

Bootstraps
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FADE IN ON:

INT. ANDREA'S RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Crystal chandeliers. China plates. This joint is real high class. So high, you get a nosebleed from entering its VIP room.

At a table, CEO DOUG MULDER (50s) and LAWRENCE CATLIN (60s) share wine, over the crumbs of dessert.

DOUG
...so then I told him: 'Money talks. The problem is, with you the only word it knows is goodbye!'

The two laugh, clink glasses. Lawrence eyes his.

LAWRENCE
Not bad.

DOUG
Not bad? That's a Screaming Eagle Sauvignon Blanc! Hold it gingerly...
(chuckles)
You know, like your prick.

LAWRENCE
If you're comparing this meal to a hand job, then buddy - you pick up the check!

Just outside: A desperate FACE peeks through the window.

ERIC STILLWELL (40s). Frizzy hair, shabby clothes. An Andrea's janitor uniform would be an upgrade.

At the table: A tuxedo clad WAITER arrives with the bill.

Eric ducks down to avoid detection. Though wisps of his hair still shows, waves in the night wind.

At the table: Lawrence reaches for the tab. Mulder intercepts, hands it back to the waiter with a gold card.

DOUG
It's on the expense account.

LAWRENCE
I have to pay for something!

DOUG
Save your pennies for those REITS I
recommended. And Melinda's next art
discovery, of course!

The two down the wine. Screaming Eagle's soon no more.

EXT. ANDREA'S RESTAURANT - MOMENTS LATER

Eric recons through the window.

Doug and Lawrence rise from their meal.

Angling constantly for a clear view, Eric squints as they
retrieve jackets and depart.

A GREETER opens the door. The bell chimes. Afraid of
detection, Eric ducks behind a decorative bush.

Lawrence and Doug emerge, moving slow - they've absorbed
more than their share of food.

Lawrence climbs into a LIMO at the curb. Then notices
Doug hasn't moved.

LAWRENCE
Wait. Where's YOUR car?

DOUG
Not here tonight. Obviously.

LAWRENCE
A staffing problem due to COVID?

DOUG
No! I live ten blocks away.

LAWRENCE
(waves to his pal)
Need a ride? Hop on in. I'll share. It's
just like Uber, but for people that
matter.

The two share a laugh. Eric stares through his bush.
Every word agitates him more.

Doug pats his stomach.

DOUG
Thanks, but pass. The night's beautiful.
And young. I could use the exercise.
Appreciate the offer, but I'll walk.

LAWRENCE

Suit yourself, big boy.

Lawrence signals to his DRIVER. The sleek machine slides from the curb. Doug yells after it.

DOUG

Call me tomorrow. But after two. Sylvia's so obsessed with her Soul Cycle class, she's demanding I give it a spin - so to speak!

The limo departs. Doug adjusts his belt, checks his watch. Then takes a step towards home.

Which is Eric's cue!

Detangling from the bush, he approaches Doug - a desperate expression on his face. Doug leaps to a conclusion, quick.

DOUG

Sorry, but I don't "do" beggars. I just paid a hefty bill. All outta cash.

ERIC

No, you don't understand!

DOUG

Wait. Don't tell me. I know how the next line goes. You wouldn't *normally* ask for anything. But through absolutely no fault of your own, you've fallen on - what's the phrase? Hard times.

Eric lunges forward. Doug stumbles back.

DOUG

Don't touch me!

He waves to the Waiter through Andrea's window.

DOUG

Shoo. Scoot. Or I'll call the police.

ERIC

I don't want your money! You're Doug Mulder, right?

Mulder freezes.

DOUG

Excuse me? You know my name?

ERIC

Your nickname is "Money" Mulder, formally the CEO of Fiduciary Health Insurance of Omaha. And you just consolidated with Aegis Medical last month!

Doug looks Eric up and down.

DOUG

You don't look like the type to read *Forbes*. And that wasn't front page news. Nor is my face that famous. Are you stalking me?

ERIC

No. I just need to talk. A few minutes. About a client of yours.

DOUG

(groans)

Fiduciary Health has millions of happy customers. It's not like I've got names memorized!

Eric's voice softens.

ERIC

It's about my daughter. Erica Stillwell. She's very sick. About to die.

Doug's eyes widen. He inches farther from Eric.

DOUG

Listen, that sounds horrible. Let's both just pray her doctors fix her up right.

ERIC

I don't need your prayers. And they can't! Fiduciary denied her treatment. She's got a pre-existing condition, and needs help right now!

DOUG

Sir, rest assured I sympathize. But you're wasting your time with me. Addressing disputes is customer service's job. Call them in the morning, after nine. Or try our online service tonight. I haven't uh, surfed it myself. But my IT guys tell me it's quite good!

Swinging 180, Doug walks away from Eric at a fast clip.

EXT. ROLLING SIDE WALK BEHIND DOUG

Eric won't let Doug escape. Matching pace with the CEO, he trails him down the street.

Storefronts roll by. One block. Two. Doug's anger and pace escalates as he walks.

DOUG
Stop following me!

ERIC
I need you to listen, not brush me off.
Is that wrong?

DOUG
Harassment? That's not just wrong. It's illegal, sir!

ERIC
What SHOULD be illegal is how Fiduciary Health exploits its customers! Erica's been paying premiums to you for years. But now she needs you, she gets denied. That's more than a conflict of interest... it's downright fraud.

DOUG
Fraud?!?! Your daughter bought a service, under very clearly defined terms. Did she read the contract carefully? If she didn't find our product sufficient for her needs, she certainly had access to higher, better tiers. And was free to shop around to our competitors!

ERIC
"Access"? That's bullshit and you know it. I have "access" to a Lamborghini. But that doesn't mean I could afford one.

DOUG
(snorts)
I can. Bought one last year. It's a shame you didn't save your money. 'Ginis are a sweet ride. And don't play word games with me, Mister. TECHNICALLY, your daughter has plenty of access.

Eric circles Doug as the two walk. This way, he can't be ignored. But not close enough they collide.

DOUG
Sir, your actions border on menacing.

ERIC
But I'm not touching you. So, TECHNICALLY
it's not menacing. Nor assault.

He falls back alongside. Now four blocks have slid by.

Doug groans, briefly touches his chest - near the heart.

DOUG
(to himself)
Geezus, speed walking's a bitch. That
Soul Cycle class would be too much!

ERIC
What's "too much" is you denying my
daughter life saving care, while price
gouging for profit. How much did that
fancy-dancy meal cost you, Mr. CEO? Lemme
guess. \$100 a head, \$200 bucks?

DOUG
(laughs)
Please! With the Screaming Eagle...

ERIC
What?

DOUG
The wine. Since you're no connoisseur,
let me fill you in. That was six grand.
Not including tip!

Eric gags.

ERIC
You're kidding!

DOUG
Hey. I have a right to splurge. I worked
hard for everything I've earned.

He shoots the evil eye at Eric.

DOUG
Speaking of. If your daughter what's-her-
name...

ERIC
"Erica". I'm Eric. Long ago, my wife and
I agree to name the baby after me. But
since she was... uh, well, a she... we
improvised.

DOUG

Touching story. Anyway, if Erica's coverage has gaps, why don't you pitch in for the extra, Mr. Name-Sake Dad?

ERIC

I can't! I'm an Uber driver. I can barely break even as it is!

DOUG

(stifles laughter)

Didn't bother to get an education? That's just so sad. Though not surprising.

ERIC

I did. A Masters in architecture! But when 2008 happened, the contract jobs dried up. Now with COVID, so have my rides.

(beat)

Just as well, since every passenger risks exposure. And with Erica's delicate condition...

Doug swings towards Eric - making eye contact with him the first time throughout this night.

DOUG

Listen, that all sounds very tragic. But it's not my job, Fate's or even Fiduciary's to gift people like you free ponies. In the end, the only one responsible for you is YOU. Before things go bad, you have to think smart and plan. Sink or swim.

Suddenly, Doug drops STRAIGHT DOWN. As if off a cliff?

Or rather, into a pothole.

Eric screeches to a halt and stares down - into a twenty foot muddy pit!

INT. POTHOLE

Dazed, Doug slumps against a grimy wall.

Tied at one end to an ORANGE CONE on the sidewalk, yellow CAUTION TAPE floats in the air, over his head.

INTERCUT BETWEEN SIDEWALK AND POT HOLE

A street sign by the hole reads: WARNING. Plumbing Repair underway.

In the hole: A PIPE gushes water into the pothole. Doug must've ripped it loose, in his fall.

The CEO staggers to his feet.

DOUG

What the fuck just happened? Did you push me?

ERIC

I didn't touch you. You fell in by yourself!

DOUG

You distracted me. I didn't see it coming.

ERIC

You came to IT. And you didn't have to listen. You chose to, of your own free will!

Doug glares, wipes mud from his clothes. No way dry cleaning'll get this out!

DOUG

My suit is ruined!

He eyes the water pipe. It doesn't stop. Already, he's ankle deep. None of this looks good.

DOUG

Well, don't gawk like I'm some freak show. This is serious. Help me out!

(beat)

If you care as much about life and humanity as you claim, that's exactly what you'll do.

Eric rolls his eyes.

ERIC

Fine.

Lacking anything better, Eric lowers the yellow tape towards Doug. It flops, limp.

Doug grabs it like a lifeline, tries to climb. The tape snaps under his weight.

Dumping Doug back into mud.

DOUG

Oof!

The water's now waist height, with him sitting down. He stares up at Eric.

DOUG

Speaking of thinking smart. Plan B. Call 911... now!

Eric thinks it over.

ERIC

But - life doesn't owe anyone a free pony. In the end, the only one responsible for you is... you.

DOUG

Meaning?

ERIC

I'm sure you have a phone. The best model there is. Call 911 yourself.

DOUG

Oh yeah. Good point.

Doug fishes in a pocket for his cell. The water's fried the circuits!

DOUG

I can't. It's dead! And I'll be, too, if you don't pull me out of this god-damned hole!

The water's rising. Doug frowns. Then smiles.

DOUG

Listen: Quid pro quo. You call 911, and I'll make certain little Ellen's -

ERIC

That's Erica. She's 20. Not little, but she hasn't lived her life yet!

DOUG

I promise. Erica's treatment will be paid for. Every dime.

Doug reaches a hand toward Eric to shake. Metaphorically: the men are too far away to touch.

DOUG

Is it a deal?

ERIC
I guess that's fair.

Eric starts to dial - until his phone RINGS. He answers:

ERIC
Hello?

His face turns grim, falls. Silently, he hangs up. Doug yells to him, frantic.

DOUG
Who was that?

ERIC
The hospital. Erica's... gone. Thanks to the delay in treatment, she went into cardiac arrest.
(sobs)
And I wasn't there with my baby! No, I was here, begging you for... well, nothing that matters anymore!

Eric turns from the hole. A panicked Doug waves.

DOUG
Wait!

ERIC
Why?

The water's up to Doug's chest now. It won't be long before he drowns.

DOUG
Because life matters?

ERIC
(snarls)
Not to the likes of you. Sink or swim, I don't care anymore. I hope that \$6K meal you had was worth it.

Eric kicks the cone into the hole. It splashes Doug, and bobs next to the CEO's freaked-out face.

A dejected Eric walks away. Doug stares at the cone - the last thing he'll ever see.

DOUG
Fuck.

FINAL FADE OUT: