

The Ride to Sanctuary
an original screenplay by
Richard McCluskey
and
Vivek Srivastava

FADE IN:

EXT. DOWNTOWN STREET - NIGHT

It's approaching midnight in the central business district. A string of cabs lies in wait at the foot of a looming skyscraper. The streets are mostly empty, except for the odd executive on the way home from a long day at the office.

JASON emerges from a revolving door into the cold winter night. He is dressed well, wearing a dark suit and trench coat, and holding a black leather briefcase. Jason is good looking, with dark eyes and jet black hair slicked back precisely. He's a recent graduate, but has a brooding air about him; like a man carrying a lifelong grudge.

He pauses briefly to consider the sight of his breath in the air. He's been drinking all night, celebrating a recent promotion, and considers the train station across the street.

Jason walks towards one of the cabs, and opens the door.

JASON

Can you take me to Sanctuary?

The driver is SALEEM, an immigrant. He is only 48, but he looks and feels much older. He is unshaven, but still bright and friendly looking. He has light eyes which look at Jason in the rear-view mirror.

SALEEM

(thinking)

Hmm... that's not close you know.
There is a train that goes there.
You know that?

JASON

I know, but it's slow. And it's
freezing out there...

(beat)

I have the money.

SALEEM

OK, OK. Let's try.

Jason gets in the car and closes the door. He is sitting directly behind the front passenger seat. He doesn't buckle his seat-belt. He places the briefcase next to him carefully. The cabbie flicks on the meter.

INT. TAXICAB - CONTINUOUS

JASON

Thanks.

SALEEM

Ehh, I don't mind a long drive. A change is nice once in a while, you know?

Jason doesn't want to enter a long conversation with the cab driver. He leans his head against the window and enjoys the cool glass against his sore forehead.

JASON

Yeah.

SALEEM

It's crazy in the city. So many insane drivers. Nobody knows how to drive.

JASON

Mmm.

SALEEM

Everybody in a rush. Look at this guy.

The cab pulls up to a traffic light alongside a silver Porsche. The driver is a middle-aged man with a tan. A young blonde woman in a cocktail dress is sitting in the passenger seat. The man in the other car looks over at the cab briefly, and Jason dazedly watches. As the light changes the driver accelerates and pulls away with a screech.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

Lawyer.

JASON

(laughing)
How can you tell?

SALEEM

Oh, it's very obvious. Everyone has a way of driving. Lawyers, they all drive the same way: for show. See that girl in the passenger seat? She is for show too.

JASON

What about that guy?
(pointing)
In the hatchback?

SALEEM

(thoughtfully)
He must be an entrepreneur. He has that car because of good mileage. He does his homework.

Jason sits up straight. He is interested in the cab driver's analysis.

JASON

What about me? I don't drive a car...
can you tell what I do?

SALEEM

Oh, you are a banker. That is
certain.

Jason is taken aback, and a little perturbed that the cab driver sized him up so easily.

JASON

What makes you think that?

SALEEM

Because of your clothes. They are
too nice for a young man. Only the
bankers have so much money to spend
on clothes... and cabs... and nice
briefcases.

Jason puts his hand on the briefcase self-consciously.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

And you never seem happy, you bankers.
Always with faces that are thinking.
Thinking about what, I wonder?

JASON

And I suppose cabbies are the happiest
people in the world?

Jason doesn't mean for this to sound insulting, but it does.

SALEEM

No. We aren't.

JASON

Look, I didn't mean--

SALEEM

(interrupting)

But you are right. Every driver I
know is miserable. They complain
about their kids, or their wives...
about how much better it is back
home. Cab drivers have a way of
driving too.

(laughs)

Jason's CELL PHONE vibrates and he
pulls it out of his pocket.

(MORE)

SALEEM (CONT'D)

He looks at the text message dismissively and puts the phone away. He's not interested.

JASON

How's your night going?

SALEEM

It's been quiet. Which is typical.

JASON

(incredulously)

Do you actually like driving a cab?

SALEEM

It's what there is to do.

JASON

There are lots of things to do.

SALEEM

Not for all of us. Back home, maybe. Here, no. So I drive.

Jason pulls out a cigarette and lights it. He pauses.

JASON

Do you mind?

Saleem eyes the prominent "No Smoking" sign pasted to the window before...

SALEEM

Go ahead. Just please roll down the window.

Jason rolls down the window. The brisk night air blows into the cab.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

I just quit three months ago.

JASON

Oh, sorry.

Jason self-consciously blows his smoke out the open window. Jason nervously tries to change the subject.

JASON (CONT'D)

How long have you been driving for?

SALEEM

Tonight or in my life?

JASON

Both, I guess.

SALEEM

I first drove in this country in 1982. Today I started at two o'clock.

JASON

(contemplating)

1982? Shit, that's a long time.

Saleem nods. Jason fidgets with his cigarette.

SALEEM

I took some years off. Did something different when my daughter was young.

Suddenly, a GARBLED MESSAGE comes through on the CB radio. It is difficult to understand.

TAXI DISPATCHER

Car fifty-seven ... (gibberish) ... location?

Saleem picks up the radio handset.

SALEEM

(into the handset)

This is Car fifty-seven. I have a fare going to the west end.

TAXI DISPATCHER

(gibberish) ... how far?

SALEEM

Sanctuary.

TAXI DISPATCHER

Good luck ... (gibberish) ... fare back from there... (gibberish) ... when you're back in the city.

Saleem puts down the handset. He lets out a substantial sigh.

JASON

Did I just get you in trouble?

SALEEM

They think they know better than us. They know nothing. Just a hand in my pocket.

(beat)

What was I saying?

JASON

You were talking about your daughter.

Saleem is caught off guard by this reference.

SALEEM

Oh... uhhh, when she was young I ran a store. But I had to come back to driving.

(beat)

And you sir, do you have any children?

Jason lets out a big laugh.

JASON

No. Certainly no kids.

(beat)

None that I know of at least.

Saleem doesn't react to the joke. Jason can't tell if his humour is lost on Saleem or if he's simply choosing to ignore the comment.

JASON (CONT'D)

Bankers don't exactly have time for kids, anyway.

SALEEM

It's funny how the ones with the time don't have the money... and the ones with the money don't have the time.

Jason feels around in his pocket. His CELLPHONE is vibrating. He looks at the caller ID with a mixture of confusion and exasperation. He tosses his half-smoked cigarette out the window.

JASON

(to Saleem)

Sorry. Just a sec.

(into phone)

Hello?... Yeah, hi... Uh, thanks, how did you--... No, that's OK... I'm doing good. Uh, and you? How's school?...

Jason is looking out the window, disinterested. It's clear from his tone that he just wants the conversation to end.

JASON (CONT'D)

Anyway... sorry, I am actually kind of in the middle of something... no, no, that's OK. I'll call you, OK?... Good night.

SALEEM
One of your girlfriends?

JASON
(laughing)
No.
(beat, not laughing)
I mean, not anymore.

SALEEM
I'm sorry.

JASON
No, it's fine. It was for the best.
You know, with work and everything.

SALEEM
What, you can't have both? You're
young! You have energy. How old are
you?

JASON
Twenty-five.

SALEEM
That's all? When I was your age, I
had three girlfriends.
(pause)
At least three girlfriends. So if
this one isn't your girlfriend, who
is?

JASON
(hesitant)
No time for a girlfriend these days.
I've been working twelve hour days
all this month.

SALEEM
I work twelve hour days, too. But I
still had time for a family.

JASON
(hesitantly)
You don't anymore?

Saleem waits a while before answering.

SALEEM
They're not around anymore.
(beat)
My wife wasn't so happy, I guess. So
she moved back to Iran with my
daughter.

JASON

Iran? Why?

Jason is clearly asking why anyone would want to move to Iran. Saleem pauses for a moment, before answering a wholly different question...

SALEEM

I don't know. There must have been something missing in her life. It's probably not easy being married to a cab driver, you know. Twelve hour shifts, seven days a week. I'm never home and there's never any money. Women need security. You're lucky -- you have a good career.

JASON

Well, it's OK. It's a lot of hours. I mean, maybe not as many as driving a cab... but it's a lot.

SALEEM

But you must get paid well. I probably will make less all weekend than what you made today.

Jason is embarrassed at the realization that this is probably true.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

It must be nice. You're a lucky guy.

JASON

(dismissively)
It's no big deal.

SALEEM

Hey, don't say that. You should be grateful. I work a lot to earn very little. I would be very happy to work in a nice building down--

Saleem is interrupted by a BUZZ coming from Jason's pocket. Jason chooses to ignore it this time.

JASON

It's really not all it's cracked up to be. I have to deal with a lot of assholes.

Saleem shrugs and gestures to the world around him. Jason understands the point.

Saleem glances at the clock which reads 10 to the hour. He very suddenly straightens up in his chair and turns his head.

SALEEM

I should buy gas.

Without flinching Saleem spins the car in a perfect U-turn into the gas station on the other side of the street. He pulls up to a gas pump on the driver's side.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

I will only be one minute. And I will turn off the meter for you.

Saleem looks at Jason as reaches for the meter.

JASON

Uh, you really don't have to -- it's no big deal.

SALEEM

No, no. I insist.

JASON

(bemused)
OK, uh, sure.

Saleem pauses the meter and smiles at Jason. He exits the car.

While Saleem fills the tank, Jason pulls out his cell phone. He has several text messages which he goes through one by one:

"Who's the most rock and roll, Elton John or Billy Joel?"

Jason smiles and moves on to the another text:

"Drinks Friday?"

He moves on to the next message:

"Jason, are you coming home tonight?"

He pauses on this one momentarily. Jason looks out the window to see Saleem paying for the gas and purchasing a lottery ticket. He looks back at his phone.

Saleem returns to the car and tucks his lottery ticket into the visor. As Saleem brings the engine to life, Jason pockets the phone.

CUT TO:

INT. TAXICAB - LATER

The two have been driving in silence for a few minutes, and the highway is quiet with not many other cars. Jason is leaning his drunk head against the window. Saleem is paying attention to the road, and idly listening to the RADIO turned low. Jason pulls out another cigarette and lights it.

JASON
(suddenly)
I got a promotion at work today.

SALEEM
Oh, wow. Congratulations.

JASON
(un-enthused)
Yeah... That's why I was at the restaurant... they were celebrating.

SALEEM
They were celebrating? You weren't celebrating?

Jason is clearly annoyed with this correction. However, he is more annoyed with himself for the statement than with Saleem.

JASON
We were celebrating.

Jason opens up his briefcase and pulls out a shiny silver nameplate with Jason's name engraved in thick bold letters. Saleem peers through the rear-view window to get a better look.

JASON (CONT'D)
This is what they got me... to congratulate me.

Jason holds up the nameplate so Saleem can get a better view.

SALEEM
Jason. Very nice. Now everyone will know who you are.

Jason laughs.

JASON
I guess it means I'm important.

SALEEM
That's exactly what it means.
(beat)
Look at what I get.

Saleem motions to his taxi licence attached to the back of his seat. The licence contains Saleem's picture, his name, his identification number, and a phone number to call in case of complaints.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

I get a mug shot... and a phone number people can call if they don't like me. It makes me look like I've done something wrong.

(beat)

You can see why I'd rather have a shiny name tag.

Jason nods in understanding.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

You earned that.

Jason smiles with this.

JASON

I sat behind a desk for three years.

Jason points to Saleem's taxi licence.

JASON (CONT'D)

That licence...

(beat)

That's something you earn.

Jason takes a long pause before tossing the nameplate onto the seat beside him.

JASON (CONT'D)

It's a glamourized paperweight... one more thing to hold down the desk.

(sarcastically to himself)

Otherwise it might just walk right off.

Jason's CELL PHONE buzzes yet again. Once again he chooses to ignore it.

Jason flicks his second cigarette outside and rolls up the window. His hands are cold from holding them close to the night air and he rubs them together to warm them up.

JASON (CONT'D)

Has anyone ever told you that you're like a bartender?

SALEEM

Excuse me?

JASON

Like a bartender... easy to talk to.

SALEEM

Most people don't talk to cab drivers.

Jason is surprised by this.

JASON

Really? If your passengers don't talk to you, and your family's in Iran...

Jason trails off.

JASON (CONT'D)

(apologetic)

I'm sorry it's really none of my business.

SALEEM

It's fine.

(beat)

My daughter and I used to talk after she moved. She would call for the first few years... first thing in the morning... tell me about her school day.

(beat)

Then she got older, and less interested in her father.

Jason hesitates before asking the obvious...

JASON

When was the last time you called her?

SALEEM

What do I tell her? My life is not interesting.

JASON

(knowingly)

You'd be surprised at what she might find interesting.

SALEEM

Maybe.

The conversation lulls and Jason stares blankly out the car window. The roads are almost empty, save the odd car flying by in the opposite direction on the freeway -- one blur of lights after another.

Jason pulls out his phone, and opens the text message which reads "Jason, are you coming home tonight?"

He punches in response on his cell phone:

"I don't know. Don't wait up."

Jason looks up at Saleem.

JASON

Do you like people, Saleem?

SALEEM

I don't think I understand the question.

JASON

Do you like people? Talking with people... dealing with people. Do you enjoy it?

(beat)

I don't.

SALEEM

I think everyone has something interesting to say.

Jason smiles, but his gaze remains focused out the car window.

JASON

Really? I think people are pretty boring. People talk and I just don't care. I don't care about their lives. I don't care what they do for a living. I laugh when I'm supposed to laugh and I feign sympathy when they expect it, but underneath it all...

Jason trails off.

JASON (CONT'D)

You know when someone's telling you a joke, and the person who's telling the joke gets to the end, and they're all excited and this stupid smile creeps across their face because they know what's coming and they start to laugh, and maybe you even start to laugh because they're laughing...

(beat)

...but they say the punch line and it just falls flat.

Saleem is intently listening, but doesn't respond. Jason has become incredibly solemn and is looking at the blur of cars out the window.

JASON (CONT'D)

Life is speeding by... and I just don't get the punch line.

As Jason finishes, something comes on the CAR RADIO that interests Saleem. He turns up the volume and reaches to the visor and pulls down the lottery ticket.

SALEEM

Sorry, one minute.

Jason watches as Saleem holds the ticket against the steering wheel. The ANNOUNCER on the RADIO calls out the winning numbers, and Saleem holds his breath.

ANNOUNCER (on Radio)

Eight, nine, eleven, twenty-four, thirty-seven and and your final number tonight is fifty-seven.

Saleem turns down the RADIO and tosses the losing ticket aside. He is a little embarrassed at having interrupted the conversation. Jason is embarrassed too, but only because he feels that he is saying too much.

SALEEM

I'm sorry. I always play.

Jason says nothing.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

I know it's stupid, the lottery.

JASON

You don't actually think you're going to win, do you?

Saleem considers this statement for a while before answering.

SALEEM

I know, my chances are very slim. And I'm sure you can tell me exactly how slim. But when I'm holding the ticket, I have to believe that there is a chance they will call my number. I know it's stupid, but sometimes...

As SALEEM trails off, the cab passes the "SANCTUARY" sign at the city limits. The cab pulls off the freeway.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

...sometimes I think it would be nice to live in place like this.

JASON

You can, you've just got to work for it. Stop relying on lottery tickets.

SALEEM

I tried working. Now I use lottery tickets.

JASON

That's defeatist.

SALEEM

It's realistic. Luck has never been on my side.

JASON

What does luck have to do with it?

SALEEM

Oh, plenty.

Saleem looks out the window at the turn-of-the-century neighbourhood they're currently driving through.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

Somebody worked quite hard a long time ago to be able to build these houses...

(beat)

I suspect your parents might have worked very hard. And I suspect you are quite lucky to have them as parents.

JASON

(offended)

Wait a minute...

SALEEM

There's nothing wrong with that, but that's not my life. I need to cross my fingers and hope for winning numbers.

JASON

Maybe you need to get off your ass and go out and work for it.

SALEEM

Like I said, I tried working.

JASON

Then work harder.

SALEEM

(heated)

Is that how you think it works? You work hard, you get rich, and life is happy? I worked hard... very hard. I had a good job, I raised money, I brought my family here. I did what I was supposed to do. But hard work isn't enough. You need luck too -- and my luck ran out.

Jason decides to let Saleem speak.

SALEEM (CONT'D)

I can't do my job here. I can't find work. I ran out of money. I lost my house, my wife, my daughter. You don't think I worked to keep those things? That's why I drive this taxi seven days a week when everyone else is sleeping. You should be grateful. You were born in this country, you have a mother and father that give you a nice house and opportunities--Jason has heard enough and interrupts...

JASON

--hey, don't be so sure you know my life. I haven't had a father since I was in pre-school and all he left us was a house and a closet full of clothes. You can pick up a phone and call your daughter. You don't... but you could. I know you think I'm just some rich asshole with a shit load of money in the bank. But you're driving me to my mom's house and I'm probably going to be paying off student loans for the next fifteen years.

SALEEM

(sarcastically)

I should be so lucky to have your misfortune. Drunk on a work night and coming home to a mansion.

JASON

(laughing)

You know what's waiting for me at home? An incredibly lonely woman who lost her husband twenty years ago and has so little going on, the only thing that keeps her going -- maybe the only thing that keeps her alive -- is me. But she doesn't know who I am. She doesn't know how everyday when I get home I secretly hope that she'll be gone. I don't even care where, just gone. But she's never gone... she's always there... waiting for me.

(beat)

And what am I supposed to do? Move out and abandon her? She'll have nothing. And the thought of her in that house by herself...

Jason shakes his head.

JASON (CONT'D)

So I stay... and I live under her thumb. I sacrifice twelve hours of my day to my job and the other twelve to her. And I hate her for it. I hate her so much sometimes. And I hate myself for wanting to get out so badly.

(beat)

That's the situation I'm in. And I don't sit around hoping some crapshoot will make it better for me.

SALEEM

Does getting drunk make it better for you?

JASON

I think it's money well spent.

SALEEM

You should try hope. It's money well spent, too.

JASON

You have so much hope, Saleem... but so little action.

SALEEM

Maybe... and it seems your problem is the opposite.

Jason pauses to reflect on this last comment. As he turns to look out the window he realizes they've gone the wrong direction. He lets out a big sigh.

JASON
I'm really sorry. I think we missed
the turn.

SALEEM
It's OK, Sir. We can always turn
around.

CUT TO:

INT. TAXICAB - LATER

Saleem and Jason have been travelling for the last few minutes in silence, each reflecting on the previous conversation.

JASON
It's this one on the left.

Saleem pulls into the driveway and puts the cab in park. It's a large two-story house in a nice residential neighbourhood. A fresh blanket of snow covers everything. Jason pulls out his wallet and hands Saleem some cash.

JASON (CONT'D)
Please. Keep the change.

Saleem accepts the money and thanks Jason. Jason sits back and doesn't move. He looks for a long time out the window at his house.

SALEEM
Aren't you going to go inside?

JASON
Not yet.

Jason reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cigarette. He contemplates lighting it for a minute, almost as if deciding between two distinct paths. He finally puts the cigarette away.

JASON (CONT'D)
You never told me what you did for a
living.

SALEEM
You're looking at it.

JASON
No, I mean before. In Iran.

Saleem looks back at Jason. For the first time the two are face-to-face.

Saleem reaches over with his hand and flicks off the meter.

SALEEM

Why don't you take a guess?

JASON

(laughing)

Well, you're obviously a pretty smart guy. I think you drive like... an architect?

SALEEM

Not bad. I was a civil engineer.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Slowly pulling back from the car still idling in the driveway. Snow is falling gently.

JASON (V.O.)

Is your daughter following in your footsteps back home?

SALEEM (V.O.)

No.

(beat)

She wants to be a lawyer.

Both of them laugh.

The two continue their conversation into the night.

FADE OUT