

THE KING OF LATE NIGHT

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THE TONIGHT SHOW by Robert Metz
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FADE IN:

INT. TV STUDIO - DAY

Image opens on the bright red light of a huge RCA TK30, a large black and white television broadcasting camera, the top of the line network TV studio camera of 1951.

SUPERIMPOSE: NEW YORK CITY, 1951

The camera pulls back to reveal the whole television camera and the studio in which it sits.

The studio is broadcasting **THE TODAY SHOW**.

DAVE GARRWAY (40), the host of the show, sits at a desk interacting with J. FRED MUGGS, the show's chimpanzee "co-host".

CUT TO:

INT. TV CONTROL ROOM - DAY

SYLVESTER "PAT" WEAVER, 43, creator of the Today Show (and The Tonight Show), powerful Executive Vice President of NBC TV and modern programming genius is watching the show on the monitor.

Weaver stands behind the show's director and his crew who sit in front of a large bank of black and white monitors that feature each of the different camera shots.

TV DIRECTOR
Camera One.

The "broadcast" monitor cuts to Garroway and Muggs at the desk.

GARROWAY
(To Fred)
That's right Fred, humans are silly.
(To the camera)
We'll be right back after these commercial messages.

TODAY SHOW DIRECTOR
Roll commercial.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
We're out. Back in two minutes.

As show goes to commercial the studio explodes into a frenzy of activity from cameramen, make-up people and lighting guys.

PAT

Great job guys. Somebody get the monkey another banana. Get Dave one too.

Pat walks out of the studio with two junior executives following along through the halls studio and building.

PAT (CONT'D)

What were the latest ratings?

JUNIOR EXEC #1

THE TODAY SHOW had a forty-five percent share of the total morning TV audience last week.

JUNIOR EXEC #2

The show is sold out for the next six months.

PAT

Tell the sales team I want it sold out for the next year.

JUNIOR EXEC #2

You get to tell them yourself sir. General Sarnoff would like you to have dinner with the advertising sales team tonight.

Off Weaver's sigh.

CUT TO:

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Pat Weaver and three other men sit in a leather booth, the remains of dinner and lots of cocktails on the table, cigarettes burning in ashtrays and smoke filling the room.

NBC AD MAN #1

All we really need Pat, are two or three more hours a day of prime time so we can sell more ads.

PAT

You guys have the easiest job in the world. The sponsors run and own the shows on the prime time schedule just like in radio.

(MORE)

PAT (CONT'D)
You just have to buy them dinner,
drinks and get them laid.

NBC AD MAN #2
Some of the sponsors are frustrated
Pat.

NBC AD MAN #3
Every advertiser wants in on TV.
They all think it is the next big
thing but if we don't get them to
budget annually for a show, any
show, the money is just going to
get poured right back into radio.

NBC AD MAN #2
Or LIFE magazine. They just print
more pages when they sell more ads.

NBC AD MAN #1
The radio guys are offering long
term discounts for sponsors, Pat.
They're telling them TV is a fad
and our growing pains prove it.

PAT
There are only twenty four hours in
a day fellas. What do you want me
to do about it?

AD MAN #1
You created the TODAY SHOW. We need
to know, what are you going to do
next?

Off Pat's look of uncertainty.

CUT TO:

INT. PAT'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

It's midnight when Pat comes home from dinner with the sales team. The bells of a grandfather clock sound the late hour.

A brand new 1950 Zenith "Saratoga", a fancy mahogany floor console television set, sits in the living room.

He turns on the TV and pours a cocktail as the screen warms up. When it's fully lit the TV screen has a test pattern on it.

Pat squats in front of his TV, turning the dial by hand from station to station looking for something to watch but can't find anything but test patterns and static snow.

PAT
Seven stations and there's nothing on?

The glow from the black and white screen provides the only light in the room as Pat goes over to his couch and sits, drinking and staring at the chosen test pattern when "**THE BIG IDEA**" strikes him...

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Tall, skinny, dark-haired, World War II veteran JOHNNY CARSON, 25, and JOAN (JODY) WOLCOTT, 22, are backstage.

SUPERIMPOSE: LINCOLN, NEBRASKA 1951

Johnny is in a tuxedo and JODY is dressed as his magician's assistant.

Johnny nervously smokes a cigarette.

Character note: Johnny is always smoking a cigarette through the entire story. A chain smoker, he died from smoking related emphysema.

JOHNNY
I double checked the microphone and the lights. Are you ready? There's a pretty good crowd out there tonight. I want to give them a great show.

JODY
You will, you always do. Now hold still.

Jody fixes his tie as Johnny grabs a microphone and affects a deep voice.

JOHNNY
Here he is, The Great Carsoni!

Johnny puts out his cigarette then he and Jody walk out on stage together to very light applause.

The "big gig" is a children's birthday party at the Elk's Hall with about 10 kids and a few parents in the audience.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Thank you Ladies and Gentlemen and
Happy Birthday Freddy! For my first
miracle tonight....

CUT TO:

EXT. DOWNTOWN LINCOLN STREET - DAY

Johnny is driving to his part time job at KFAB the local radio station in Lincoln smoking a cigarette.

Johnny tunes into KFAB on the drive.

JINGLE VOICES
WFAB!

The announcer reads boring ad copy for a local bank commercial in a dull monotone.

RADIO ANNOUNCER
You can always trust your neighbors at Lincoln Trust Bank. They are The Friendly Bank.

Johnny is at a stop light in front of Lincoln Trust Bank.

They have a sign in the window that reads The Friendly Bank.

Johnny waves to the bank from his car.

JOHNNY
Hi Friends! How you folks doing today? What a friendly bank.

The light changes to green and Johnny drives on leaving a few people with strange looks on the sidewalk behind him.

CUT TO:

EXT. KFAB RADIO STATION - DAY

KFAB is in a small, stand-alone building next to a big transmitter on the edge of town.

CUT TO:

INT. KFAB STUDIO - DAY

Carson behind the microphone in the radio booth is a wacky madman.

Johnny is reading his version of the Lincoln Trust ad copy in a nasally voice that will become his famous Art Fern character.

JOHNNY

That's right friends, Lincoln Trust Bank is the bank you can trust. They are the friendly bank. You can trust them and they trust you. Just stop by anytime you need money, 2 AM, 3 AM, anytime at all. Just help yourself to all the money you want and leave a note, because Lincoln Trust Bank is the Friendly Bank!

Johnny drops a needle on a record and **Benny Goodman type Big Band music** starts playing.

The station General Manager BOB WILSON, 58, pokes his head into the broadcast booth and yells.

BOB WILSON

Hey Carson! When did I hire you as a copywriter? Read the ads!

Then he pauses, smiles at Johnny and speaks in a softer voice no one else can hear.

BOB

That was a funny bit Johnny, keep it up.

Bob closes the door and walks away.

Off Johnny's relieved face.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA - DAY

It's a warm spring day at the University Of Nebraska.

Graduation ceremonies are taking place.

Johnny and Jody are sitting in caps and gowns in the crowd of students awaiting degrees.

UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

John Carson.

Johnny walks across the stage and receives his degree.

Johnny's parents MR. & MRS. CARSON (each 60) are sitting in the crowd applauding for their son.

Johnny waves to them from the stage.

UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT (CONT'D)
Jody Wolcott.

Jody walks across the stage and receives her degree. She waves to her folks and the Carsons.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNIVERSITY COURTYARD - DAY

Graduates and their families mill around celebrating and taking pictures with large box cameras as the elder Carsons approach Johnny and Jody.

His Mom gives him a hug and kiss.

Then she gives Jody one too.

Mr. Carson shakes Johnny's hand.

Both parents clearly like Jody very much.

MR. CARSON
Well done son.

MRS. CARSON
We are so proud of both of you.

JOHNNY
I can't take all the credit, I owe it all to FDR and the GI Bill.

JODY
I told my folks we'd meet them at the restaurant in an hour.

JOHNNY
Perfect.

The group is approached by a PROFESSOR, 50.

PROFESSOR
Pardon the interruption folks, congratulations Johnny.

JOHNNY
Thank you Professor.

PROFESSOR

You know, I was reluctant to approve your senior thesis topic at first. Comedy Writing on the Radio isn't the typical thesis subject for an American Literature class but yours was an amazing analysis of the subject matter. I was very impressed with your thesis Johnny.

JOHNNY

Whew. That's good news. The deposit on the graduation cap and gown is non-refundable.

PROFESSOR

Seriously Johnny, this is a very scholarly work. Your breakdown of joke construction and delivery techniques are amazingly thorough and I found your definitions and analysis of ad-libbing very thought provoking.

JOHNNY

Most of the great comics have been working so long they just remember a line that fits their needs at the time.

PROFESSOR

With a little more work this is a paper that could be published by the University Press and be received very well by the literary community. You should consider it and a career in education as well. You would make a great teacher or university professor.

JOHNNY

Thank you sir but people will pay more to be entertained than educated.

PROFESSOR

You may be right about that. You're smart Johnny. Good luck.

The professor shakes Johnny's hand and walks away.

JODY

Maybe you should think about the teaching job over the summer?

JOHNNY

I was going to spend the summer
making a new demo tape and sending
out to radio stations for a job.

JODY

You get a lot of free time teaching
college kids.

MR. CARSON

And a lot of vacation.

Bob Wilson approaches the group and shakes Johnny's hand.

BOB WILSON

Congratulations Johnny.

JOHNNY

Thanks Bob. Thanks for coming.

BOB WILSON

I wouldn't miss it for the world.
It's time for your graduation
present.

He hands Johnny an envelope.

JOHNNY

Bob, you didn't have to do this...

BOB

Just open it.

JOHNNY

Okay.

Johnny rips open the envelope and pulls out a street map of Omaha, Nebraska. Johnny looks confused.

BOB WILSON

You're going to need that map.
It's time for you to start wasting
that degree in a real radio job
college boy. A friend of mine runs
W-O-W up in Omaha. He needs a full
time morning man. I sent him a tape
of your show and the job is yours
if you want it.

Johnny is stunned.

BOB WILSON (CONT'D)
It pays \$35 a week and you might
have to sweep up a bit around the
station sometimes.

JOHNNY
W-O-W in Omaha? Really? Thank you!
I can't believe this. My own show!
In Omaha!

BOB WILSON
He needs you to start in two weeks.
Can you do it?

JOHNNY
Two weeks! I could be there in two
days if they needed me.

BOB WILSON
Good luck Johnny. I'll miss you
son.

Bob walks away and Jody, and Johnny parents circle him to
congratulate him.

Jody looks a little nervous about this sudden development.

MRS. CARSON
This is all happening so fast.
Graduating college and then moving
away again.

MR. CARSON
Your Mother is trying to tell you
it's been nice having you back home
after your time overseas in the
Navy during the war and we both
hoped it might last a little
longer.

JOHNNY
I did too.

Johnny hugs his Mom.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Omaha is only a phone call away.

Jody looks a little left out of the conversation.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Would you two mind waiting a minute
while I talk to Jody?

Johnny takes Jody's hand and walks about ten feet away for a modicum of privacy in the large crowd.

JODY

I understand if you want to break up. This is a great opportunity for you.

JOHNNY

Who said anything about breaking up? I want to be the next Jack Benny but I want you there beside me all the way too.

Johnny pulls a ring box out of his pocket and opens it.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

We should probably get married before we move to Omaha but I'm willing to try it the other way if that's what you really want.

JODY

Oh my gosh! (beat) I accept your proposal. I don't think my parents will settle for your other option.

They hug and kiss each other.

JODY (CONT'D)

I love you Johnny Carson.

JOHNNY

I love you too. Today Omaha, tomorrow the world!

They turn back to Johnny's parents to share the good news.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL DELIVERY ROOM - DAY

Jody, sweaty and red faced, is preparing to give birth to their first child.

SUPERIMPOSE: **OMAHA, NEBRASKA 1952**

She is surrounded by doctors and nurses but Johnny is not in the room.

NURSE

Keep breathing dear.

DOCTOR
When I say "Now" I want you to
push.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - DAY

Johnny paces back and forth in the hospital Maternity Ward
waiting room smoking a cigarette.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL DELIVERY ROOM - DAY

Jody is breathing as instructed.

DOCTOR
Now! Push now!

Jody pushes and screams.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - DAY

Johnny continues to pace back and forth.

He sits down for a moment and gets right back up onto his
feet again and returns to pacing.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL DELIVERY ROOM - DAY

Jody is breathing as instructed.

DOCTOR
One more time!

Jody pushes and screams once again.

Off the cry of a baby.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - DAY

Johnny stops pacing as the doctor walks into the waiting room and lights up a cigarette.

DOCTOR

It's a boy Mr. Carson. Mother and child are perfectly healthy.

JOHNNY

A boy! Thanks Doctor.

As Johnny is shaking the doctor's hand a nurse walks through the door with the baby wrapped in a blanket and stops for a moment in front of Johnny.

NURSE

Congratulations Mr. Carson. Meet your son.

JOHNNY

My son. Hello Chris. That's the name we picked if he was a boy and he is!

NURSE

I have to take him to the nursery now. I'll love your TV show Mr. Carson. Your radio show too.

JOHNNY

Thank you very much.

The nurse takes the baby and leaves.

DOCTOR

Would you like to see your wife now?

JOHNNY

Would I ever!

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL DELIVERY ROOM - DAY

Jody is laying exhausted in her bed when Johnny walks in.

JOHNNY

You look beautiful.

JODY

Stop it, I look awful.

JOHNNY
I saw the baby. You do great work.

JODY
We do great work. You did make a contribution.

JOHNNY
It was so long ago I don't remember.

JODY
We're parents now.

JOHNNY
It's scary as hell huh?

JODY
Scary enough to make me think you should consider that job in Los Angeles Fred told you about.

JOHNNY
Really?

JODY
You need to think about your career. You have a growing family to take care of now.

Johnny kisses Jody.

CUT TO:

INT. WOW RADIO ANNOUNCER BOOTH - DAY

Johnny walks in for his radio show and waves at the engineer in the other booth.

The engineer hits the microphone button and leans into it.

ENGINEER
Congratulations Daddy! Where's my cigar?

Johnny holds up a box of Cuban cigars.

JOHNNY
I've got it right here!

The engineer comes into the broadcast booth and gets his cigar.

ENGINEER

Thanks Johnny. How did you have time for a baby doing a radio show and a TV show at the same time?

JOHNNY

A man finds time for his favorite hobbies. All work and no play...

ENGINEER

What are you still doing here? Why not just do TV? That **SQUIRREL'S NEST** show you do on the weekends is great.

JOHNNY

I need both salaries now that the baby is here. Besides, TV is fun but I love radio. Where else can you be famous and have your privacy too?

ENGINEER

How can a guy who loves his privacy want to be famous?

Johnny thinks about that one before answering.

JOHNNY

I think the only thing a performer owes the audience is a good performance. Off stage, it's my life. I can't explain it any more than that. I wish I could.

ENGINEER

My wife loves you. She says you're going to be bigger than Milton Berle.

JOHNNY

Give her a cigar too.

Johnny hands him another cigar.

ENGINEER

So Johnny, if you could have any job in TV or radio, what would you choose?

Off Johnny's thoughtful look.

CUT TO:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY STREET - DAY

Archival footage of NYC. All the men on the street wear hats and the cars are all made in America.

SUPERIMPOSE: NEW YORK CITY 1952

PAT WEAVER

(V.O.)

"How would you like to host my new late-night network TV show? It's called BROADWAY TONIGHT or THE TONIGHT SHOW. I haven't decided yet."

CUT TO:

INT. PAT WEAVER'S OFFICE - DAY

There are two men sitting in Pat's office facing Pat across his desk.

The man Pat is asking to be his host, STEVE ALLEN, 30, is short, with a crew cut, and wearing black horn-rimmed glasses.

The man sitting next to him is Steve's manager, JULES GREEN, 38.

GREEN

Will there be anyone watching TV at eleven PM at night Pat? People have to get up and go to work in the morning.

WEAVER

No one thought there were people who would watch TV at seven AM but there are if you give them something good to watch. That's why my TODAY SHOW is a hit. TONIGHT is going to do the same for late night. Music, comedy skits and talk Monday through Friday from eleven PM to one AM.

STEVE

I thought it was a hit because of the monkey. Why not do a late night version of TODAY? More news oriented. Are you sure you want a variety/comedy show?

WEAVER

People want to wake up and find out what happened while they were sleeping. But they want to go to bed relaxed and happy.

JULES

That theory makes a lot of sense. Why are you so hot for the late night show?

WEAVER

The major stations have some pre-war movies running late at night but a lot of affiliates go off the air as early as eleven o'clock.

Allen and Green are clearly resisting the idea but Weaver persists.

WEAVER (CONT'D)

I have national brands that can't find airtime in prime time begging to spend money with us. This will give them a national show they can buy spot ads on. No one sponsor will control the show like they do in prime time. NBC will own the show so the sponsors will stay off your back.

ALLEN

So instead of sponsors and a network on my back all the time like my radio show, I'll just have a network on my back?

WEAVER

The network will hold guest approval but Steve, I want a show that can be funny one minute and then feature an opera or orchestra. A show like this can bring quality classic entertainment to the masses. Because if we don't do it, TV is going to become a wasteland of quiz shows and soap operas like radio is now.

STEVE

What do you think Jules?

JULES

I think Pat is offering you a tremendous opportunity.

Allen thinks for a few seconds before making his decision.

ALLEN

Okay Pat. If you can make stars out of Garroway and his chimp you might be right about late night TV too. But I don't want you making a monkey out of me. I want to keep this show smart and sophisticated just like you said. Agreed?

Weaver stands and comes around his desk to shake Steve's hand.

WEAVER

Agreed. Welcome to the NBC family
Steve Allen.

ALLEN

Glad to be here Pat. Work out the details with Jules.

GREEN

I'll call you later Pat. Get your checkbook ready.

CUT TO:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY SIDEWALK - DAY

ALLEN

I don't know Jules. Pat is a very enthusiastic guy but who's going to stay up watching TV at midnight and still get to work in the morning?

GREEN

Everyone in television is enthusiastic for a reason. Radio is dead Steve. TV is the future and Weaver is the smartest guy in the business.

STEVE

That's what everybody says.

JULES

NBC is allowing us to produce the show too, which means more money.
(MORE)

JULES (CONT'D)

You could be as famous as Uncle
Milty and as rich as a Rockefeller
inside of a year.

ALLEN

Only if enough people stay up past
their bedtime Jules. How many
insomniacs are there in America?

CUT TO:

INT. THE HUDSON THEATER STUDIO 6B - NIGHT

Steve is sitting at a piano ready to start the first show.

There is a black backdrop behind him and a live studio
audience watching.

Large TV cameras are between the audience and the stage.

FLOOR MANAGER

We're live in...five...
four...three..two...

The Floor Manager points at Steve.

STEVE

Good Evening, This is Tonight, and
I can't think of too much to tell
you about it except I want to give
you the bad news first: this
program is going to go on forever.
You think you're tired now, wait
until you see one o'clock roll
around!

The live audience laughs.

STEVE (CONT'D)

The show will go from eleven thirty
until one o'clock in the morning.
This is the Hudson Theater. We
selected it special because this
theater sleeps eight hundred
people.

Off the audience laughter.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOMS & BEDROOMS - NIGHT

A man is sitting in a recliner watching his TV.

On the tiny black and white set Steve is sitting at his piano singing a song.

CUT TO:

A middle aged couple is watching Steve on their TV from bed.

Steve is jumping in a giant cup of tea with hundreds of tea bags tied onto him.

CUT TO:

A man watches while his wife sleeps in the bed next to him.

On the TV Steve is in a bathing suit sitting in a big tub as people make a giant banana split out of him pouring ice cream, bananas and chocolate syrup all over him as he howls from the cold.

CUT TO:

A couple on their couch watches and laughs as Steve pulls his hat down the sides of his head making funny faces in a sketch on their television.

They are not the "dignified" activities Steve originally wanted but he's a huge ratings hit.

CUT TO:

INSET: VARIETY Magazine headline: ALLEN & TONIGHT HIT BIG

CUT TO:

INT. THE HUDSON THEATER STUDIO 6B - DAY

SUPERIMPOSE: 1953

Flanked by one of his junior executives, Frank Goldman, 30, Pat Weaver walks into the studio where Steve Allen is in rehearsal with his cast.

Steve is on the stage with Don Knotts and Louis Nye working on one of their famous **Man on the Street** interview sketches.

Jules Green is watching from the seats in the audience holding a Polaroid camera.

Steve goes to reach for a soda bottle but it isn't where he expected it to be and he explodes.

STEVE

Can someone tell me why this prop isn't where it's supposed to be?

JULES

Sorry Steve. It will be in the right place for the show.

STEVE

Jules, why don't you have the person whose job it is to do that waiting in my office after rehearsal?

Jules appears used to these outbursts.

JULES

Okay Steve.

Steve and Jules see Pat and Frank.

Jules comes down the stairs to greet them.

STEVE

Attention! Officer on deck, or at least the new network President. Congratulations Pat. Don't forget us little people when you're up in your Ivory Tower.

WEAVER

How can I forget Steve Allen, NBC's biggest star?

STEVE

I thought it was still the chimp.

WEAVER

No, it's you. Here's this weeks TV GUIDE to prove it.

Weaver hands Steve the magazine with his picture on the cover.

The cast gathers around excitedly to look.

DON KNOTTS

Congratulations Steve.

LOUIS NYE

What's this world coming too?

WEAVER

TONIGHT has taken the country by storm and I want to congratulate you Steve, and all of you, for the great job you're doing.

STEVE

Thanks Pat. Do you think we can tell the Greyhound Bus people that I don't want that dog in the studio for the live commercials anymore? It keeps going for my balls during the spot and I don't really like dogs anyway.

SKITCH HENDERSON, 35, the legendary NBC Orchestra band leader, enters the room.

WEAVER

I'll talk to the Greyhound advertising team.

SKITCH

Steve, are you ready for rehearsal with the band?

STEVE

Just let me get out of this costume and I'll be right there Skitch. Thanks for the pep talk Skipper.

Steve leaves the studio.

Don and Louis wander off leaving Jules, Pat, Skitch and Frank.

WEAVER

Jules, we spoke last week about overloading the guest list with all these book authors and politicians. That's all I see on the schedule this week.

JULES

Steve doesn't like the network forcing all those NBC actors on him.

WEAVER

We need to promote the prime time schedule Jules.

JULES

I know. Next week we have André Baruch from YOUR HIT PARADE and Martha Roundtree from MEET THE PRESS.

WEAVER

I really need you to book Bill Gargan from MARTIN KANE, PRIVATE EYE. Roy Rodgers is killing us in that time slot.

JULES

Consider it done. It's just getting harder to get Steve to listen to anyone any more, even me. Isn't that right Skitch?

SKITCH

And that TV GUIDE cover won't make his head any smaller.

Weaver notices the camera in Jules hands.

WEAVER

The man is a TV star guys. Stars have big egos. What is that thing?

JULES

This is a new **POLAROID** camera. It takes pictures that develop right in your hand in just a couple of minutes.

FRANK

Really?

JULES

Watch this.

Jules takes Frank's picture with the camera

Jules pulls the picture out of the camera, starts to shake it back and forth then hands it to Frank.

JULES (CONT'D)

Just shake it like that for a minute.

Frank watches the picture develop before his eyes.

FRANK

That's amazing.

WEAVER
But why do you have it?

JULES
Steve and I are investors in the company. You two should buy as many shares as you can, I'm putting all our money into it.

Jules is called for by a staffer off-screen.

JULES (CONT'D)
I've got to go, Pat thanks for coming by. Remember what I said about Polaroid.

Jules leaves.

Skitch is still hanging around.

SKITCH
Do you have a moment Pat?

WEAVER
Sure Skitch. What can I do for you?

SKITCH
I'm pretty upset. I've been writing songs for the show for a year now and I just found out Steve has been registering them with the publisher and taking a co-writer credit on all of them.

WEAVER
Okay Skitch, I'll look into it and take care of it.

SKITCH
Thanks. Now I have to go rehearse with my "collaborator".

Skitch leaves.

Weaver and Goldman walk to the elevator.

FRANK
What are we going to do about this?

WEAVER
Nothing.

FRANK

Nothing? But you just told
Skitch...

WEAVER

I'm the President now Frank and you
are going to need to learn how to
handle the talent if you're going
to keep my old job. TONIGHT is
making a lot of money for the
network so keeping Steve Allen
happy is important.

The elevator doors open and the men get on.

FRANK

When does that change?

WEAVER

Knowing that is the secret. TV is
big and it's going to get bigger so
the stars are going to get bigger
and more powerful. We build them up
from nobody into big stars, but you
can't let them get too big or you
lose control.

FRANK

I'll remember that. If he gets too
big for his britches, do we get rid
of him?

WEAVER

Not while the show's this
profitable. Besides, who could
replace Steve Allen?

The elevator doors close.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOLLYWOOD HILLS - NIGHT

SUPERIMPOSE: LOS ANGELES 1955

Camera on the **HOLLYWOOD sign** and **archival footage** of Los Angeles in 1954.

INT. CARSON HOME, LOS ANGELES - NIGHT

Johnny sits at his desk writing in a notebook when Jody walks into the room wearing pajamas.

JODY

It's late honey, why are you still working?

JOHNNY

I had an idea for a bit for tomorrow's show and I had to write it down before I lost it.

JODY

You work too hard. Come to bed.

JOHNNY

I will in a minute.

Jody has heard this before.

She smiles and shakes her head as she turns and heads for the bedroom.

Johnny turns back to his work and is lost in thought almost immediately.

He keeps working and writing.

CUT TO:

INT. RADIO STATION STUDIO - DAY

Johnny Carson is on the radio at **WNXT** radio station in Los Angeles.

"Mr. Sandman" by The Chordettes is playing on his turntable. Johnny is smoking a cigarette.

NEWS READER

Hey Johnny, here's that **Red Skelton** interview record from the publicity service and here's the sheet of the questions you ask to match his pre-recorded answers.

JOHNNY

Thanks but I make up my own questions. It's funnier that way.

NEWS READER

Have fun then.

The News guy leaves as the record ends and Johnny speaks into the microphone.

JOHNNY
I think I need a nap after that song...

CUT TO:

EXT. BEVERLY HILLS RODEO DRIVE - DAY

RED SKELTON, 41, is driving through Beverly Hills in a convertible listening to Johnny on the radio.

JOHNNY
...but we all need to stay awake for our big live interview with Red Skelton coming up in a few minutes.

Red is shocked.

RED
Gosh dang it, why don't these publicity people tell about this stuff?

He does a U-turn and speeds off.

INT. RADIO STATION STUDIO - DAY

Red rushes into the station while Johnny is on the air.

Johnny is shocked.

JOHNNY
Red Skelton just walked into our studio ladies and gentlemen. Red you look out of breath.

RED
I made it. We better talk fast, the police should be catching up to me in a few minutes.

CUT TO:

INT. RADIO STATION STUDIO - DAY

The men are winding up the interview.

JOHNNY

Don't forget to tune into Red's show on NBC at eight o'clock on Thursday nights.

Johnny starts a commercial.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Thanks for coming in Red, it was a nice surprise.

RED

I heard you on the radio and these publicity people never tell me anything. I should fire the whole lot of them.

JOHNNY

Don't fire anybody. You weren't scheduled to be here. I was just going to have fun with this interview record the news service sends.

RED

You mean I didn't need to run those red lights?

JOHNNY

Sorry, no.

RED

How about that, you know you're pretty funny Carson. How would you like to write monologue jokes for me on my show?

JOHNNY

I want to be a performer Red, not a writer.

RED

So, keep your radio show, write jokes for me and we'll use you in some skits on the show too. It pays a truckload of money. Whaddaya say?

JOHNNY

How can I say no?

RED

Welcome to the big time Johnny.

They shake hands.

CUT TO:

INT. THE RED SKELTON SHOW STUDIO - DAY

Johnny hands a script to Red.

JOHNNY

Here's your monologue for tonight
Red. I worked in all the material
about you going swimming at the
pool that you wanted.

RED

Thanks Johnny. This is perfect.
That's a funny line. Great job! Why
don't you take the rest of the day
off?

JOHNNY

It's show day are you sure you
don't want me to stick around?

RED

You're not in any sketches tonight
so go home, have dinner with your
wife and enjoy the show from your
couch for a change.

JOHNNY

I won't say no to a night off.

CUT TO:

EXT. LAUREL CANYON DRIVE - DAY

Johnny is in his Galaxy convertible driving over the hill to
his home in Sherman Oaks.

INT. THE RED SKELTON SHOW STUDIO - DAY

In rehearsal before the live broadcast Red Skelton walks into
a breakaway door that doesn't breakaway.

Red is knocked to the floor out cold.

Everyone in the studio rushes to his aid.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE - DAY

The phone is ringing.

Jody answers it and is shocked by what she is told on the phone.

She looks out the window.

JODY
He's pulling into the driveway
right now. I'll go tell him.

Jody hangs up the phone and goes running out of the house.

EXT. JOHNNY'S DRIVEWAY - DAY

Jody goes running up to the car before Johnny can get out of it.

JODY
Johnny, the studio just called. Red walked into a wall and got knocked out. They are taking him to the hospital for x-rays and you need to get back there right away. You're hosting the show tonight!

JOHNNY
What? Really?

JODY
The producer just called. You need to go now!

Jody leans into the car and gives him a kiss.

JODY (CONT'D)
Break a leg.

JOHNNY
Thanks honey.

Johnny throws the car into reverse and peels out of the driveway into the street and races away.

CUT TO:

EXT. LAUREL CANYON DRIVE - DUSK

Johnny is racing back over the hill and talking to himself.

JOHNNY

Crap. Red's monologue was all about him so I need a whole new monologue. Good evening ladies and gentlemen, Red wanted to be here tonight but our set disagreed. No. Red wanted to be here tonight but there are nurses in Beverly Hills he hasn't pinched yet. Maybe. Good evening ladies and gentlemen...

The car speeds through the canyon's curves as Johnny continues writing his monologue out loud.

CUT TO:

EXT. GOWER STUDIOS - DUSK

Johnny's car pulls off Sunset Boulevard and races into the studio parking lot.

CUT TO:

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

The show's producer walks into Johnny's dressing room.

Johnny is smoking a cigarette trying to relax.

PRODUCER

Red told me months ago if anything happened to him you should be the fill-in host. I thought you knew.

JOHNNY

No, Red never said anything about hosting. I wrote a monologue for myself on the way back over the hill.

The producer pulls Johnny out of his chair.

He pushes him out the door into the hall amid a buzz of activity.

Dancers, actors musicians and stagehands fill the halls.

It looks like chaos but everyone knows where they have to be and what they have to do.

Everyone that is except Johnny.

PRODUCER

That's perfect. You're a funny guy so I'm not worried about the monologue but we have an hour to air. Review Red's script for the sketches while wardrobe adjusts his costumes for your size. Follow the cue cards and we'll all survive the night...

He pulls Johnny into the wardrobe room.

PRODUCER (CONT'D)

I hope.

Off his worried face.

CUT TO:

INT. THE RED SKELTON SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

A very nervous Johnny Carson walks down the corridor to his spot behind the curtain as people call out to him and wish him luck.

He hardly notices any of them.

Johnny takes a deep breath as he hears the show's announcer say "Ladies and gentlemen, Johnny Carson!"

Carson turns on his special smile, pulls back the curtain and walks on stage to perform.

CUT TO:

INT. THE RED SKELTON SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

Johnny is on stage doing the monologue.

JOHNNY

So all things considered I think it should be Red's doctor out here...

The studio audience is laughing hysterically at Carson's monologue on the stage.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jody is watching Johnny and she is beaming with pride and laughing.

INT. CBS TELEVISION STUDIOS - NIGHT

Also laughing are several executives in the **CBS offices** watching Johnny on Red's show over cocktails.

Two of them give each other a knowing look.

EXECUTIVE

Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

The other nods in agreement.

CUT TO:

INT. THE BROWN DERBY - DAY

Johnny is having lunch with the CBS executives.

EXECUTIVE

Welcome to the CBS family Johnny.

They are all smiling as Johnny shakes hands with each of them.

CUT TO:

INT. THE JOHNNY CARSON SHOW STUDIO - DAY

THE JOHNNY CARSON SHOW set if full of activity.

Johnny is surrounded by producers and CBS executives.

Everyone is smoking a cigarette.

JCS PRODUCER

Have we considered dancing girls? A chorus line of dancers like Jackie Gleason has?

CBS EXECUTIVE

Sid Caesar doesn't have dancers.

JCS PRODUCER 2

Caesar is in New York, they don't have room for dancers. This soundstage has plenty of room.

CBS EXECUTIVE
There needs to be more slapstick
like on Skelton's show.

JOHNNY
Why don't we let him be more like
Carson?

This stops everyone until they see it's Johnny talking.

CBS EXECUTIVE
You're very funny Johnny and the
production team is trying to make
sure **THE JOHNNY CARSON SHOW** has the
best chance to become a hit over
the next thirty nine weeks.

JCS PRODUCER
CBS knows how to fit comics into
successful formats and we've got to
make this show important John.
There's a reason we're the "Tiffany
Network".

Johnny looks doubtful but doesn't want to rock the boat.

JOHNNY
Whatever you guys think is best. I
want to be a team player.

JCS PRODUCER
Great.

CBS EXECUTIVE
So, the chorus girls are in?

Off Johnny's eye roll.

CUT TO:

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

SUPERIMPOSE: 39 Weeks Later

Johnny sits in his make-up chair with a dejected look on his face smoking as the stage manager gives him the "two minute" warning to airtime.

Johnny puts out his cigarette in the cheap metal ashtray.

A very depressed Carson walks down the corridor to his spot behind the curtain like an inmate walking his final mile.

Nobody backstage is making eye contact with him.

He is a dead man walking.

Johnny takes a deep breath at his spot behind the curtain.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Ladies and gentlemen, Johnny
Carson!

Carson, ever the professional, always determined to deliver on the stage for the audience, turns on his "showtime" smile, pulls back the curtain and walks on stage.

CUT TO:

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Carson is removing his make-up after the show.

The CBS Executive walks in.

CBS EXECUTIVE
Great job tonight Johnny. I have
some bad news. CBS isn't renewing
the show.

JOHNNY
I don't blame them, I wouldn't
either.

CUT TO:

INT. CARSON LIVING ROOM - DAY

Johnny is moody and brooding around the house.

Jody is cleaning up after feeding lunch to their growing family of two young boys.

Johnny is wearing slacks and a white shirt with a button down collar.

Jody wears a flower print gingham dress.

Tired-looking and unshaven, Johnny is drinking a cocktail and smoking a cigarette.

JODY
You boys go play outside. Chris,
watch your brother. You boys play
nice.

The boys run out to the backyard slamming the screen door behind them as they go.

JODY (CONT'D)

And you were out too late last night playing with the boys. Staying out all night, sleeping late and drinking all day isn't going to get you another TV show.

JOHNNY

It sure makes cancellation easier to live with.

JODY

I thought you were relieved the show was over. You know what those producers were doing to you.

JOHNNY

Those guys just tried to make me into Milton Berle or Jackie Gleason. They wouldn't let me be me or even let me write as much of my own material as I wanted.

JODY

They wanted you to be someone you're not. But something else is bothering you. I can tell. What is it?

JOHNNY

My agent dropped me yesterday. I'm scared. CBS gave me a huge build up and it didn't work. Now I'm television's biggest failure.

JODY

You can always go back to radio, or if we need to we can always go back to Nebraska...

Johnny doesn't see the look on her face, but this is what Jody really wants.

JOHNNY

Going back home means my dream is over. I'm trying to think of this as a temporary setback.

JODY

So what do you want to do?

Johnny puts the drink down on the table and lights another cigarette.

JOHNNY

I want to be able to do it my way.
I want a new agent and producers
who understand me next time. But
they aren't exactly knocking down
our door right now.

JODY

Al Bruno keeps calling you. He
wants to manage you.

JOHNNY

Al isn't really an A-list manager.
He's no MCA.

JODY

He restarted Jimmy Dean and Dave
Garroway's careers. Maybe he can
restart yours next. If he believes
in you, like I do, then isn't that
what matters?

Johnny and Jody embrace and kiss.

JOHNNY

It is. I'll call him and see if
he's still interested. Maybe he has
an answer to the sixty-four
thousand dollar question.

JODY

What's the sixty-four thousand
dollar question?

JOHNNY

Where does a guy go after he's made
it to the top and lost everything,
all in the same year?

CUT TO:

INT. THE BROWN DERBY RESTAURANT - DAY

Johnny is sitting at a table with AL BRUNO, (45).

Al is an unassuming, heavy, balding man in a dark suit with a
skinny black tie.

Lunch is over and the men are drinking coffee and smoking.

AL
You need to forget about CBS
Johnny.

JOHNNY
That's not as easy as it sounds Al.

AL
Look, Johnny, I think you're the
next Bob Hope or Jack Benny.

JOHNNY
Then why am I afraid I'm never
going to work in this business
again?

AL
Because you never had a manager
like me before John. I believe in
you like no other performer I've
ever seen. I'm going to make you
the biggest star in television or
die trying.

JOHNNY
You dream big Al.

AL
Don't you Johnny?

JOHNNY
Yes. I do.

AL
Am I your manager?

Al sticks out his hand for Johnny to shake.

Johnny grabs onto it like a safety rope and shakes on it.

JOHNNY
Yes you are.

CUT TO:

INT. SARDI'S RESTAURANT - DAY

SUPERIMPOSE: NEW YORK CITY 1957

Al Bruno walks in from the snowy weather outside and approaches the hostess.

AL
Al Bruno for Art Stark's table, oh
never mind I see him.

Al walks over to greet **ART STARK, 38,** sitting at a table for two.

ART
Hi Al. How was California?

AL
Sunny and warm. All of their snow
is made out of confetti.

Art signals for a waiter.

ART
In California snow is an option,
like whitewall tires on a Buick.

The waiter appears at the table.

AL
Gin and tonic please.

Art gestures to his drink.

ART
And another one of these.

The waiter leaves.

AL
How is life at **BROADWAY OPEN HOUSE?**

ART
Cancelled.

AL
I'm sorry Art.

ART
Don't be. ABC has hired me as the
new producer of **DO YOU TRUST YOUR**
WIFE?

AL
Congratulations! Quiz shows are the
hottest thing on TV right now.

ART
ABC wants to revamp the whole show.
Edgar Bergen is out as host.
(MORE)

ART (CONT'D)

The network wants a modern Groucho Marx type who can titillate the housewives.

Al is excited.

AL

Art, do you know who Johnny Carson is?

ART

After all the promotion CBS did for that show of his? Of course. He's a funny guy. He's smart funny, not that zany Gleason slapstick CBS had him doing.

AL

Smart and funny enough to talk to ABC about him for your show?

The waiter reappears with a tray with four drinks on it.

He put two of them on the table in front of Al and Art.

ART

I'll talk to the network. Let's set a meeting.

The waiter walks away from their table and the camera follows him as he puts the last two drinks on another table in front of Steve Allen and Jules Green.

The waiter walks away and the camera stays on the new table.

Steve is looking at some papers while Jules smiles like the cat that swallowed the canary.

STEVE

If these numbers are real Jules, we need to set a meeting with the network.

JULES

The numbers are real Steve, and whatever you want to do is fine with me.

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK GOLDMAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Steve Allen and Jules Green are sitting on Frank Goldman's couch.

FRANK
You're doing what?

STEVE
I'm quitting the show Frank.

FRANK
You want to re-negotiate your contract? That's what this is really about isn't it Jules?

JULES
No, this is real Frank.

FRANK
Quitting? You're quitting? Quitting the Tonight Show? Why?

STEVE
To put it crudely Frank, I'm rich. Jules and I are millionaires, several times over in fact and this show isn't the type of work I want to do anymore. I'm ready for prime time.

JULES
I told you to buy that Polaroid stock Frank.

FRANK
I got my wife one of those cameras last Christmas. It's the only thing she wanted.

JULES
See? That why we're rich now. You could have been too.

FRANK
So you're just quitting?

STEVE
I'll finish out my contract to give you time to find a replacement.

JULES
Here's written notice per our contract with NBC.

Jules puts a letter on Frank's desk and the two men leave the Frank sitting in shock.

After the door closes Frank speaks out loud to himself recalling Pat Weaver's words to him.

FRANK
Who can replace Steve Allen?

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE - DAY

Johnny is on the phone and Jody is watching intently.

JOHNNY
So they just offered me the job?
Just like that?

We hear Al Bruno through the phone.

AL
Of course they did. You have a great manager. And ABC loves you! They think you're brilliant. Art Stark is the show's producer and he can't wait to work with you.

JOHNNY
I've worked with a bunch of network producers now Al and none of them get me.

AL
This one does. You and Jody have to be in New York City in three weeks. Can you do that?

JOHNNY
We'll be there Al. We'll be there.

AL
This is the second chance you wanted Johnny.

JOHNNY
Thank you Al. I won't ever forget this. I'll talk to you later.

Johnny hangs up the phone.

JODY
Well?

JOHNNY

I got the job. I'm a game show host now.

Jody gives Johnny a big hug and kiss.

JODY

See? I told you they would love you.

JOHNNY

We have to be in New York City in three weeks.

JODY

New York. That soon?

JOHNNY

Something wrong?

JODY

I don't like the idea of raising the boys in the city. I know you love show business Johnny. It's in your blood. But I'm still just a girl from Nebraska. I'm scared of the city. I didn't like it when we had to go there for the network up-fronts for CBS and I sure don't want to live there.

JOHNNY

I need to do this Jody. New York is the heart the TV business. The center of power. Why didn't you tell me this before? Or on the trip?

JODY

I didn't want to worry you or upset you before your meetings.

JOHNNY

We'll get a house in Westchester County. It's the Sherman Oaks of the Tri-State area.

JODY

Really? I love you Johnny Carson.

They embrace.

JOHNNY

This is probably for the best. The further you are from Sak's Fifth Avenue and Tiffany's the cheaper it is for me.

JODY

I don't need those fancy places. I just need you.

Off their kiss.

CUT TO:

INT. PAT WEAVER'S OFFICE - DAY

Frank Goldman and Pat Weaver are discussing their problems.

FRANK

Ernie Kovacs doesn't want to do the show permanently. He'll keep guest hosting for another week and then he's going on tour.

WEAVER

Where does that leave us?

FRANK

We need to pick a host. Affiliates are starting to show movies instead of TONIGHT. We're down to sixty stations carrying the show right now.

WEAVER

We've tested a dozen guest hosts. None of them worked.

The men are silent for a moment.

WEAVER (CONT'D)

There was a kid I liked back in California, Johnny Carson. CBS gave him a show for a while.

FRANK

Speaking of the Eye, CBS just cancelled the talk/variety format of THE MORNING SHOW for a straight news format.

WEAVER

They can copy my TODAY SHOW but they will never beat it. Okay, the Morning Show is cancelled. So what?

FRANK

Jack Paar was the host and he's available now.

WEAVER

Really? Jack Benny's fair haired boy. He's funny and a much better interviewer than Steve ever was.

Pat ponders the potential of Paar, while all thoughts of Johnny Carson are forgotten, for now.

WEAVER (CONT'D)

It's time to face facts. Steve Allen and the success of the Tonight Show might have been a thing of its time, like catching lightning in a bottle. It might not work with anyone else. Offer Jack Paar a twenty-four week contract for TONIGHT.

FRANK

Twenty-four weeks? We never do twenty-four week contracts.

Pat points to a calendar on the wall.

WEAVER

Twenty-four weeks takes us exactly to December thirty-first, 1957. If Paar doesn't work out the first thing we'll be doing in 1958 is cancelling the Tonight Show.

CUT TO:

INT. NBC HALLWAY - DAY

Frank Goldman is walking down a hallway with two men, JACK PAAR, 40, and PAUL KEYES, 39, Jack's best friend and head writer.

Jack has a receding hairline and a manic energy about him that can turn dark and depressing in an instant.

FRANK

So what was it like working for
Jack Benny when he produced your
radio show Jack?

JACK

I had no idea how poor being famous
was going to be when I left the
Army. The newest writers were
making more money every week than I
was.

FRANK

Seriously?

JACK

I kid you not.

Frank laughs at Jack's signature catch phrase.

FRANK

Most of the Tonight Show's staff is
still a part of the show. Skitch
Henderson and the NBC Orchestra are
still here too. Gene Rayburn has
left NBC to host a game show so you
will need a new announcer.

PAUL

Hugh Downs is looking for work.

JACK

I like Hugh.

FRANK

That's perfect. Offer him the job.
Paul can take over the writing
staff today as head writer.

PAUL

We were thinking about changing the
format a little for Jack so he can
be comfortable. Steve always sat at
the piano to open the show and Jack
doesn't play so...

FRANK

Do you want a desk to sit at Jack?

JACK

No, I was thinking of a stool and
then two chairs for guests after
the opening monologue.

Frank opens the doors and the men walk into the large empty theatre.

Jack and Paul are in awe of the prize they have been given.

FRANK

That sounds great. You guys have fun.

Frank leaves.

JACK

They really don't care about this show anymore.

PAUL

Twenty four week contracts? You're the host of a show they're going to cancel at the end of the year.

JACK

Then we better make the most of it while we have the chance, right Paul?

The men walk through the empty theater.

PAUL

Right Jack.

JACK

The first thing we have to do is get rid of all the silly costume sketches. The show opens with my fifteen minute monologue about my wife and daughter. Then I interview the guests. Then the singer sings a song and we all go home late.

PAUL

Play to your strengths. Let Jack be Jack. Got it.

JACK

This is going to be fun. I kid you not.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOMS & BEDROOMS - NIGHT

A man is sitting in a recliner watching his TV.

On the tiny black and white set Jack sits on a stool for his monologue.

The show looks different than Allen's show with just chairs on the set for Jack and his sidekick and their guests.

CUT TO:

A middle aged couple is watching Jack and his sidekick HUGH DOWNS, 35, laughing.

CUT TO:

A man watches while his wife sleeps in the bed next to him.

On the TV Jack is interviewing FIDEL CASTRO.

CUT TO:

A couple on their couch watches Jack interviews RICHARD NIXON.

CUT TO:

A man is watching Jack on a small set in his den. He is watching as Jack Paar interviews JOHN F. KENNEDY.

CUT TO:

INSET: VARIETY Magazine headline: JACK PAAR: KING OF LATE NIGHT

CUT TO:

INT. PAT WEAVER'S OFFICE - DAY

SUPERIMPOSE: 20 weeks later.

Pat and Frank sit in the office toasting their success.

FRANK

TONIGHT is tops in the ratings again. The sponsors are back.

WEAVER

And station clearance is rising. We have 85 stations carrying the show now. But I want you to keep an eye on Paar. We've given him a two-year contract. I don't want a repeat of Steve Allen. This time we keep the star under control.

FRANK
You can count on me Pat.

CUT TO:

INT. JACK PARR'S OFFICE - DAY

Jack, Paul and Hugh are also toasting their success with drinks.

HUGH
You did it Jack.

JACK
Here's to The Tonight Show. May it run as long as my contract.

They both raise their glasses and drink.

PAUL
The show is extended and so is your contract. Is NBC still going to let us do what we want?

JACK
Paul, the only time a network leaves you alone is when you have no ratings. When you're a hit they are all over you like a wet suit in the rain. Network executives only like to fix what isn't broken. That way they don't get fired, but they look busy and get to take credit for it.

PAUL
We're getting bigger ratings than Steve Allen did. You're a cultural phenomenon Jack. They are not going to mess up a good thing.

Jack gives him a knowing look.

JACK
You'll see. I kid you not.

CUT TO:

INT. ART STARK'S OFFICE - DAY

Johnny, now 32 years old, walks into Art's office carrying a script.

Art is sitting at his desk talking to a man sitting in the chair in front of the desk.

JOHNNY
I'm sorry Art, I didn't see you
were busy.

ART
Johnny, come in. Meet Dick Clark.
Dick, meet Johnny Carson, the new
host of WHO DO YOU TRUST?

DICK
Hi Johnny, nice to meet you.

JOHNNY
Hi Dick, I'm a big fan of AMERICAN
BANDSTAND. When are you going to
have Elvis on? My wife and I love
Elvis.

DICK
Colonel Parker won't let him
anywhere near us but since he just
got drafted we're going to have to
wait until Uncle Sam is done with
him.

ART
You two should go to lunch and get
to know each other. You'll be doing
a lot of promotion together. You
guys are the anchors of ABC's
afternoon programming block, along
with the Mickey Mouse Club. The
network has everything bet on
daytime since prime-time is a
disaster.

DICK
No pressure huh?

JOHNNY
Easy for you to say. If we fail you
get to blame Fabian.

The men laugh.

DICK
I'll let you two get to work.

JOHNNY
Nice meeting you Dick. Let's have
lunch soon.

Dick Clark Leaves.

ART
What can I do for you Johnny?

Johnny holds up a script.

JOHNNY
I just got the script for the first
show tomorrow.

ART
Is there a problem?

JOHNNY
It's kind of, um, not funny.

Art grabs the script and looks at it and immediately relaxes.

ART
What? Oh, you got the script for
the network censor.

JOHNNY
The censor gets a different script?

ART
Shh! Not too loud.

Art closes the door to his office.

ART (CONT'D)
You've been here less than a day so
I haven't had the time to walk you
through the process of making the
show yet.

JOHNNY
I told you the producers of my CBS
show just told me to "trust them"
and you see how that worked out. So
I need to know how it all works and
be more involved this time.

Art motions to a chair.

ART
Sit down. Okay. The research staff
searches the city for interesting
people, mostly at tourist spots
like Radio City Music Hall and the
Empire State Building.
(MORE)

ART (CONT'D)

Then they comb through newspapers and magazines looking for people with stories with a hook for our show.

Art hands Johnny files of potential guests.

ART (CONT'D)

When they find someone good they call Mary Dodd, our Associate Producer. She interviews them and decides if they are quirky enough to make the show. Then she interviews them and gets all the good stuff out of them. She turns that over to the writing staff who generate two scripts, one for the censors...

Art reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a script on blue paper and tosses it Johnny.

ART (CONT'D)

...and a naughtier blue version for you to "ad-lib" on air. That way we can get away with a lot more. We usually try to book guests three or four days ahead of the live show.

Johnny gets it and likes what he sees in the script.

JOHNNY

And since we're "live" anything can happen, right?

ART

That's right. It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission from a TV network. And this is ABC, as long as we get ratings they don't care what we do. Anything else?

JOHNNY

I know I'm just a game show host now but I'm going to need the writing staff to report to me.

Art looks concerned.

ART

The writers know what they are doing.

JOHNNY

I can tell but I wrote all my own stuff in radio and for my TV shows in Omaha and Los Angeles even before writing for Red. If you want me to be at my best I need them to understand me but also respect me as the guy who makes the call because he is the one who has to say it.

Art thinks for a moment.

ART

You are perfect for this format. Talking to regular people, going blue when you can and your "takes" for the camera are great. It's classic stuff. We get a lot of heat for being a copy of Groucho Marx's **YOU BET YOUR LIFE** but if anyone can fill Groucho's shoes it's you Carson. Okay, the writers report to you but you guys better push the envelope.

JOHNNY

Art, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

ART

Damn straight Johnny. You're going to be a huge star and this show is going to be a big hit. Quite frankly, we both deserve one. Do you want to go get some lunch?

JOHNNY

No thanks Art. I brought mine. I'm going to eat lunch in my office and work on the script okay?

ART

Sure.

Johnny walks off and Art watches him realizing Carson is not your typical "talent" in show business.

CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM OF THE CARSON'S NEW HOME - NIGHT

Jody, now 29 years old, is cleaning up boxes of Chinese take-out food after dinner.

Johnny is having a drink and a cigarette at the table.

There are still large unpacked cardboard boxes in corners of the dining and living rooms.

JOHNNY

I've never had a producer talk straight with me like this before. I have a great feeling about this Jody and so does Art and Al.

JODY

That's great Johnny.

She is quiet though and Johnny senses something is bothering her.

JOHNNY

Is something wrong honey?

JODY

Nothing is wrong. We don't know any of our neighbors, everything we own is in boxes, the boys need to be registered for their new school and you're going on live TV tomorrow with our whole future at stake. Why should anything be wrong!?

Jody rushes into the kitchen with the remains of dinner.

Johnny follows her and pulls Jody close to him.

Jody sobs on his shoulder.

JOHNNY

It's okay to be scared Jody. I sure as hell am.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE AT WHO DO YOU TRUST? - DAY

Johnny is pacing nervously waiting for the show to start when Art approaches.

ART

You okay Johnny?

JOHNNY
Just a few pre-show jitters Art.
I'll be okay.

ART
Johnny, you are not alone out there. Everything on this show is researched and planned out just for you. All you have to do is just be you. You have the pre-interview questions and answers. You are in control. If something unexpected comes out of a guest's mouth, go with it, but most of all have fun out there.

Johnny is reassured.

JOHNNY
Go with it, have fun, got it.

ART
Break a leg Johnny. Two minutes to air.

CUT TO:

INT. TV STUDIO - DAY

Johnny is hosting the show, just standing on stage talking to a husband and wife standing next to him.

JOHNNY
So what do you do for a living Mr. Germinow?

MR GERMINOW
I teach fencing at the New York Athletic Club.

JOHNNY
That must be a good skill to have on the subway. Especially if you need a seat.

Johnny makes a broad parrying and thrusting motion with a make-believe sword.

MR GERMINOW
You would be a very good fencer. I can always tell a good fencer from a bad fencer when I see one.

JOHNNY
Wouldn't the bad fencer be the dead
one?

The two guests and audience roar with laughter.

Off stage Art gives Johnny a thumbs up.

Johnny is having fun just like Art said and the crowd loves it.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOMS AND OTHER PLACES - DAY

Johnny gets a montage of viewers tuning in across the country while **Jerry Lee Lewis** sings Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On one of 1957's most popular songs:

CUT TO:

In a living room a house wife watches Johnny while folding laundry.

CUT TO:

Kids and old folks watch Johnny together sitting on a couch.

CUT TO:

In beauty parlors women watch the show while getting their nails done.

CUT TO:

In bars and taverns people are watching and laughing at Johnny's wit and antics on their black & white televisions.

CUT TO:

INT. HARRISON NY - DAY

Jody gets a montage detailing her suburban routines too:

CUT TO:

Jody is driving the kids to school.

CUT TO:

Jody meeting the P.T.A. for the first time.

CUT TO:

Jody is shopping at the A&P grocery store.

CUT TO:

Jerry Lee Lewis's song ends.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

Johnny is having lunch with Dick Clark.

DICK

We're a hit John. ABC loves us. And Mickey Mouse too, but he's not here to take any credit so screw him.

JOHNNY

I keep wanting to pinch myself. I can't believe it.

DICK

Believe it.

JOHNNY

I'm still getting used to signing autographs.

DICK

Bandstand was a hit in Philadelphia before the network took us national but this attention is crazy.

JOHNNY

My last show was cancelled after thirty nine weeks so I kind of like it.

DICK

I don't blame you.

JOHNNY

You know a lot of people Dick. Our announcer Bill Nimmo is retiring so we need a new one. Got any ideas for who Art should bring in for an interview?

DICK

Oh yeah, my neighbor. He's experienced in TV and radio but stuck doing fight nights and spot work around town right now. He's a great guy, married, former Marine fighter pilot in the Pacific and Korea, his name is Ed McMahon.

CUT TO:

INT. WHO DO YOU TRUST STUDIO - DAY

ED MCMAHON, 35, a big, brawny guy is standing in front of a microphone with the ABC logo on it.

ED

Ladies and gentlemen, Johnny Carson!

The audience applauds as Johnny walks out on stage.

CUT TO:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Johnny, Art, Ed and Al Bruno are hanging out together after work drinking and smoking.

AL

To Johnny Carson, the clown prince of daytime television!

They all raise their glasses and drink.

CUT TO:

INT. THE CARSON'S HOME - NIGHT

Jody is laying in bed, unable to sleep at home, alone, while Johnny is out with the guys.

She looks at the clock on the bed table.

The time is 2:15 am.

CUT TO:

INT. WHO DO YOU TRUST STUDIO - DAY

Finally happy at work Johnny is sitting in his make-up chair smoking as the stage manager gives him the "one minute" warning to airtime.

Johnny puts out his cigarette in a nice metal ashtray.

A happy Johnny Carson walks down the corridor to his spot behind the curtain as people call out to him and wish him luck.

He smiles and waves back at a few people as he approaches the curtain to the stage.

Art Stark gives him a salute and heads for his spot in front of the stage to watch the show.

Johnny takes a deep breath as we hear Ed McMahon say "Ladies and gentlemen, Johnny Carson!"

Carson turns on his "have fun" smile, pulls back the curtain and walks on stage to perform his monologue.

INT. JACK PARR'S OFFICE - DAY

SUPERIMPOSE: January 1962

Jack and Hugh are working when Paul walks into the office.

PAUL

Hi guys, the censor just killed tonight's John Kennedy joke in the monologue.

Jack is annoyed.

JACK

The whole piece is a set up for that joke. Without that, it doesn't work. These people are trying to drive me crazy, I kid you not. Every day it's something. You can't do this Jack, you can't do that Jack.

HUGH

Relax, Jack. Do you want to rewrite the monologue?

PAUL

I can do that for you Jack.

JACK

I'll just use the story I was going
to tell tomorrow about my wife
confusing a water cabinet for a
water closet.

Jack pulls the new script from a file folder on his desk.

PAUL

The network doesn't like bathroom
humor. We hear from them every
time...

JACK

If they don't want us to mock
presidential candidates we need to
do something else. We have a show
to do in two hours.

Jack hands him the new monologue.

Paul leaves.

HUGH

You know you can't let them bug you
Jack.

JACK

It's like they are going out of
their way to pick on me Hugh. I
just can't take it.

Hugh looks worried.

Jack's fragile mental state is showing.

CUT TO:

INT. TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

Jack is sitting on his stool signing off for the night.

JACK

Thank you and good night.

Jack gets up and walks off stage.

Paul is waiting in the wings.

PAUL

Um, Jack, the network pulled the show off the air during your monologue. It was the water closet joke.

Jack is shocked.

JACK

They pulled the plug. The show went dark?

Paul nods.

PAUL

It came back on after the monologue.

Paul expects an angry display but none ever comes.

Jack, in shock, walks away shaking his head.

JACK

If they are trying to drive me crazy, it's working.

CUT TO:

INT. TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

The next night Jack and Hugh are sitting in their chairs.

The show is on the air live to a nationwide audience.

JACK

So I said to the powers-that-be here. Let me just show the part of the tape that wasn't shown so I can address these scurrilous articles in the yellow press accusing me of obscenity but they won't allow it.

Jack is getting very emotional.

JACK (CONT'D)

The Hearst press has been attacking me mercilessly. Just let me show the tape I said. But they said no. Well I've decided what I'm going to do about it. This is the hardest thing I've ever done.

Jack's lip is quivering, his voice breaks, he is on the verge of tears.

JACK (CONT'D)
There must be a better way of
making a living.

And to everyone's shock both in the studio and at home, Jack Paar gets up and walks off the live Tonight Show broadcast.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

A ringing phone wakes up Frank Goldman and his wife.

Frank answers the phone in a sleepy voice.

FRANK
Hello.

He bolts upright at what he hears.

FRANK (CONT'D)
What? Jack did what? Walked off the
show? Just Like that? Then he is
done in this business! Finished!

Frank hangs up the phone.

FRANK'S WIFE
Frank, honey, what's wrong?

FRANK
Jack Paar just walked off the
Tonight Show during the show.

Frank goes down the stairs to his living room.

He turns on the his TV to see Hugh Downs finishing the show for Paar.

FRANK (CONT'D)
Shit!

CUT TO:

INT. DRESSING ROOM - DAY

Al is talking with Johnny in his dressing room.

AL

Paar just got up and walked off.
The look on Hugh Downs face was
priceless. Did you see it?

JOHNNY

No, Ed and I were at Toots Shore
last night.

AL

Paar is gone. There is no way NBC
can bring him back after walking
off the air.

JOHNNY

So what Al? That has nothing to do
with us.

AL

I already called my guy at NBC and
pitched you to them as his
replacement. He likes you. He saw
you on Steve Allen's prime time
show last month.

JOHNNY

You what? That's crazy Al. Who can
follow Jack Paar? He is not an act
any performer wants to follow. The
public will rip whoever gets his
job to shreds.

Johnny shakes his head in frustration.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

What about going after some more
parts in feature films for me? I'll
audition for anyone.

AL

Hollywood doesn't think you're a
leading man or else I would have
gotten more calls after your part
on **PLAYHOUSE 90**.

JOHNNY

So I'm stuck as a game show host. I
thought I'd be the next Bob Hope by
now Al.

AL

You're not listening to me. The
Tonight Show is a perfect show for
you Johnny.

(MORE)

AL (CONT'D)

Basically it's a grown-up version
of **TRUST** and it would make you the
biggest name in show business, like
we both think you should be.

JOHNNY

Well, you just let me know if NBC
agrees with you because I'm not
sure I do.

CUT TO:

INT. JACK PAAR'S APARTMENT - DAY

Paul Keyes is at Jack's door as it opens.

Paar motions for him to come in because he's on the phone.

JACK

Okay Swifty. Let me know what's on
the table and call me back.

Jack hangs up the phone.

JACK (CONT'D)
Club soda Paul?

PAUL

Yes, please. Was that your agent?

JACK

The one and only. Apparently CBS
and ABC are both interested in
giving me shows on their networks.
I kid you not. I'll have to pick
only one of them of course.

Jack smiles like the cat that swallowed the canary.

PAUL

So we are going to be okay? It's
been almost three weeks Jack.
You're all over the newspapers but
off the air.

JACK

Steve Allen got a prime time slot
after he left the Tonight Show.
Should I ask for a prime time show?

CUT TO:

INT. PAT WEAVER'S OFFICE - DAY

Frank Goldman is in front of Weaver's desk.

WEAVER
Paar is talking to ABC and CBS.

FRANK
Where did you hear that?

WEAVER
His damn agent called me!

Weaver regains his composure.

WEAVER (CONT'D)
He also told me what it will take
to get Paar back.

FRANK
What? Come back? He walked off the
air Pat!

WEAVER
Paar wants an apology, and a raise.

FRANK
Screw that. We can replace him just
like Steve Allen right?

Weaver gives Frank a deadly stare.

WEAVER
I'm retiring next year Frank and
I'm going out on top like I
planned. So you are going to get
Jack Paar back to work on The
Tonight Show or you can join him on
the damn unemployment line.

CUT TO:

INT. TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

Unannounced to the studio audience, Jack Paar cockily strolls on stage to open the live broadcast of the Tonight Show.

JACK
As I was saying before I was
interrupted...

The audience erupts in laughter and applause. Jack waits for it to die down.

JACK (CONT'D)
When I walked off, I said there
must be a better way of making a
living. Well, I've looked, and
there isn't.

The audience goes crazy with more laughter and applause.

CUT TO:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Johnny, Al, Art and Ed are watching Jack Paar's return, along with every other New Yorker in the place and most TV viewers in the country.

After Paar's opening kills with the crowd in the bar Johnny turns to Al.

JOHNNY
Well, that's that. Jack Paar is
going to be bigger than ever. He'll
never leave the Tonight Show.

AL
We'll see Johnny. The man's a time
bomb.

Art is a little jealous and afraid of Johnny leaving his show.

ART
You're right Johnny. We need to
focus on the show you're on now.

ED MCMAHON
We should focus on the "work" at
hand boys.

Ed points and all the men turn and look at a table full of very pretty women checking the guys out.

CUT TO:

INT. THE CARSON HOME - NIGHT

Johnny arrives home late at night.

He is trying to be quiet until he hears the TV on upstairs in the bedroom.

Jody is still up watching Jack Paar.

Johnny goes upstairs to the bedroom.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

JOHNNY
Hi honey, sorry I'm late.

Johnny takes off his shirt and walks into the bathroom connected to the bedroom.

Jack Paar is signing off for the night.

Jody gets up, walks over to the black & white TV sitting on the bureau, turns it off and gets back into bed.

JODY
I suppose I should consider myself lucky that you're still coming home at night.

Jody turns out the light on the bed table leaving Johnny in a dark room lit only by the moonlight.

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK GOLDMAN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Home in bed with the flu Frank Goldman watches an episode of WHO DO YOU TRUST? (still broadcast in black & white) and is impressed with Carson's wit and manner on the show.

FRANK
Pat was right. He is funny.

Frank blows his nose.

CUT TO:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Johnny, Art and Ed are drinking in a bar at a table with several beautiful women.

Johnny is really wasted.

The drink glasses, the cigarette smoke, the women all start to blur together from his perspective.

CUT TO:

INT. CARSON BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jody wakes in bed alone.

Johnny didn't come home last night.

CUT TO:

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

Frank and Jack are having lunch in an attempt to resolve some recent differences.

FRANK

I know you're upset. That's why I thought we should have lunch and work things out man to man.

JACK

Company memos can be so impersonal.
But a lunch with the new network president...

Jack's having fun with him but Frank doesn't realize it.

FRANK

Jack, I need you to understand the network's position.

JACK

He's a past guest and I don't think there's anything wrong with talking about a man I've interviewed.

FRANK

He's not just a past guest Jack.
He's Fidel Castro and he's a fucking communist working with the Russians! And you're taking his side! It's un-American!

Some other diners turn to look at the loud voice Frank is using.

JACK

Frank, I thought McCarthy was dead?
The point is I think Fidel is doing some good things. The "Tractors for Freedom" program is one of them.

FRANK

It looks bad. It doesn't matter if he has a point, you shouldn't be promoting it on-air.

JACK

I think it does matter and I should be allowed to say so, since it is my show after all.

This sets Frank off.

FRANK

That's just it Jack, it's not "your" show. It's not even my show. It's the network's show. NBC owns the show. The network is bigger than both of us. You just work for the network on the show they own and you're very well paid to do so. So if collecting your big paycheck means not talking about what a great fucking guy Fidel Castro is and making NBC look like a network of pinko sympathizers then I think you can handle that, right Jack?

Jack puts his napkin on the table and stands up.

JACK

At least I know where I stand.

Jack walks out of the restaurant.

A few diners are looking at Frank but he stares them down and they look away quickly.

Frank leisurely finishes his martini and motions to the waiter with an imaginary pencil.

FRANK

Check, please.

CUT TO:

INT. TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

Jack is signing off for the last time, alone on the stage, sitting on a stool talking to the audience.

JACK

It's been an honor and a privilege coming into your homes all these years to entertain you. I bid you a very heartfelt good night. Come on Likka, we're going home.

Jack's dog, **LIKA**, runs onto the stage from the audience and walks offstage with Jack.

CUT TO:

INT. THE BRUNO HOUSE - NIGHT

Al and Johnny are watching Paar sign off.

AL

I'm going to get you Jack Paar's job, Johnny. It's going to make you the biggest star on TV.

JOHNNY

That's a nice dream Al, but who would want to follow Jack Paar? He's the king of late night Al, I'm the clown prince of daytime. Just another game show host. And besides I'm still under contract to ABC.

AL

This is my opportunity with Frank Goldman at NBC. He's a big fan of yours.

JOHNNY

And ABC?

AL

I'm your manager. Let me worry about your contracts.

JOHNNY

If you can get NBC to hire me for the Tonight Show then you'll be the best manager in the history of show business.

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK GOLDMAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Frank is watching Paar sign off.

Frank's wife is sleeping next to him.

Frank gets out of bed muttering to himself.

FRANK
I'll just find another host of the
Tonight Show. How difficult can
that be?

CUT TO:

SUPERIMPOSE: **Three Months Later**

INT. NBC MEETING ROOM - DAY

Frank is in the room with his staff.

FRANK
We've run guest hosts for the last
three months and no one has
clicked. I've tried your way. Now
we go mine.

JUNIOR EXEC #1
Not the game show host again?

FRANK
Johnny Carson is the right man for
this job. I'm going to trust my gut
on this one. Set up a meeting with
Al Bruno. He's easy to reach, he's
probably outside my office door.
That's where he's been for the last
three months.

JUNIOR EXEC #1
Yes sir.

CUT TO:

INT. TWENTY-ONE RESTAURANT - DAY

Frank and Al are having a power lunch.

AL
So what finally convinced you
Frank?

FRANK
Johnny was the emcee of a charity
dinner I went to at the Friar's
Club.

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)
I haven't laughed that hard ever.
He's perfect for late-night and I
want him.

AL
There's only one small problem.
He's under contract to ABC for
another three months. Will NBC
wait?

FRANK
For this show I need the right man.
For the right man, we can wait
another three months.

AL
And Johnny's the right man?

FRANK
Your instincts are right about this
Al. He's the "One".

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S DRESSING ROOM - DAY

Al tells a still youthful looking Johnny Carson, although now
37 years old, about NBC and their generous offer.

JOHNNY
I can't do it Al.

AL
Don't be crazy John. This is the
big time.

JOHNNY
How can I follow Jack Paar?

AL
The Jack Paar Show is gone. The
Tonight Show, starring Johnny
Carson is here to stay.

JOHNNY
Honestly Al, as my manager and not
as my friend, is leaving a
successful series a smart thing to
do? ABC loves me. We're a hit here.

AL

Normally leaving a hit show is stupid but NBC is offering you a two year contract for a hundred thousand dollars a year.

JOHNNY

Wow. They are serious.

AL

Dead serious Johnny. Opportunity is knocking at your door, answer it.

JOHNNY

It's really just talking to guests and doing funny bits, just like on this show isn't it?

AL

It's uncanny. TRUST has made you the best equipped host in the business to do this.

JOHNNY

It's really Art and this show that did it. He's the only producer that ever got me Al. He's under contract to ABC. If I leave, I leave Art and Ed. How do I know the NBC producers aren't going to be like the ones at CBS? All they wanted me to be was just like the guys before me.

AL

Art and Ed are great, but Johnny, you are the star. It has always been you. Take this job and America will forget Jack Paar in six months. You're going to be as big as Bob Hope or Jack Benny, maybe bigger.

That's exactly what Johnny has always wanted.

JOHNNY

Okay Al, tell NBC I'm their guy. I'll do it.

CUT TO:

INT. THE CARSON HOME - NIGHT

Jody and Johnny are in their living room talking.

Johnny is wearing a turtleneck shirt and cardigan sweater.

Jody is wearing Capri pants and a blouse.

JODY

We're never going to see you. We never see you now. If you're doing the Tonight Show until all hours of the night when are you going to see your three boys or me?

JOHNNY

I'll make time. We'll move into the city. Get a place on Park Avenue. We can afford it now.

JODY

I don't know if you've noticed John but the boys and I have a nice regular life here. I want it to stay that way, for their sake.

Jody pauses.

JODY (CONT'D)

Maybe you should get an apartment in the city just for yourself.

JOHNNY

What are you saying?

JODY

You can't be bothered to come home half the time anyway. You're the one who wants to be the most famous man in America. I just want a normal life.

Jody bursts into tears.

JODY (CONT'D)

Congratulations on getting the show.

Jody rushes out of the room crying.

Johnny stands speechless.

This is a sacrifice for fame he didn't think he'd ever have to make.

CUT TO:

INT. NBC MEETING ROOM - DAY

SUPERIMPOSE: Fall 1962

Frank welcomes Johnny and Al as they enter the room.

FRANK

Welcome to the NBC family Johnny.

JOHNNY

Thank you Frank, I'm proud as a peacock.

The executives laugh at Johnny's joke about their network mascot.

FRANK

You remember Bill Miller and Ken Murphy, the producers of the Tonight Show.

Al and Johnny shake hands with everyone and say their hello's.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Sit down Johnny. We wanted you to know the sales department has pre-sold the first six months of ad time on the show.

BILL

Sold out!

KEN

Madison Avenue is excited about you taking over the Tonight Show. And so are we.

JOHNNY

That's great news.

KEN

We have gone all out for your first show. We've booked Groucho Marx, Joan Crawford, Rudy Valle, Tony Bennett and Mel Brooks.

JOHNNY

Wow, what are we going to do the second night?

BILL

We'll keep booking great guests Johnny. That's going to be easy.

FRANK

We do have small issue about the show we want your input on.

Johnny is concerned.

JOHNNY

What is it?

FRANK

Nothing too serious. The show's latest announcer, **FREDERICK WINSTON** is retiring and we need to hire a new one. Any thoughts?

JOHNNY

Can we get Ed?

FRANK

Ed McMahon?

Johnny nods.

AL

Ed only has a month or two on his contract and I think ABC would be willing to release him since Johnny's gone. They've hired Woody Woodbury to replace Johnny on TRUST and his fishing hat clashes with Ed's style.

FRANK

We'll see how long Woody lasts but that's a good idea Johnny. Let's get Ed McMahon and let's get this show on the air.

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

The studio is buzzing with pre-show activity.

On the left side of the stage is a desk and an easy chair with a couch to the left of it.

The Band is on the right side of the stage.

It's finally the iconic set of the Tonight Show as viewers will come to know it for the next thirty years.

The producers, Bill and Ken are going over some note cards with Ed.

BILL

Here's the final rewrite on the script for the introduction tonight Ed. Groucho Marx will open the show greeting the viewers into the new format and then he will throw it to you

Ed takes the note cards.

ED MCMAHON

Thanks guys. Why the long introduction?

BILL

We just want to explain to the new viewers who Johnny is.

ED MCMAHON

They will find out soon enough.

KEN

I'm going to check on Johnny. We're live in 15 minutes.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Johnny is sitting in his make up working on his script.

KEN

Hi John. What are you doing?

JOHNNY

I'm rewriting the last few jokes the staff gave me. And some of the pre-interview questions. They need some work.

KEN

Johnny, you should let me worry about the writing staff. They are pro's...

Johnny hands him his rewritten script.

KEN (CONT'D)

Okay, these are better. I'll get them on cue cards right away, but you shouldn't be worrying about this. The other jokes were good.

JOHNNY

But they weren't the best.

Johnny's stare makes Ken uncomfortable.

KEN

I'll go get these on cue cards.
Break a leg tonight.

Johnny is left in his dressing room alone.

He lights a cigarette and stares in the mirror at his reflection.

JOHNNY

Break a leg.

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO BACKSTAGE - DAY

The camera follows the stage manager through the halls to Johnny's dressing room.

STAGE MANAGER

Two minutes Mr. Carson.

Johnny puts out his cigarette in the ashtray.

Carson walks down the corridor to his spot behind the curtain.

Groucho Marx is done speaking.

The band starts to play and for the first time we hear the iconic theme song, JOHNNY'S THEME to the Tonight Show by Paul Anka.

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

In front of the stage Ed stands at his announcer podium.

A stagehand runs past him to get offstage fast and brushes into Ed causing him to knock his long introduction cards off his podium.

The floor manager points at Ed giving him his cue.

Ed looks at the cards on the floor and improvises.

ED MCMAHON
Ladies and gentlemen,
Heeeeeeeerrre's Johnny!

Ed stretches the words out to fill the time of the extended introduction as long as he can.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Johnny takes a deep breath at his spot behind the curtain.

Carson turns on his "showtime" smile, pulls back the curtain and walks on stage.

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

After the broadcast Bill and Ken are giving Ed a hard time as Johnny walks up.

BILL
Christ Ed couldn't you get the opening right?

ED MCMAHON
The stage hand bumped into me, I had to ad-lib it.

JOHNNY
Leave Ed alone guys, I like it and we're keeping it. Every night from now on.

Ken and Bill look skeptical.

KEN
Okay Johnny.

JOHNNY
The real question is how did the show go?

KEN

Joan Crawford, the biggest bitch in Hollywood, had such a good time that she wants a talk show now too.

JOHNNY

Meaning?

BILL

If the rest of America enjoyed it even half as much as Joan and the studio audience you'll be a huge hit.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOMS & BEDROOMS - NIGHT

Sam Cooke sings Twisting the Night Away:

A man is sitting in a recliner watching his TV.

On the tiny black and white set Johnny is doing his monologue.

CUT TO:

A middle aged couple is watching Johnny doing his Carnac the Magnificent bit with Ed.

CUT TO:

A man watches TV while his wife sleeps in the bed next to him.

On the TV Johnny is interviewing guests and it seems everyone is having the time of their life laughing, drinking and smoking on stage.

CUT TO:

INSET: VARIETY Magazine headline: CARSON'S TONIGHT SHOW #1

Sam Cooke's song ends.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S OFFICE - DAY

Johnny is behind his desk and Al Bruno is sitting in the chair facing the desk.

AL

I'm happy the show's a hit. You're a hit Johnny. Why aren't you happy?

JOHNNY

I feel like I'm right back at CBS Al. You weren't with me then. It was the second worst time of my life. This is the worst. I'm on a hit TV show and I should have ridden off into the sunset after we got this show right? Living happily ever after? Except the show is driving me crazy during the day and at night...I'm all alone in my fancy new apartment. I think I miss being a game show host.

AL

Tell me what's wrong and we'll fix it together.

JOHNNY

The producers are making it up as we go, they have no plan for the show week to week.

AL

Is that all?

JOHNNY

There's no real plan for me either, all they want is for me to be like Jack Paar. They aren't listening to my suggestions for sketches. I'm re-writing all the monologue jokes every night before the show. I miss Art.

AL

The situation may be similar to your experience at CBS except for one major difference.

JOHNNY

What's that Al?

AL

This show's a huge hit and you're a star now.

JOHNNY

So?

AL

I made you a star Johnny, now I'm
going to teach you how to take
control like one.

Off Johnny's interested face.

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK GOLDMAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Al and Johnny enter Frank's office.

FRANK

Sit down Johnny, Hi Al.
Congratulations, the new ratings
book is in and your ratings are
almost double Jack Paar's last
ratings period.

AL

I'm glad we're getting strong
ratings Frank but this grind is
killing Johnny.

FRANK

What's wrong?

JOHNNY

I'm rewriting all the jokes coming
out of the writer's room. Bill and
Ken don't know how to get the
talent coordinators to prep the
guests correctly. They just don't
get me. That remote broadcast from
Yankee Stadium was a fiasco.

FRANK

What do you want me to do about it?

JOHNNY

We need some new writers and I want
to replace Bill and Ken.

FRANK

With who?

JOHNNY

Art Stark.

FRANK

Art's under contract at ABC.

AL
We want you to buy it out.

FRANK
Johnny, the show's a hit.

JOHNNY
But it's not the best it can be
Frank, and I know we both want that
don't we?

AL
You've made a big investment in
Johnny and the show Frank, what's a
few more thousand?

Frank reluctantly agrees and nods his head.

FRANK
If it will make you happy Johnny
I'll do it. It's only money.

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - DAY

Johnny, Ed and Art are working in rehearsal.

The gang is back together and everyone's happy.

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

Johnny and Ed are doing a show in front of a live studio audience.

Art is at his place at the producer's podium in front of the stage.

The place is packed and the audience is laughing hysterically at Johnny, Ed and their guests on stage.

CUT TO:

INT. THE CARSON HOME - NIGHT

In her bedroom Jody watches Johnny on TV with tears in her eyes.

She has lost him and she knows it.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S OFFICE - DAY

Johnny and Art are reviewing the booking schedule.

ART

We added **Joan Rivers** and Morris West the writer of THE SHOES OF THE FISHERMAN for Fridays show. Did you get the book the publisher sent over?

JOHNNY

Yeah, I read it the other night. That should be a fun interview. There's a lot of good stuff in there. By the way, can we book Flip Wilson on the show as soon as possible? He was great the other night.

ART

Sure. That will drive the censors crazy too. They think he's going to swear every time he's on. I'll have Betty call his agent.

JOHNNY

The censors spend all day driving me crazy so let's deliver a little payback.

ART

One last thing John, Skitch Henderson came to me today. He wants to retire, says it's time to putter in his garden.

JOHNNY

Damn, what do we do? Do we need to hire another famous big band leader?

ART

I think we should give the job to Doc Severinsen. The stuff you two do during the **STUMP THE BAND** bit when Skitch is on vacation is great TV.

JOHNNY

He's a great arranger too, that's how he got the assistant band leader job. I'm fine with it if the network is.

ART

Not hiring a Guy Lombardo type saves the show budget.

JOHNNY

So NBC will love it.

ART

We're heroes. Johnny, Ed and Doc, I like the sound of that.

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - NIGHT

Johnny, Ed and DOC SEVERINSEN, 39, in his gaudy dress jacket, are doing another show.

Johnny is talking with his guest ED AMES, 40.

JOHNNY

So Ed, you're starring as "Mingo" on the DANIEL BOONE SHOW, and you've actually learned how to throw a tomahawk?

AMES

I can hit a target from across the room now.

Johnny pulls three little tomahawks from behind the desk.

JOHNNY

Can you show me how?

Johnny hands Ames one tomahawk and keeps two of them.

The two men get up and walk over to the open area of the stage.

A large wood panel with a chalk outline of a cowboy on it is brought out and placed about twelve feet away from Ames and Johnny as a target.

AMES

The secret is to control the rotation of the tomahawk so it goes around only once.

Ames throws the tomahawk across the stage.

The tomahawk hits the chalk outline right in the groin sticking in the wood with the handle pointing upward in a phallic image.

There is a very long burst of laughter from the studio audience.

Ames is mortified by the accidental placement.

Ames starts toward the target to retrieve the tomahawk but Carson quickly and casually hooks his arm and stops him.

Ames gets a quick look from Johnny that says "Relax, it's okay, follow my lead".

Johnny casually sharpens the blades of the two tomahawks on each other as he patiently waits, allowing the classic moment to be milked for its full potential.

Just as the audience laughter is dying down, Johnny speaks.

JOHNNY

Ed, I didn't know you were Jewish.

The audience roars with laughter again.

Ames cracks up on the stage and Johnny looks straight into the TV camera.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Welcome to Frontier Bris!

More laughter.

Ames motions to the target and Johnny's tomahawks.

AMES

Would you like to try it?

JOHNNY

Why not? I can't hurt him any more than you did.

Off the audiences continuing laughter.

CUT TO:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Johnny, Art and Ed are the toast of the town.

They are out drinking in a bar at a table with several beautiful women including a **BLONDE, 29,** and a **BRUNETTE, 30.**

The women are sitting on either side of Johnny.

JOHNNY

So how long do you think this will last Art?

ART

As long as you want it to John.
This is your time, just like Al says.

BLONDE

You are the funniest man in the world Johnny.

BRUNETTE

It's true. You really are.

JOHNNY

Thanks, but I meant how long can this go on without ABC and CBS taking a shot at us?

ED MCMAHON

Bring them on!

ART

Ed's right Johnny. Jack Paar is gone. The King is dead. Long live the King!

ALL

Long live the King!

Art motions to the waiter for another round of drinks.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S APARTMENT - DAY

Johnny wakes up in bed, the **BLONDE** from the night before still asleep next to him, and lights a cigarette before his feet hit the floor.

His new apartment is a penthouse with a spectacular view of the city.

Johnny wanders out onto his balcony still smoking, clad just in his boxers and stares at the New York City morning.

He looks down at a patio table with a **TV GUIDE** laying on it with a cover of the now famous late night threesome, Johnny, Ed and Doc on their equally famous couch on the Tonight Show set.

JOHNNY
Long live the king...

Johnny sighs.

CUT TO:

INT. ABC OFFICES - DAY

A group of executives greet **JOEY BISHOP, 38**, as he enters the office.

ABC EXECUTIVE
Joey Bishop! Welcome to ABC!

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW STUDIO - DAY

Art walks up to Johnny and Ed in rehearsal with a copy of **VARIETY MAGAZINE** in his hand.

Johnny is in costume as his famous AUNT BLABBY character.

ART
ABC just cancelled **THE JOEY BISHOP SHOW.**

Off Johnny smiling.

CUT TO:

INT. CBS OFFICES - DAY

A group of executives greet **DICK CAVETT, 30**, as he enters the office.

CBS EXECUTIVE
Dick Cavett! Welcome to CBS!

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S OFFICE - DAY

Art knocks on Johnny's door and leans in.

ART
CBS just cancelled **THE DICK CAVETT SHOW.**

Off Johnny smiling.

CUT TO:

INT. ABC OFFICES - DAY

A group of executives greet **MERV GRIFFEN, 46**, as he enters the office.

ABC EXECUTIVE #2
Merv Griffin! Welcome to ABC!

CUT TO:

INT. THE TONIGHT SHOW HALLWAY - DAY

Art walks up to Johnny with a copy of **THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER** in his hand.

ART
ABC just cancelled **THE MERV GRIFFEN SHOW.**

Off Johnny still smiling.

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK GOLDMAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Frank is getting a briefing on The Tonight Show.

NBC EXECUTIVE #1
Westinghouse has changed their syndication plans for **THE MIKE DOUGLAS SHOW**. It's going to be a daytime show now instead of late night.

NBC EXECUTIVE #2
Carson has completely destroyed any competition CBS and ABC have put up against him.

NBC EXECUTIVE #1
Even with his raise to a half million dollars a year after the last contract negotiation the show is a cash cow for the network sir.

NBC EXECUTIVE #2
Right now, Johnny is NBC's number one money-maker.

NBC EXECUTIVE #1
He's generating thirty percent of the networks profits every year.

Frank isn't as happy as the younger executives. He's heard all this before.

FRANK
It's good news everyone but it also means all our network eggs are in one late night basket.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S OFFICE - DAY

SUPERIMPOSE: 1967

Johnny is sitting at his desk working when his secretary knocks on his door.

SECRETARY
Excuse me Johnny, but your wife Jody is here to see you.

Johnny is surprised.

JOHNNY
Send her in.

Jody walks in to the office wearing a blue bell-bottomed pantsuit and a blazer.

She new look exudes the confidence of a modern woman.

Johnny kisses her on the cheek.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Hi, would you like a soda or coffee?

JODY
No, thank you.

Johnny's secretary leaves and closes the door.

JODY (CONT'D)
I'm sorry I didn't call first.

JOHNNY
How are the boys? Is everything
okay?

JODY
Yes, well...I've spoken with a
lawyer Johnny. I want a divorce.

JOHNNY
But...

JODY
We've been separated for five years
John. It's time, for both of us, to
move on with our lives.

Johnny is silent for a moment.

JOHNNY
If this is what you want.

JODY
It's not what I want but it's what
we have to do.

Jody pulls some papers out her purse and walks over to
Johnny.

She puts the papers on his desk and gives him a kiss on the
cheek.

JODY (CONT'D)
I will always love you Johnny.

Johnny is lost in thought as Jody walks out of the room.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S OFFICE - DAY

Johnny, Ed, Art, Doc and a few more staffers are in the
office.

JOHNNY
As you may know the **American
Federation of Television & Radio
Artists** is probably going on strike
next week.
(MORE)

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Ed, Doc and I will be walking the
picket line and I expect every
member of our staff to respect that
line. Are we clear?

Everyone nods.

Art claps his hands and shoos everyone out of the room.

ART

Everyone back to work. We still
have a show to do tonight.

Everyone leaves except Art.

JOHNNY

So how long do you think the strike
will last?

ART

I don't know. The networks are
sticking to their guns this time.
It's going to take at least four
weeks before they open their
checkbook to settle. You going to
be okay dealing with the divorce
during all this?

JOHNNY

We'll see. I was hoping to stay
busy with the show so I hope the
union wraps it up faster than that.
I'm going to miss this. Do we have
all the shows picked for the reruns
while we're shut down?

ART

Yeah, we're all set. I wish this
strike wouldn't happen. I've got a
bad feeling about being off the air
for so long.

JOHNNY

Art, my greatest fear is that the
viewers will forget about me while
we're dark.

ART

The viewers love you. I worry about
the network. You never know what
the suits are going to do.

CUT TO:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY STREET - DAY

There is an A.F.T.R.A. strike in progress.

A large group of striking workers, including Johnny and Ed, are carrying signs and walking a picket line in front of NBC.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Johnny is reading and working on the couch with the TV on.

The half-empty scotch bottle on the coffee table shows he's had quite a few drinks.

NBC starts broadcasting a **BEST OF CARSON** rerun that causes Johnny's head to jerk up and take notice.

He watches curiously for a few moments.

Johnny picks up the telephone and dials a phone number familiar from practice.

CUT TO:

INT. AL BRUNO'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The phone rings and Al answers it.

AL

Hello.

The scene intercuts between Johnny and Al during the call.

JOHNNY

It's me. Do you have NBC on?

AL

It is and I was just about to call you.

JOHNNY

What's going on? It's only nine-thirty. Did they move daylight savings time?

AL

NBC must be desperate for programming Johnny. The strike has gone a lot longer than anyone expected.

JOHNNY

Where do we stand contractually?
This is wrong. They aren't supposed
to rerun any show without the show
and a license fee agreed to by both
parties.

AL

Oh yeah, they are violating the
contract right now. They are going
to have to pay you an arm and a leg
for this John.

JOHNNY

That's it? They think they can just
piss on me and I have to take the
fee and cash the check?

AL

They're a network John, it's always
about money at the end of the day.
I'll call the lawyers. We'll meet
with them and see what they think
about this.

JOHNNY

This is about more than just money
Al.

AL

We'll take care of it Johnny.

They both hang up their phones.

Al looks at the NBC show on the TV.

AL (CONT'D)

What the hell were you guys
thinking?

CUT TO:

INT. LAWYERS CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Johnny and Al sit across the table from several lawyers at
the conference table.

THOMAS VAN OWEN, 48, a tall, distinguished Wall Street
attorney is the lead partner representing Johnny.

THOMAS

NBC has been running the program's
reruns for over a week now.
(MORE)

THOMAS (CONT'D)

The license fees will have to be paid along with any penalty but it is our legal opinion that you could move to void this contract and it would be upheld by the court.

AL

So we could renegotiate with NBC?

THOMAS

That could be an option.

JOHNNY

What if I wanted to do a new show on another network?

THOMAS

You would be free to do that also.

AL

Do you want to leave the Tonight Show Johnny?

JOHNNY

It's been five years Al. I have the itch to do something else. Maybe prime time or even movies?

THOMAS

Gentlemen, our legal opinion would be that you do nothing and make no decisions right now.

AL

Why?

THOMAS

If you are to consider renegotiation as an option there is some serious due diligence that needs to be done on what the Tonight Show is worth to NBC and how much it makes every year from the show.

JOHNNY

Ha!

AL

NBC keeps those numbers in Fort Knox. We've done everything we can to find out.

THOMAS

Give us two weeks and we'll find out. The network is officially in breach of contract. If the strike ends Johnny, don't go back to work. Now you're on strike by yourself.

Off Johnny's shocked face.

CUT TO:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY STREET - DAY

Al and Johnny have left the lawyers office.

AL

Johnny, I'm not sure you should do this.

JOHNNY

These are the best lawyers in the business Al.

AL

Getting a new deal is one thing John but do you really want to leave to do a prime time show? You are the King of Late Night now. No body remembers Paar or Allen. They both tried prime time shows and failed. Both of them have been trying to regain what they lost when they lost this show.

But Johnny won't let it go.

JOHNNY

Do you think I'd fail too Al?

AL

I didn't say that. I thought you loved the Tonight Show? It's your baby. You're not just another star. You make stars. You're one of the most powerful men in show business and this show gives you that power.

JOHNNY

Answer the question Al. Don't you think I can cut it in prime time?

AL

Of course I do.

But it too late.

Johnny feels let-down and betrayed.

JOHNNY
I'm going home to think about this.

Johnny leaves Al dumbstruck on the street.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S APARTMENT - DAY

Johnny is drinking heavily by himself.

The scotch bottle is almost empty this time.

Johnny's phone rings and he answers it.

Intercut between Johnny and his caller Art Stark.

JOHNNY
Hello.

ART
Johnny, it's Art! AFTRA settled!
The strike is over!

JOHNNY
Not for all of us Art. I'm not
coming back yet.

ART
What the hell are you talking
about?

JOHNNY
NBC screwed up. Call Al. He'll fill
you in.

ART
Don't do this Johnny. There has to
be another way.

JOHNNY
I was hoping I'd have your support
on this Art.

Johnny hangs up the phone.

ART
God damn suits.

CUT TO:

INT. LAWYERS WAITING ROOM - DAY

Thomas walks out to greet a hung-over Johnny in the waiting room.

THOMAS
You look like hell Johnny.

He addresses the RECEPTIONIST, 23, very pretty.

THOMAS (CONT'D)
Get Mr. Carson a coffee please.

RECEPTIONIST
How do you take it Mr. Carson?

JOHNNY
Black.

Thomas escorts Johnny into his office.

Johnny sits in the client chair.

RECEPTIONIST
Here's your coffee Mr. Carson.

She leaves.

JOHNNY
Thank you.

Thomas sits behind his large desk and arranges some documents.

THOMAS
This hasn't been easy for you has it Johnny?

JOHNNY
My personal strike? I'm being vilified in the press as an arrogant, greedy jerk. My producer and my manager think I'm crazy. My staff probably hates me for taking away their paychecks. Even my boys called me to tell me that the other kids at school are teasing them about this.

THOMAS

One way or the other it will all be over soon. We've found out everything we need to assess The Tonight Show's financial situation.

JOHNNY

How? Al could never find out anything.

THOMAS

NBC guards the numbers like Fort Knox, just like you said, but our firm does a lot of business with the Madison Avenue advertising companies too so I had our people call around and find out how much they all spend on your show.

JOHNNY

Amazing.

THOMAS

Looks like NBC makes about twenty-five million dollars a year from the Tonight Show.

JOHNNY

I'm making five hundred thousand. That's tip money to them.

THOMAS

If that. It's a big part of NBC's profits every year, twenty-five to thirty percent if our math is right.

JOHNNY

Holy crap.

THOMAS

So now we know how much to ask for if you want to keep doing the Tonight Show.

JOHNNY

How much should we ask?

THOMAS

A lot. However, if you want a prime-time show the market is very receptive. Every network wants you and they will let you pick your show.

(MORE)

THOMAS (CONT'D)
Late night, prime time, variety,
comedy, you name it. Now you have
to ask yourself the big question.

JOHNNY
Which is?

THOMAS
This is your shot Johnny. When
people get leverage like this they
can use it once. You need to ask
yourself, down deep inside, all
your life, what is it you really
want?

Off a thoughtful Johnny.

CUT TO:

INT. NBC MEETING ROOM - DAY

Johnny, Thomas and the lawyers are facing off against Frank Goldman and his executives.

THOMAS
...and Carson Productions gets full
creative control and ownership on
The Tonight Show.

The NBC team goes crazy at this.

FRANK
What?! That's out of the question.

THOMAS
These are the terms gentlemen.

FRANK
Johnny, NBC is the network. You are
the star. But we know what's best
for the show and you.

JOHNNY
No you don't Frank. I'll stay at
NBC and I'll do the Tonight Show
for the next twenty years if I need
to. But I know what's best for me
and the show and I'll call the
shots. If you want me, it's my show
now.

Johnny walks out of the room.

Thomas gets up and leaves a file on the table.

THOMAS

We can work on the numbers in here
but control and ownership are
dealbreakers. He will go to CBS or
ABC.

Thomas walks out of the room.

The executives all start talking at once.

EXECUTIVE WITH BEARD

Everyone in the business knows he
has had plenty of offers.

EXECUTIVE WITH CREWCUT

If Carson walks away from NBC he
instantly becomes the most valuable
talent on the market.

EXECUTIVE WITH GLASSES

Who can follow Johnny Carson?

FRANK

I asked that same question about
Jack Paar. I had an answer then.
Anyone have one now?

The room is silent.

FRANK (CONT'D)

That's what I thought.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S APARTMENT - DAY

Johnny is having a cocktail on the balcony.

The phone rings.

Johnny answers it.

JOHNNY

Hello.

THOMAS

Johnny, it's Thomas Van Owen.

JOHNNY

What does your crystal ball say
about my future Thomas?

THOMAS

I'd say it's pretty bright Johnny.
NBC gave in. You will own and
control the show. Your salary will
be just over two million dollars a
year for the next five years. You
still have to deal with network
censors but you are the master of
your fate. You control your destiny
John. Congratulations.

Johnny is overwhelmed.

He didn't think this would happen.

JOHNNY

Thank you. I really mean it Thomas,
thank you very much.

THOMAS

Come in to the office later. We'll
go over all the details.

JOHNNY

I'll see you then.

Johnny hangs up.

Johnny looks out at New York City.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Long live the king!

He believes it now.

Johnny raises the glass of scotch to his lips and stops.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Control. No control with this
stuff.

He looks at the glass of booze and decides he's done with it.

He grabs the bottle and the glass and pours both down the
drain in the kitchen.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Master of my destiny, huh? Well,
from now on I will be.

A determined Johnny lights up a cigarette.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY'S APARTMENT - DAY

Johnny's on the phone and the doorbell rings.

JOHNNY

Let me know when the final papers
are ready to sign Thomas. Thanks.

Johnny answers the door and let's Art Stark in.

ART

Hi Johnny. I came right over.

JOHNNY

You heard about the new deal?

ART

It's all over the newspapers. Since
you're my boss now I hope I still
have a job?

JOHNNY

I'm sorry Art. I'm going to have to
let you go. I'm taking the show in
a new direction.

ART

God damn suits!

Art hangs his head for a moment.

ART (CONT'D)

So who's it going to be?

JOHNNY

Fred DeCordova will be the new
producer. I'm moving the show to
the west coast next season. Los
Angeles is the center of the TV
business now, that's where the
guests are. Fred knows LA. You're a
New York guy Art. I'm sorry.

ART

Forget it. It's television John.
Nothing lasts forever.

With nothing else to say Art rises and heads for the door.

Art pauses just before he leaves and turns to Johnny.

ART (CONT'D)

Good luck in LA.

JOHNNY
Thanks Art.

Art leaves.

Johnny sighs.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Nothing lasts forever.

CUT TO:

INT. TWENTY-ONE RESTAURANT - DAY

Johnny and Al are having lunch.

AL
But John, after all we've been through? I got you the Tonight Show for Pete's sakes. You didn't even want to do it.

JOHNNY
I'm sorry Al. I don't need a manager anymore. Especially one that I feel isn't there one hundred percent for me. The lawyers will handle my business dealings. WILLIAM MORRIS will handle my endorsements, concerts and licensing. That's how it's going to be.

AL
Damn John after everything...

Al looks Johnny right in the eyes.

AL (CONT'D)
You don't really care do you? You got what you want and everything else doesn't matter right?

JOHNNY
I'd like to think you're wrong Al.

Al stands up.

AL
Here's my last piece of professional advice to you: Don't ever leave that show. You fought too hard for it.

Al starts to leave but turns back.

AL (CONT'D)
I hope it was worth it Johnny.

Al leaves.

Johnny lights a cigarette.

JOHNNY
I hope so too Al. I hope all of it
was worth it.

CUT TO:

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

SUPERIMPOSE: Burbank, CA 1970

An older Johnny Carson, 45, now going grey at the temples, is sitting in his make-up chair smoking as the stage manager gives him the "one minute" warning to airtime.

He is wearing one of his iconic plaid blazers. Johnny puts out his cigarette in the fancy crystal ashtray.

CUT TO:

INSERT PHOTO OF STEVE ALLEN.

SUPERIMPOSE: Steve Allen hosted several television talk shows, wrote many best selling books and acted in dozens of films and TV series for the next 50 years.

He never had to take another job because he needed the money.

CUT TO:

INT. BACK STAGE HALLWAY - NIGHT

A confident Johnny Carson walks down the corridor to his spot behind the curtain.

People in the hallway stop talking and step back as he passes as if the Pope or a King were going by.

CUT TO:

INSERT PHOTO OF JACK PAAR.

SUPERIMPOSE: Jack Paar kept trying. He hosted several more talk shows on different TV networks until he retired.

None were as successful as his time on The Tonight Show.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Johnny stands at his spot behind the curtain.

Fred DeCordova, 40, gives him a small salute and heads for his spot in the front.

Johnny takes a deep breath.

ED MCMAHON
(V.O.)
Heeeeeeeerrre's Johnny!

Carson turns on his trademark smile, the curtain pulls open and he walks out onto the stage.

FREEZE FRAME: on Johnny Carson, the undisputed, undefeated King of Late Night Television, as he steps out in front of the Tonight Show's famous rainbow curtain to thunderous applause that continues on until we fade to black.

SUPERIMPOSE: The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson was #1 in the ratings for 30 straight years.

Johnny retired in 1992, one of the richest and most powerful men in television.

FADE TO BLACK.