

EXT. INNER CITY - WINTER MORNING

Ominous rain clouds cast darkness on an impoverished city - its empty, icy streets walled in by condemned buildings.

Two cars pass each other - a pimped-out Chrysler blasting Chicano rap music and a struggling Geo Metro.

INT. GEO METRO - CONTINUOUS

The driver with the skinny face is MILES, 30s - a bloodshot, strung-out junkie who's gone too long without his fix.

Next to him is DANNY, 4, a sweet boy who's too innocent to know what's wrong with his father. He's lost in a PALM PUZZLE, tilting the toy to move the ball through the maze.

Miles turns into a residential alley, where he stops and honks three times - this is protocol.

EXT. ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

A DRUG DEALER, 20s, emerges from a gate with his hands in his jacket pockets, looking left and right for possible trouble.

DEALER

Miles, my man.

MILES

I'm twenty short, but you know I'm good for it.

The Dealer notices Danny - or rather, his Raiders jacket.

DEALER

I can deal. That's a sweet jacket your kid's got. It would look good on my boy.

(to Danny)

What do you say, little man?

Danny looks up from his toy to reveal a SCAR across his eyebrow, as Miles contemplates the trade. He knows Danny needs his winter jacket. But Miles also needs his fix.

INT. GEO METRO - LATER

We see Miles's purchase in his lap - a brown bag that he's itching to open. As he drives along, fighting off emotion, he turns up the heater for a crushed Danny, who's now coat-less.

MILES

I didn't have a choice, Danny. I need my medicine. My body can't go without it, you understand?

No, Danny doesn't understand. He's shivering.

EXT. CITY - DAY

The Geo enters a new part of the city - a huge upgrade from the last. It zigzags through streets until it comes to a CHURCH with well-dressed MEMBERS heading inside.

INT. GEO METRO - SAME

Miles brakes at the stop sign in front of the church parking lot, where he sees a FATHER putting a JACKET on his SON.

Next, Miles looks at the church - with an awful idea in his head. He clutches the bag of drugs, then looks sadly at a freezing Danny, already regretting what he's about to do.

INT. CHURCH HALLWAY - DAY

Miles leads Danny (holding tight to the palm puzzle) past classrooms until he finds Danny's age group. He looks in over the half-door to see KIDS playing, as a CAREGIVER greets him.

CAREGIVER

First timers?

Miles nods as the Caregiver hands over a sign-in sheet.

CAREGIVER (CONT'D)

Good to have you. Just sign him in.
Be sure to add your phone number.

The Caregiver hands him a laminated TICKET with "LIGHTHOUSE CHURCH CHILD CARE" and "2" printed on it.

CAREGIVER (CONT'D)

Just return this ticket when you pick him up.

The Caregiver opens the door, but Danny refuses to go in. Miles crouches to Danny's level, tearing up as though this is goodbye forever. He strokes Danny's hair.

MILES

You go with this nice church lady.
You'll be taken care of here.

DANNY

But I want to stay with you.

MILES

It has to be this way, Danny. But
you'll be safe here. With them.
Without me around.

Miles hugs him as tight as he can. It's hard to let go, but he finally does, and Danny mopes into the playroom.

The Caregiver watches suspiciously as a broken-hearted Miles hurries back down the hall – utterly consumed by addiction.

CAREGIVER

(to Caregiver 2)

I don't think he's coming back.

The Caregiver turns to Danny, who overheard her.

FADE TO BLACK.

The words: "Eleven years later" appear on the screen.

We hear a loud banging on a door.

FADE IN:

INT. DANNY'S FOSTER HOME - 11 YEARS LATER - DUSK

As the banging continues, Danny, now 15 with a BLACK EYE to go with the scar across his eyebrow, furiously packs a DUFFLE BAG with clothes. The sweet-looking boy looks a bit hardened by the world, and we see why: Behind him is a chair wedged under the knob to keep out his irate FOSTER FATHER.

FOSTER FATHER

Open this door, Danny! Right now!

All packed, Danny opens the window, kicks out the screen, and throws his duffle bag onto the ground two stories below.

FOSTER FATHER (CONT'D)

Danny boy, you got nowhere to go.
Nobody will take you in. I own you!
You hear me? So open up the door
before I get really upset.

Danny spots his PALM PUZZLE on the shelf – a sentimental keepsake. He grabs it as his FOSTER FATHER, 40s, a giant, kicks the door open. With no time to spare, Danny hops out --

EXT. SHABBY HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

-- onto the canopy. He lowers himself down, then, with his bag over his shoulder, jogs past houses until he comes to --

EXT. CITY - CONTINUOUS

-- a busy business street. He disappears among the crowd.

EXT. HAMBURGER STAND - NIGHT

Streetlights come on as a hungry Danny counts change - 42¢. He glances up at the menu, knowing he's short, then moves on.

EXT. BUS STOP - NIGHT

Coming to a bench, a chilly Danny drops his heavy bag and sits down with his head in his hands - panic is setting in.

To his right, Danny sees a HOMELESS WOMAN lie down on the other bench. He stares at her, wondering if this is his fate.

HOMELESS WOMAN

That's where Sal sleeps. You can't sleep there.

(beat)

There's a shelter on Figueroa Lane. Go there. Sal sleeps here.

Danny contemplates the shelter, knowing it's his best option.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

Danny, growing colder, walks along the block, stopping at an intersection with another PEDESTRIAN.

DANNY

Is this the way to Figueroa?

PEDESTRIAN

It runs the other way. You want to head west about four blocks.

When the light says "WALK", Danny starts west.

EXT. FIGUEROA LANE - CONTINUOUS

The brutally cold, dark city is now empty. As Danny walks along, he looks around nervously to make sure he's alone.

At the next intersection, he finds the homeless shelter, a short line out front. Danny hesitates there, but finally makes his way in, past a string of cigarette-smoking HOMELESS MEN in hooded coats who look him up and down.

INT. HOMELESS SHELTER - CONTINUOUS

As soon as Danny enters the reception area, he's nearly run over by two EMTs pushing a WOMAN out the doors on a gurney.

EMT
Move, people! Let's go, make way!

Once the EMTs are outside, Danny turns to see PASTOR RAY, 50s
– a man as worn down as anyone else there.

DANNY
Is this where I check in?

Ray gives him a quick glance up and down.

RAY
First time here?
(off Danny's nod)
Come with me.

Before following Ray down a hall, Danny observes the people
and the place, unsure if he's better off here.

INT. RAY'S OFFICE/BEDROOM – CONTINUOUS

As Pastor Ray offers Danny a chair:

DANNY
What was that all about?

RAY
A stoned resident supposedly *fell*
from her bunk and cracked her head
on the floor. So how old are you?

DANNY
Twenty. Is she alright?

Ray gives him a look – he knows Danny is lying.

RAY
No, she isn't. You look fifteen,
maybe sixteen.

DANNY
Does my age matter?

RAY
Not to me. Can you read?

Danny nods, and Ray hands him a set of rules, a medical
evaluation form and a pen, and a stamp-sized bed ticket.

RAY (CONT'D)
Fill that out and read the rules,
which are simple: Don't cause
trouble. Use the ticket to get a
bed assignment.
(MORE)

RAY (CONT'D)

Mass starts in about five minutes.
Join us or don't, it's up to you.
And if you have any money, the
safest place to hide it is in your
underwear.

DANNY

All I got is forty-two cents.

RAY

Then they'll come after your
possessions. Those are as good as
money. Are you hungry?

INT. NEAR-EMPTY CAFETERIA - NIGHT

Danny sits alone at a table eating a PB&J sandwich. A cheerless BOY, 5, sits near him, eyeing Danny's juice box. When Danny notices, he slides it down the table to him. With a big smile, the boy rips open the straw and begins to drink.

INT. MEETING ROOM FOR MASS - NIGHT

Danny enters a big room with tables and chairs, where about 50 PEOPLE are singing a hymn accompanied by a harmonica.

Holding tight to his duffle bag, Danny finds space at the back table next to a sleeping man. This is DANNY'S FATHER, MILES - though not even his mother (or the audience) would recognize him with the long hair and beard hiding his face.

Miles snores, which prompts Ray to pinch his nose shut, startling him awake. Ray glares at him before moving along.

Though years of drug use have ravaged his mind, Miles is sharp enough to notice Danny - not as his son, but as a target. He eyes the duffle bag with envy.

MILES

You look like a mouse lost in a
snake hole.

Danny tries to hide his fears. And to ignore Miles.

MILES (CONT'D)

It's only natural. My first night,
I hung out in a bathroom stall
until bedtime. At least you're
brave enough to be out here.

(beat)

Just stick by me. I'll get you
through it.

DANNY

Thanks, but I'm OK on my own.

MILES

Not with that goodie bag you're not. Might as well have a bull's-eye on your back.

DANNY

There's nothing of worth in it.

MILES

People here can turn the clothes on your back into dollars for drugs.

Up front, BARBARA, 50s, shares her testimony.

BARBARA

I'm Barbara, and I'm here to share my story - that with God's help, I've been clean for 4 years. Every day is a struggle, but every day God helps me stay clean by --

As Miles stands up to leave:

MILES

(loudly)

What a load of crap. Addiction is incurable! It's just lying dormant, like a volcano that's set to blow at the next earthquake. You watch.

(to Danny)

Come on, kid, let's get outta here.

With all eyes on them, Danny decides to duck out with Miles in order to end the disruption.

EXT. COURTYARD - NIGHT

Danny and Miles stand near the doors, apart from the other HOMELESS MEN and WOMEN talking and smoking in groups.

As Miles, with shaky hands, smokes:

MILES

So what's your story? No other family to take you in?

Hesitant but not wanting to be rude, Danny shares:

DANNY

Not after my father disappeared.

MILES

So you went into to a foster home?

DANNY

I'm on my fourth, third in the last two years. My first was with a good woman from a church. She loved me like her own. But she wasn't well. She died when I was twelve.

(beat)

The couple after her treated me good, but they had marriage problems. The last two have been...

MILES

Boxers?

As Danny caresses his black eye:

DANNY

Being the oldest in the house, I get punished for things, like if money goes missing.

Here comes FREDDY, 50s, a wild-eyed man who doesn't seem to know where he is. He stands in Danny's personal space, smacking his lips, feeling the sleeve of Danny's jacket.

MILES

Beat it, Freddy.

Freddy looks greedily at Danny's bag.

FREDDY

Whatcha got there?

MILES

I said beat it, you old mule.

Wanting Danny's goods for himself, Miles kicks Freddy in the butt and shoves him away. He kicks again, sending Freddy to the pavement. Then once more as Freddy stumbles off.

MILES (CONT'D)

(mid-kick)

I said get!

Pleased with himself, Miles turns to see Danny shaking his head in disapproval as he heads back inside.

INT. CAFETERIA - NIGHT

Danny lays his sleeping mat down on the floor among 100 others all wedged together.

When Miles spots him in the crowd, he throws the mat beside Danny's away – while giving the mat's OWNER a threatening glare – and then sets his own down in its place.

MILES
 (off Danny's look)
 What? I said I'd get you through
 this. People here are no good.

Danny puts a sweatshirt under his head, hugs his duffle bag, and tries to sleep – amid the groaning, snoring and farting.

MILES (CONT'D)
 Try these, kid.

Miles hands him ear plugs, which Danny takes reluctantly.

MILES (CONT'D)
 Don't worry. They're clean.

As the lights go dim, Danny stuffs them in his ears.

INT. CAFETERIA – NIGHT – LATER

Danny is asleep, and his bag has rolled out of his arms.

Miles, though, is wide awake. He looks around for witnesses, then quietly opens Danny's bag, pulls out clothes and stuffs them into his backpack. Then he finds it – the palm puzzle – which he recognizes. Hoping it's just coincidence, he looks closer at Danny and finds the scar across the eyebrow – proof that this is his son. Miles collapses, as old guilt creeps back in. Then new guilt over what's become of his sweet boy.

EXT. BATHROOM – NIGHT

Miles bursts into the empty bathroom and plops down against the wall, unsure how to handle this. Then, looking at his backpack, he knows – get stoned. He pulls out a bottle of pain-numbing methaqualone and dumps out three tablets.

Just then, in comes a whacked-out, drooling, stumbling resident mumbling gibberish. He enters a stall, leaving Miles alone again. Miles looks down at the tablets, then up at the stall, wondering which is worse – the guilt or the drugs?

INT. RAY'S OFFICE/BEDROOM – NIGHT

Ray wakes to a knock on his door. He unlocks and opens it.

RAY
 You're not supposed to be here.

As Miles pushes his way in and sits at Ray's desk:

MILES

You know Danny, the kid who came in alone tonight? He needs your help.

Ray remains by the door, irritated with Miles.

RAY

This can wait till morning.

MILES

You know people, you can get him a better foster home, a job. He shouldn't be in here.

Ray realizes something big is up. He finally sits down at his desk and looks Miles over – time to see where this is going.

RAY

Nothing worth having in this life is free but God's grace, so if I do this, I'm going to need something from you in return.

MILES

What do I have that you want?
(off Ray's knowing look)
No, I'm clean, Ray. I swear.

RAY

Everything you got. All those mind-numbing pills you take. *Everything.*

MILES

I'm telling you, I'm clean.

RAY

And here I thought you were serious about helping this kid.

Miles realizes he can't fool the wise old pastor.

MILES

What good would it do, anyway? I'm not going to rehab. It's never worked. It won't now.

RAY

You've never wanted to quit before. You've also never come into my office and asked me for anything, because you didn't want what I had to offer. But now here you are.

MILES

I see a chance to help a kid out.

RAY

Everyone in this place needs help, and you've never stuck your neck out for any of them. That means this boy is special.

MILES

He reminds me of someone, alright?

RAY

Someone you wronged?

Miles says nothing – he can't admit it.

RAY (CONT'D)

I know you don't want to hear it, but God gives us opportunities for atonement. Sometimes He puts us in the same place, in the same situation – so this time you have a chance to do something different.

MILES

Don't pretend to know me.

RAY

I know you chose drugs over your family once. Now it looks like you have the same choice – drugs or this boy. What's it going to be?

INT. CAFETERIA – DAY

Danny grabs breakfast – cereal and a muffin – then sits with Miles, who looks as clear-headed (and ashamed) as ever.

DANNY

I never caught your name.

MILES

Never said it.

DANNY

Well, I'm Danny.

They eat in silence for a while.

MILES

What would you say, Danny, if I talked to Pastor Ray about getting you into a new foster home?

DANNY

I haven't had much luck with those lately.

MILES

Ray knows people down at child services. He'll make sure it's a good situation. What do you say?

DANNY

I guess I'd say I owe you.

MILES

You give me half your muffin there, and we'll call it even.

DANNY

I can do better than that.

MILES

OK then. Promise me you'll do your part. That when life goes bad, you won't run from it. That you'll push back. Hard. That you won't end up back here, with these people, waiting to die.

Danny nods, suddenly serious. Then he hands over his whole muffin, which Miles picks up on his way out.

EXT. SHELTER PARKING LOT - DAY

Danny, Miles and Ray are saying goodbye beside an idling van.

DANNY

Thanks.

Miles hugs him and won't let go. Danny finds it strange, but he goes along with it.

MILES

Don't break your promise. I don't want to see you again.

Danny nods, then gets in the back of the van. Ray watches Miles look on as it rolls out onto the street.

INT. VAN - DAY

Danny rides in back, happy. He reaches in his bag for the palm puzzle and finds something unexpected - the TICKET with "LIGHTHOUSE CHURCH CHILD CARE" and "2" printed on it. It takes him only a moment to realize...that was his father.

