Dave raises one hand away from the other, making the EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, some ten blocks away, seem to "magically appear," then "disappear."

DAVE
Eh?? Eh??

OSCAR
(through absurd braces)
That'sh someh pretty lame magic.

A GIGGLE prompts Dave to turn to see --

BECKY BARNES (10), a pretty girl with her own sense of style. Maybe it's his shameless goofiness, but as Dave makes the Empire State "magically appear" again, Becky smiles.

BECKY
Happy Birthday, Dave.

As Becky walks off with her friends, Dave grins at a stunned Oscar.

DAVE
Chicks dig the magic.

EXT. MINETTA TRIANGLE PARK — DAY

An unlikely sliver of forest off Sixth Avenue. The FOURTH GRADERS congregate around their teacher, MS. ALGAR (25).

MS. ALGAR
...Greenwich Village has a rich and colorful history...

Becky feels someone brush past her. She looks down, sees a FOLDED UP NOTE in her hand.

Becky opens the note, sees written in ballpoint: "PLEASE CHECK ONE. I WOULD LIKE TO BE DAVE'S..." There are two boxes that can be checked: "FRIEND" and "GIRLFRIEND."

Dave watches nervously from afar as Becky looks up, her face impossible to read. She takes a pen, checks a box, folds the note up and places it beside a CIRCULAR FOUNTAIN.

Becky rejoins her friends. Dave gulps, heads for the fountain. He reaches for the note and --

WHOOSH! A GUST OF WIND blows the note to the sidewalk. As Dave leans over to grab it --

A BIKE MESSENGER runs over it. The note sticks to the tire.
DAVE
Hey!  Hey, stop!

Dave gives chase as the bike keeps going, out onto Minetta Street where the note falls off the tire...and gets snatched up by a FRENCH POODLE, running alongside a JOGGING WOMAN.

DAVE
Ma'am, your dog!  Stop!!

But the woman can't hear over her headphones. Dave chases them down a brick lane lined with ECLECTIC SHOPS.

The dog spits out the note and keeps going. Dave pulls up, breathing hard. The note has landed in front of the door to a shop. As Dave leans over to pick it up --

WHOOSH! The note is sucked under the seam of the door. Dave's hand recoils. Did that just happen?

Dave looks up at a foreboding SHOP. An ornate SIGN hangs above the door: "ARCANA CABANA - ANTIQUITIES, OBSCURITIES, UNUSUAL GIFTS - BALTHAZAR BLAKE, PROPRIETOR."

The street has gone eerily quiet. Dave feels the sudden urge to go back the way he came, but eager to retrieve the note, he walks into the store, going past --

THE PHAETON, a gleaming monster in black and chrome.

INT. ARCANA CABANA - CONTINUOUS

Turns out "unusual" is an understatement. The shop is narrow but deep, and packed with all manner of strange objects:

An IRON MAIDEN...CALIGARI-ESQUE FURNITURE...a STUFFED OWL whose massive wings cast EERIE SHADOWS across the wall...

...and a haunting yet beautiful PAINTING: a RAVEN-HAired WOMAN, alluring and mysterious, sits in a chair. An OLD MAN in a Victorian overcoat stands behind her.

Suddenly Dave FEELS SOMEONE WATCHING HIM, whirls around to see --

A MACABRE URN. Two feet tall, it looks hand-painted by Hieronymus Bosch: TORMENTED SOULS and weird MONSTER MEN writhe in a nightmare landscape.

Curious, Dave is about to touch the urn's ornate lid when -- A HAND snatches his wrist! Dave GASPS, looks up...
IT'S BALTHAZAR -- looking only slightly older than the last time we saw him. He wears a black coat adorned with cryptic ALCHEMICAL SYMBOLS, and like Lord Byron, still gives every impression of being "mad, bad and dangerous to know."

BALTHAZAR
(re: the urn)
You break that one and we both buy it.

DAVE
I -- I was looking for a note.

BALTHAZAR
Note? From who?

DAVE
From -- a girl.

BALTHAZAR
(cocks an eyebrow)
Young and in love. I've got just the thing.

Balthazar goes behind the counter, starts rifling through artifacts from every corner of the globe.

DAVE
Uhh, I'm not really looking to buy --

Balthazar produces an ancient but still-sharp KNIFE, encrusted with JEWELS and AZTEC CARVINGS.

BALTHAZAR
The sorcerer-king Ahuizotl used this blade to commit ritual human sacrifices. Basically he'd tie you down on a stone slab, slice you open just below the rib cage...

Dave FLINCHES as Balthazar mimics the violent SLICE.

BALTHAZAR
...then reach in...pull out your still-beating heart...and throw it down the temple steps before your eyes were even closed.

Balthazar smiles, slides the knife across the counter.

BALTHAZAR
Pretty much like falling in love.
DAVE
Wow, that's really -- romantic.
(deflecting)
Hey, that's a cool ring...

BALTHAZAR'S RING -- is indeed cool, and very unusual: a luminous GREEN DIAMOND set in an intricate Gothic setting. Dave's interest prompts a look from Balthazar.

BALTHAZAR
How'd you find my shop?

DAVE
Just -- you know. Coincidence.

BALTHAZAR
Right, right, coincidence. You know, I do have another ring...

Balthazar reaches under the display case and pulls out the DRAGON RING, last seen in Mexico decades ago.

BALTHAZAR
Go ahead...try it on.

Dave stares at the ring, feels its strange pull...then looks up to see Balthazar looming over him, a mad light in his eyes. Balthazar comes around the counter, starts backing Dave up.

DAVE
I should be going.

BALTHAZAR
You just got here.

DAVE
My class is prob'ly looking for me.
(sotto)
Please let them be looking for me.

BALTHAZAR
What are you afraid of?

DAVE
Afraid? I'm not af--

BALTHAZAR
Is today your birthday?

DAVE
No!

Balthazar stops, stares at Dave.
DAVE
It's not!

Balthazar stares at the DRAGON RING, waiting for a sign that doesn't come. He turns abruptly.

BALTHAZAR
Then I guess you're not him.

Balthazar places the ring in an ANTIQUE RING BOX and heads up a half-flight of stairs to his STUDY.

BALTHAZAR
You can let yourself out.

Balthazar's door SLAMS SHUT. Dave exhales, relieved. He turns to leave when suddenly --

He sees the RING BOX sitting on the counter. A RED GLOW seeps out of the seam on the box.

Dave is frightened but curious. He picks up the box, opens it to see the DRAGON'S EYES GLEAMING with a fiery light.

Dave gazes at the ring, simultaneously repelled and attracted to it. He looks both ways and takes the ring out of the box. An ENGRAVING is etched along the gleaming band:

DAVE
"Take me up."
(turns the ring over)
"Cast me away."

The ring is sitting in the palm of his hand when --

THE DRAGON'S CLAWS AND TAIL -- coil around his finger! Dave GASPS, grows frantic as he pulls harder and harder.

THE RING IS HAPPY WHERE IT IS.

DAVE
Come on! Come on!!!

A MAHOGANY BOX -- sits on a shelf, ancient like the PADLOCK that secures its lid. As Dave shakes his hand --

The PADLOCK JOSTLES in sync. Dave stares for a beat, twists his hand to the side and --

KLINNK! The padlock UNLOCKS and the BOX FLIPS OPEN.

A NESTING DOLL -- sits inside. A sorcerer or magician of some kind is painted on the outermost doll. Strange...
...and entrancing. Dave picks up the doll, marvels as his fingers send Ripples across its surface. A Seam appears in the doll where there wasn't one before. He doesn't notice that --

The Eyes on the Dragon Ring are glowing. Dave turns the top of the doll, then pulls the top from the bottom and --

Dave gasps, drops the doll as a Cockroach scurries out. Then another Cockroach, and another...

Dave stares in horror as a Torrent of Cockroaches pour out of the nesting doll and start to form a column, gradually taking shape -- Human shape. Finally the Figure turns, and --

Maxim Horvath (40) stands there, an evil sorcerer of the deadliest rank, and a crazy-eyed motherf**ker. Dave gasps.

Maxim Horvath
When am I?

Dave
New... New York City!

Maxim Horvath
I said When!

Dave stammers as Horvath comes at him.

Maxim Horvath
The Year!!!

Dave backs into the wall. Nowhere else to go.

Maxim Horvath
You're wasting my time.

The eyes on Horvath's Ancient Egyptian Scarab Ring glow red.

Suddenly -- WHAM!!! The Mahogany Box flies into Horvath's jaw, drops him like a stone.

Dave turns to see Balthazar on the stairs, his hands splayed out, his Ring glowing. He comes at Dave, seething.

Balthazar
Not your birthday, huh?! You will never lie to me again, apprentice.

And the nightmare continues.
DAVE
"Apprentice?!"

Balthazar grabs a massive tome off the shelf -- THE ENCANTUS. Dave buckles under its weight.

BALTHAZAR
Your homework. Learn it.

WHAM!!! AN INVISIBLE FORCE knocks Balthazar into the wall, CRATERING IT. Dave whirls around. Horvath smiles.

Dave drops the book, in horror. Horvath's eyes light up -- the NESTING DOLL lies in his path. (AN EVIL CHINESE SORCERER is depicted on the next outermost doll.)

MAXIM HORVATH
The Grimhold!

Horvath and Balthazar leap for the doll simultaneously. Balthazar gets there first, spins out of the way as Horvath SMASHES into a display. Balthazar hands the doll to Dave.

BALTHAZAR
Whatever you do, keep this safe... NOW GET OUT OF HERE!!!

Dave SCREAMS as EVERY ITEM ON EVERY SHELF COMES FLYING OFF! Balthazar and Horvath send OBJECTS OF ESCALATING SIZE flying at each other: BOXES, CLOCKS, VASES, THE MUMMY CASE.

Dave is terrified, caught in the middle.

DAVE
This isn't happening...

Dave blindly, reflexively throws his RING HAND out.

DAVE
LEAVE ME ALONE!!!

THOOM! A SPHERE OF LIGHT rocks the shop, sends Dave flying into the wall. And when he finally opens his eyes...

Dave is alone in the DEMOLISHED SHOP.

EXT. ARCANA CABANA - CONTINUOUS

Dave runs out, realizes he's still got the NESTING DOLL and drops it to the sidewalk. The shop door closes behind him.

MS. ALGAR (O.S.)
Young man, where've you been?!
Dave turns to see Ms. Algar and his class staring. Dave looks back at the shop. Ms. Algar decides to have a look.

Dave nearly tackles her. He is out-of-his-mind scared.

DAVE

No!!! They're sorcerers and they're made out of roaches!!! I'm their apprentice!!!

The students GIGGLE as Ms. Algar brushes him aside, pulls open the door, TO REVEAL --

The shop is still and silent and exactly as Dave found it.

Dave can't believe it. His classmates break out in LAUGHTER. Suddenly he sees something on a shelf...

THE LIDDED URN -- now with two new souls depicted on its painted hellscape: BALTHAZAR AND HORVATH.

Dave GASPS, bolts. As Becky and the others watch him take off down the street...

THE NESTING DOLL -- is snatched up by a HOMELESS MAN, who tucks it in his ratty coat.

EXT. DAVE'S APARTMENT BLDG. - DAY

Dave runs up to the modest building where he lives.

INT. BASEMENT - DAVE'S BUILDING - DAY

Dave pulls on the ring as hard as he can -- IT COMES OFF! He runs to the FURNACE that heats the building and THROWS THE RING into the flames.

The ring MELTS into a small silver puddle.

INT. DAVE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Dave sleeps fitfully, opens his eyes to see --

THE RING -- is lying on his pillow, whole again. The DRAGON'S EYES glow like TINY EMBERS in the dark. Dave stares at the ring with fear and foreboding, as we --

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. STUDIO APARTMENT - MORNING

Dave sleeps with a pillow over his head. AN ELEVATED TRAIN RATTLES the room as he tosses the pillow aside, TO REVEAL --
20-YEAR OLD DAVE. He sighs, hits the alarm. Another day.

QUICK CUTS -- Dave throws on a t-shirt, black hoodie, Chuck Taylors. Tall and gawky, on further review he's actually inconspicuously handsome.

ON HIS WALLS -- NIKOLA TESLA and ALBERT EINSTEIN take their place next to GOLDFRAPP, THE RACONTEURS, BUDDY HOLLY.

- Dave opens a drawer to grab his watch. THE RING is there, but Dave stopped noticing it long ago. He exits without it.

- Dave fishes a chunk of pop-tart from a glass of Quik as he plays his PHONE MESSAGES. BEEP!

  ENGLISH ACCENT VOICE
  ...Professor Lowndes, reminding you that submissions for the Newton Prize are due next week...

BEEP!

  LANDLORD
  ...got a number for Mr. Mathematical Genius: ten. As in, your rent's ten days late!

BEEP!

  MOM/DAD SINGING (O.S.)
  ...Happy Birthday dear Daveeeyyyyy...

Dave cringes at the singing. On the T.V. behind him, a MASSIVE STORM FRONT converges on New York.

PRELAP AUDIO: A LOUD, CRACKLING BLAST -- the sound of LIGHTNING as it literally RIPS through the air...

INT. UNDERGROUND ROOM -- DAY

LIGHTNING BOLTS are reflected on Dave's BLACK PROTECTIVE GOGGLES as he stares dispassionately at --

TWO STEEL COLUMNS -- set 20 feet apart, each topped by an odd-looking DISC. And between these discs:

HUGE BOLTS OF ELECTRICITY -- leap through the air. These aren't puny sparks but long tendrils of HIGH-VOLTAGE PLASMA. These are TESLA COILS.

The room is big, with a high ceiling and a row of DIRTY WINDOWS along the top of one wall, where muted SHAFTS OF LIGHT pour in.
ALL MANNER OF SCIENTIFIC EQUIPMENT -- is here: OLD STUFF, mostly junk, but it's the MINI-FRIDGE and the MATTRESS on the floor that tell us Dave spends a lot of time here.

EXT. N.Y.U. - OLD SCIENCE BLDG. - DAY

A rundown building made obsolete by the new building next door. KEN CHIN (24), a physics grad student, lifts a pair of IRON CELLAR DOORS and descends into...

INT. UNDERGROUND CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Ken BANGS repeatedly on a door marked "NYU PHYSICS DEPT." Finally the door SWINGS OPEN. Dave looks annoyed.

KEN (re: Tesla Coils)
There's an easier way to toast a pop tart.

Ken breezes past Dave.

DAVE
No, I insist. Come on in.

Ken eyes the firing Coils, smiles.

KEN
So this is what's gonna win you the Newton, huh? Plasma? The "fourth state of matter?"

DAVE
Tesla thought it could solve the world's energy problems.

KEN
Right. He also thought it could be used to power a "death beam" that could wipe out entire armies from 250 miles away.

DAVE (beat)
That is another application.

KEN
And you think you can create a self-generating sample, without the coils. You cracked it yet?

DAVE
No...but I'm close.
KEN
I would hope, all the work you've put into it. But isn't the deadline in like, five days --

DAVE
Did you have a reason for stopping by, Ken?

KEN
Oh, yeah. You know that class I'm T.A.'ing? I need you to cover for me.

DAVE
Physics for English majors?
(Shakes his head)
I'm independent study. I like it that way.

KEN
Look, I realize you'll have to expose yourself to sunlight and actual human beings, so I get this is a big deal for you. But come on. Hellman'll kill me if I don't find a sub.

Ken grins. Dave gives a relenting sigh.

INT. PHYSICS CLASSROOM - DAY

The STUDENTS chat before class. Dave sits in the first seat in the row farthest from the door, working on an equation.

The CLASSROOM DOOR OPENS. The window next to Dave is open and a sudden draft BLOWS his piece of paper off the desk. Dave jumps up as the paper skips across the floor toward the door.

Dave catches up, leans down to grab it when --

A HAND GRABS IT FIRST. Surprised, Dave straightens as we TILT UP TO REVEAL --

A GORGEOUS GIRL (20), with sparkling eyes, a vintage Kinks t-shirt and a plaid mini over black tights... IT'S BECKY.

BECKY
I know you...Dave, right? We went to grade school together.

DAVE
Becky.