

WINNING A PALACE

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FADE IN:

INT. PHARAOH'S PALACE CASINO -- NIGHT

This is a huge place.

Slot machines line in perfect sequence like growing crops. They produce a barrage of blips and beeps as cigarette smoke unravels through the thin rows, and permeates above the machines' multicolored lights.

A hunched-over lady dressed in pink, PINK LADY, sits on a stool in front of a slot, smoking a thin cigarette. She's wrinkled, has curly radish colored hair, pink lipstick, heavy eye-shadow, and glossy eyes from slot staring. The lady incessantly yanks the slot's arm: cherry; BAR; blank. Her comp-card is attached to a coiled cord that runs from her belt to an opening in the slot machine where it collects points.

A dull bell rings, a red light strobes, and 75 cents shoots out onto the floor. The Pink Lady pulls out a pale green pouch.

RICKY SANOFI, early thirties, American, well-groomed and amiable, is stopped by the Pink Lady.

PINK LADY

Boy, bend over and pick them winnings up.

RICKY

Sorry?

PINK LADY

My winnings, they're on the floor.

RICKY

I work in the deli.

PINK LADY

I know where you work, and that don't care as long as you work here -- Manager Ritzour would agree.

Ricky bends down, picks up the three coins, and hands them to the lady.

INT. WINNER'S CLUB DELI -- NIGHT

Ricky stands in front of the checkout register.

RICKY

Oatmeal or chocolate chip?

CUSTOMER

What for?

RICKY

Your combo, you get a cookie. Oatmeal or chocolate chip.

CUSTOMER

Neither.

RICKY

Okay, that's one Club Sandwich, one small drink. Would you like to pay with your comp-card points?

CUSTOMER

Yeah, it's been too long of a long-long day, there should be plenty of points.

The customer hands Ricky his comp-card, which like the rest of the casino's customers, is attached to a coil that runs to his belt.

The coil stretches straight and awkwardly pulls the man as Ricky swipes the card in the register.

BORIS, an early forties Russian American, sports a flattop, and a purple bow tie, the trademark of a Pharaoh's Palace Casino card dealer's uniform. He sneaks up behind Ricky.

BORIS

(whispering)

Where are the midnight freaks?

RICKY

You mean prostitutes?

BORIS

No my friend, I mean the beautiful women coming for the high-rollers. The classy femme-fatales who know how to work the big-daddies.

RICKY

Shouldn't you be dealing to the daddies now, taking their wasted riches one pink chip at a time?

BORIS

Man, don't remind me. No tips today. I've been at the low-end tables all day. Bunch of melodramatic amateurs and bottom feeders. Cry about losing five bucks, and blow a load winning 10.

Ricky turns around to face him.

RICKY  
Look over there.

He nods his head towards the many rows of slots.

RICKY (CONT'D)  
Just look at those people. It looks like they have umbilical cords attaching them to the machine. Sick, isn't it? Why does the casino hand those out?

BORIS  
It's a losers facade. The machines take their money, but as a consolation, they win meaningless points. Therefore, alleviating the feeling of being raped by a preprogrammed, flashy-light computer.

RICKY  
Meaningless? You mean free oatmeal or chocolate chip?

BORIS  
Oatmeal.

Boris grabs one from the basket.

BORIS (CONT'D)  
Breaks over. Back to the table.

RICKY  
Boris, hold on. When our shifts' over, wait for me at the employee shuttle. Something very important is going to happen to me in the near future. I need to discuss it with you.

BORIS  
Last time someone told me that my ex-girlfriend Claudette proposed to me, drunk, on a roller coaster. All right, this better be just as exciting.

INT. EMPLOYEE SHUTTLE -- NIGHT

The shuttle-bus cuts through an endless parking lot. The employees inside are washed out, some sleep leaning against the windows, others stare and stare.

Boris and Ricky are sitting next to each other.

RICKY  
All those people grinding it out daily -- bleeding slowly. I get nauseous looking at them.

(MORE)

RICKY (CONT'D)

Sick Boris, I really get sick. They just don't get it. They win, and should move on, you know, just walk away. But they're all suckers, not greedy, just suckers. They stay too long and lose their winnings, and then all their money. It's how the house wins.

BORIS

Like that is some new revelation? I'm a dealer, how many times have I've seen it? Up thousands, then leave a couple hours later with nothing.

The shuttle bus rounds a corner sharply. Gravity pulls Ricky into Boris.

RICKY

I intend to do something about it, at least on a personal level. For the past six years I've been saving about a quarter of my paycheck for something special. Something really amazing.

BORIS

Three Ukrainian prostitutes in a banya?

RICKY

No. Not that. Not with this money.

Boris pulls out a flask.

BORIS

Then it is nothing special or amazing.

RICKY

I intend to put it all down on one hand of blackjack, just one hand -- about 30,000 dollars. Then when I double up, I walk without looking back.

Boris takes two gulps from the flask.

BORIS

Are you serious?

RICKY

Absolutely.

BORIS

What is wrong with you?

RICKY

Nothing.

BORIS

One hand?

RICKY

Just one hand, at the high-rollers table.

BORIS

You're right about why the house wins -- people never walk. They're gears grinding until the oil runs out, but what you're saying is only half right. Even though you'll walk, there's half a chance you'll lose.

RICKY

(grabs Boris' flask)

You have vodka in this thing?

BORIS

It's funny stereotyping me? How many people have you told now that I used to wrestle polar bears in the Soviet era?

RICKY

Co-workers, some family.

BORIS

Ricky, what happens if you lose? You'd be the biggest ass in the state.

RICKY

I don't see myself losing. I see myself winning, and walking.

BORIS

You're a fool.

RICKY

Listen, we all have a dream. Mine is to get off this goddamn reservation. To get away from the phonies, the desperate, the undeserving lucky. And swiping comp-cards all day and asking cookie preference is not a way use up life.

BORIS

It's called work.

RICKY

Who cares what it's called? A day hasn't passed where I have not thought of this day tomorrow. I see myself not working for a year, moving into a small house next to the New England coast and sleeping on a cot.

Boris tilts the flask taking gulp after gulp until it is finished.

RICKY (CONT'D)

I'll go to the shore everyday. Sit and taste a thing of beauty. Collect smooth rocks, make paper boats with my nephew, and watch them capsize on one foot tsunamis -- Maybe I'll adopt a mutt to run the shoreline.

BORIS

That's romantic and all, but you still haven't clearly answered what happens if you lose this one grand hand?

RICKY

Even in winter my soul will be warm. You ever been to the Massachusetts coast in winter? It's absolutely stunning.

BORIS

Shut up already, my tolerance for romanticism died with Rachmaninov. Ricky, answer me now, what will you do when you lose?

RICKY

When I lose?

The shuttle bus comes to a sharp stop at the employee parking lot. Both of them fly forward and Boris hits his head on the seat in front.

RICKY (CONT'D)

I'll get a job at a cafeteria in some small town. Maybe grocery store. Start saving again. At least I won't be in a casino.

They stand up with the other zombie-like employees, and slowly walk in a line down the bus aisle. Boris walks behind Ricky.

BORIS

Are you serious?

RICKY

About what?

BORIS

About it all. Your 30,000 one hand.

RICKY

Double up. That's all I want -- and a different future after that.

Boris stares at the back of Ricky's head.

INT. PHARAOH'S PALACE CASINO -- EVENING

The Pink Lady is at her usual slot, hunched-over and dropping nickel after nickel from her seemingly bottomless plastic bucket. Her glazed eyes reflect spinning cherries and bars.

Ricky walks briskly through the casino. He looks fresh and is dressed in a black suit. He holds a vintage metallic briefcase in one hand, and a manilla folder in the other.

He walks through a small cloud of exhaled smoke, and is grabbed by the sleeve. Ricky's suitcase falls. It is the Pink Lady, who pulls him close.

PINK LADY

Cookie boy.

She takes a slow drag from her slim cigarette, and licks her pink lips. She holds the smoke in while examining Ricky, then exhales, like a cartoon bull, out her nose.

PINK LADY (CONT'D)

How about you get me an ashtray, yeah? I've been ashing all over the floor waiting for one of youz' to get over here.

RICKY

The ashtrays are everywhere, just get up and get one.

PINK LADY

My comp-card is collecting points. I can't just *get up and get one*.

She strums the coiled cord that runs from the inserted comp-card to her belt.

She yanks violently on the slot's arm.

PINK LADY (CONT'D)

Be a darlin'.

Ricky walks about ten feet and grabs an ashtray for her.

INT. CASINO'S GENERAL MANAGER RITZOUR'S OFFICE -- MOMENTS LATER

The office is stale, and a steel desk is the room's centerpiece. An aspidistra plant collects dust in the corner, and a banal painting of a boat hangs on the wall.

MANAGER RITZOUR, early thirties, thin with overly gelled hair, holds a scrolling daily earnings report.

Ricky steps in.

RICKY

Hello, my name is Ricky Sanofi, and I will not be working for Pharaoh's Casino any longer. Here's my resignation, sorry if this causes any inconvenience.

MANAGER RITZOUR

You are deli cashier?

Ricky nods.

MANAGER RITZOUR (CONT'D)

Yes, I knew that was right. I suppose you'll be staying with us for another two weeks.

RICKY

Actually, I won't. I will be leaving today, only after I go up to the High-Roller's room.

MANAGER RITZOUR

Sorry?

Ricky hands over his resignation letter.

RICKY

Yeah. I'm going up there.

MANAGER RITZOUR

You are serious? Okay. Number one, the High-Roller's room is for professional clientele, who you know are our elite patrons that gamble in the thousands or millions. Number two, employees cannot gamble, it is a conflict of interest.

RICKY

You're wrong on both numbers chief. I have 30,000 ready to go, and as I had said a few seconds ago, I do not work here anymore.

MANAGER RITZOUR

Where did you get the money Mr. Sanofi?

RICKY

It matters?

MANAGER RITZOUR

Yes, the man who has been signing your checks is asking.

RICKY

I'm a customer, now. A very important customer, I'd say.

MANAGER RITZOUR

Mr. Sanofi, look from my perspective.  
A deli cashier brings thousands in  
cash to gamble at the casino he just  
quit working at. Suspicious?

RICKY

No. Flattering I'd say, and I'd  
like to go to the room now.

INT. HIGH-ROLLERS ROOM -- MOMENTS LATER

Manager Ritzour opens the door for Ricky, exposing a grandiose  
room with a single card table in the center. A man in a tux  
immediately invites Ricky to one of the plush seats, and  
offers him a drink. Ricky refuses, and sits at the table.

ELAINE, beautiful and professional, enters the room.

ELAINE

I heard you were formerly one of our  
own, the culinary depart I believe. \*  
Welcome back, Mr. Sanofi--

RICKY

--Ricky.

ELAINE

You know the room's rules I assume?

MANAGER RITZOUR

Actually Elaine, he does not. Why  
don't you articulate it to him, as I  
am sure, all these new surroundings  
are quite new to Mr. Ricky Sanofi.

ELAINE

Yes, sir. Ricky, I will be the  
moderator. Any requests, questions  
or grievances, I am your liaison to  
the house. The objective official.  
I will take care of you as equally  
as I will be taking care of the house.  
Assuming you have already been offered  
luxuries, lets get to business.  
What is your buy in?

RICKY

\$31,620.

MANAGER RITZOUR

How about you keep the \$20.

Ricky pays no attention.

MANAGER RITZOUR (CONT'D)

Well you will need something for the  
taxi fare home, will you not Mr.  
Ricky Sanofi?

ELAINE  
Ricky, how do you want your chips?

RICKY  
One chip.

ELAINE  
Sorry?

RICKY  
Just one chip.

MANAGER RITZOUR  
If I may interrupt. There is no such thing as a thirty-one thousand six-hundred-something chip. Perhaps he thinks you're referring to fried potatoes, do you know--

ELAINE  
--Mr. Ritzour.

RICKY  
I want one hand. That's all.

ELAINE  
You want to bet one hand, all in?

RICKY  
Yes.

ELAINE  
Mr. Ritzour. Call up a dealer, and a second observer, as I count his money.

The manager gives a base smile, and lifts the house phone at the small bar.

Elaine unlatches Ricky's vintage briefcase. She flips through the stacks of hundreds.

Ricky situates himself to be comfortable.

MANAGER RITZOUR  
The dealer and observer are coming up.

ELAINE  
The money is set, \$31,620.

The manager writes down the number on his note pad, he looks at his watch, then documents the time.

The door opens behind Ricky. Two men walk towards the table. The OBSERVER walks to the side of the table and whispers in Elaine's ear.

The dealer, who Manager Ritzour phoned, is Boris.

Boris stiffly walks around the semicircle table, and plops down.

RICKY  
Boris! What luck.

Boris doesn't make eye contact, says nothing, and picks up the deck of cards.

RICKY (CONT'D)  
Common Boris, relax--

ELAINE  
--If this is a breach of interest  
Mr. Ritzour, then maybe we should  
call for another dealer.

MANAGER RITZOUR  
No, no. There isn't a need for that.  
Boris is one of our finest. No  
interest here worth a dismissal.

Boris slides the cards face up in a rainbow arch. They are checked -- 52 cards. He flips one end of the deck and the cards turn face-down in a wave.

RICKY  
Boris, really don't worry, I know  
what I'm doing.

BORIS  
(under his breath)  
Damn you Ricky.

RICKY  
You'll be tipped well for your  
loathing.  
(to bartender)  
A double shot of your best vodka for  
my dealer friend, chilled please.

Ricky coolly winks at Boris, who is shuffling the cards.

For a massive casino, the High Rollers room is mute. Ricky gently feels the green felt of the table. Manager Ritzour is in the corner with his arms crossed. Elaine stands impartially above the table. The Observer is next to Elaine, void of expression. Sloshing ice in the cocktail shaker is the only sound.

The Observer again whispers to Elaine.

BORIS  
Cut.

He holds out a thin red plastic card

RICKY  
Thin or Thick?

Boris says nothing. His head is turned down towards the cards. He looks ashamed, and nervous.

RICKY (CONT'D)  
Thick? Okay, thick.

He slices the red card in the lower half of the deck.

BORIS  
Bets down.

RICKY  
Why you being like this? Acting like you don't know anybody.

BORIS  
Bets down.

RICKY  
All in.

ELAINE  
\$31,620.

Boris deals. The first card goes face up to Ricky: 2 of hearts.

The second card goes face down to the dealer.

The third card goes to ricky: 7 of spades.

The final card is the dealers, face-up: 5 of spades.

RICKY  
Hit.

Boris deals a 7 of diamonds to Ricky.

ELAINE  
That gives you 16 Mr. Sanofi. Would you like to stay, or another card? Over 21, you bust.

Boris closes his eyes. Ricky is shaken. The manager smiles.

RICKY  
Okay, okay...

Ricky's palms are flat on the table. He glances at the dealer's 5 of spades, then up at Boris, whose solemn face still refuses to make eye contact.

RICKY (CONT'D)  
Boris.

Boris slowly looks up.

RICKY (CONT'D)  
I'm staying.

ELAINE  
Dealer, turn your card.

Boris flips a king of hearts.

Ricky exhales deeply, and covers his mouth and cheeks with his hands.

ELAINE (CONT'D)  
Dealer shows fifteen. Dealer must hit.

Boris, hesitates, then flips another card: jack of clubs.

RICKY  
(jumping up from chair)  
Whoa!

ELAINE  
Dealer busts.

MANAGER RITZOUR  
(shouting)  
I want a full camera circuit review of the hand, immediately.

Ricky takes the double shot of vodka on the bartenders tray.

Boris has a huge smile of relief.

BORIS  
That was my drink.

RICKY  
I'll buy you ten more, and the Ukrainian hookers you incessantly ramble about!

ELAINE  
Congratulations Ricky, I'll escort you downstairs to claim your winnings.

Ricky, shakes Elaine's hand feverishly, takes his dated briefcase, and walks towards the only exit of the room.

As he takes his floating strides, he smiles at Manager Ritzour, and in a Bogartesque fashion, presents his hand for a shake.

Manager Ritzour looks at his hand.

MANAGER RITZOUR  
We all know people like you will be circling in drama all your life. But, at least you have superb job experience to back you when you squander it all.

RICKY

No need to be sore, the house will  
make it back one hundred fold today.

MANAGER RITZOUR

And what does cafeteria clerks do  
when they win twice their salary?

RICKY

Boss, I'm going to the New England  
coast and live for a year doing  
nothing. Absolutely nothing.

MANAGER RITZOUR

And what would you do with four years  
off? The opportunity to have \$120,000  
is not everyday.

Boris nervously looks at Ricky.

RICKY

No. I don't think so boss.

Ricky walks out the door, Elaine follows behind.

MANAGER RITZOUR (O.S.)

Boris, you useless son of a bitch.  
You were in on it, I know it! I'll  
be filing a report, your ass is gone.  
I will--

RICKY

(reentering)  
--double down.

Everyone turns to Ricky.

RICKY (CONT'D)

(to manager)  
Four guaranteed years away from this  
wasteland sounds pretty good boss,  
and someone has to support Boris if  
his ass is gone.

ELAINE

Boris, please issue Ricky's chips,  
31,620 dollars. That gives you 63,240  
dollars. Ricky, you want to put it  
all on the table to bet, one hand.  
Am I correct?

RICKY

All of it.

Boris, somber and quiet, counts the pink thousand dollar  
chips, stacking them in small piles on the table.

BARTENDER

Another vodka with--

RICKY

--no.

Boris shuffles the cards.

Manager Ritzour crosses his arms. He's taken aback by the gamble of his former deli cashier.

Boris hands over the thin red plastic card to cut the deck.

RICKY (CONT'D)

Thick or thin?

BORIS

Thick.

Ricky slides the cards in the lower half of the deck. The cards get cut, and then dealt.

Boris deals face up to Ricky: 10 of spades.

Face down to the dealer.

Face up to Ricky: 2 of diamonds.

The fourth and final card, face up to dealer: 3 of diamonds.

Ricky takes a deep breath, and glides his finger tips over the green felt of the table.

RICKY

What a predicament, no a quagmire,  
no, an ordeal I'd say. Boris help,  
hit or stay?

True to his job, Boris doesn't speak. He keeps his head down on the cards.

RICKY (CONT'D)

Boris, it's okay.

Still, Boris is quiet, as Manager Ritzour, looking monolithic, stares on in approval.

RICKY (CONT'D)

Advice -- anyone? I have twelve.  
One face card and I bust. I stay, I  
have to count on good friend Boris  
to bust.

Tension.

RICKY (CONT'D)

Hit!

Boris immediately shakes his head, no. Manager Ritzour catches the signal.

MANAGER RITZOUR

The customer has confirmed hit,  
deal the card.

Boris obliges, and turns over an 8 of spades.

RICKY

Whoa baby -- twenty. That's money!  
Boris you're a gem! I true pal, I  
tell you.

Manager Ritzour looks down in disbelief. Boris turns  
cheerful, and savors the relief.

MANAGER RITZOUR

Deal the rest Boris.

Boris' friendly smirk goes away. He turns over the dealer's  
face-down card: 5 of clubs.

MANAGER RITZOUR (CONT'D)

Eight, dealer must hit.

Boris turns over a card from the deck: 2 of diamonds.

MANAGER RITZOUR (CONT'D)

Ten, dealer must hit.

Boris turns over another card from the deck: Ace of hearts.

MANAGER RITZOUR (CONT'D)

21, Dealer wins.

Ricky doesn't move. He counts his cards, and then counts  
the dealer's, over and over, again and again.

Elaine, who now looks guilty, takes the suitcase of money  
from the card table.

BORIS

Ricky, damn you. You had walked.  
Why'd you let --

MANAGER RITZOUR

-- Boris, report to the five dollar  
minimums downstairs.

Boris stands, walks out. The staff follows behind, except  
for Manager Ritzour. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out  
a twenty dollar bill from his wallet.

He lets it float down on the blackjack table.

MANAGER

For your taxi.

Manager Ritzour walks out, leaving Ricky alone. Ricky is an  
odd fixture in the eloquent room.

The open door allows a flood of blips and beeps to overwhelm the room. Ricky is jarred from his despondent gaze, and grabs the twenty dollars, and crumples it in his hand.

INT. PHARAOH'S PALACE CASINO -- MOMENTS LATER

Ricky walks down the stairs to the main casino floor. Colors swirl, people gleefully yell, curse, and look like face-glowing zombies in the rows of slot machines.

Ricky pauses to absorb it all.

He stumbles down the last stair, and heads toward the exit.

Boris is looking at him from his new blackjack table where he deals out some cards.

As Ricky nears the double-door exit, he is grabbed by the sleeve.

PINK LADY

You, get me an ashtray, will ya?

Ricky rips out her umbilical cord comp-card, and then throws the crinkled twenty in her face.

RICKY

Don't you see how you've been wasting away for the last decade? Where has your life gone? -- Think about it.

The double doors open, and Ricky walks into the night.

As Ricky takes a deep breathe of the smoke free air, Boris runs through the doors and puts his hand on Ricky's shoulder.

BORIS

I don't know what to say to you, but I can't let you disappear leaving me with guilt. I couldn't do anything, you know I would have, but I need my job.

RICKY

Stop. I think this was supposed to happen to me, Boris. I mean, I don't know how I'll feel tomorrow, but perhaps that is part of the beauty of it all. No more predictability. I know you had nothing to do with it. It's all odds, and the odds are always against us. But, right now I have absolutely nothing, and I have freedom.

BORIS

No more oatmeal or chocolate chip.

RICKY

That's right. Time to leave and  
make myself different world -- So  
long Boris.

Boris stands as Ricky walks down the sidewalk. He raises his arm as if to say something, but hesitates, and decides instead to go back to his job.

As Boris walks through the double doors, the Pink Lady inserts the crinkled 20 dollar bill into her slot, and yanks the arm of the machine.

A piercing siren comes out of the machine as Boris walks by. Boris falls from the noise. A red light spins at the top of the machine, and another light flashes on and off: JACKPOT - JACKPOT - JACKPOT.

The Pink Lady drops her large bucket of change and stands. The cord from the comp-card is stretched tight.

PINK LADY

(with a phlegmatic  
laugh)

Jackpot! 100,000 bucks. I win.

She turns to Boris.

PINK LADY (CONT'D)

You, get me an ashtray, will ya?

FADE OUT: