

Sample file

NEIL 1990



LOOK AT  
JOB.  
GOD  
HIM.

MARQUEE:

CHEECH AND CHONG: THE CORSICAN BROTHERS

C.H.U.D.

REPO MAN - Nic Cage

June walks through the door from bright sunshine into the dark interior of the combination office and projection room. She puts her hands up to her eyes, as if trying to peer through the darkness. Finally, she switches on a light.

"Neil, you in here?" she asked, looking at the lumpy shape huddled by the ancient projector.

There is no answer.

"Neil, you okay?" she asked.

Still no answer.

June walks over to the projector, knowing that Neil is never far from it.

"Neil honey, it's almost showtime and you're not playing your usual peacenik protest, underground people-no-one's-ever-heard-of music," June said. "What's wrong?"

The lump next to the projector stirs. Neil unfolds himself, running his fingers through his mane of long hair, rubs his bleary eyes, puts on his John Lennon glasses.

"I'm here," he said.

"I suppose you are, but where's the music?" June asked.

"Why bother?" he said. "The people are here to see Cheech and Chong and C.H.U.D., two of the crappiest movies of the year. Clearly, they don't want to hear B.B. King or Fairport Convention."

"We've got "Repo Man" on the bill, you love that one," she said. "How about some John Lee Hooker?"

"We only got Repo because the other two crapfests were so short and they had Repo lying around," Neil said. "People suck. They're all idiots."

June steps forward, concern on her face. She's never seen Neil like this. Sure, he could be irascible and preachy. His taste in music was strange and esoteric, he managed to find songs no one ever heard of, but everyone seemed to like them. But this, morose and anti-social malaise, this was unheard of.

"Neil, what's bothering you?" June said. "Maybe it's time you took a little vacation, went away for a while."

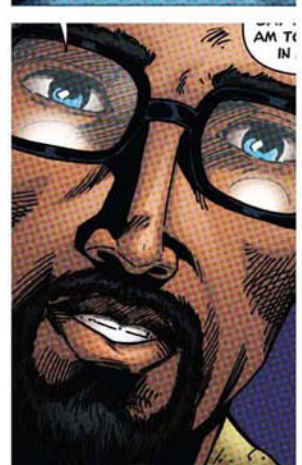
Neil steps into the light and looks at June. He looked worse than she thought. His clothes are wrinkled, his old Santana t-shirt, filthy. And he is barefoot.

"Right, because I always leave here and go on vacation don't I?" he said. "Haven't you ever wondered why I never seem to leave this place?"

June stands up straight, looks a little angry.

"Only every day," she said. "But you made it very clear that your private life was off-limits, remember? When I first came here you said you would stay as long as I never asked you any questions you didn't want to answer. If the door is open, you just say so because I have lots of questions."

Neil says nothing, sits down. He pulls out a record and puts it on the turntable.



Tom Waits' gritty voice spills out over the speakers around the lot singing about "Looking for the Heart of Saturday Night."

"Now I know you're depressed," June said. "You only play Tom Waits when you're down."

Neil turns to her.

"Today's my birthday, I turned 50," he said.

June smiles.

"Is that it? Feeling a little old?" she smiled. "That's nothing, it's normal. Besides, you don't look a day over 40, really. Must be that weird macrobiotic diet of yours."

Neil stands, as Tom Waits continues to sing about the lonely guy cruising the streets of his home town convinced that happiness is at the next bar.

He walks full into the light and looks at June.

"I'm 50 and I've only left this place a few times since 1953," he said. "I have a secret apartment in the basement. I stay here all winter. You never knew that did you? Everything I need, including women and certain illegal substances for my mental health, comes to me here."

June is shocked. She sits in a chair before she falls down.

"I knew you were eccentric, but this...really...you never leave here? Really?" she asked.

"You have an apartment in the basement."

"That's right, this is my life," he said, waving his arms in the air.

"Neil, I don't know what to say," she said. "That's crazy."

Neil sits again, looking downcast.

"Yeah, I know, it is crazy," he said.

"I had no idea," June said.

"No one did," Neil said. "Walt, the former manager, and I worked it out years ago. It's called agoraphobia, fear of the marketplace, makes people not want to go outside. I must be the poster child for it."

June nods her head in understanding.

"Well, you're certainly good at keeping it hidden," she said. "Still, you have left the grounds a few times."

"It took me four years to get the courage to spread Walt's ashes over at the theater in Cadiz, Ohio," Neil said. "But I did it."

"Now, my life is three-quarters in the can, middle-aged my ass," he said. "Forty is middle aged, I'm on the downhill slide and I never even looked around the hill."

June looks serious. Her brow is furrowed as she puts some things together.

"My sister is a psychiatrist and I know enough about agoraphobia to know that there's always a some cause for all this," she said. "Here's where I play Batman and deduce that considering your anti-war stance, your left-leaning lifestyle and that you started here in 1953, that Korea has something to do with all this."

Neil is stunned.

"Jeez, Batman's got nothing on you," he said. "You nailed it. I was still in high school when the war started. My older buddies signed up to go fight the war and as soon as I turned 18, I did too."

June looks disapproving.



"You were just a kid, where the hell were your parents?" she asked.

"My mom left when I was 12 and dad went into a bottle," he said. "I pretty much raised myself, with some help from Walt, who was more of a father to me than my own dad.

"After high school, I signed up," Neil said. "I went through boot camp and was and getting ready to ship out when one of my buddies came home from Korea, he was a mess. He looked like one of those people in a Nazi concentration camp. He had been taken prisoner and rescued, but not before the North Koreans tortured him."

Neil stops as Tom Waits ends. He puts on "Crown of Creation" by the Jefferson Airplane.

"When my buddy was lucid, which was not often, he begged me not to go over," Neil said. "He made me promise to do anything to get out of it, run to Canada if I had to. That's where Walt came in, he was about as anti-war as anyone. I would just not go back to the army. I could work at the drive-in until they stopped caring, couldn't be more than a couple years. Who cares about one kid?"

June looks sad.

"But you would never know if they stopped looking, right?" she asked. "You never took the chance to find out."

"You know what they say, weeks turn into months, months into years and before you know it, here I am," he said. "The pirate died at 50."

There was silence in the small room, broken at last by June.

"Well, it's not hopeless," she said. "I don't think anyone is looking for you. I'm sure they forgot all about you decades ago, but I can look into that. Meanwhile, you got some real work to do in *my* head, boy."

"Tell me about it," he said.

"I told you my sister is a shrink, I think she can help you," June said. "I'll even pay for it, consider it health insurance. She'll come out here for the first few sessions and gradually, you'll start going to see her in the city."

"What about the Army?" Neil asked.

"What do you think, they have groups of secret agents out looking for a kid who went AWOL in 1953? Please. But I have some friends in high Democratic circles, I'll work on it. Don't you worry."

"Meanwhile, you just keep doing what you do," she said. "I got a couple errands to run."

"I don't know, all I can promise is that I'll try," he said. "I would someday like to leave this place and see the country."

"You will," she said. "Now man the fort for a few hours."

"Where are you going?" Neil asked.

"I have to go out and get my favorite employee a birthday cake, don't I?" she said.

**End**

*I decided this piece worked better as text, since it was little more than a conversation. At least now we understand Neil better. Being my favorite character in the series, Neil returns in many more stories. What happens here has repercussions later in the book, especially June's promise to talk to friends in high Democratic circles.*

*Keep reading.*



1985



HOW MANY  
ADULTS?

TWO. CHILDREN  
UNDER 12?

JUST ME, IF  
YOU COUNT AGE  
AS A FEELING.

GEE, I HAVEN'T  
HEARD THAT ONE  
IN HOURS.



HOW  
MANY?



ROUGH NIGHT?  
YOU GET  
ANY SLEEP?

NOT  
YET.

GONNA BE  
A LONG  
NIGHT, GIRL



YOU LET  
ME TALK,  
HEAR?

