

THE HIGHWAY

an opera noir in four scenes

(libretto)

* * *

music and libretto

JEREMY BECK

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Prologue: "At Home"

(The stage is dark. There is a PRELUDE. Lights up to reveal a counter which functions here as a bar. MIKE is behind the bar, polishing a rifle. JAMES stands at the bar, beer bottle in hand. There is a guitar in its case and a small backpack by his side on the floor. Otherwise, the stage is empty.)

JAMES
I mean it.
(MIKE ignores him.)
I said, I mean it!

MIKE
(not looking up)
I heard ya.

JAMES
So?

MIKE
(stops polishing)
So?

JAMES
Ya got nothin' to say?

MIKE
No.
(goes back to it)

JAMES
(speaks)
You're not much of a conversationalist.
(MIKE shrugs)

(sings)
Tonight, I'm goin',
And you got nothin' to say?

MIKE
(pinching his cheek)
Be a good boy, for Mommy!

JAMES
Cut it out!

MIKE
So you're fed up with the garage - what's new?

JAMES
But this time
I'm gonna leave!

MIKE
Same old story...
You've said the same thing
A thousand times before!
"Hey, Mike- tonight I'm goin'!
Hitchin' to Chicago
To be a rock 'n roll star!"
Sure- go ahead.

Sure you are.

JAMES
This time it's different.

MIKE
Yeah, OK.

JAMES
Really.

MIKE
Whatever you say.

(NIKKI enters behind JAMES. Two periods of time and two different spaces are now superimposed: NIKKI with JAMES earlier that night simultaneously with JAMES and MIKE in the present.)

NIKKI
You're home earlier than usual.
Anything wrong at work?

MIKE
So what's so different tonight?

JAMES *(to NIKKI)*
Not too much going on at the garage-
I thought I'd come home and write.

MIKE
Problems with Nikki?

NIKKI
What?

JAMES *(to MIKE)*
None-a your bus'ness.

NIKKI
We have bills to pay!

JAMES *(to NIKKI)*
I know that!

NIKKI
And the phone's overdue!

JAMES
I know that!

MIKE
Has she been sleepin' around?

NIKKI
How are we gonna pay them
If you're not at work?
What I make at the drugstore
Isn't gonna cover it all!
James, I love you,
But you need to be more practical!

JAMES
You don't understand-

MIKE
You can tell me!
You caught her sleepin' with someone else, didn't you?

JAMES
(to MIKE) Shut up!
(to NIKKI) I was laid off, OK?

NIKKI
How come?

JAMES
There's not enough work.
Something like that.
The boss said he'd call me
When he had more.
What can I do?

NIKKI
I'm sorry.
I didn't know.
It'll be all right.
We'll figure something out.
You're home now.

JAMES
Nikki, I been thinking-

MIKE
Man, if I was livin'
With a girl like Nikki,
I sure wouldn't leave!

JAMES
This is- (*searching for the word*)
-an opportunity!
A chance I never had before.

NIKKI
We'll get today's paper-

JAMES
An open door!

NIKKI
We'll find you something else.

JAMES
No one's gonna notice
A songwriter
Who works in a garage!

MIKE
I sure wouldn't want to leave-
Know what I mean?

JAMES
Nikki,
I could do it!

I could be a writer!
Go to Chicago!
Get a hit on the charts!
Like striking gold!
In the old days,
By covered wagon,
They chased a dream in California.
Panning for riches
In a mountain stream!
But today, Nikki,
Panning with this (*holds up guitar*)
Is the way to the dream!

MIKE
Nikki is hot-
You'd be crazy to go!
Nikki is not
Somebody I'd leave.
No-

NIKKI
Go to Chicago?

MIKE
-way, buddy!

NIKKI
I thought that was out of your system!

JAMES
(to MIKE) She doesn't understand!
(to NIKKI) You don't understand!

NIKKI
And what am I supposed to do-

JAMES
How can I explain-

NIKKI
-while you're gone?

JAMES
I need to do this.

MIKE
Send me a postcard-

NIKKI
Sit around and wait?

JAMES
I have to go!

MIKE
-if you really go!

NIKKI
I won't, you know!

JAMES
This is an opportunity-

An open door!

MIKE
Don't worry about Nikki-

NIKKI
You need to be practical!

JAMES
A chance to explore!

MIKE
-I'll make sure she's OK...

JAMES
A chance I never had before!

NIKKI
Be practical!

JAMES
I'll call you tomorrow.

NIKKI
Don't bother!
(starts to leave - JAMES grabs her arm)

MIKE
Know what I mean?

JAMES
(NIKKI jerks her arm out of his grasp and turns around.)
Please understand!

NIKKI
Get out!
Go!

JAMES
Nikki,
Ever since we were kids
We had certain things we had to do.
All of it laid out in a straight line-
From kindergarten to high school
Then working at some job.
For how many years do you work then?
And for what?
This is a chance for me to do
Something I love.
To really try to do
Something I've only dreamed of.
Please let me try this
Sure, I know it's risky-
There's no guarantee.
But the garage wasn't guaranteed, either, see?
So what have I got to lose by trying?

NIKKI
Me!

JAMES
Are you really happy

With the way things are?
With the path you have
To travel on?

NIKKI
Ev'rything was fine until today!

JAMES
Maybe I'll regret my going
Once I've gone.

NIKKI
Go!

JAMES
But there are different highways-

NIKKI
Go!

JAMES
-leading to different pla-

NIKKI
Don't worry about me!

JAMES
-ces!
Different highways-

NIKKI
I'll be just fine without you!

JAMES
-under an open sky-

NIKKI
Get along just fine without you! *(she leaves)*

JAMES
-for me.
(to MIKE)
She doesn't understand at all.
Can't she see?
This is something I need to do.
(JAMES picks up his pack, the guitar and leaves.)

MIKE
(yawns) Same old story...
(squints down barrel of rifle - whistles. A WOMAN enters, smoking a cigarette.)
Lights fade to black. End of scene.)

Scene 1: "The Highway On The Left"

(Music begins in darkness. Lights up on JAMES, standing at a crossroads with his guitar case and backpack in hand. . JAMES chooses the Highway On The Left. Lights change as JAMES walks. He comes upon a broken-down car . A young woman, MELODY, sits inside. An older man, DAVE, is looking under the hood. DAVE has a flashlight in one hand and, unseen by JAMES, a rifle in the other.)

JAMES
What seems to be the trouble?
(DAVE, startled, points the flashlight and the rifle at JAMES.)
No! Put the gun down!
I'm a mechanic; I can probably help.

DAVE
What the hell are you doin' out here
This time a' night?

JAMES
Hitchin' to Chicago.
Now put down the gun and the light!

DAVE
You can fix cars?

JAMES
Yeah, so put down the-
(DAVE lowers the light and gun.)
-light.

DAVE
Be my guest.

(JAMES looks under the hood. DAVE holds the light for him.)

JAMES
Got a pair-a pliers?

DAVE
Melody. Pliers.

(She hands them out to DAVE who gives them to JAMES. JAMES fiddles in the engine.)

JAMES
Try turning it over.

(MELODY does - it sputters.)

DAVE
Fix my car! I shoulda known no mechanic carries a guitar!

JAMES
(fiddles some more in the engine.)
Try it again!
(MELODY tries again and it turns over.)
There! It's fixed!
Think I could get a ride with you?
As far as you're going is fine.

DAVE
Turn the car off, Melody, and get out!
(MELODY gets out of the car.)

JAMES
How about that ride?

DAVE
What do you think of my niece?

JAMES
It's late! We should get going...

DAVE
Don't you think my niece is a piece?

MELODY
Uncle Dave, I-

DAVE
Melody, shut up!

JAMES
We should be going.

DAVE
In a minute.
Now answer my question.
Don't be shy.
You could be a lucky guy tonight.
Just play your cards right.

MELODY
Please, Uncle Dave, it is getting late.

DAVE
I said "shut up"! *(slaps her)*

JAMES
What the hell are you doing?

DAVE
Now here's the offer I'm prepared to make.
A splendid offer for you!
How would you like to "do" Melody?
Screw Melody right here?

JAMES
You must be crazy!
I'm out of here!

DAVE
(grabbing JAMES)
Listen up now, you stupid little punk,
My niece works for me!
But tonight she didn't act very smart.
Tonight, she wouldn't live up to her part
Of our agreement.
So I tell her since she wouldn't screw the guy
Who paid me for her,
She was gonna spread 'em wide
For the very first man we met

Tonight.
Black or white.
And you're the first, got it?
So now it's up to you.
If you're not int'rested, that's fine!
I'll give her to the next one in line!
Maybe then she'll learn that she is mine!

JAMES
You're a bastard!
She's not your damn property!
(DAVE laughs)

MELODY
Please don't say anything!
You'll just get him madder!

DAVE
(Begins to fondle MELODY)
Don't you think she's lovely?

JAMES
Stop!

(JAMES grabs DAVE's arm and lunges at him. DAVE drops the gun. They fight, DAVE shoves JAMES off, reaches for the gun, but MELODY has gotten there first. She grabs the gun and steps back, pointing the rifle at DAVE.)

MELODY
Get the hell back!

DAVE
Easy, Mel, that's loaded!

MELODY
Then do as I say!
(she cocks it)

DAVE
Jesus!

JAMES
Be careful!

DAVE
I didn't mean it, Mel.
Do you think I would let some kid mess with you?
(seductive) No way.
Not a chance.
C'mon, Mel, give me the gun.
Nothing's gonna happen.

MELODY
I mean it!
Back off!

JAMES
Hey! Take it easy!
Don't do anything you'll later regret!

MELODY
Will you help me?
Please help me!

DAVE
What are you up to?

JAMES
How can I help you?

MELODY
He's abused me for years!

DAVE
She lies.

MELODY
Ever since I was ten years old-

DAVE
Don't listen to her!

MELODY
-he's been selling me on the streets!

JAMES
You bastard!

MELODY
It's true!

DAVE
Don't believe her!

MELODY
Please help me!

JAMES
Oh, God!

MELODY
Will you help me?

DAVE
Don't believe her-

JAMES
What can I do?

DAVE
-she loves it! She loves the money!

MELODY
Free me!

DAVE
Don't trust her-

JAMES
How can I free you?

DAVE
-I know!

MELODY
Take this!
(She offers the gun to JAMES)

DAVE
I taught her ev'rything!

JAMES
I can't!

MELODY
Don't you want to help me?

JAMES
Yes, but-

MELODY
Then take it! Kill him!

DAVE
She's using you!

MELODY
Kill him! Kill him!
Free me from this nightmare world!

DAVE
No, don't do it!

JAMES
I'm not strong enough to kill him!

MELODY
Do it for me!

DAVE
No, don't!

MELODY
Kill him for me!

DAVE
Give me-

MELODY
I know you have the strength!

DAVE
-the gun!

MELODY
I feel it in your arms!
Free me!

JAMES
I can't do this!

MELODY
Free me!

JAMES
I can't!

DAVE
That's enough!
No more playing games!
I won't be shot by some stupid, young-
(DAVE reaches to grab the gun from JAMES. They struggle. The gun goes off. DAVE is shot and crumples over.)
Mel-
Melody, I loved you.
Believe me, I always loved you.
(dies)

JAMES
(kneels slowly next to DAVE, putting the rifle down)
I didn't mean to-
The gun went off!
An accident.
You saw that.

MELODY
I hated him so much.

JAMES
What'll we do?

MELODY
All the years of pain are washed away.
Already it's like a dream.

JAMES
This is no dream!

MELODY
A far away dream of another time!

JAMES
How can we prove it wasn't my fault?

MELODY
Another place!

JAMES
You'll have to explain it!

MELODY
Another person!

JAMES
An accident!

MELODY
Another person!

JAMES
An accident!

MELODY
Unafraid.
Not alone.
With an uncle who loves me!

Uncle?
What happened to my uncle?

JAMES
You saw what happened.

MELODY
No!
Why did you kill him?
Why?

JAMES
It was an accident!

MELODY
It wasn't!

JAMES
He grabbed my arm!

MELODY
I don't remember that!

JAMES
The gun went off!

MELODY
I don't remember that!

JAMES
While you said, "Kill him, kill him!"

MELODY
You're a liar!

JAMES
Save you from your nightmare world!

MELODY
Liar! Because I loved him!
I loved him! (*she picks up the rifle*)

JAMES
It was an accident!

MELODY
And he loved me, too!

JAMES
I didn't mean to shoot him!

MELODY
Now I'm all alone.

JAMES
But the gun just went off!

MELODY
You killed him!
Now I'm all alone! (*points gun at JAMES*)

JAMES
No! Please, don't!
I didn't mean to kill him!
(*MELODY shoots JAMES. He falls over and dies.*)

MELODY
He loved me.
And I loved him, too.

(*Lights fade to black. End of scene.*)

Scene 2: "The Highway On The Right"

(Music begins in darkness. Lights up on JAMES, back at the crossroads with his guitar case and backpack in hand, exactly where he was at the beginning of Scene 1. JAMES chooses the Highway On The Right. Lights crossfade from JAMES to NIKKI, in her apartment, as JAMES walks off.)

NIKKI

(kneeling, praying)

God,
I can't sleep.
I keep dreaming of James.
I was only being practical.
Now he's gone.
Please bring him back.

God,
Please bring him back to me.
He belongs here.
I'm worried and afraid.
Where is he?
Can you see him now?
Is he OK?
Tell me what I can do!
Please help me.

God,
Please tell him to come home.
I need him back home!
I was only being practical...
Was that so wrong?

(Lights fade on NIKKI, then snap up brightly on JAMES. He is in Chicago, guitar in hand, working on a song. It is late in the evening.)

JAMES

(strumming chords and working out a tune)

Da da dee-da dee-dum.
Da da da dee da da dum
Ba dee dee.

(writes)

When I think about love...

(writes)

When I think about love,
I get nervous and my heart grows weak.
I try to speak to you, but no,
It's hard to let my feelings show
When I think about love.

When I think about love,
I turn and hide
Like many people do
From what's inside.

Love is a mystery and more.
Strange and dark behind its door.
I accept most are afraid,
But I must explore.

When I talk about love,
I get flustered and my brain goes numb.
I try to come up with some word,
But you make me feel absurd
When I talk about love.

When I talk about love,
You respond with fear.
Like many people - you
Don't want to hear...

Love is a mystery and more.
Strange and dark behind its door.
I accept you are afraid,
But I must explore.

(There is a knock at the door. JAMES puts down his guitar and opens the door. It is MELODY.)

MELODY

Hi.

JAMES

Hi.

Can I help-?

MELODY

Am I bothering you?

JAMES

No, but-

MELODY

I'm sorry if I am, it's just that-
(walks past JAMES into apartment)
-I used to live up here.

JAMES

Up here?

MELODY

In this very apartment.
When my father left,
My mother and I moved into the basement
With my uncle.

JAMES

Excuse me, but who are you?

MELODY

Oops. Sorry.

My name is Melody.

(She extends her hand, JAMES shakes it and doesn't let go.)
And you are?

JAMES

James.

MELODY

May I have my hand back, James?
(He sheepishly lets go.)
Have you lived here long?

JAMES
Just moved in.

MELODY
Ev'ry so often,
When I feel a little lonely,
I like to come up here and-
I don't know.
Re-visit my past, I guess.

JAMES
And whoever lived here before
Didn't mind your coming by?

MELODY
(Looking out the window)
It's been empty 'til you came.
(JAMES is silent. He is uncomfortable, but he doesn't want her to leave. MELODY continues looking out the window.)
I always liked the view here.

JAMES
The whole city-
It's pretty fantastic.

MELODY
All those lights.
Like people saying "hello".

JAMES
(moving in behind her)
So beautiful...

MELODY
(moving away, referring to his guitar)
Do you play?

JAMES
Some.
Mainly I write.

MELODY
You write songs?

JAMES
It's nothing.

MELODY
What do you write about?

JAMES
Lots of stuff.
Things I feel.
Love.

MELODY
Love.
One of the strangest things in the world.

JAMES
I think so, too.

MELODY
Are you in love?

JAMES
I thought I was-

MELODY
I bet she misses you.

JAMES
I'm not so sure about that.

MELODY
Come on, a songwriter?
Who thinks about love?
What could be better?

JAMES
I've never met anyone like you before...

The world is a strange place.
I've been so lonely.
Writing down my thoughts
In this city of strangers.
And then you appear,
Here, like a mystery!
A shadow I must explore.

MELODY
The world is a strange place.
I've been so lonely, too.
Visiting my past
Just to comfort my present.
And then you are here.
You appear, like a mystery!
A shadow I must explore.

(they tentatively embrace, then kiss)

JAMES and MELODY
And then you appear,
Here, like a mystery!
Like no one I've met before!

JAMES

The world-
-is a strange place.

Searching for your past,
Trying to comfort
your present.

And then you appear,

Here, you're
A shadow I must explore!
A shadow I must explore!

MELODY
The world-

is a strange place.

I've been so lonely.

Trying to comfort
my present.
And then you appear,

Here, like a mystery!

A shadow I must explore!
A shadow I must explore!

(They kiss. Lights change. DAVE enters his apartment. For a moment, the two rooms, DAVE's and JAMES', are superimposed.)

DAVE
Melody, I'm home.

MELODY
I should be going now.

JAMES
No...

(DAVE goes briefly offstage to another "room"- he returns with his rifle.)

MELODY
I need to make dinner for my uncle...
He'll be home pretty soon.

(DAVE sits in his chair and polishes his gun.)

JAMES
When can I see you again?

MELODY
I don't know...

JAMES
When?

MELODY
Maybe later...

(She kisses him goodbye, lights fade on JAMES, MELODY crosses to DAVE.)

DAVE
(still polishing)
How did it go upstairs?

MELODY
Fine. He's very sweet.

DAVE
(putting gun down)
Good! Good!
Like putty in your hands-
They always are!
(takes an envelope out of his pocket)

MELODY
He wasn't what I expected...

DAVE
(hands envelope to MELODY)
Here's the note for him to deliver for me.

MELODY
I don't want to use this one.

DAVE
What?

MELODY
Let me find someone else.

DAVE
There isn't time!

MELODY
I don't want to lose this one!

DAVE
I think you've lost your mind.

MELODY
No, I've just changed it! *(throws down note)*

DAVE
This is not the night
To change your mind.
Ev'ryone's in place-
Ev'rything's ready!
We have spent months
Planning this out.

Don't be fooled.
He may talk sweet to you now.
But given the chance he will hurt you somehow.

MELODY
Why do you always say that?

DAVE
You know what they're like
These hungry boys.
Feed them what they want
And they're gone tomorrow.
This clown is the same-
Make no mistake about that!

MELODY
(turns away) No, he's not!

DAVE
I don't want to fight.
(speaks) Maybe you're right.
(picks up note, sings)
But, Mel-
I worry about you.
I don't want to see you hurt.
I love you, Mel.

(MELODY turns back to DAVE. He hugs her, kisses her.)

DAVE
Please go back upstairs-
-and give him this note.
(puts it in her hand)

MELODY
Are you sure-

-this is all he has to
do?

DAVE
Don't you worry-
Nothing will happen!

MELODY
I really like him.

I don't want him
to get hurt!

I can guarantee
He'll be just fine.

*(Lights fade slightly on DAVE - crossfade up on JAMES -
MELODY crosses to JAMES while DAVE stays in the shadows.)*

DAVE
There's no risk involved.

MELODY
(with JAMES, but asking DAVE)
What do you want me to say?

DAVE
Ask him to deliver that note.
It will tell Robert I'm ready now!
And where I'll do it!

MELODY
But what do I say?

DAVE
(temper rising)
Say anything you want!
(calm)
Just get him to go!

MELODY
(to JAMES)
Will you help me?
Please help me!

JAMES
How can I help you?

MELODY
My- my mother is sick!
She could be dying!

DAVE
(coaching her)
That's a start.

MELODY
My- my uncle's still at work-

DAVE
Ha! Nice touch!

MELODY
And I can't get him on the phone!
He needs to know! *(JAMES is skeptical)*

DAVE
Now give him the note!

MELODY
(turning back to DAVE)
You promise?
Nothing's gonna happen?

JAMES
I don't know...

DAVE *(to MELODY)* and MELODY *(to JAMES)*
Trust me!

JAMES
Where do I need to go?

DAVE *(to MELODY)* and MELODY *(to JAMES)*
If you love me, do this for me!

MELODY
(MELODY puts the note in James' hand.)
Here's a note for my uncle.

JAMES
Where?

MELODY
Go to the Mayor's mansion.
That is where my uncle works.
Ask to see my Uncle Robert.
Robert Steel!

DAVE
You're a good girl!

JAMES
Just take this to your uncle?

MELODY
(to DAVE) You're sure he won't get hurt?

JAMES
That's all?

DAVE
He'll be fine!

JAMES
Robert Steel is his name?

MELODY
(to JAMES) Yes.

JAMES
I'll be back soon!
(he kisses her and runs out with the envelope)

DAVE
Did he go?

MELODY
He's gone. Are you happy now?

DAVE

You're a good girl!
(kisses her on the cheek)
See you later tonight!
(exits with his rifle)

(MELODY exits opposite of DAVE as lights change. We are now in a room in the Mayor's mansion. JAMES is hustled into this room by GEORGE, the head of security, who pushes JAMES into a chair. JAMES has the envelope in his hand.)

JAMES

This is a matter of life and death!
Please!
I must see Mister Steel!

GEORGE

Mister Steel is unavailable!

JAMES

What do you mean?

GEORGE

(referring to the envelope JAMES has)
What is that?

JAMES

This is for Robert Steel!

GEORGE

Give it to me!

JAMES

No, it's personal!

GEORGE

(takes the envelope)
(speaks) Sit down!
(JAMES sits. GEORGE opens the envelope and reads the note inside, sings)
You people are idiots.

JAMES

What?

GEORGE

Steel has been found out and arrested.
You might as well give up.

JAMES

I don't know what you're talking about.

GEORGE

I don't have time for this!
(collars JAMES)
Who will be waiting
At the corner of Franklin and Bradley tonight?

JAMES

Stop it!

GEORGE

(reads note)
"Tonight at Franklin and Bradley
When he goes to Mass."
Now who will be there?
(shoving him in his chair)
Answer me!

JAMES

Let me see that!
(taking note and reading it)
There must be some mistake.
This was from a girl for her uncle...

GEORGE

Yeah, sure.

JAMES

No, really!
(in disbelief)
She lied to me.

GEORGE

Same old story...

JAMES

I thought she was acting strange.
She seemed nervous-

GEORGE

Guys like you get suckered all the time.

JAMES

But she said her mother was sick...

GEORGE

All the time.

JAMES

So you believe me-

GEORGE

No way-
You think I'm stupid or somethin'?
I been head of security twelve years now,
And you're the one who's lying.

JAMES

I swear I'm innocent!

GEORGE

Ev'rybody's innocent!

JAMES

Don't you see?
She used me!
I was her errand boy!

GEORGE

Tell you what- I'll make you a deal.

JAMES
I told you, I'm innocent!

GEORGE
Look, it doesn't matter to me whether you're innocent or not!
Guilty, innocent-
I don't care!
I need to find out what's going on.
And you're gonna help me.

JAMES
How?

GEORGE
Be a decoy.
Take the Mayor's place.

JAMES
No...

GEORGE
You don't have a choice.
You'll do it
Or I'll have you locked up for
(holds up note)
Conspiracy!

JAMES
But I'm innocent!

GEORGE
Innocent, innocent.
Ev'rybody's innocent!
(pause)
Well?

JAMES
You'll make sure nothing happens to me?

GEORGE
Don't you worry-
I'll be right there.

JAMES
That's not very comforting.
(GEORGE shrugs)
What do I do?

GEORGE
You don't do nothin'.
Just gimme your coat.

*(JAMES takes off his coat- GEORGE takes it and leaves.
MELODY enters, unseen and unheard by JAMES. While she
sings, GEORGE returns with a hat and a topcoat. He gives these
to JAMES to put on.)*

MELODY
James, if I knew,
I would not have lied to you.
I'm sorry, James.
I loved you. *(she exits)*

JAMES
I believed in your love!
Why did you lie to me?
*(GEORGE puts JAMES in the car and leaves him praying.
Lights fade up on NIKKI, at home, also praying.)*

JAMES & NIKKI
Please, God,
Don't let anything happen...

*(JAMES is now on his way to Mass. DAVE slowly,
imperceptively, emerges from the darkness. He approaches
JAMES from directly behind him, rifle in hand. When DAVE
gets right behind JAMES, he points the rifle at JAMES' head
and smiles slowly. JAMES' head falls forward, slowly.
Simultaneously, GEORGE enters from the wings with a .45
drawn. He walks calmly up to DAVE and places his gun to
DAVE's temple. GEORGE smiles slowly and DAVE's head falls
forward in the same manner as JAMES' head did. This tableau
freezes and the lights fade to black. This is the end of the scene,
but the music is continuous and the next scene follows
"attacca".)*

Scene 3: "The Highway In The Middle"

(Lights fade up to reveal JAMES standing, once again, at the crossroads. He starts to take the middle path. MELODY and DAVE suddenly appear in a strange light, as if in a vision, at the end of this path. JAMES stops, confused. As if warned by some premonition, he turns back and heads for home. NIKKI appears as lights change.)

NIKKI

James! You're home!
Are you all right?
I worried all night!
I'm so glad you changed your mind!
I'm so glad to see you!

JAMES

Something stopped me-
I can't explain...
I got to the crossroads at the highway.
I had every intention-
But something felt wrong.

NIKKI

James! I know!
I felt it, too.
That something had happened to you.
Couldn't go to sleep at all!
I prayed you were safe!

And now that you're home
Things will be better!
We'll make it work-
You'll see.

This is your home!
We can be happy!
We'll work out the money-
Whatever our problems
Might be.

I've been thinking-
It wasn't fair what I said.
Being practical
Isn't always the best thing to be.
And you don't need lectures on money from me.
I guess that means I'm sorry.
OK?
Will you stay? (*hugs him*)

JAMES

(*thinking to himself*)
Now that I'm home,
Will things be better?
Could I be happy
And stay?

Is it OK

That I didn't make it?
Didn't go to Chicago
Like I said I would
Someday?

But what's important?
Nikki loves me, I know.
Being practical,
This is where I was meant to be.

NIKKI

This is your home!
We can be happy!
We'll work out the money-
Whatever our problems
Might be.

JAMES

No more fights about music from me.

NIKKI

OK?
Stay!

JAMES

This is our home!

We can be happy!

We'll work out the money-
Whatever the problem,

Now that I'm home,
Things will be better!
We'll make it work-

We'll work together!
It won't be just you-

It'll be me, too.

I'm home!

Me, too!

It's so good I'm home!

I'm so
glad I'm home!
I'm home

I'm home!

NIKKI

This is our home!

We can be happy!
We'll work out the money-

We'll see it through.

Things will be better!

'Cause
We'll work together!

It won't be just you-

You're home!

I'm so glad you're
home!

It's so good you're
home!

I'm so glad
You're home!
Welcome home!

Welcome home!

Welcome home!

(JAMES and NIKKI embrace, kiss. MIKE enters. Two periods of time are now superimposed - MIKE is in the future, a week later.)

MIKE

(*speaks*) How come I ain't seen ya all week?
I heard ya come back the mornin' after ya left!

JAMES

(*still hugging NIKKI*)
Yeah. So what?

MIKE
(sings) I knew it.
I knew you wouldn't go.
Didn't I tell you?
Same old story!
Know what I mean?

(NIKKI kisses James goodbye and leaves, taking his backpack with her. JAMES turns to face MIKE. Now we are in the bar from the Prologue and it is the present, a week after JAMES left and came back.)

JAMES
For a friend, you're a real asshole.
Know what I mean?

MIKE
Look, I'm more of a friend than you think.

JAMES
Sure, sure.
Just gimme a beer.

MIKE
That night, after you left?
I had a new customer.

(The TALENT AGENT enters as she did at the end of the Prologue, smoking a cigarette. Two points in time are now superimposed with MIKE: the night with the new customer and the present with JAMES.)

JAMES
Great.
Now you won't have to go outta bus'ness.

MIKE
Funny guy.
(serves AGENT a drink)
She's here to visit her aunt or her mother or somethin'.
She said she's an agent.
A talent agent.
And I told her 'bout you.

JAMES
What did you say?

MIKE
(mocking) "For a friend, you're a real asshole."

JAMES
Please, what did you say?

MIKE
Well, I said you was amazing.
That you wrote some decent songs
And you had a cute ass!
She seemed int'rested.

(AGENT takes out a business card and writes something on the back of it.)

JAMES
(speaks) You're a jerk!
Nobody came in here!

MIKE
I swear!
Swear to God!
It's the truth!
(AGENT hands MIKE her card.)
That agent was here!
This is her card. *(gives JAMES the card)*
She wrote where she was stayin' on it.
She said you could give her a call...

JAMES
You're not kiddin' me?

MIKE
Believe it.
Go on - give it a try!
Maybe she'll like you.
Just act "friendly".
Know what I mean? *(chuckles to himself and leaves)*

(AGENT finishes her drink while JAMES takes his guitar out of its case.)

JAMES
(speaks) I got your number from Mike at the bar.
I hope it's OK I called.

AGENT
(speaks) I'm always looking for new talent, James.

JAMES
(plays guitar, sings - he is auditioning for her)

Nikki was the girl that could get a boy shot;
Queen of the high school prom.
Thought she'd get to be a model
'Cause she looked so hot,
But instead she's got three kids
Calling her 'mom'.

What does she do when the day breaks cold
And her dreams haven't worked out at all?
When the present throws the past right into her face,
Nikki smiles back
And walks tall.

Mike got the lead in all the school plays.
He could make you laugh or cry.
Always thought he'd be a movie star
'One of these days'
But now he's tendin' bar,
Just to get by.

What does he do now that there's no more gold
And his part in life is small?
When the present throws the past right into his face,
Mike smiles back
And walks tall.

Dreams are like clouds on a windy day.
They seduce us with their beauty.
Wrap around our hearts
And then drift away.

Ev'ry body here has a dream gone by.
A secret that's part of their past.
But whoever said that all dreams must die?
If you keep on dreaming, your dreams will last.

Sometimes it isn't in the turn of the cards,
But still you must play or call.
The stakes can be high and you're playin' for keeps
But whether you win or lose,
Walk tall.
Walk tall.
Walk tall, tall, tall.
Walk tall.

(after a pause)
So, what do you think?

AGENT
It was - int'resting.
Nice. *(pause)*
Really, it has possibilities.
I don't want to be discouraging-
But you'd need a degree in psychology
To understand your lyrics.

JAMES
What do you mean?

AGENT
Don't get defensive!
I just mean that-
Well, they're really-
Deep, you know?
Now I can get into that.
I mean, I really love that kinda stuff.
I love it!
But you need to be practical.
It won't sell.
And the music-
Well-
It wasn't bad.
But you really don't have a hook.

I don't want to be discouraging-
You're very talented.
But in this bus'ness these days,
You really gotta have a hook.
And a look.

(she plays with his hair.)
You know, James, your hair is a little short.
Ever think of growing it longer?
Sort of flipped on the side,
Layered in back?
(sings) James, I like you,
Let me give you some advice.

You gotta have a hook.
Gotta have a look.
Or you're never gonna have a hit
Let me tell you from the start
Forget about Art
Or you're never, ever gonna fit.

This business, James, is a business.
There are ways that things are done.
So don't try to do it different,
Or you're finished before you've begun!

Do it by the book.
Get yourself a look.
That's the way you get known.
If you get the image right,
You can make it overnight.
Then you can be on your own.

A little hype never hurt, James.
Get them to know your name.
Write the songs you want later,
After you've earned some fame.

Believe me, James, it's worth it.
Spend some time creating a look.
Stay in touch and let me know
When you've written a song
Where the melody's strong
So I can sing along.

You gotta have a hook.
I wouldn't lie, James.
Work on a look.
Try, James.
Do it by the book.
(she shakes his hand)
Good-bye, James!
(she leaves)

JAMES
A degree in psychology
To understand my lyrics...
(mocking)
"I love it!
But you need to be practical."
Practical.
(with NIKKI singing offstage with him on this word.)
Practical.
(The counter of the bar is now the counter of a pawnshop. THE DEALER enters. JAMES crosses to him with his guitar. He hands it to the DEALER.)

DEALER
Nice...
What are you lookin' to trade it for?

JAMES
I want a gun.

DEALER
You need a permit for a gun in this state.

Gotta permit?

JAMES
No...

DEALER
Well, that's a problem.
(pause)
Tell you what, son, I'm not supposed to do this.
But you look OK-
You just want to do some huntin', right?

JAMES
Yeah. Some hunting.

DEALER
Just for you.
For fifty bucks and the guitar,
I'll let you have this.
(takes out a rifle from under the counter and hands it to JAMES, who admires it)
What do you think of this piece?
Beauty, ain't she?
Got a story goes along with her.
Picked it up in Chicago-
Gotta friend there
Works for the police.
He sells me- stuff.
This gun was the one last month
That was used on the Mayor.
Crazy guy!
Security blew his head clean off.
(laughs)
Anyway, works just fine.

JAMES
Is it loaded?

DEALER
Where's my fifty?
(JAMES pays him.)
Here's a box-a cartridges.
(holds on to them as he passes the box to JAMES)
Just between us, OK?
(gives box to JAMES)

(DEALER leaves with guitar. JAMES sits down in a chair, facing front, studying the rifle. NIKKI enters. JAMES has locked himself in their bedroom. NIKKI's space is just outside the "bedroom door". While NIKKI calls to JAMES through the locked door, he loads the rifle.)

NIKKI
James! What are you doing?
Please unlock this door.

AGENT
(enters as a memory and stands next to JAMES)
Gotta have a hook, gotta have a look!

NIKKI
Is there something wrong?

MIKE
(enters as a memory and stands on the other side of JAMES)
Same old story...

AGENT
Never gonna have a hit.

MIKE
Know what I mean?

NIKKI
Now that you're home
Things will be better!

AGENT
...degree in psychology...

NIKKI
We'll make it work-
You'll see.

MIKE
Buddy, if I was livin'
With a girl like Nikki-

AGENT
Forget about Art!

MIKE
-I sure wouldn't leave!

DEALER
(enters as a memory and stands behind JAMES)
Just want to do some huntin', right?

AGENT
Forget!

NIKKI
This is your home!

AGENT
Degree!

(By this point, the gun is loaded. JAMES covers his ears, trying to block out these memories which surround him.)

MIKE
Know what I mean?

NIKKI
We can be happy!

AGENT
Never!

NIKKI
We'll work out the money-

DEALER
Crazy guy-

MIKE
Know what I mean?

DEALER
-security-

AGENT
Ever!

DEALER
-blew his head clean off.

NIKKI
Listen!

AGENT
Gonna fit!

NIKKI
James! Please-

AGENT
Never, ever gonna fit!

NIKKI
-unlock this door!

MIKE
Know what I mean?

AGENT
Never!

DEALER
Clean off!

(JAMES doesn't respond - NIKKI runs out to get help.)

AGENT
Ever!

MIKE
I mean!

DEALER
Clean off!

(lights down on AGENT, DEALER and MIKE - MIKE crosses back behind the bar.)

JAMES
Ever since we were kids
We had certain things we had to do.
All of it laid out in a straight line-
From kindergarten to high school
Then working at some job.
For how many years do you work then?
And for what?

NIKKI
(running on from the opposite side of the stage to MIKE, who is now in reality. Lights back up.)

Mike, Mike-

JAMES
For what?

NIKKI
I need your help!

JAMES
Are you really happy
With the way things are?

MIKE
Babe- what can I do for you?

JAMES
With the path you have
To travel on?

NIKKI
James has locked himself in the bedroom.
He won't answer me!

JAMES
Maybe I'll regret my going
Once I've gone-

MIKE
You two had another fight?

NIKKI
No- I came home from work
And he was just in there-
With the door locked.

MIKE
Hey-

AGENT & DEALER
(mocking)
Now that you're home-

MIKE
-if it was me,
I wouldn't lock the door...
(crosses to NIKKI from behind the bar)

NIKKI
Mike, I'm worried!

JAMES
But there are different highways-

AGENT & DEALER
Things will be better!

MIKE
Why do you hang around with a guy
Who'd go off and leave you?

JAMES
Leading to different places.

NIKKI

What are you talking about?

MIKE

He should be grateful to have a girl like you!

(grabs her arm)

AGENT & DEALER

(now encouraging JAMES)

Things will be better!

NIKKI

Let me go!

MIKE

I could take much better care of you!

NIKKI

Please! I have to go home!

MIKE

Not yet!

NIKKI

James needs me!

(MIKE pulls her closer to him, slowly stroking her hair.)

JAMES, AGENT & DEALER

(a cappella)

Diffrent highways...

NIKKI

(MIKE tries to kiss her, she tries to pull away)

Cut it out! Stop!

(MIKE starts to pull her offstage)

What the hell are you doing?

MIKE

Don't fight me!

NIKKI

Let me go!

(MIKE drags NIKKI struggling offstage. During MIKE and NIKKI's struggle and exit, the following simultaneously takes place between the other three players: First, the AGENT takes the loaded rifle from JAMES, checks it, nods approvingly and then hands it to the DEALER. The DEALER takes the rifle from the AGENT, also examines it and then, with a smile, hands it back to JAMES. During this passing around of the rifle, JAMES sits facing front, staring blankly. Once JAMES takes the rifle from the DEALER, he calmly looks at it, then, with no great effort, he places the barrel in his mouth while keeping one hand on the trigger. He freezes in this position. After the DEALER gives the rifle to JAMES [and while he is getting ready to put it in his mouth], the DEALER and the AGENT exit together holding hands. By the time JAMES freezes he should be alone on stage. Also, during all of the above, the lights have slowly been fading. They are very dim by the time JAMES is alone. They then fade completely to black. End of opera.)