THE KING OF ARTHUR AVENUE

An Original Screenplay by

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First 15 pages

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EXT. VITO'S BARBER SHOP, THE BRONX - DAY

An old fashioned, striped barber pole revolves outside a tiny shop on a side street off of Arthur Avenue.

A sign in the window reads: 'Three Chairs, No Waiting.'

TONY (V.O.)
There was a barber in the Bronx.

INT. VITO'S BARBER SHOP - DAY

An ancient, Italian barber, VITO ANGELONE (87), shuffles to his post. He opens a straight-edge razor with unsteady hands.

TONY (V.O.)
Vito Angelone. Legend has it that Giuseppe Verdi wouldn't go out in public until Vito's great-great granddad gave his whiskers a trim.

Vito grabs the leather strop and runs the razor across it.

TONY (V.O.)
Those tonsorial skills were passed down from generation to generation, which is how Vito became the best barber in the tri-state area.

The razor drops to the floor. Followed by Vito. THUD!

TONY (V.O.)
This story isn't about him.

INT. THE CHURCH OF ST. PHILIP NERI - NIGHT

A casket full of Vito rolls through the packed church. The organ plays him off with, of course, Verdi.

TONY (V.O.)
Vito's passing left a hole in the soul of the Bronx. Not just with the locals, but with a customer who made the pilgrimage from Jersey to see Vito twice a week.

In the last row of the church sits CARLO MANNETTI (85). He's frail and glassy-eyed but still very much in charge.

TONY (V.O.)
That's Don Carlo Mannetti, the head of the Mannetti crime family.

He's flanked by his twin grandsons, NINO and DINO MANNETTI (30). Two huge cinder blocks, dressed in black.

The casket passes Don Carlo. He shakes with emotion.

TONY (V.O.)
This story isn't about him either.

The man speaking, TONY PALMIERI (30), sits in a back pew. He shifts his attention to two men arguing near him.

BENICIO 'BENNY' CASTELLI (75) pleads with a well-dressed old gent next to him. It's his brother-in-law, JIMMY VESTI (80).

TONY (V.O.)
The story's about this guy. Giacomo Vesti. AKA 'Jimmy the Gent.' He's not the second-best barber in the hood. More like fourth or fifth. But Jimmy has a lot of grit. And tremendous style.

Jimmy straightens his tie as the Monsignor passes and blesses him. Once he's gone, Benny returns to begging.

BENNY
You gotta do this for me.

JIMMY
No. There's-a no way.

BENNY
I gotta go pick up your sister, in Yonkers. So I can't stop no place. The drawing's tonight. 250 million.

JIMMY
I can't. You know I make a promise.

BENNY
I know. But it wouldn't be like <u>you</u> was playing. You'll be using my numbers. And if I win I'll give you ten percent.

JIMMY
(thinking)
Twenty-five.

BENNY
What? Sure. Okay. You got it.

Benny hands him his list of 'numbers.' Jimmy stashes it in his pocket and mops his sweaty brow with a hankie.

EXT. THE CHURCH OF ST. PHILIP NERI - NIGHT

Nino and Dino lead Don Carlo toward a waiting black town car. Following close behind, Tony loudly calls out.

TONY
Hey! Don Carlo!

The twin bodyguards look back at him. Don Carlo stares straight ahead, unresponsive.

TONY (CONT'D)
I know what you did. And you're not gonna get away with it.

Nino approaches Tony. He grabs him by the shirt.

NINO
Listen Palmieri. If I catch you anywhere near Don Carlo again, I'll rip your balls off and stuff them in your ears.

TONY
Is that a threat or a proposal?

NINO
Keep it up and I'll put you in a hole right next to your Dad.

Tony stares him down as Nino helps the don into the car.

INT. LOCAL BODEGA - NIGHT

The counter guy, FRANKIE (25), punches in the lengthy list of Benny's numbers. Jimmy anxiously watches.

The Lotto machine shoots out ticket after ticket.

FRANKIE
Forty-five bucks, Jimmy.

JIMMY
Shhh. Please. No names.

Jimmy hands him the cash and stuffs the tickets in his coat. He tips his hat and goes. Frankie smiles. He's so old world.

EXT. ARTHUR AVENUE - NIGHT

Jimmy bustles toward home. Seeing people, he stops, tips his hat and semi-bows. A young couple laugh and bow back.

INT. VESTI LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Planted on the couch, wolfing down Doritos, BRUNO VESTI (30) yells at the Mets game on TV.

BRUNO
Ah! You bums! You stink!

Jimmy enters and cringes at the insanely loud volume.

JIMMY
Hey! Turn that down!

Bruno ignores him. Jimmy is about to yell again but gives up. He knows it's useless. He heads back toward his bedroom.

INT. VESTI BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sprawled in bed is her highness, MADALENA VESTI (75). She eats Fritos and screams at a wrestling match on her TV.

MADALENA
Suplex! Do the suplex! Stupido!
(seeing Jimmy)
How was the service?

JIMMY
Oh. It was-a nice. Crowded. They had to move it from-a the chapel into the big cathedral. Fifty pews. No waiting. Heh heh.

MADALENA
Sure it was crowded. People liked Vito. He was very respected.

The word 'respected' lands heavily on Jimmy. As he takes off his jacket, the lotto tickets fall out of his pocket.

Madalena sees this. Her eyes narrow with anger.

MADALENA (CONT'D)
What is that!?

JIMMY
(playing innocent)
What is what, cara mia?

MADALENA
You're gambling again!

JIMMY
No, Mama. No!

Jimmy hurriedly gathers the fallen tickets.

MADALENA
You swore on your mother's grave you'd stop! And now, look!

JIMMY
Cara mia, I didn't--

MADALENA
Here we go! First comes the lying! Then the gambling and the drinking. You keep this up and we gonna lose what little we got left. Merda!

JIMMY
If-a you let me explain--

MADALENA
My mother warned me. She said, "Don't go off with that 'Dapper Dan.' He'll break your heart!"

Embracing his fate, Jimmy sadly moves to the closet.

MADALENA (CONT'D)
It's not like I didn't have other offers. Like Vinnie Isola. He's a big success now, selling in-ground pools. And Robbie Bernardi. And--

As she continues, Jimmy exits with a pillow and blanket.

He pauses in the hall when he sees a framed photo from the 1980s of his family in front of a beautiful two-story house. Jimmy, Madalena and their two kids. All smiles.

INT. VESTI LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Madalena rants away as Jimmy trudges in with the bedding. Bruno's still planted on the couch.

JIMMY
Turn that off. I gotta sleep.

BRUNO
No way. They just went into extra innings.

JIMMY
You do like I say!

BRUNO
Hey. Don't yell at me. It's not my fault you pissed off Nana.

Bruno cracks a fresh beer and takes a slug from it.

Jimmy licks his lips with envy. He puts the pillow and blanket down and heads to the kitchen.

INT. VESTI KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jimmy tip-toes to the pantry. He opens it and takes items off of a shelf, one by one, silently putting them on the counter.

He reaches far back inside the shelf and reacts with disgust. He pulls his hand out. It's stuck in a roach glue trap.

Jimmy yanks the trap off and tosses it. He reaches back inside and pulls out a half pint of whiskey.

Jimmy opens it and takes a sip. It soothes him. He caps the bottle and tries to put it down, but it's stuck to his hand.

Panicking, he rushes to the sink and turns on the hot water. The water helps him un-stick the bottle and he puts it down.

During this, he hears the ANNOUNCER on the living room TV.

ANNOUNCER
So we go on to the eleventh inning!

Sighing, Jimmy takes another slug from the bottle.

EXT. VESTI BUILDING - DAY

It's a glorious, sunny morning in the Bronx.

INT. VESTI BATHROOM - DAY

Jimmy preps himself for the day. His tie, perfectly knotted. He studies himself in the mirror. Something's off.

He picks up a pair of scissors and trims a runaway nose hair.

Madalena walks past the doorway and sneers at him.

MADALENA
You lost, right? You must've lost. Otherwise you'd be gone. Vamoose!

Jimmy ignores this. He calmly puts down the scissors.

JIMMY
We out of milk. I pick some up.

He exits the bathroom and heads for the door.

MADALENA
Go after work so it stays cold. And come straight home, you hear?

EXT. ARTHUR AVENUE - DAY

Jimmy strolls along the block, tipping his hat 'Good Morning' to locals as he passes. He is indeed a very 'Dapper Dan.'

INT. CASTELLI'S MARKET - DAY

Jimmy enters the shop full of meat, cheese and pastries.

He passes FORTUNA BELLEZZA; a beautiful, 25 year old Italian native. Smiling, he tips his hat to her.

JIMMY
Buongiorno, bella Fortuna.

She smiles back while placing pastry in a display case.

Benny and his wife ANGIE (70) finish with a customer. Jimmy pulls the lottery tickets out of his pocket.

JIMMY (CONT'D)
So sorry, Benny. We lose.

BENNY
I know. Turns out Angie played my numbers for me up by her Aunt.
(smiling at her)
I may have lost the lotto but I won the grand prize with her. Eh?

Angie blushes. Benny kisses her. Jimmy isn't moved.

JIMMY
You owe me forty-five bucks.

BENNY
I just told you. Angie played the numbers for me.

JIMMY
I play them too. So you owe me.

BENNY
But we lost. So forget about it.

JIMMY
I no want to ‘forget about it.’ I want-a my forty-five bucks.

ANGIE
Benny, give him the money.

BENNY
What are you? My accountant? I’ll pay him back when I feel like it.

Jimmy puts the tickets on the counter and walks out.

Fortuna sadly watches him go. She picks up a plate of sfogliatelle and follows him.

EXT. ARTHUR AVENUE - DAY

Grumbling, Jimmy moves toward his shop down the street. Fortuna chases after him, holding the cookies.

FORTUNA
Signore Vesti.

She hands him the cookies and speaks to him in Italian.

FORTUNA (SUBTITLE) (CONT’D)
They shouldn’t treat you like that.

JIMMY (SUBTITLE)
What can I do? They’re my family.
(looking at the cookies)
Please. Take-a this back.

FORTUNA (SUBTITLE)
I bake them myself. For you. It’s sfogliatelle. Your sister says they’re your favorite.

JIMMY (SUBTITLE)
Yes, they are. Thank you.

They swap tender smiles. Jimmy walks off with the cookies.

INT. BARBER SHOP - DAY

Jimmy unlocks the door. He puts down the cookies and raises the shade covering the window. Sunlight pours into the shop.

It’s ancient and lovely. Black and white tile with two red leather chairs waiting for customers.

Jimmy removes his blazer and dons his crisp white coat. He sees a black town car pull up outside.

EXT. BARBER SHOP - DAY

Out of the car steps Don Carlo’s sizable twin grandsons, Dino and Nino. They are identical but not very similar in nature.

Nino spots Tony Palmieri sitting on a stoop across from the shop. He shoots Tony a threatening look as they go inside.

INT. BARBER SHOP - DAY

The two behemoths enter. Nino pulls a list from his pocket.

NINO
Are you-- Jimmy Vesti?

Jimmy’s frightened. Their look and manner scream ‘mob.’

JIMMY
Yeah. I mean, yes. That’s-a me.

NINO
Seeing as Vito Angelone is gone, we’re looking for another person--

DINO
A barber.

NINO
Right. A barber to tend to our granddad. You know who that is?

JIMMY
(fearful)
Don Carlo?

NINO
That’s right. You might-a heard he had a stroke--

DINO
A really bad stroke.

NINO
So he can’t talk or do a lot of what he used to do for himself.

DINO
He can't talk. At all.

NINO
I just said that.

DINO
I thought it was worth repeating.
(to Jimmy)
He was born three minutes before me so he thinks he's smarter.

Nino shoots him a 'knock-it-off' look and continues.

NINO
Anyway, Don Carlo likes to get a shave. Twice a week. And a trim when he needs it. But he wants someone who can be, uh, quiet. Uh--

DINO
Discreet.

NINO
(growing angry)
Will you stop?

DINO
You was struggling. Searching.

Nino glares at his brother. Then he turns to Jimmy.

NINO
Anyway, it's good you have a shade. Don Carlo likes his privacy.

JIMMY
Not to worry. My father teach me 'What people say in-a the chair, stays in-a the chair.'

NINO
That's good. But, Don Carlo doesn't say nothing. He can't speak.

DINO
At all!

NINO
We're checking out some local barbers and we was wondering if you want to be considered for the job.

Jimmy's overwhelmed. And a bit terrified.

JIMMY
I don't know I--

NINO
We pay well. Two hundred a visit.

Dino bites into one of the sea shell cookies and yells!

DINO
Jesus!

Reacting, Nino pulls out his gun and looks around.

NINO
What?

DINO
This cookie! It's amazing!

JIMMY
A girl I know make them.

NINO
You got cookies here all the time?

The sight of Nino's gun frightens Jimmy into saying--

JIMMY
Yeah. Sure. Whatever you want.

Nino puts away his gun and makes a note on his list.

NINO
Don Carlo will like that. How's tomorrow at ten? That work for you?

JIMMY
Yes. That's-a fine.

NINO
We'll bring our granddad by. If he likes you, the job is yours.

Dino holds out a sea shell masterpiece to Nino. Nino growls.

NINO (CONT'D)
You know I'm watching my weight.

DINO
But they're so freakin' good.

Nino takes it and they go. Jimmy's in shock. And thrilled.

EXT. BARBER SHOP - DAY

Dino and Nino climb into the town car. Watching from the street, LUIS MARTINEZ (30) pulls out his phone and dials.

LUIS
(into phone)
It's Luis. Get me Don Pepe.

EXT. CAFE SOCIALE - DAY

Three young men, MIGUEL, JUAN and SIXTO (all in their 20s) lift cases of liquor from the trunk of their beat-up Toyota.

They carry the cases to the back door of the club as DON PEPE HERMOSA (50) steps out, flanked by two armed guards.

DON PEPE
Miguel. Come here.

Nervous, Miguel puts the case down. Sixto whispers to him, in a mocking, sing-song way.

SIXTO
What did you do-oo?

Ignoring him, Miguel reverently approaches the powerful man.

MIGUEL
What is it, Don Pepe?

DON PEPE
You tell me that you and your friends want to move up in the organization. That you're ready.

MIGUEL
Yes. We are.

DON PEPE
Bueno. I have a job for you.

Don Pepe pulls a handgun out of his belt and tosses it to Miguel. The boy catches it, delighted by the show of trust.

EXT. VESTI BUILDING - DAY

Jimmy bustles toward his apartment building.

INT. VESTI LIVING ROOM - DAY

He excitedly bursts in.

JIMMY
Mama! I got-a some terrific news!

Madalena's on the couch, clipping Bruno's toenails.

BRUNO
Ow! Nana, that's my skin!

MADALENA
Hush up. I'm done having these claws tear up my sheets.

Jimmy smells the air and smiles.

JIMMY
You making sausage and peppers?

MADALENA
You stay away from that. That's for me and Bruno. I made you farina.

The old fella's smile fades. While Madalena works over Bruno's nails Jimmy sneaks into the kitchen.

INT. VESTI KITCHEN - DAY

Jimmy moves to the stove. He raises the lid on the pan full of sausage and peppers. The delicious aroma fills the air.

Jimmy spears a sausage with a fork and takes a bite. He's in heaven. Madalena yells in to him.

MADALENA (O.S.)
You better not be eating those sausages. Doctor Lofaso told you to stay away from them.

Jimmy defiantly takes another bite. Chewing ferociously, he twirls the last bit with peppers and lustily gobbles it up.

MADALENA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
And those peppers give you gas. I don't want you tootin' all night.

Jimmy wipes his mouth and scoops a big dollop of farina into a bowl. He tops it with butter and goes back inside.

INT. VESTI LIVING ROOM - DAY

Jimmy holds up a spoonful of farina so Madalena can see. He sits while Madalena moves Bruno's feet from her lap.

MADALENA
Go wash your feet so we can sit down to supper. Now!

Moaning, Bruno heads toward the bathroom. Madalena puts away her clippers. Jimmy clears his throat.

JIMMY
Mama, I have something important to tell you. Two men came in today--

MADALENA
(ignoring him)
You got to help Bruno get a job. Something good. Something steady.

JIMMY
No.

MADALENA
Why not? He's your grandson.

JIMMY
He's also a lazy, no good bum. Let him find his own job.

MADALENA
You'd help him if you wanted to. You had no trouble getting that tootsie a job at Castelli's.

JIMMY
Fortuna's no tootsie. She's a good girl. And she's got-a skills.

MADALENA
Don't give me with the 'skills.' I see how you look at her. So does your sister, Angie. It's shameful.

Madalena moves into the kitchen. Jimmy calls in to her.

JIMMY
Anyway, these two big guys come in. They are brothers. Twins. Nino and Dino Mannetti. And they ask me to--

Madalena appears at the door. Her accusatory glare stops Jimmy cold. She's holding the pan of sausage and peppers.

MADALENA
There were six sausages in here. Now there's only five. How do you explain that?

JIMMY
Mice?

Not amused, Madalena puts the pan of sausages on the table. She suspiciously eyes Jimmy as he continues to eat.

EXT. CASTELLI HOME - NIGHT

A lovely residence. Epic splendor circa the 1950s.

INT. CASTELLI HOME - NIGHT

Benny, Angie and Fortuna finish dinner. Fortuna gets up.

FORTUNA
Thank you so much. I clean up now.

ANGIE
No no. It's almost eight o'clock. Time for that program you like.

Fortuna nods and smiles. She goes upstairs.

INT. FORTUNA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Fortuna sits on the edge of her bed and attentively watches 'The Bachelor' on TV.

A woman in a cowboy hat exits a limo and moves to the man.

WOMAN (ON TV)
Howdy! I'm Cathy. I'm from Texas.

FORTUNA
(imitating her)
How-ee! I am Cathy. From Tex-ass.

The woman leans forward, showing off her ample cleavage.

WOMAN (ON TV)
You know what they say about Texas. Everything's bigger there!

Cathy winks at the bachelor. Fortuna looks down at her modest bust and grimaces. But she copies the wink to perfection.