CALLIE (CONT'D)
What's so important?

ANDREW
I wanted to see you.

CALLIE
Is that all?

Andrew gets irritated.

ANDREW
Isn't that enough?

CALLIE
No, Andy, it's not.

ANDREW
What's your problem?

CALLIE
You come to my house in the middle
of the night and risk me getting
grounded or worse all because you
wanted to see me? What's my
problem?

Andrew gets angry.

ANDREW
Yeah. It's supposed to be sweet,
right.
(sarcastically)
I'll do anything for you.

CALLIE
No. You'll do anything for you.
You do whatever you want without
thinking about anybody else.

ANDREW
What're you talking about? I
always take you places to have fun
and buy you things--

CALLIE
You do that because you want to
get something--

ANDREW
Yeah, you.

CALLIE
Exactly. You don't care about me.
You just use me to get off.

ANDREW
That's not true.

CALLIE
Yes it is. I'm done.

ANDREW
Come on Callie.

CALLIE

We're done. Go home and leave me alone. I don't want to see you anymore.

ANDREW

What?

CALLIE

Go. Home.

ANDREW

I'm not your dog.

CALLIE

Got out of here. I don't want to see you anymore.

Tears break free from her and she starts to cry.

ANDREW

Don't do this.

CALLIE

It's done Andy. And it's your fault.

ANDREW

Fine. Whatever. I don't need you anyway. I don't need anybody.

Andrew marches off into the night.

Callie watches him go as tears run down her cheeks.

CUT TO:

EXT. ANDREW'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Andrew sits outside on his driveway. A tear runs down his cheek as he watches the sun rise.

Terry comes outside and sits next to him. He puts his arm around Andrew's shoulders and pulls him in a sideways hug.

Andrew puts his face on his father's shoulder and sobs.

The snow melts away as the new day dawns.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - DAY - SPRING 2001

Andrew opens the door and pops his head in.

ANDREW

Hello?

No answer.

Andrew sighs and mopes in, irritated.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Dad? You here?

(beat)

Grandpa?

(beat)

Anybody?

He sees a checkerboard sitting on an end table.

He turns the corner and sees his Grandfather staring at a photo, tears run down his cheeks.

Andrew goes silently back to the door and speaks gently.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Hello?

(beat)

Grandpa?

ERNEST (O.S.)

(croaking)

Hello?

ANDREW

Hey Grandpa, it's me.

Ernest clears his throat, rounds a corner wiping his eyes and sees Andrew.

ERNEST

Just taking a nap.

His hair is disheveled and his glasses are crooked.

He fixes both as he makes his way to the kitchen.

ANDREW

Oh, sorry. I can come--

ERNEST

No, no. It's okay.

ANDREW

I was just... I thought, maybe...
you want to play some checkers?

ERNEST

Sure.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN

They sit down across the table from each other.

Andrew grabs a red checker and a black checker,
shakes them up and puts one in each hand.

ANDREW

Pick.

Ernest picks the right hand, black.

They set up their checkers.

Andrew notices faint numbers on the board.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Is this the board?

Ernest nods.

Andrew very carefully places his pieces.

ERNEST

You don't have to do that.

ANDREW

I don't wanna hurt it.

ERNEST

It's just a game.

They start to play. Ernest moves first.

Andrew responds quickly.

ANDREW
 Hey grandpa, I just...
 (beat)
 I haven't seen you in a while and
 I wanna say I'm sorry.

Ernest takes his time before he moves again.

ERNEST
 I don't even remember what you're
 talking about.

ANDREW
 I do.

ERNEST
 I've been through worse.

They continue to play.

ANDREW
 I'm sorry. Really.

ERNEST
 Okay.

Andrew moves his checker forward.

ANDREW
 What was World War Two like? I
 mean being German fighting against
 Germany.

Ernest looks agitated.

ERNEST
 I'm an American.

ANDREW
 I know but--

ERNEST
 I was as soon as I got here.

ANDREW
 I didn't mean anything--

ERNEST

Everyone was from someplace else.
No one treated me any different.

CUT TO:

INT. BARRACKS - 1943 - NIGHT

Ernest, 32, wearing fatigues, sits on a bunk.

Opposite him sits Chris, 29, clean cut and all smiles.

On the side sits Frank, 30, shirtless, wearing a gold Italian horn around his neck.

They play Poker.

FRANK

We're goin' over tomorrow.

Ernest nods.

CHRIS

What do you think we'll do?

FRANK

Kill Nazis.

ERNEST

You guys still remember the boat to America?

FRANK

Running on the rails.

CHRIS

I almost fell off.

FRANK

I almost pushed you.

ERNEST

I never thought I'd be going back.

CHRIS

To kill our relatives.

Frank and Ernie nod.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

I hear at Normandy the tide is
still red and you can find body
parts in the sand.

Frank looks at Chris like he's ridiculous and Chris
blushes slightly in embarrassment

ERNEST

I call.

Frank lays down two pair.

CHRIS

Straight.

Chris lays out his cards and reaches for the pot.

A LARGE SOLDIER strides over and snatches the pot.

Chris jumps to his feet.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

What's the big idea?

LARGE SOLDIER

You Krauts better stay up front
when we get there.

FRANK

What's that supposed to mean?

LARGE SOLDIER

I don't want no German watching my
back.

ERNEST

We're American, just like you.

LARGE SOLDIER

We'll see about that.

He drops the money to the ground and walks away.

CUT TO:

INT. BOAT - DAY

Ernie, Chris and Frank jostle around as the rough waters toss the vessel. The rest of the PLATOON rides in similar circumstance.

Chris leans over the side of the boat and vomits.

Frank chuckles and smacks him on the back.

Ernie stares at the beach ahead.

CUT TO:

EXT. NORMANDY BEACH - DAY

Ernest, Frank and Chris climb the snow covered hill from the beach along with the other soldiers.

As they crest the summit they see before them an endless sea of makeshift crosses floating on a sea of pristine white snow.

The entire Platoon stands in awed silence and reverence as they take in the scene.

The sunlight reflects off of the snow, almost causing the scene to glow.

Ernest kneels and crosses himself.

A few other SOLDIERS follow his lead.

The Large Soldier glares at him and walks by.

Their SARGENT screams from far off.

SARGENT

Move on. Lets Go.

Slowly the Platoon treads through the makeshift cemetery, careful not to disturb the crosses.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMP - DAY

The Platoon pitches its tents, 2 men per unit.

Ernie shares his with Chris, the meager shelter their only cover from the falling snow.

CHRIS

Not what I expected.

Ernie nods.

ERNEST

It's so... peaceful.

Few MEN move between the tents and only when absolutely necessary.

The snow makes the camp look like a Christmas Village.

MONTAGE:

Soldiers clean their rifles in the snow.

Ernie gathers fire wood.

The Soldiers surround a bonfire singing Christmas carols.

The Platoon marches through a French town. The locals surround the street and cheer as they go through. One BOY puts a Christmas wreath around Frank's neck. Ernie and Chris laugh.

The platoon pitches their tents in a forest.

END MONTAGE:

INT. ERNEST'S TENT - NIGHT

Ernest and Chris lay in their tent, shivering beneath their covers.

Their breath freezes in the midnight air.

SARGENT (O.S.)

Shower truck!

They scramble out of their tent, taking off their clothes as they run into the cold snow.

The rest of the Platoon does likewise.

In the distance a large truck pulls up.

The men sprint to it in their underwear.

When they arrive water sprays from spigots so that the men can bathe.

The hot water steams and each man only stays under the water for a minute before running back to their tents, bodies steaming in the moonlight.

They gather their discarded clothing on the way.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMP - DAY

The Platoon boards a train as the Sargent supervises.

They climb into worn, wooden boxcars. 40 soldiers and two horses in each car.

Ernie, Chris and Frank clamber into their car with the other MEN from their squad.

CUT TO:

INT. BOXCAR - DAY

There is only enough room for each man to sit with his knees to his chest as the train starts to crawl forwards.

Ernest pulls out a letter.

FRANK
(taunting)
What's that?

Ernest ignores him.

FRANK (CONT'D)
Come on. Don't keep us in
suspense.

Frank snatches at the letter.

Ernie moves it and Frank's hand falls on Ernie's lap in an... unfortunate position.

Ernie looks at him and their eyes lock momentarily.

All on board stare at the two men in absolute silence.

Frank's face flushes with embarrassment as he slowly withdraws his hand.

ERNIE

We haven't been gone that long.

Ernie and the rest of the Soldiers break into laughter at Frank's expense.

Frank backs off.

Ernie opens the letter and starts to read.

ELENORE (V.O.)

My dearest Ernie, I miss you my love. The days aren't the same without you here. I think about you constantly. Every time I look at our son I see your face. He rolled over for the first time today. If only you could have seen it...

Ernie wipes tears from his eyes.

CUT TO:

EXT. TRAIN - DAY

The loaded train rumbles slowly down the track.

It gains speed as it pulls away from camp and off into the French countryside.

CUT TO:

INT. BOXCAR - DAY

The Men play Poker as farms pass by outside.

Ernie takes the pot yet again and groans escape from the losers.

The train slows and stops.

SARGENT (O.S.)

You gotta go, go now!

The Soldiers pile out of the cars and into an unlucky farmer's field.

The train empties of virtually all occupants.

Men drop their pants as they run and then stop to fertilize the field wherever they find open ground.

Ernie and Frank sneak up to the engine, where they accost the CONDUCTOR.

ERNEST

Go.

CONDUCTOR

I have to wait until they're all on board.

Frank climbs into the compartment and grabs the Conductor.

Ernest follows him in and pushes the lever to make the train go forwards.

As the train starts to roll ahead on the tracks the Soldiers relieving themselves in the field panic.

They yank up their pants and scramble to get back on board afraid of being left behind.

The train rolls ahead for 100 feet then Ernie stops it again and he and Frank bolt out of the Conductors compartment and back to their car.

CUT TO:

INT. BOXCAR

They return to their car and burst out in laughter when they see the panic on the faces of their compatriots.

CHRIS

You sons of...

They get assaulted by hurled helmets and boots as the others catch on.

Once everyone has returned, the train starts on its way again.

CUT TO:

INT. BOXCAR - NIGHT

The Soldiers sleep, sitting up.

Their backs are propped against the far walls yet their feet still overlap in the center of the car.

They struggle for whose feet get to be on top throughout the night.

Dawn approaches and the train slows to a stop.

The Soldiers grab their gear and pile out.

CUT TO:

EXT. STEEL REFINERY - DAY

In the distance slag piles three stories high cover the ground.

The Platoon marches into the old refinery where they are met by a SCOUT.

SCOUT

(to the Sargent)

Sir. The Germans are on the slag piles, but the factory is abandoned.

SARGENT

(to the Platoon)

We bunk down here tonight. Take the slag tomorrow morning.

The Men set up and settle in.

SARGENT (CONT'D)

Kramer. You got first watch.

ERNEST

Sir.

Ernest moves to the entrance of the factory and stations himself there.

The sky is a fiery red as the sun sets in anticipation of the coming battle.

Night falls and the silence is deafening.

The Large Soldier strolls up.

LARGE SOLDIER
You signalling to your buddies so they can get us in our sleep?

Ernest just stares at him.

LARGE SOLDIER (CONT'D)
I've got my eye on you boy.

CUT TO:

INT. STEEL REFINERY - NIGHT

The Sargent approaches Ernest from the rear.

SARGENT
What's happening?

ERNEST
I don't like the way the wind is whipping up.

SARGENT
What else?

ERNEST
They're moving.

The Sargent disappears and returns moments later with the Scout in tow.

SARGENT
Go see what they're up to.

SCOUT
Sir.

He takes off, melting into the shadows.

ERNEST
It's my birthday tomorrow.

SARGENT
Sorry to hear that.

ERNEST

My wife sent me a letter.

(beat)

I haven't had a chance to write
back yet.

SARGENT

You will.

Ernest nods.

SARGENT (CONT'D)

My daughter turns four next month.

(beat)

Get some sleep. I'll take the next
shift.

Ernest nods and disappears into the factory, leaving
the Sargent staring out into the darkness.

CUT TO:

INT. STEEL REFINERY - DAY

Everyone loads up their gear and checks their rifles.
Ernest stands with Chris and Frank.

The rest of their squad surrounds them, all wait in
nervous anticipation.

The winter wind whips up a fierce chill as it snakes
through the area.

SARGENT

Our scouts tell us they've moved
back to the third pile. We should
be able to take the first two
without a fight.

He looks at Ernest's squad.

SARGENT (CONT'D)

You take the first hill. We'll
follow and take the second.

He looks at the third squad with the Large Soldier.

SARGENT (CONT'D)

You get the prize. After we secure
the second pile, you move in and
take three.

(beat)

Lets move out.

CUT TO:

EXT. STEEL REFINERY - DAY

The morning dew coats the gravel in a fine layer of
ice as the soldier's boots crunch their way towards
the slag pile.

The fierce wind howls its defiance at their
intrusion.

Ernest brings up the rear as his squad moves to the
top of the first pile.

They take up firing positions, kneeling at the top of
the hill rifles aimed forwards.

Squad two flows up the hill and is immediately over
the top.

As they work their way down the other side a land
mine explodes, taking out a man.

Machine gun fire erupts from the second hill as squad
two starts the ascent up the pile.

Soldiers get mowed down as they hit the deck and
start to crawl towards the hidden nest.

Squad three moves over the first hill and is hot on
the heels of squad two as more land mines explode and
men are crippled and killed.

Ernie trains his rifle on the machine gun nest and is
about to squeeze the trigger when--

The Large Soldier lurches right into his crosshairs.
Ernest hesitates, then takes his finger away from the
trigger and prepares to move forward.

Suddenly the machine gun nest explodes from a
grenade.

The third Squad tops the second hill and a fire fight erupts on hill three as the GERMANS try to defend their position.

An orange ember glows next to Ernest's knee.

He looks at it quizzically as another strikes the slag next him.

ERNEST

Sniper!

He climbs to his feet and starts forwards only to trip over his limp right arm.

A bullet whistles by his head.

He looks and sees blood from his shoulder as he tucks his right hand into his jacket in a makeshift sling.

He nudges Chris, who is still kneeling next to him in firing position.

Chris' body falls over and as his helmet rolls off his eyes stare off, empty.

The rest of Ernie's squad rushes over the summit of the pile.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Chris?

He leans over and gently removes Chris' dog tags and closes his eyes.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Thank you Father for taking your son home. Welcome him warmly in your arms.

Ernie bows his head silently for a moment then gets up and begins to move again.

Ernie merely walks as tracer bullets imbed themselves by his feet.

He crosses over the peak and sits in a hole on the other side.

His Sargent is there also, watching the assault. He sees Ernie's wounded arm.

SARGENT
What happened?

ERNEST
Sniper.

SARGENT
Looks like the wind saved your
life.

ERNEST
Didn't save Chris though.

SARGENT
Damn!

The Sargent looks down for a moment.

SARGENT (CONT'D)
He was a good soldier.

ERNEST
A good man.

The Sargent pulls out a thermos.

SARGENT
Drink?

Ernest shrugs his one good shoulder.

The Sargent holds up a flask.

Ernie nods.

SARGENT (CONT'D)
To Chris.

He takes a swig and passes it to Ernie.

SARGENT (CONT'D)
Happy birthday.

CUT TO:

INT. CAMP O.R. - DAY

Ernest lays in a rough cot as SURGEONS and NURSES
patch up the DYING and WOUNDED around him.

JUNE, 26, and old for her years, approaches Ernest's cot.

JUNE

Morning.

ERNEST

Hi.

JUNE

It looks like you got a million dollar wound there.

ERNEST

Sorry?

JUNE

Not bad enough that you're crippled, but bad enough that you can't fight anymore.

ERNEST

Fight? I never fired my gun. Just got shot.

JUNE

Somebody misses you.

She hands him a stack of letters, all from Elenore, and leaves.

He struggles to open one with his left hand and is barely successful.

As he tears the envelope red flower petals, Mum petals, fall to the ground.

CUT TO:

INT. CAMP - A FEW MONTHS LATER - DAY

Tiny bits of snow cling to the ground as the temperature rises and drives the winter away.

Ernest sits at a table covered in opened letters from Elenore.

He tries and fails time and again to write with his left hand.

He gets frustrated and wipes the table clean.

Tears fight to free themselves from the corners of his eyes.

June happens by and witnesses his actions.

JUNE

You okay?

ERNEST

I can't write.

JUNE

You'll be able to write in a few months.

He smacks his right arm.

ERNEST

She doesn't even know I'm still alive.

He breaks down as tears run down his cheeks.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

My wife.

JUNE

I'll do it.

Ernest looks at her, confused.

JUNE (CONT'D)

Tell me what you want to say.

She sits down next to him and picks up his pen.

ERNEST

I can't.

JUNE

Pretend I'm not here.

He sighs, thinks for a moment, then begins.

ERNEST

My dearest Ellie, How I've longed... this is weird.

JUNE

Do you want to write to her?

ERNEST

Yeah, but--

JUNE

Can you do it?

Ernest looks at the ground.

JUNE (CONT'D)

Let me help.

ERNEST

I'm used to doing things myself.

JUNE

It's why I'm here.

Ernest takes a deep breath and lets it out.

ERNEST

My dearest Ellie, how I've longed to see your face. It's been a while since I've written because I was wounded. I'm alive and recovering. They tell me I'll be home soon. I miss you more than you can imagine. I feel so lost here without you. God knows how lonely it is. I swear, once I get home I'll never leave you again...

CUT TO:

INT. CAMP - MONTHS LATER - DAY

Ernest sits, slowly exercising his right arm.

The summer flowers are bright with color as the wind blows them through camp. If it weren't for the walking wounded it would be paradise.

He sees Frank wandering aimlessly.

ERNEST

Frank!

Frank turns and looks around, lost and confused.

Ernest approaches him.

A glimmer of recognition crosses his face.

FRANK

Ernie.

ERNEST

Hey, how are you?

He shrugs.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Where's everyone else?

He makes a shooting motion with his hands.

FRANK

Battle of the Bulge.

ERNEST

How many?

Frank holds up three fingers and Ernie sighs with relief.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Only three. Who?

FRANK

Alive. Only three left alive,
counting you and me.

Ernest recoils in shock.

Frank watches his friend without offering a word.

Ernie sits on the ground hard.

The shock penetrating deep, he struggles with a variety of emotions until he lurches to his feet.

He slowly stumbles toward his bunk, climbs in and lays down.

Frank wanders off.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - DAY

Elenore and a two-year-old Terry play in the grass.

A car slowly drives up the street.

It stops at the curb a few houses away.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR

Ernest sits watching his wife and son.

A UNIFORMED MAN sits in the driver seat.

UNIFORMED MAN

This it?

Ernest nods.

ERNEST

What if she doesn't recognize me
anymore?

UNIFORMED MAN

She will.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERNEST'S HOUSE

Ernest climbs out of the car, pulls his bag out and slings it over his shoulder. He begins to walk towards his wife when she looks up and sees him.

She covers her mouth as tears stream from her eyes.

Terry looks at his mother with confusion.

Ernest approaches them.

ERNEST

Ellie.

She wraps her arms around him and sobs into his chest.

He slowly wraps his arms around her and sighs, tears of his own break free.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

I thought I'd never see you again.

Terry hides behind his mother.

Ernest gently squats on the ground and looks at his son.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Hi Terry. I'm your father.

CUT TO:

INT. ERNEST'S HOUSE - 2001 - DAY

Ernest captures Andrew's last checker.

ANDREW

Play again?

Ernest shakes his head no.

ERNEST

Want a drink?

ANDREW

They're downstairs, right?

ERNEST

I'll get it.

Andrew doesn't even attempt to get up, he just nods okay.

There's a knock at the door and Andrew opens it.

He sees a TRANSITION OFFICER escorted by 2 POLICEMEN.

ANDREW

Can I help you?

TRANSITION OFFICER

Ernest Kramer.

ANDREW

He's not here right now.

ERNEST (O.S.)
Who is it?

The Transition Officer nods to the Policemen who enter and move Andrew aside.

Ernest comes upstairs.

ERNEST (CONT'D)
Hello?

TRANSITION OFFICER
Ernest Kramer?

ERNEST
Yes.

TRANSITION OFFICER
Office of the Assisted Transition.
We have some questions we'd like to ask you.

ERNEST
I don't understand.

ANDREW
Grandpa, don't tell them anything.

TRANSITION OFFICER
What's today's date?

ANDREW
Come on, I don't even know what the date is.

The Transition Officer nods to one of the Policemen who takes Andrew to the kitchen.

KITCHEN

Andrew gets out his cell phone and dials furiously while the Policeman watches.

ANDREW
Dad! Come over to Grandpa's quick.
The Transition Office is here.
They're going to take Grandpa.

FADE TO:

INT. ERNEST'S LIVING ROOM - LATER

Terry and Andrew stare in shock as the Transition Officer packs up his things. The two Policemen hold Ernest gently.

ANDREW

Where are you taking him?

TRANSITION OFFICER

He's become a burden on society.

ANDREW

Leave him alone.

TERRY

Andrew, there's nothing we can do now.

Terry holds Andrew back as they start to take Ernest away.

ANDREW

They're gonna kill him.

ERNEST

It's okay.

ANDREW

But it's a mistake. It's all a big mistake.

TRANSITION OFFICER

We don't make mistakes.

ANDREW

It's not his fault. He's not a burden.

EXT. ERNEST'S HOUSE

Andrew chases after them as they direct Ernest to the car and in.

ANDREW

Where are you taking him?

TRANSITION OFFICER

We are going to assist him in his transition.

ANDREW

You can't. He didn't do anything wrong.

Andrew claws at the car window.

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Grandpa. Don't let them take you.

ERNEST

I know where I'm going.

Andrew's father wraps his arms around him and starts to pull him from the car.

TERRY

There's nothing we can do.

Andrew sobs in his father's arms as his grandfather is driven away.

ANDREW

It's my fault. I didn't mean to.

TERRY

You didn't do anything wrong.

Terry wraps his arms around Andrew tighter as Andrew starts to collapse.

ANDREW

I called them. I called them. But that was months ago. I thought they forgot.

TERRY

They never forget.

Terry holds him tighter as he falls to his knees under the guilt.

ANDREW

But he's a human being. He has a life.

TERRY

But not a value, not anymore.

CUT TO:

INT. TRANSITION OFFICER'S CAR

Ernest sits in the back seat and continues talking as if Andrew were still with him.

ERNEST

Your grandmother always liked flowers. Flowers and sunsets. I remember when she died.

FADE TO:

INT. NURSING HOME 1990 - EVENING

Ernest walks in and a PLUMP NURSE immediately approaches.

She hugs him.

PLUMP NURSE

She's fading fast.

Ernest chokes back tears.

ERNEST

Can I see her?

CUT TO:

INT. ELENORE'S ROOM

Ernest walks in and sees his wife Elenore, she can't speak, but her eyes say everything.

ERNEST

Sweet, sweet Ellie... I should've been here. I'm sorry, I should've been here more.

Andrew, 8, and Terry arrive behind him.

Terry walks in and puts his hand on his father's shoulder, tears welling in his own eyes.

TERRY

Hi mom.

Ernest nods.

ERNEST
Let's go home, Ellie.

He collapses to his knees at her bed side, slides his arms underneath her and lifts.

TERRY
Dad, you're not strong enough.

Ernest ignores Terry.

Elenore can't move and her arms hang limp as Ernest shuffles out of the room.

He walks down the hall away from them.

Terry places his hand on Andrew's shoulder and they watch them walk away.

TERRY (CONT'D)
You okay?

Andrew sniffs back some tears.

TERRY (CONT'D)
Me too.

CUT TO:

EXT. NURSING HOME - EVENING

Ernest emerges from the home carrying Elenore. They walk towards Lake Erie as the sun sets.

ERNEST
I love you Ellie.

A tear breaks free from her eye.

Ernest sits on a rock with Elenore on his lap.

ERNEST (CONT'D)
I'll be with you soon.

The sun sets over the water.

FADE TO BLACK:

THE END