

NO SHORT CUTS

By Michael Reed

Written for the NYC Midnight
Screenwriting Competition 2021.

Placed in top five entries of
Round 1 to go through to Round 2

The required elements were:

GENRE: DRAMA

SUBJECT: AN ANNIVERSARY

CHARACTER: A VALEDICTORIAN

MAX LENGTH: 12pp

Logline:

A one-time valedictorian is mugged on the
night he turns one year sober, and faces a
battle of will to stay that way.

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FADE IN:

EXT. CITY RESTAURANT - LATE NIGHT

In an unglamorous district of a small city, two MEN emerge from a small, friendly-looking restaurant onto the street.

CAMERON CLARK is in his early 30s, but there's a combination of exhaustion and experience in his face you'd expect in someone older. He seems anxious.

Andrew "RUDY" Rudolph is around 50. His is a kindly, intelligent face. Lively eyes. He looks like he laughs a lot.

The two men stop outside the restaurant. An awkward beat. Then Rudy takes Cameron's hand and shakes it, before pulling him in for a hug. Rudy slaps Cameron on the back. They pull apart, but Rudy keeps his hands on Cameron's shoulders, looks him square in the eye.

RUDY

Seriously, man. I'm proud of you, Cameron. A whole year. Don't you forget how far you've come.

Cameron nods. He appreciates the words, even if he's not as convinced as Rudy. Rudy drops his hands and grins.

RUDY (CONT'D)

Okay, I'll stop pep-talking you. You okay getting home?

Cameron's eyes flicker sideways. From HIS POV, we see what's distracted him: across the street is a neon sign above a door: KELLY'S BAR. Rudy catches the look.

RUDY (CONT'D)

I'll walk with you.

Cameron shakes his head.

CAMERON

I'm fine. Thanks Rudy. Don't worry.

Rudy gives him a penetrating look.

RUDY

It's not far. I don't mind.

CAMERON

No, seriously, I'm good. I could do with some ... alone time.

A beat or two as Rudy assesses him.

RUDY

Okay. You're doing just...
magnificent, man. I know it's hard.
You know I know that. But you're
doing it. Remember: there are no
short cuts.

Cameron nods.

CAMERON

Thanks for dinner.

RUDY

You earned it, man.

Rudy gives Cameron's shoulder another squeeze. They part in opposite directions. Cameron heads quickly away, head down. Rudy stops and watches him go for a moment. Satisfied, he heads off.

EXT. STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Cameron walks just past the mouth of a narrow alleyway between buildings, then stops and steps backward, looking into the alley. It's dark and forbidding, but the glow of the next street shows at the far end. He checks his watch - IN CLOSE-UP, it shows 00:15.

He hesitates, looks ahead in the direction he was walking. FROM HIS POV, we see it's some way to the next intersection. Cameron squints down the alley again, then decides: he turns into the alleyway, quickening his pace.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - CONTINUOUS

As Cameron trots along the alleyway, three dark figures unpeel from the shadows: MUGGERS. Young men, barely out of their teens, sharp-eyed. Each with a bandanna or scarf covering the lower half of their faces.

FIRST MUGGER steps in front of Cameron, who pulls up quickly.

CAMERON

Shit--

As he turns, the SECOND and THIRD MUGGERS cut off the route behind him. Cameron looks beaten and scared.

FIRST MUGGER

Whatcha got?

CAMERON

Not a lot man, sorry, but here--

He goes for a pocket but the First Mugger throws a punch so hard and sudden, Cameron is taken by surprise and goes down. The three attackers close in on him.

FROM CAMERON'S POV we see flailing feet and legs as they kick at him.

WIDE SHOT as SECOND MUGGER produces a weapon like a billy club and swings at Cameron's thrashing form. WE HEAR it connect.

FIRST MUGGER

Okay! All right!

They back off. Cameron, his face bloody, coughs and moans.

First Mugger checks there's no one around, bends down and goes quickly through Cameron's pockets. He finds a slim wallet - flips it open and pulls out... a five and three singles. He looks disgusted, searches again in the wallet, digs something else out.

CLOSE UP: he's holding an AA 1 Year medallion, inscribed: TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE.

FIRST MUGGER (CONT'D)

Whathfuck...

Cameron watches intently. First Mugger turns the medallion over, checking it out, shrugs and tucks it in his own pocket.

CAMERON

Come on, man.

Second Mugger gives Cameron a sharp kick.

FIRST MUGGER

Where's your phone?

CAMERON

Don't have one.

FIRST MUGGER

What? Who the fuck doesn't have a phone?

Surprising even himself, Cameron lets out a short laugh.

CAMERON

You're complaining?

Second Mugger gives him another hard kick and Cameron cries out, curls up in pain.

First Mugger stands, tosses the empty wallet on the floor.

FIRST MUGGER

What a loser.

He turns and the others follow him to the mouth of the alley.

FROM CAMERON'S POV, we watch them make a quick check of the street, then vanish.

Cameron moans and tries to get up, falls back. He lies there breathing raggedly.

EXT. KELLY'S BAR - LATER

Cameron, filthy and bloodied, is at the door of the bar he noticed earlier. He's stooping and moving slowly, in obvious pain. He pushes at the door and it opens.

INT. KELLY'S BAR - CONTINUOUS

Behind the bar is KELLY: 32, friendly, cheerful, determined. She's cleaning up, stacking glasses behind the bar. The place is deserted. She hears the door open but doesn't look over.

KELLY
Sorry, closing up!

No reply, and she looks over.

KELLY'S POV: Cameron making his shambling way across to the bar.

KELLY (CONT'D)
Oh my God! What happened to you?

She scoots round from behind the bar, guides him to a stool. Cameron grips the bar like a drowning man finding driftwood.

CAMERON
Thanks. Sorry.

KELLY
Someone did this?

He nods.

CAMERON
Three guys in the alley over there.
Stupid of me. Shouldn't have gone
that way.

KELLY
Oh yeah, this is totally your
fault.

She goes back behind the bar, pulling her cellphone out of her pocket.

KELLY (CONT'D)
I'm calling the cops. Then we're
going to the hospital.

He holds his hand up.

CAMERON
No, don't. Please. There's no
point.

KELLY
You can't just let them--

CAMERON
They had masks. I couldn't ID them.
There's no point. I just wanted to
get a... a glass of water. Is that
okay?

Kelly's hovering over her phone, considering it. She realises
he's right.

KELLY
Okay, but Jesus. And you should
still go to the ER.

He gives a small defeated smile and turns his palms up.

CAMERON
No insurance.

She shakes her head. Grabs a big glass and fills it with
water, puts it in front of him, looking intently at his face.
His left eye is bruised and swelling up, and there's a bloody
graze on his temple. Otherwise his face isn't so bad.

She grabs a handful of crushed ice, wraps it in a cloth and
hands it to him.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Thanks.

He presses it gingerly to the side of his face.

KELLY
What's your name, wounded soldier?

CAMERON
Cameron Clark. Cameron. Thanks.

He takes a careful drink from the glass.

She's frowning, looking at him afresh.

KELLY
Jesus, hang on. Cameron Clark?
Bellfield High?

He looks at her, surprised.

CAMERON

Er, yeah.

She laughs and slaps the bar.

KELLY

Oh my God! I remember you! Cameron Clark - you were valedictorian!

He looks uncomfortable. Tries a smile.

CAMERON

Er, yeah, I guess I was. God. Were you there?

KELLY

No, I read your interview in Vanity Fair. Of course I was there. I'm Kelly Garfield. You wouldn't remember me, I was nowhere near cool enough.

(gesturing around)

But now I own a pretty neat bar.

He's looking at her, trying to recall. She smiles.

KELLY (CONT'D)

Don't bother. I had dorky glasses, I was real shy. Contact lenses now though.

She does a kind of jazz-hands display of her de-spectacled eyes.

CAMERON

I'm sorry. I don't remember. I've... forgotten a lot about school.

He downs the last of his water. She smiles.

KELLY

You fancy something stronger? On the house, valedictorian.

He looks at her. He's suddenly very still. A beat. She senses his intensity, is a little thrown off, and almost speaks.

CAMERON

Sure. Thanks. Bourbon.

KELLY

Good choice. I'll join you.

He watches her pour two glasses. She opens the ice bucket.

KELLY (CONT'D)

Rocks?

He nods and she gives them both some ice.

KELLY (CONT'D)

Let me just lock up. Don't want any more waifs and strays drifting in.

She goes round the bar and heads to the door.

THE AUDIO DROPS. We only hear a sort of LOW ROAR like blood in your ears. Cameron sits and stares at the glass in front of him. He puts his hand out and takes hold of the glass, lifts it slowly towards his mouth. Sweat pops on his brow. He shuts his eyes.

Kelly returns and breaks the moment. SOUND RETURNS TO NORMAL. She looks at him - it's obvious something's wrong.

KELLY (CONT'D)

You okay? God you're pale, I knew I should have--

Cameron shoves the glass back onto the bar and rears back from it, as if tearing himself free of a magnet.

CAMERON

Sorry-- I can't, I-- can you--

KELLY

(Recognizing the signs)
Oh my God.

She snatches up both glasses, dumps all the whisky into the sink under the bar. A LOUD CLATTER OF ICE.

He slumps, puts his hands to his face and rubs - then cries out with pain and snatches his hands away.

CAMERON

Goddamn--

KELLY

How long?

CAMERON

Huh?

KELLY

How long have you been sober?

He lets out a long breath.

CAMERON

A year.
(a "ta-dah" gesture)
One year today!

He looks at the clock behind the bar: it reads just after 1am.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Or yesterday now I guess.

KELLY
Jesus. And I nearly--

CAMERON
No. I nearly.

KELLY
But you didn't.

CAMERON
(A small smile)
No, I didn't.

A beat.

KELLY
Are you sure I can't run you to the hospital?

He nods. She watches him. Silence for a couple of beats.

KELLY (CONT'D)
Okay, here's what's happening. We'll have some tea, then you're staying here.
(shaking her head as he tries to speak)
I live upstairs. You're on the couch. I can't send you home like this. In the morning, assuming you're still alive, we'll decide what to do.

Cameron opens his mouth to say something.

KELLY (CONT'D)
No arguments.
(Pulls out a cellphone)
Now, who's your sponsor and what's their number?

INT. KELLY'S LIVING ROOM - LATER

Cameron is asleep under a blanket up on the couch in a small, neat, faintly bohemian-looking living room. Beaded fabrics, ornaments, a wide bookshelf stuffed with books. A small TV in one corner, a small lamp lit in another.

We HEAR Kelly's voice coming from another room.

KELLY (O.S.)
I think he's OK. It was close
though... Sure...

INT. KELLY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

We find her sitting on the bed, talking on her cell.

KELLY
Yes, of course. Okay, we'll see you
in the morning... Sorry again for
waking-- ... No problem. Sure,
okay. Bye.

She hangs up and drops the phone on the bed. Looks towards
the door, thinking.

INT. KELLY'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Cameron is waking up. His left eye has closed up in a dark,
swollen bruise. There's a neat bandage stuck over the graze
on his head, showing a few small spots of red. He stretches
and winces. He lies there, looking at the unfamiliar room.

Kelly leans in through the doorway, checking on him. Sees
he's awake.

KELLY
Hey.

He looks over.

CAMERON
Hey.

She comes in and he moves to make room so she can sit on the
couch. Wincing as he does.

KELLY
He lives.

CAMERON
Just about.

KELLY
I spoke to Rudy. He sounds a nice
guy.

CAMERON
He's... the best.

KELLY
He's coming over later.

Cameron nods, lost for words.

CAMERON

I...

KELLY

Forget it. How's the head?

She's checking out his bruise.

KELLY (CONT'D)

Let me see.

She touches his face gently, turning his head so she can get a good look at his black eye.

CAMERON'S POV: watching her looking at him, tending to him. She looks beautiful, almost angelic, in the soft morning light filtering through the blinds.

Impulsively, he reaches up and takes her hand. It's an unmistakable move. Her eyes snap to his – she knows that look.

KELLY (CONT'D)

Woah...

She pulls her hand back.

CAMERON

Sorry--

KELLY

Okay, no. That is not what happens next.

CAMERON

I know, I'm-- Jesus--

She stands up, furious.

KELLY

What were you thinking? I, like, tenderly dress your wounds, and we fall in love and live happily ever after? Jesus, you think life's that easy?

Cameron looks mortified.

KELLY (CONT'D)

How in God's name did you end up valedictorian? You gave that whole speech -- about earning your happiness... or something.

Cameron looks startled, and she sees it. She's knocked off her stride a little.

KELLY (CONT'D)
Okay, so I remember. Get over it.
(looks at him)
What happened? How did... you give
a speech like that?

Cameron falls back against the couch. He shrugs.

CAMERON
I was drunk.

She blinks at him. Her temper cools.

KELLY
Oh, Jesus.

She sits on the arm of the couch. They're silent, both absorbing. She looks at him, clearly softening.

KELLY (CONT'D)
Anyway, I'm already seeing someone,
so...

CAMERON
(defeated)
Of course you are.

She gives him a sly smile.

KELLY
And she would not take kindly to...
(a gesture pointing to
them both)
...this.

He catches up with what she's said. His look says "Ohh."

KELLY (CONT'D)
I forgive you, valedictorian. Let's
put it down to that crack on the
head.

Friends?

She holds out a hand. He shakes it.

CAMERON
Friends. Thank you. For everything.

She gets up.

KELLY
I'm making coffee, you want some?

He nods and she heads out of the room. He slumps back on the couch.

INT. BAR - LATER

Cameron, Kelly and Rudy are sitting at a table in the empty bar, sipping coffee. They've been eating: there are plates and cutlery on the table bearing the remnants of a good breakfast. A satisfied quiet.

RUDY
That was amazing.

KELLY
Yes it was. I have to say. I outdid myself.

Cameron is quiet. The other two look at him.

RUDY
(to Cameron)
Quite a night.

Cameron nods.

RUDY (CONT'D)
Ups and downs, from what I hear.

Rudy grins at Kelly. Cameron can't look at either of them.

RUDY (CONT'D)
My man. You looked over the edge,
but you didn't fall. Still proud of
you, Cameron.

Cameron manages to meet Rudy's eye. He sits up a little straighter, manages a small smile. Winces at the movement.

RUDY (CONT'D)
Just remember. What do I always
tell you?
(he leans forward gravely)
Seriously. No short cuts.

His serious expression breaks into a grin. Cameron returns it shyly.

We PULL BACK as Rudy taps his coffee cup hopefully. Kelly rolls her eyes, hooks a thumb over her shoulder. Rudy grins, gets up and goes to get the coffee pot.

KEEP PULLING BACK, framing them in the spill of morning light through the bar windows. Rudy pours the coffee. Cameron leans forward, accepting some. They're all clearly in conversation, although we can't hear them now. They look easy together. Maybe even happy.

FADE OUT.