

Locked down to the speeding bike, shown rushing toward the rear of Nathan Jr.'s car seat. With a clank of chains, Lenny's hand drops down into frame, palm forward, tensing to scoop up the car seat, which we are almost upon.

A tattoo on Lenny's wrist reads: "No Prisoners."

THUS BEGINS A KEY SCENE in *Raising Arizona*, a warp-speed, redneck comedy that may very well become the sleeper hit of the spring. In the film, among other oddities, a childless couple kidnaps quintuplet Nathan, one of the heirs to a chain of unfinished-furniture stores, only to lose him to a pair of escaped cons, who, following a robbery, forget that they've left him on top of their car and drive off. Stuck in the middle of the road, the kid is literally picked up by a mangy and mystical "biker from the Apocalypse," who is on the trail of the original kidnappers and who may or may not be real. Things get crazier before they get saner, but one thing is perfectly clear: Nathan Jr.'s brief life in the fast lane is a charmed one, indeed.

As are those of his creators, the filmmaking Coen brothers: 31-year-old writer-director Joel and 28-year-old writer-producer Ethan. They grew up in Minneapolis making Super-8 movies and continued working in film in New York after college, eventually scraping up \$1.5 million from 64 investors to make their debut movie, the stunning film noir, *Blood Simple*.

They wrote it together, took eight weeks to shoot it and a year to edit. After the picture gained some momentum on the film festival circuit, it was turned down by every major studio for being too arty and too gory but was eventually picked up by a small Washington, D.C., distributor.

Described as a "baroque blend of murder and misunderstanding," *Blood Simple* spins a James Cain-like tale about a cuckolded bar owner who hires a sleazy private detective to track his young wife, who is having an affair with his bartender. But the detective does something unexpected: He kills the husband and steals his money.

The body is discovered by the bartender, who naturally assumes that his girlfriend has done the deed. He cleans up the evidence and tries to dispose of the body, discovering in the process that the husband isn't quite dead. In a grimly slapstick sequence, the bartender tries to bury the still-mobile husband, who keeps crawling away until he is clobbered over the head with a shovel.

The film succeeds by playing it straight and playing havoc with the audience's expectations, while at the same time letting them in on the joke.

Within weeks of *Blood Simple*'s release in 1985, the Coens were compared to Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock and Steven Spielberg, among other master film stylists. "One of the most brazenly self-assured directorial debuts in American film history," said *New York Magazine*. "An irresistible blend of meticulous construction and mordant humor, [it's] the funniest comedy and the thrillingest thriller in what seems like an age," gushed the *Washington Post*. Added *Vanity Fair*: "They're making Hollywood movies better than Hollywood makes them."

Ironically, after *Blood Simple* the Coen brothers were wooed by the very studios that had rejected them the year before. Courted by virtually every major independent producer and production executive in town, "they had many opportunities to direct other scripts," according to Jim Berkus, their agent. Broke, they seriously considered several offers that would have paid them as much as \$500,000.

"Money is secondary to them," says Ben Barenholtz, vice president of Circle Films, the small company that released *Blood Simple*. "They will never be Hollywood filmmakers. If it was the only way to make films, they'd come to L.A. and work within the system. They have a single-minded commitment to making films. The only [other] director I've met who is that consumed is David Lynch (*Blue Velvet*). They're artists—though they'd laugh at me for saying that."

20th-Century Fox production president Scott Rudin was among the ranks of the Coens' early admirers. "We offered them a bunch of things," he says. "They always wanted to do their own stuff. If they had pitched, I'd have bought."

But the brothers wanted what all filmmakers want: control, the freedom to make movies the way they want to make them. And so they turned their backs on Hollywood, heading back east to Washington, D.C., and Circle Films, where they signed a four-picture deal.

Although there had been some criticism of Circle's handling of *Blood Simple*'s release, the Coens were pleased with the company. "They were real honest," says Joel. "Given that there was someone we knew and trusted and liked, we didn't feel we had to look any further. So we figured, as long as they want to finance movies we want to make, and they're real happy with us, why not?"

For their next project, the Coens had been planning to shoot *The Hudsucker Proxy*, a '50s period, big-business com-

edy, but realized it was too expensive for Circle to finance. So they turned to a second idea, says Ethan, "about a couple with an unorthodox approach to parenting."

It took the Coens four months in their Manhattan offices on West 23rd Street to write *Raising Arizona*, four months of Joel pacing and chain-smoking while Ethan pounded the typewriter.

"They lock themselves up," says Barenholtz, "and it grows, assumes a life of its own. They're instinctive filmmakers. Asking them what their movies are about is like asking de Kooning what a painting is about."

Although Circle loved the *Raising Arizona* script and raised a \$6 million budget for it, they decided it demanded a wider release than they could handle effectively. So they sought a major Hollywood distributor. The company weighed four serious offers for studio release and finally settled on—surprise—20th-Century Fox. Chairman Barry Diller, then-president Lawrence Gordon and current president Rudin were all enthusiastic about the project and wanted to make the deal. According to a Fox source, "It could be the only movie all three of them ever agreed on."

The distributing company, 20th-Century Fox, granted the Coens a rare concession in Hollywood: final cut. "We wanted the film and that was the way to get it," says Rudin. "We knew the guys very well, and you could see what they could do. There was no reason not to give it to them. The script is so precise. There's no scene in it that isn't in the final film. That's an extraordinary thing."

The Coens' style is not difficult to figure out: They grab the audience by the throat, make situations as tense as possible and try to cram in as many visual tricks as they can imagine. They may be independents who insist on keeping control of their movies outside Hollywood, but, unlike some of their more socially conscious or *avant-garde* colleagues, the brothers are unabashed entertainers. "They're from the school of zany knuckleheads," says their old friend, filmmaker Sam Raimi, who made the underground horror sensation, *The Evil Dead*.

Not surprisingly, *Raising Arizona* has a cartoonish, fairy-tale quality—although after the cold-blooded theatrics of *Blood Simple*, the Coens made a conscious attempt to *humanize* their second picture.

For its first third, *Raising Arizona* is a shameless love story. H.I. "Hi" McDonnough (Nicholas Cage), a convenience-store bandit, falls for his police booking officer, Edwina (Holly Hunter), proposes marriage and vows to go straight. All is wedded bliss until "Ed" discovers she is unable to get