

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS:

Screenplay vs. Short Story, Who Will
Win?

A thought experiment or *Gedankenexperiment* (from German) considers some hypothesis, theory, or principle for the purpose of thinking through its consequences. Given the structure of the experiment, it may or may not be possible to actually perform it, and, in the case that it is possible for it to be performed, there need be no intention of any kind to actually perform the experiment in question. The common goal of a thought experiment is to explore the potential consequences of the principle in question.

—Wikipedia

Einstein was famous for them. Me, I'm not trying to solve the fundamental mysteries of the universe, just tell better stories, maybe make some sense out of history and life.

by
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Screenplay vs. Short Story, Who Will Win?

I sometimes go to John August's site to listen to his podcasts — www.johnaugust.com — very informative. I highly recommend them for anyone interested in story and script work — though he often becomes sidetracked and like all writers he's more self-absorbed than an ordinary guy you'd meet on the street. That's just the way writers are.

A while back, just how far back I don't know, John began a contest for the benefit of his listeners, THE THREE PAGE CHALLENGE. I happened to stumble upon an undeleted stash of these script samples. The packrat that I am, I downloaded them. They sat on my hard drive for months. One day recently, I stumbled across them. I just finished another of my *Realm of the Gods* novels — huge, complex affair writing one of those — when an idea passed through my brain. Transforming one of these short script snippets into fiction, now that would be an interesting little project. Only take a day or two. Why not?

First up, Trevor Hollen's pages from "Everything Means Nothing To Me." Terrible title, by the way. Maybe a better one? "Everything and Nothing." Here's the script. My "prose-ification" of it is HARDBOILED.

EVERYTHING MEANS NOTHING TO ME

FADE IN:

EXT. ABANDONED WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

The Warehouse District of L.A.

Door flies open.

MAX exits bloody as hell. Right eye is swollen shut. A (very dead) man is handcuffed to her left wrist and slung over her back.

A gaping and bloody hole where his left eye used to be bleeds down Max's shirt.

Max stumbles toward the street, struggling and grunting. The dead man begins to weigh Max's tiny frame down. She steps between two box trucks and into the street--

HEADLIGHTS LIGHT UP HER FACE.

She turns--

BRAKES SQUEAL!

CUT TO BLACK:

UNDER BLACK--

LITTLE GIRL VOICE (PHOEBE)
Don't go! Don't go!

ON MOVIE SCREEN

The Monster Squad. The finale.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Max, not bloody and no swollen eye, sits among a sea of fanboys. Tears run down her face at Phoebe and Frankenstein's emotional farewell.

LATER, IN THE LOBBY

Crowd files out.

Max makes her way out, wipes her eyes. She lingers on a Streets Of Fire poster advertised as "Coming Soon". She smiles to herself, exits the lobby and...

OUTSIDE - NIGHT

Into the L.A. night. She reaches into her messenger bag and checks her phone:

11:50 PM - 2 missed calls from Johnny

Flashes:

Low Battery

Then dies.

MAX

Shit.

She hurries down the street.

INT. MAX'S CAR

Max drives.

A HOLE Where her stereo used to be.

ON PASSENGER SEAT

A mini boombox sits surrounded by a dozen CDs. Lid opens and Max slides a CD (burnt copy of South Pacific) in, slaps it closed and...

"A Wonderful Guy" by Florence Henderson plays.

Max grabs a cigarette pack from the glove box and lights up.

While the song continues...

INT. MELTDOWN COMICS - EARLIER THAT NIGHT

JOHNNY, greasy hair sticks out from under a Philadelphia Phillies ballcap as he thumbs through The Goon. His eyes dart from side to side, then quickly stuffs the comic into his hoodie and grabs another one to read.

COMIC BOOK GUY (O.S.)

Hey.

Johnny turns.

COMIC BOOK GUY

Closing up, guy.

Johnny looks up

A WALL CLOCK

Of a pin-up girl leaning against a B-17 bomber that says "The Flying Fortress." It's almost nine.

Johnny sets the comic back on the shelf. Heads for the door.

EXT. MELTDOWN COMICS - NIGHT

Johnny exits onto Sunset, lights instantly go out in the store behind him.

Johnny fishes his comic out and flips through it.

Behind him, TWO FIGURES begin to follow.

Johnny rounds a corner. Watches his shadow on the ground created by the streetlights.

Two shadows bookend his shadow.

He slows and turns. The shadows cover his face.

INT. MAX'S CAR - THE PRESENT

Max sings along...

MAX

(singing)

Flatly, I'll stand on my little
flat feet and say, love is a grand
and a beautiful thing!

...And she's pretty damn good.

THE STREET - EARLIER

LUCKY and SPIKE tower over Johnny. Tattoos cover their arms and necks as they give off a "not fucking around" attitude.

Johnny turns and runs.

The men chase.

Johnny rounds another corner.

FROM BEHIND, a cherry 50's pick-up truck approaches fast!

IT'S ALMOST ON TOP OF HIM!

Everything and Nothing

by
R. P. Bird

"It's almost over," Maxine told the dead man chained to her wrist. She had taken a beating, but at least she was still alive. Vincent was dead and he was dead weight. It took all the strength in her short, thin little body to slowly drag him out of the room. Maxine clung to the crowbar in her free hand like it was a precious talisman, which, in a way, it was. Hadn't it defeated a man with a gun? Maxine still wasn't sure how the crowbar had managed that. She came to the metal utility stairs. How was this going to work?

She knew she didn't have all day. The gunman's friends would miss him soon enough to drive out for a look. It was a dusty old prop warehouse full of boxes and shelves. Maybe she could hide, only, how would that work with a dead man attached to her wrist?

"You're a lot of bother," she told the dead man. It wasn't a usual thing for her to talk to dead people. Perhaps she'd get a pass on it because of the concussion. Maxine turned away from the corpse and draped its arm over her shoulder. She took a couple steps down the stairs and crouched. Maxine pulled on the arm with all her might, slowly dragging the dead guy over her hips and partly up onto her back. She slowly paced down the stairs, one stair step at a time.

At the bottom, she straightened up and let the body fall. She sat down next to it and took a break. But only for a minute. Back up, she dragged the body toward the distant glowing EXIT sign. How nice of them to be up to date on the fire code.

There was no chain or lock on the bar latch. It was just an ordinary fire door. She crouched, grabbed the guy under the arms, folding her arms up to trap his arms in her elbows, still not willing to abandon the crowbar. She promised herself that the crowbar would always have a home with her. She wondered in a fuzzy thought if it were permitted marry a crowbar. Save her life, she'd be loyal forever — or at least until they caught her. Maxine straightened her knees and backed into the bar latch. She was able to drag the body out the door.

Where did it get her? A large parking lot and a line of delivery trucks parked in front of the warehouse. She looked around for a possible solution, and easy way out. None confronted her. She began to drag the body forward. Just as she and the dead guy

managed to get past the delivery trucks, bright lights. She was illuminated by car headlights. The vehicle slammed to a stop in front of her. Max raised up the crowbar, facing the man from the car as he walked toward her.

###

The fun had begun twenty-four hours earlier in a movie theater, though Max did not know this at the time.

"Don't go! Don't go!" a little girl shouted from the screen, from the closing moments of *Monster Squad*.

This was hours before the beatings, the shooting, and the chance meeting with her hero the crowbar. Maxine, Max to her boyfriends and her brother, sat in the dark. She was crying. The man she would kill in a few hours probably would not understand how such a silly softie of a tiny woman, who'd cry over the ending to a fucking movie, could manage to kill him. But there she was anyway, balling her eyes out over Phoebe and Frankenstein. Heartache issued from every one of their parting words.

The movie done, she dried her eyes during the credits before making her way with the last of the crowd out into the lobby. They led her into the street. She paused by the entrance to inspect the Streets of Fire poster near the door, the one with the "Coming Soon" banner across it.

Aren't art-house theaters just...wonderful? she asked herself, wanting at that moment to hug a teddy bear. It was just the remedy she needed after what went down at work. Ebert was right, DVDs didn't cut it when the original product was made to be seen on the big screen. *Not many chances these days to see old movies the way they were meant to be seen.* She knew she had to grab each single chance as it came by.

Max walked away toward her car. She wasn't too worried about anyone breaking into her car. They had done it a month ago. A big hole was in her dash from where her car radio had been. She didn't need a new radio as much as she needed the money, so she kept the insurance payment, except to fix the broken window. She could see as she approached her car that the windows were still intact. First she went to the trunk and pulled out a small cardboard box she had fished out of a dumpster behind the mall. In it were her "driving CDs" and the small, worn boom box she had been given by her dad when she was fifteen, right before he left her mom — and her, it turned out. The STOP and PLAY symbols had long ago been rubbed off by her fingers pressing at them. She never saw Dad again after that. Back at her little studio apartment, she'd

listen to her tunes on headphones jacked into her scruffy old laptop, the one with the crack in the corner, or the five-year-old desktop sitting on her kitchen table. It couldn't play the latest games. She was saving up for a new one. Either that or an xbox, she couldn't make up her mind.

She plopped the cardboard box down on the passenger seat, hit the play button, and checked her cell phone. Being a hardcore cinema fan, she always turned her cell off before the show began. Classic Debbie Harry washed through her ears as she looked at her phone, "Live it Up" from her days in Blondie. Why she liked music recorded before she was born, Max didn't know, any more than she knew why her dad disappeared.

8:45 PM - missed call from Johnny
8:46 PM - missed call from Johnny
8:46 PM - missed call from Johnny
8:47 PM - missed call from Johnny
8:49 PM - missed call from Johnny

He hadn't left a message. Probably in a griever mood, wanting to rant at her. That afternoon he had come by the Staples where she worked, asked to borrow money, then called her a stupid cunt and made fun of her small breasts in front of everybody. Max wasn't in the mood for more of the same. She put the phone back in her pocket. Fuck all boyfriends with a sharp stick.

###

A couple hours before Maxine checked her cell, Johnny was standing next to the long magazine display at Meltdown Comics, trying to get her on his cell. No luck to be had. He put it away and adjusted his Phillies ball cap. He was uncertain as what to do next, after what he had just pulled off. He had paid Juan to drive him over to the house, and that had used up most of his money. He hadn't dared to open the big duffle with Juan right there, Juan would have shot him if he had known what was inside. Juan had dropped him at his mom's place and his mom had given him a ride to the comic store on her way to work. A glance up at the novelty wall clock high up over the magazine display confirmed the time. A stylized pinup girl was on the face, something of Will Eisner's perhaps. Johnny couldn't say, he didn't pay much attention to the artists. He went back to the comic he had been reading. With one hand, he casually unzipped his hoodie and stuffed the comic inside.

The hoodie zipped back up, he reached out and plucked another comic from the display shelf.

This one was good, too. He was tempted to try it again, but a voice spoke right behind him.

"My Man John, you gonna buy anything tonight? If not, gimme a break, it's closing time," Carl said. Though Carl worked at a comic book store, he did not conform to the stereotype of the Comic Book Guy from *the Simpsons*. He was tall and thin. Both Carl and the store's owner had unexpected depth, at least from Johnny's point of view, informed at it was by a cartoon show. Both the owner and Carl were members in the same karate dojo, plus, Carl the Comic Guy had mad mechanic skillz. He had fixed Johnny's car, but it never stayed fixed for long. Johnny had his number in case he ever wanted to blow the money to get the car running again. Carl called Max "Maxer" whenever she came into the store. He called Johnny "My Man John." Strange guy.

"All right." Johnny put the comic back on the display shelf and moved toward the door.

"New comics in next Tuesday," Carl said after him.

Johnny waved a hand as he left the store. Carl locked the door after him.

He was nearer Westwood, where the bookstores and comics shops were. Up east on Sunset, north to Hollywood Blvd., that's where the hookers and cops usually were. Hookers. Cops. Where hookers were, that's where cops were — or was it the other way round? Johnny smirked at the inane thought. He walked down a couple blocks to a liquor store and sat in front under the lights to read the stolen comic. He pulled his money out of a pocket and inspected it. Just enough for a forty. He shoved the money back in his pocket, stashed his comic, and was about to stand. Just his bad fortune, Lucky and Spike appeared out of nowhere in front of him.

"What the fuck, man?" Spike said in his no-fucking-around voice.

"Yeah. What the fuck?" Lucky echoed.

Tattoos were just about everywhere on both of them. Up one side of Lucky's face, along Spike's neck. Johnny didn't need to be told, they knew. If they knew, then he was in deep shit.

Spike leaned down and reached out with a big hand for a piece of Johnny.

Johnny dodged the hand and weaseled between the two as they tried to grab him.

The chase was on. If Johnny were to take a beating, then those fuckwits would have to earn the right by catching him. Johnny's skinny body outran them. He cut back across a parking

lot, went through an alley — Spike and Lucky had big meaty bodies, not made for long chases. They were lagging.

A cherry-red '50s hot-rodged pick-up truck screeched to a halt at the mouth of the alley. Johnny couldn't slow down. He slammed into the side of it and went down. Of course. Where Lucky and Spike were, Vincent had to be around somewhere nearby. It was a beating for sure this time.

###

I Couldn't turn it into an actual, real work of adaptation, not without seeing the rest of the script. The script bits are so maddeningly vague, so lacking in character revelation, I have no idea where the story is headed or why I'd want to take the trip. So I decided to turn it into a short story, MY short story.

###

It was an uneventful drive home for Max. She drove out to her apartment complex in the Redlands, where rents were a little cheaper. Her little studio apartment was made littler still by the piles of manga and comics lying around the bed. Johnny kept a few clothes in her closet and a toothbrush in her medicine cabinet — both of which were slated in her mind for a trip to the dumpster in the morning. She got ready for bed, hugged her favorite teddy bear, and turned out the lights. Max half-expected Johnny to pound on her door in the middle of the night, so she had a little trouble getting to sleep. She thought it was a lucky sign that he had yet to put in a midnight appearance, for which she was deeply grateful. Most likely scenario, he couldn't cage a ride from his friends. His own car was in a permanent state of disrepair, parked — embedded — in the street in front of his mom's place. Her last thought before dreamland captured her, she was so fucking done with him.

So it was with despair that deep in the night she was awakened by knocking at her door. Max pulled on a pair of old

cargo pants and a sweat shirt, not wanting to have it out with Johnny in her night gown. Though, come to think of it as she approached the door, the knocks weren't like Johnny's. They were intermittent and firm, not rat-tat-tat. She peeked through the door's peephole. It was that tattooed guy Spike, one of Johnny's friends. She put the chain on the door and cracked it.

"Hi, Spike. Johnny's not here."

"You wouldn't just be saying that, would you?"

"No, he and I broke up."

"Can I come in? We need to talk."

"No, it's the middle of the night. I'm not with Johnny anymore and I have to work tomorrow."

She started to close the door when a boot slammed into the other side of it. The blow punched the door back into her forehead and broke the chain. The next thing she knew, she was staring up at ceiling. Spike was kneeling next to her.

"It's not here," another voice said.

"Look again," Spike said.

"What the fuck? 'Look again'? It's a fucking tiny apartment. It ain't in the bathroom, it ain't in the closet, it ain't in the kitchen area — there aren't any other fucking rooms!"

"Why'd you do that?" Max asked. She raised her hand to rub the knot on her forehead where the door had caught her.

Spike grabbed her sweat shirt and shook her. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"You'll tell us now or you'll tell us later. Where's Johnny?"

There was shouting in the hallway about the noise.

"Let's go," Spike said. He grabbed up Max and dragged her out the door. Lucky knocked down the old guy from next door, the one who had been out in the hallway complaining. After that, things got fuzzy for Max.

She knew she was in the back seat of a car. She heard voices.

"We haven't found Juan yet. You go look for him. I'll stay and ask her a few questions. You be careful with Juan, he keeps a little twenty-five auto on him."

"I'll be nice."

"Did I say 'be nice'? Find out where our stuff is!"

"Who made you boss? I took that shit from Vincent because he could find us work, but you? You're just like me."

"All right. Sorry. Sorry. There, see? I'm being polite. Do you want to stay? I'll go."

"No. I know what you're going to do to her. I don't want to see that. Guys are one thing, but I have sisters, man."

Take this car. It'll be done by the time you get back. We'll bury the bodies, split the stuff."

Max only heard the last part. She had been unconscious for the rest of the conversation. She tried to sit up, but one of them smacked her from over the back of the front seat and she was out again.

###

Vincent had once worked as a security guard. He hadn't been a very good security guard — he had made copies of the keys to every place he watched over. Coincidentally, quite a few of the places he worked at suffered break-ins. He kept the keys after he was fired. The location of Johnny's interrogation was one of those places, a dusty old prop warehouse in Burbank. The company was in bankruptcy, nothing but parked delivery trucks with dirty windows in the parking lot and endless lines of shelves inside. Up on the second floor were the offices and storage rooms to the place. Amazing the amount of dust that could accumulate in a place over just six months or so. Perfect place for an intimate conversation.

"No, I didn't take it," Johnny said.

Lucky hit him.

"No, I didn't take it," Johnny repeated.

Spike hit him. The blow knocked him out of the metal folding chair they had sat him in.

It was a lie. If he told the truth, that he had, in fact, stolen the money and the meth, why then he'd be dead about five seconds after he told them where he hid the stuff. So Johnny lied. He lied and he lied while they put fists and feet to his body. He lost consciousness for a few minutes. When he woke up, he pretended to be unconscious. He listened and he waited. Despite Vincent's job history as a security guard, the guy had almost no law enforcement training. A three-day seminar, that's all.

"The little fuck's stubborn, isn't he?" Spike said.

Lucky kicked the supposedly unconscious Johnny. "Fucker." He leaned down to yell into Johnny's ear. "Where's our fucking stuff, man?"

Vincent was soft around the middle. Unlike the jeans his compatriots wore, he was dressed in a shirt and slacks. But that didn't really fool anyone. The big shoulders, the thick arms — but most especially that look, that "don't fuck with me motherfucker" look in his eyes. His next gig after the rentacop thing was a bouncer in a club in Anaheim, for which he hardly ever showed up,

but for which he was paid anyway. "Leave this to me. You two scoot on out, talk to Johnny's friends. See what Dogs, Juan, Reynolds, and Jesus have to say. I want answers, my friends, answers. Get answers."

Spike knew enough about Johnny's friends to bring up a valid point. "If they knew anything, our stuff would be gone and so would they."

"If they're still here, that means they haven't found it, either. Find out where they've been looking. Check his mom's house, too."

A few more words, and the two of them left.

Vincent stared down at Johnny. "Steal from me? Come on, you little shit, up in the chair again." He bent over and grasped Johnny under the arms, assuming he was still out.

Johnny counted himself lucky, so lucky, that his associates weren't cops. Vincent was at most only half of a cop. Real cops would have searched him. Cops would have found the switchblade in the side pocket of his jeans. He drew it out as Vincent put him in the chair. Johnny thought it was a little strange, Vincent didn't shout or say a word as Johnny stabbed him again and again. Johnny went down on top of him, stabbing and stabbing and stabbing. He even stuck Vincent in the neck a couple times, just to make sure the man was dead.

###

Max screamed when she saw the blood-soaked body. One moment, her brain concussed and in shut-down mode, the next, awake, lying next to the blood-soaked dead body of a man she had never met.

"Johnny's been a bad boy," Spike said, apparently unaffected by the sight of his dead boss. "He killed my boss. Vince just wanted what was his. Is that fair, to kill a man because he wants what's his?" He grabbed Max by the hair and shook her head. "I'm asking you a question!"

"No! No, it isn't fair!" Max shouted. She hated Johnny at that moment, her dislike maturing instantly into pure loathing. If she knew where Johnny was, she'd help them track him down. Fuck, she'd shoot him.

Spike punched her a couple times in the face.

"Wait, wait." She put up her hands. "If I knew where he was, I'd help you catch him. I hate the motherfucker. I'll help you catch him. Please, just don't hit me."

Spike didn't listen to her. He punched her a couple more times. The blows were enough to shut down her brain again, but

they hurt, hurt so much. She could feel the left side of her face swelling up. She could hardly open her left eye. Spike threw her to the floor.

"Poor Vince." Spike pawed over the body in a strange combination of acquisitive searching and affection. He took the dead guy's wallet, his little snub-nose revolver, and his handcuffs. He looked at Maxine lying over in a corner of the storage room, right next to the lockers.

She was semi-conscious. Her brain had put up with enough by this point. It wanted to quit working and go to a quiet place far, far from violent men and dead bodies. Max rubbed her head absently, trying to figure out just what she had done to deserve this. She inspected her hand when she took it from her head. It was covered in blood. "I don't know anything," she said. Blood dribbled out of her mouth.

Spike walked over to her, grabbed her by the hair, and dragged her back to the corpse.

"Your boyfriend killed him. Least you could do is be best friends with him."

"I told you, he's not my boyfriend anymore." That comment bought her another hard smack.

Spike hooked up the handcuffs, one end to her wrist, the other to the corpse's arm.

"Poor Vincent, at least he has a girlfriend now." Spike smacked her again. "Where is Johnny?"

"I don't know!"

He smacked her again. "Where's your other boyfriend, sweetie? Where's Johnny?"

"He's not my boyfriend anymore."

He hit her again, a little too hard this time. Max saw sparkly lights. Her concussed brain closed down for a few minutes.

When Max woke up, she found herself on the floor of the storage room. Her wrist was chained to the dead guy's arm with a pair of handcuffs. So it wasn't a dream.

Someone pounded on the door. "Little girl, you awake? You think on this. If you don't tell me where Johnny is, I'll call up some friends and we'll have a party on you all night long, rape you till you're dead. You think on that for a little bit. You or Johnny."

I'd give you Johnny if I could, she thought. Max didn't say it out loud, she knew it wouldn't do any good. Silence. She looked around the dusty room. This was where the unknown owners of the place must have kept the stuff they used all the time. The metal shelves along the back wall had boxes of toilet paper and cleaning

supplies. Then there were the lockers along one wall. The other had a sink and a table.

Max pulled at the dead guy's arm until she was next to the lockers. She opened the first one. Plunger and drain cleaner. The second one: light bulbs. The third one: cardboard shipping tubes standing upright. She almost went on to the next locker. By her one good eye, the other one having swollen shut, she discerned something at the back of the locker. She reached in and pulled it out.

It was a crowbar. But not just any crowbar. This wasn't some thin, light-weight thing for a weekend repairman to tear out drywall, this was the king of crowbars. It was solid steel and gray. Thick and heavy, as if it were made to pry at engine blocks or boulders. It wasn't longer than a conventional crowbar, just meant for serious business. It had known a long and tough-ass life, little dents and dings and scratches along its dark gray surface. Up at the hook and around the claw there were spots of rust. Little flecks of dust at the other end, where the thick flat blade was. She swung it around with her free arm. It felt good. She looked around the room.

Spike had taken a break to make a few calls on his cell. Still no fucking luck at all as to where Johnny was or Juan was or where their stuff was. He put the phone away as he walked down the metal balcony outside the second story offices and storerooms. Down below stretched a dusty endlessness of tall metal shelves, platforms really, upon which were heaped the collected detritus of the film industry. He pounded on the door before he entered. "Ready with a few answers?"

He opened the door. The little bitch had dragged Vince's body across the room. She crouched behind it.

"If you're trying to hide, you're not doing a good job of it." He walked over to her and crouched. He reached out to grab her.

The gray metal crowbar whizzed up and over from behind Vincent's body to crack Spike on the top of his head.

He stood up and stepped back, blood from his scalp pouring down into his face.

Max jumped out from behind dead Vincent and swung the crowbar at his left knee.

Spike screamed and fell down. He began fumbling in his pocket for Vincent's little revolver.

Max was at almost the fullest extent of the tether that was dead Vincent's arm. She swung the crowbar in an arc with her free hand right into Spike's head.

Spike collapsed, but after a moment, he tried again to pull the little pistol from his pocket.

Max smashed him across the forehead.

After that, Spike moved no more. Max pounded on his face with the crowbar until it was a bloody mess. She wasn't being intentionally vicious, she was making sure he wouldn't get up again.

###

After Johnny killed Vincent, he stole the guy's car and went to an emergency room. They stitched up his face but he split before the cops could arrive to question him. He drove Vincent's cherry-red truck to his mom's place. No one was around. He switched plates on his old car with Vincent's, dug the duffle out of the trunk, and was almost ready to head for Vegas when a slight pang of conscience hit him. He went inside his mom's house. Lucky and Spike had kicked in the back door of his mom's place and ransacked every room while she was at work. They didn't find it. Lucky and Spike were very thorough. His mom would certainly have the shock of her life when she got back. He found the phone.

Who the fuck was he gonna call? All his friends wanted him dead or were dead, except for Juan and fuck knew where he was. He didn't know that Max was about to kill Spike with a crowbar, but of course Spike was in the "wanted him dead" category. He called the only guy he could think of. Carl answered.

###

"Carl?" Max said. "Really, Carl, I'm not interested in comics right now." He was looking at her funny, not ha-ha funny, shocked and a little horrified. "Do I look that bad?"

"It's the blood."

"Some of it isn't mine."

"Who's he?" Carl gestured at Vincent.

"I don't know. It was the other one's big joke, to handcuff him to me. Can you get me out of these?"

"Yes. My tools are in the trunk." He walked around her to the back of his car.

She tugged on dead Vincent's arm. Carl came back to her, grabbed Vincent's arm, and the two of them dragged the body back to the rear bumper. Carl opened his trunk.

Max took one look inside and knew the right man had arrived. It was full of wrenches, hammers, screwdrivers, and a couple cordless drills. He pulled a giant pair of pliers out of the pile.

"What's with all the tools?" she asked. When Max spoke, she inadvertently sprayed Carl's shirt with her blood.

He didn't seem to mind. "A clerk in a comic book store doesn't earn much. I repair things, too."

Max was very dizzy. "What things?"

"Everything." He looked at the cuffs. "Whose are these?"

"His." She pointed down at Vincent. "I don't think the other guy had the keys. The one I killed with this." Max shook the crowbar at Carl.

"These are handcuffs like the LAPD uses. Was this guy a cop at one time?"

"Yeah...I don't know...Johnny said he had a cop friend." Max was having trouble with the conversation. Her head ached more than it ever had before and she desperately wanted to understand just what Carl repaired.

Carl laid the immense pliers back in the trunk and knelt by dead Vincent. He narrated his actions for Max's benefit.

Max thought that was ever so sweet of him to do.

"If this guy takes after cops, he'll have a spare key somewhere." Carl began to rifle dead Vincent's pockets.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"Two of my uncles are cops. I once wanted to be a cop."

She felt like an idiot, but only vaguely, when he found a key in the guy's side pocket. "Wish I had thought of that."

"You're concussed, Maxer. You can be forgiven the occasional error in thinking."

He used the name he called her when she came into the shop. Was he flirting with her? Was that appropriate with a dead guy right next to them? Was that the polite thing to do in this situation? Her thoughts were in the process of abducting her mind. She shook her head to put everything inside back in order. "I don't feel so good."

The handcuffs were undone. Dead Vincent's arm fell away from her.

Carl steadied her with a hand. "Do you want me to put the crowbar in the trunk?"

"It's mine now." Max was very insistent on this point.

"I know it is. If you want to keep it, put it in the trunk. You can get it from me later, otherwise the cops will take it. I'll even clean it for you."

"You'd do that?"

"Yes."

"Okay." She handed him the crowbar. He put it in with his tools.

He closed the trunk and walked her to the passenger door. He opened it up and sat her down on the edge of the seat. Vincent was

left forgotten in the dust. He pulled a flashlight out of the glove compartment and began to look at her. "You're going to need a hospital, Max."

"Why didn't you call the cops?"

"I did. They put me on hold." He reached around to pull some kleenex out of a box. He wiped blood off of her face.

"Careful. Please, Carl. It hurts."

He pulled a big wad of tissues out of the box and pressed it to the side of her face. "We'll get you to a hospital. Here." He moved her hand up to the wad of kleenex. "Press hard." He eased her into the car seat, then ran around to get behind the wheel.

She squinted at him through her one good eye. The other one was probably still good, but it was swollen shut. She watched him start the car. "I thought that was an urban myth, 911 on hold."

"No. Common occurrence in southern California. It's happened to me twice now."

"Oh. Never knew. Never had a reason to call the cops." She smiled at Carl.

"Uh, Max, two of your teeth are missing."

"Goddamn." She put her other hand over her mouth.

"Don't worry about it, Max." He brushed the bloody hair out of her face. "They can fix that." He put the car into gear.

Off they went to the hospital and many, many stitches for Maxine. Max considered the episode a triple plus for her. She was rid of Johnny. She kept the crowbar. And she got a new boyfriend out of it. Carl even brought her flowers.

"Down goes Script! Down goes Script!"
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9q7mvc6bsY>)

Thanks for playing, folks. Sorry, no prizes. Screenplays are schematics, plans for a work of art, not a work of art in and of themselves. The limitations of the form — the limitations of the art form they will become — are quite apparent. The fiction writer works inside the head of the reader. He has an ally in his storytelling. It's not a passive art form. Much can be done with an external art like cinema, but at the end of the day it is limited because it only *shows*. Literary fiction, being interactive in the reader's head, can do more. Literature *constructs*. A novel, a short story, is most definitely NOT a flowchart, a course outline, or organized note-taking. You see this difference even among wannabes. Everyone, every last person on this earth, thinks they can write a screenplay. Maybe everyone's right, and judging from a lot of recent movies, they are right. I cannot imagine the life of a screenwriter, even though I occasionally write screenplays. Someone in love with cinema holding in his mind a deep commitment to visual storytelling, he would have to know the complexity of the work, he would understand just how hard it is to create the schematic for a movie — then to see just how little respect the craft has in the eyes of the world. It would break my heart in two. Working with words doesn't pay as much, but it has one immense advantage: it is only the rare soul who thinks he can write a novel. An even rarer one who actually does.

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