

Baltimore Is Missing

by
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FADE IN:

INT. SIMPLE LIVING ROOM - DAY

YOUNGER BILL, 30, slightly bald, and average build, sits shirtless and undershorts on a worn brown SOFA next to YOUNGER JOETTA, 30, brunette and pregnant, in a small living room with two simple chairs and some bookcases with old books, and not much else. Bill's chest looks a little stubbly, his legs a bit attenuated even if he is still somewhat youthful. There is a plain beige carpet. Bill pulls down a dark red 1950 WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA volume and opens it to a well-colored relief map of Maryland, including the area around Baltimore, Washington, and the various suburbs. Sunlight comes through the window, and overhead there are many dark dust clouds that the sun is fighting. The terrain is treeless prairie.

Bill takes Joetta's hand.

YOUNGER JOETTA

So that was Baltimore?

YOUNGER BILL

Now I actually lived in a state called Virginia, across the river. You know, Carry Me Back ...

YOUNGER JOETTA

I remember it now.

YOUNGER BILL

It started there. It doesn't seem like it was long ago. But then again, neither do my red letter days. When I got to be a young man before.

She reaches for the band of his shorts.

YOUNGER JOETTA

You never got to be a little boy or learn what it's like around your kids, did you.

YOUNGER BILL

Some things are bad for you.

YOUNGER JOETTA

Well, we'll get a record player soon. Not many records yet at the Wal-Mart.

YOUNGER BILL

Yeah, we'll start all over again.
Or I will.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

ROLL CREDITS

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. POTOMAC RIVER 14TH STREET BRIDGE AREA -
NIGHT

Traffic crosses the bridge, including a green Ford Escort,
manual transmission, driven by Bill.

INT. SOLAR FLARE DISCO (WASHINGTON) DANCE FLOOR - NIGHT

The disco is a large dance bar with several rooms, including
a room with flat screen computer terminals and customers
surfing (some look at soft pornography, but a least one
patron looks at an astronomy site that shows various
sequences of stars). This patron is SEAN, 23, short, slender,
well built, in tank top and shorts, shaggy legs, metallic
gold hair and young beard. He sports a tee-shirt, "GEEKS RULE
THE WORLD." There is a quiet bar, and then a dance floor with
a separate bar, and a hallway that leads outside to a patio
that is partially covered by wet snow. It appears to be
raining lightly.

BILL (now looking 60) is watching the dancers on a moderately
full disco floor. Bill is ectomorphic but soft in the middle,
and adjusts his Sunfish Navy cap to reveal a bald pate. He
wears a gray tee-shirt that reads "DON'T ASK DON'T TELL DON'T
BELIEVE IT."

The DANCE FLOOR is bathed with rainbow flashing DISCO LIGHTS
but most of the time the dancers are reasonably well lighted,
particularly by a ceiling sphere of changing colors, to
represent a star with planets. The floor is three-fourths
full, with three stands, with energetic break dancing on all
three. The crowd is diverse, about two thirds white, one
third female. About half of the couples are same-sex couples.
Most of the patrons appear to be under thirty. Maybe a fifth
are smoking. Most wear green wrist bands.

Bill puts down a tip and picks up a Budweiser and starts
sipping it. His cell phone and pager perilously hangs from
his waist, and it is blinking. He keeps tapping his neck,
like it was itching.

Sean, exiting the computer area, walks by. Now it is too dark on the floor to see his legs well. Bill makes eye contact, Sean winks back and then looks at Bill intently, with a measure of disapproval and frown. Bill looks away, and then touches his own neck, which emits a green sparkle. Sean makes his way to the central stand, and Bill migrates to the back of the dance floor, pushing his way through the crowd.

On the central stage GREG, 19, short, sandy-haired, with long sleeve black shirt open at the neck and red wrist band, dances in front of JASON, 25, red-head with short hair, who plays with Greg's shirt while break dancing. Jason steps back for a moment, and Bill sees a toy stethoscope hanging in front of Jason's v-necked white smock shirt. Jason now faces Greg and kisses him, then playfully places the stethoscope just below Greg's collar.

JASON
Doctor's orders!

LORRAINE, 26, African American, approaches Greg and Jason, taps Jason on the shoulder, then faces Greg and teases his shirt, but Greg gently puts his forearm over his chest to protect it from unbuttoning. Jason yanks the hand away and applies the stethoscope again. Sean gets up on the stand, too, and starts break dancing with Lorraine in front. Finally, SHEILA, 18, tall and brunette, comes up behind Sean and joins the love train.

INT. SOLAR FLARE DISCO DANCE FLOOR - MOMENTS LATER

Bill has migrated back to the front of the dance floor, in front of the bar. The Budweiser is almost all consumed.

The break dancers on the stand disperse and come down off the stand. Greg and Sheila tend to stay together, with Sean trailing quickly.

SHEILA
Greg, it's not warm enough. It's
been snowing.

Shelia looks at Bill.

SHEILA
Hi, sweetie.

SEAN
What you call it? Purify!

Then Sean looks at Bill and leads them away. Lorraine, straggling behind, approaches Bill and looks him in the face.

LORRAINE

Baby, when's your birthday.

BILL

In the summer. July 10. Cancer.
Okay, sixty-one. Old enough to use
my 401K. With no penalty from the
I.R.S.

LORRAINE

So you're having a senior moment?

BILL

Not yet. I can't afford long term
care.

LORRAINE

You like Greg, don't you.

BILL

Well, I think I've seen him on TV
in...

LORRAINE

His boyfriend thinks that you like
him. And that is creating a
problem. Just, stay cool. Keep a
distance. Give him a break, guy.

Bill walks away without speaking, and Lorraine feigns a
chase. Greg, Sean, Jason, and Sheila are stepping outside,
where there is bright light, and still a little wet snow on
the patio, punched with holes. The rain has stopped but there
is a clap of thunder and some lightning. Bill can now make
out Sean's shaggy legs. Sheila takes out a cigarette and
offers one to Sean, but Jason catches her hand and shakes his
head.

Bill picks up his cell phone, which he has stored in his
jeans pocket because the case has ripped open. The message
reads NIGHTCALL. URGENT. 240-444-5735.

BILL

Shit! Damn warm front.

He makes his way out to the lobby, where he sees a long line
at coat check. He approaches it, and then heads for the exit.
He sees another long line of people being hand searched by
security guards before they enter the disco.

EXT. SOLAR FLARE DISCO IN WASHINGTON DC - MOMENTS LATER

Bill walks outside, where now it is raining hard again, and the rain is dissolving the snow quickly. The neighborhood is somewhat run down, but there is one block of rowhouses being renovated, suggesting approaching gentrification. In the distance the US Capitol appears through fog. A HOMELESS MAN approaches him and blocks the one clear area of sidewalk. Bill, without coat, shivers.

HOMELESS MAN

Hey, Mister, can I sponge a cigarette.

BILL

I don't smoke.

Bill forces his way past. The Homeless Man starts to give chase. Bill's cell phone falls out of his broken pouch and the homeless man picks it up. He talks into it.

HOMELESS MAN

A fag refused me a cigarette.

Bill RACES down the street and gets to his car, the gray Escort with some shiny green finish and chrome. He acts short of breath. There is some slush and dirt on the back and front windshields, but Bill tries to start it immediately. The security key fob will not operate. The homeless man approaches his car. Bill, inside, reaches underneath the dash, presses a hidden button, and gets the car to start. He races off as he hears a thump on the back. The ices slides off the roof of the car but Bill continues to drive. From behind, the camera shows one tail light out.

He gets on to I-395 and is driving. He picks up police lights behind, no siren.

BILL

Oh, shit. I wonder if my breath smells.

An panel truck comes up behind him and hides the police car. Bill takes an exit and drives down through an underpass. He notices the lumpy ride of his car. The police car does not follow. He sits in the underpass and grimaces, gripping his neck and upper chest, as if he were fighting off a heart attack.

He STAGGERS outside. The right rear tire is almost flat. He opens the trunk with the key fob and looks at the mess inside and digs around. He is barely able to see the jack. He goes back to his car and drives off, slowly.

INT. BILL'S APARTMENT - LATER

Bill enters his apartment and immediately turns up the heat. The efficiency looks like a small office, with many books, magazines, and personal papers, and three computers on his old desk and utility table in the alcove, with a tangle of wires over the floor. The bed is at one end of the living room, next to the kitchen. A black CAT sleeps on the bed. Bill turns on the cable TV. There is a panel of young adults, one of whom looks like the redhead JASON, 27.

ACTION NEWS ANCHOR

So the Epilight will stop a lot of these hospital infections. Making surgeons and nurses really get clean. That means, when you men like you enter medicine..

JASON

It's already a sacrifice. Look at my wrists.

Suddenly, as Jason rolls up his sleeve in the television picture, the cable goes off.

Bill walks into the bathroom, urinates, and notices some vomit on the floor. He leaves it. He walks to his bedroom and picks up his cat, who wakes up and starts to knead him.

Bill picks up his silver cordless phone handset from the top of the unmade, messy bed with mattress cover, a bit soiled, showing. He presses some buttons.

OPERATOR (O.S.)

Postulate-A systems.

BILL

You paged me while I was at the disco. It's Saturday night. I thought you were just doing dumps and compactions anyway.

OPERATOR

Not when the computers are in India. You know, we outsourced. Look, you still work here? A guy called in and, blew us off.

BILL

I got, well, sort of mugged. Lost the cell phone.

OPERATOR

Sorry. We had a job you wrote get a weird userabend. India called. Maybe a chance to make some money from your own mistake. The good old logic bomb, eh Bill?

BILL

That mainframe trick is fifteen years old. Before viruses. I'll log on and look. Believe me, I'm an honest person. I don't collect pennies.

OPERATOR

They said something about missing variables that look like dots. They're all reeling from the solar flares over there today, but they swear this is your program.

BILL

Missing, yeah, that sounds like SAS. The Data Step. My program was COBOL. I'll take a look at it.

Bill turns on his computer and the computer hangs as he tries to connect to the Internet high speed, with a blue screen.

BILL'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Bill has reconnected his computer to the phone modem with a messy lead wire across the apartment floor, and dials into America Online. He first looks at one website that says "The domain temporarily out of service." He migrates to a computer folder that reads "my hacked website." Then he logs on to Postulate-A and gets a mainframe looking screen that shows his job is down. He messes around a bit. Suddenly, his left hand freezes as it grabs the mouse, and his neck locks up. His eyes freeze open, with rigor. The computer screen goes blue. A green lesion on his neck above his collarbone lights up and changes color to red.

The cat races over, pushes away the computer to the floor, and kneads his chest. Bill comes to. He gets up in a daze, and slowly puts on his dark blue pajamas and crashes into bed. He rolls over on his stomach as if to please himself and vomits once.

BILL'S APARTMENT - LATER

It is still dark, rain is pelting the windows of the high-rise, and Bill is now sleeping. The phone screams.

BILL

Hello, I know. My computer crashes.

JASON (O.S.)

Bill, this is the doctor. From the bar and the TV show.

BILL

Oh. Everything is down. Like an e-bomb went off or something.

JASON

Just the storm. But look, get to a computer and dial on. By the way I read your book.

BILL

But the black girl. African American.

JASON

Yeah. She just thinks you should see the doctor.

Bill looks at a black-and-white copy of his novel "RAIN ON THE SNOW" on the floor.

JASON

Look, if you want to live this, catch a train tonight to Baltimore. You've wanted to go to Tribunals your whole life. You know, I'm excited. You know, forget the bad vibes from the dance floor. You gotta get the directions now.

Bill hangs up, picks up his car keys, grabs his work badge, and races out into the hallway with his pajamas, which look reasonably intact. While waiting for the elevator, he pukes once more, just a little, into the cigarette jar.

EXT. I-270 FREEWAY - MORNING

In early morning, the sun up, Bill drives north to work. There is more snow as he approaches an office park.

When he arrives, he notices that he still has his pajamas, which are frankly a bit soiled, but he is relieved that there is no security guard. He lets himself into the building. He looks back, and sees a SECURITY GUARD in the parking lot, looking at the sun and a nearby body, which could be a crescent moon. A cardinal flies over him, chirping, and then a mockingbird follows, dive-bombing him one and dabbing his bald head with white goo.

INT. BILL'S OFFICE - MORNING

Bill logs on to his computer, and acts relieved that he can log on. He looks across to the next cubicle and sees DAN, 32, albino complexion and hair, pounding away.

BILL

You came in on Sunday morning, too?

DAN

A lot of us may. Looks like we have a major disaster recovery with our servers.

BILL

The ice storm?

DAN

It wimped out. Like in the South. So, no. But it looks like they're gonna tell us soon.

Bill looks over his shoulder at a website.

DAN

This is on my machine. I know, they won't let me bring your domain back yet.

The webpage reads "DEATH STAR TIMETABLE." There is a picture of a brownish-orange disk with bands of clouds, rather like an oversized Jupiter.

BILL

Like the brown dwarf in the Oort Cloud? You know it's coming and they just aren't telling us.

DAN

Well they're telling us now. But first things first. Let's be professional and get our customers back online.

Bill gets onto his machine and logs on to AOL and gets to an email that gives directions that he scribbles down. Suddenly he gets a warning. "ACCESS DISABLED. LOG OFF NOW."

BILL

Looks like they're really going to fire me for this.

DAN

What? Just look at you. I thought your mother was home now from the nursing home.

BILL

She is. But I've always been in your own place.

Bill looks down at his pajamas, and they are coming loose.

BILL

Ooh, this is embarrassing. I hope I don't get caught streaking.

DAN

I meant, your head. Was that a mocker or a cowbird that went on you?

Bill looks up toward the exit door, and the security camera is following him. He walks towards it, and tries to open it. The door remains locked. He looks for the exit button and can't find it.

BILL

What is this, Dan, your IQ test?

Dan looks up with a wicked smile. Bill starts banging on the door and the glass shatters.

Dan gets up and looks.

DAN

Do you remember what I taught you?

INT. BILL'S APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

Bill puts a new hard drive into the bay of one of his computers, and works very carefully and gingerly. He turns on the machine, hitting F2, and still gets the blue screen.

INT. BILL'S OFFICE - MORNING

It is Monday, and now Bill is carefully dressed in a pin-striped suit, but still grizzled. A MANAGER, 40 and female, approaches him.

MANAGER

Bill, we have a meeting.

Bill looks over at Dan's cubicle and sees the 3-D picture of the rotating brown dwarf. He then follows the manager to a corner conference room that looks out on the superhighway. In the distance, Bill can see a passenger train coming from the west. A HUMAN RESOURCES GENERALIST, 50 and female, motions him to sit down.

HUMAN RESOURCES GENERALIST

Bill, I'm not gonna waste your time with niceties. We are letting you go.

BILL

It's not about the Internet access just now. Zero tolerance, I know about it. I mean, the story about the death star. We did get everything to run.

HUMAN RESOURCES GENERALIST

I'll be nice about it. Let's just say your management thinks you aren't smart enough anymore. No problem solving ability.

BILL

Come on.

MANAGER

Yeah, Bill, let's see you fight for yourself.

BILL

I took the calls. I mean, you parents with kids got paid and I did some of your work. Isn't that enough?

MANAGER

You never turned in a slip. It's off the clock, Bill. So come on, hit back.

INT. BILL'S APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

Bill looks at each of his three computers, and they all show the blue screen. He unplugs each one, picks up a small briefcase, and locks up.

EXT. UNION STATION, WASHINGTON D.C. - AFTERNOON

Bill drives up to Union Station on a sunny late afternoon. Most of the snow is gone. He drives up a complicated parking garage and barely finds a space. He leaves quickly.

INT. UNION STATION, WASHINGTON D.C. - MOMENTS LATER

Bill buys a ticket from a TICKET AGENT, 47, overweight. He pays cash when his credit cards fail.

TICKET AGENT

I dunno, a lot of this plastic doesn't work today. Now that's just Bert-e-mer.

BILL

That's all. Those are my orders.

TICKET AGENT

That's all the trip you get any mo.

Carrying his light pack, he walks around and looks at the immense N-scale model railroad exhibit. It looks like a whole little kingdom, with flat areas with several towns, and then a mountain range giving way to a sea. The trains are quite a large variety and include several steam engines, including one from pre Civil War.

Bill walks to the concourse, looks at his ticket. He goes to MacDonalds and buys a meal.

MACDONALD'S CLERK

That's to go?

BILL

I guess so.

MACDONALD'S CLERK

Check yourself out, sir. You look like you need a job, too.

Bill takes a sack of burger and fries, and looks down toward his loose fly.

INT. UNION STATION, WASHINGTON D.C. CONCOURSE - MOMENTS
LATER

Bill prances around, buying a newspaper with headline
"JUPITER SIZE STAR THREATENS EARTH IN JUST 15 YEARS"

Only now does he notice the second headline, "STOCK MARKETS
CLOSE"

The concourse is rather empty, but he finds the gray door
with access panel at the end, keys in a passcode, and goes
downstairs, where there is a single track and a train. The
cars are silver, and the engine is a gray switch engine with
no trademark on it. He starts to climb into car when he
realizes he is missing something.

He races back to MacDonalds and picks up his briefcase, and
then goes back to the entry door which seems to have moved.
This time he has to enter a different passcode. He gets back
down to the train.

He enters the car. It is about half full, and a lot of the
passengers seem to be young adults.

BILL

They have something to lose.

He looks around for an interesting companion. He thinks he
spots Jason. He hesitates and walks up towards the front of
the car. CLARK, 18, a very tall and mature-looking lanky teen
with close-cropped brown hair, sits in street clothes. He
makes eye contact. He looks across the aisle where OETER, 42,
bald, and overweight sits and burps. Clark stands up and
moves out into the aisle. Bill measures himself, and barely
comes to Clark's chin.

CLARK

Well, we're making eye contact. I
think you'd rather sit by me than
anybody else.

BILL

Um, sure.

CLARK

I'll porter your gear.

The train lurches forward as Clark puts Bill's suitcase up.

BILL

Careful. A laptop in there. It
could get broke too.

CLARK

I know.

BILL

You're just going to Baltimore,
too?

Clark hesitates, then nods. The train starts moving. Oeter starts to stand.

OETER

Just forty miles. I smell dinner.

SEAN (O.S.)

Thirty nine rail to be precise.

Bill turns around, and makes out Sean's bearded face toward the back. Bill restrains himself from looking further.

OETER

Baltimore is the armpit of the
country. Just a place for dessert.

CLARK

For you, Oet, it's tea with lemon,
no cookies. Not much refreshments
left.

BILL

Sounds like you're in charge.

CLARK

Not exactly.

Bill takes out his hamburger, that is starting to get cold.

OETER

The goody line will be open for
fifteen minutes. Bill, you want to
go for me?

Bill gets up, walks back, and enters the next car without incident. There is a snack bar, and the line fills the length of the car, mostly middle aged people. A SALES CLERK, 50 and African American, works the register like he was a bar tender.

SALES CLERK

Come on. It's already last call.

OETER

We just started rolling.

CLARK

Don't mind him, he doesn't get it yet.

Bill scans the car stands hesitantly.

BILL

Oh my God?

JASON (O.S.)

What? You get too much food anyway.

Bill turns around and sees Jason in a lounge chair. The twilight from the late winter countryside hits his glassy hands, which he tries to hide with his purple sweater.

BILL

I forgot to leave food and water out for my cat. I hope this isn't too long.

Jason cackles.

BILL

I'm not used to pets. Had him a month. He never bothers the computers.

JASON

And I bet they don't work now. Clark will take care of you. I think he's who you want. Well, you know, they tell you to pack when you go to the hospital. For outpatient surgery. Even the infirmary. Well, sit down while you still can.

Jason picks up his laptop.

JASON

You know, these are the only puters that work now. Well built.

Jason keystrokes, through the Britannica site, and brings up an article on brown dwarfs.

JASON

It isn't a joke. The solar flares were the first sign.

Sheila comes from the snack bar with two hot teas. Greg follows.

SHEILA

And this

JASON

It's for Oeter. Not him.

The outside twilight is going down.

SHELIA

Bill, I think Jason wants you to get your grip before sundown. Take this drink to Oeter. He needs your help.

JASON

And do come back.

INT. TRAIN CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Bill is back at his seat. He picks up his seat and gives the tea to Oeter, who starts slurping it.

BILL

Looks like the fabulous formula diet from the Ladies Home Journal.

CLARK (O.S.)

You mean you read all those women's magazines, too, Bill.

Clark skips down, grabbing on the overhead bins, from the other end of the car.

CLARK

Like your last suitor, Bill.

Clark taps Oeter on the shoulder.

OETER

Don't rub it in. You'll get yours.

Bill gets back to the snack car with the gripsack. He turns around once to stare at Clark and then rights his head like he was Lot's wife getting caught. The line is gone and snack bar dark. In fact, visually he can't see that it is there.

Bill sits down by Sheila, without looking at her. She smiles, her mouth puckered and crinkled. Then she gets up and sits by Greg across the aisle.

JASON

Bill, you will need a girl friend for the tribunal. That is mandatory.

GREG

But she's mine.

JASON

I don't know, Greg. I thought Tobey was going to show.

GREG

It's okay. She's woman enough for both of us. But we need the slave trade to find one for Bill. But that's after his, what, audition.

BILL

What is this? Public speaking? You know public speaking is easy. I hope that's what it is. In high school, that's what I did for the Honor Society, when I was initiated. Gave a talk about replacing carbon with silicon. For life on other worlds. Another guy gave a talk on lysing leukocytes, and that would foreshadow AIDS.

Bill half gets up and lets one.

CUT TO:

INT. RECREATION ROOM - EVENING - FLASHBACK

YOUNG BILL, 17, and other high school students are seated at card tables eating country fried chicken, fries and cole slaw. A few are seated at the undersized chartreuse ping pong table that has an unused net. Parts of an unused model train set are also on the table. Bill is standing in front of his audience. He is holding a test tube filled with sand.

CUT TO:

INT. UNIVERSITY CONCERT HALL - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Bill (a few years younger than in present time, in a business suit and on crutches), struggles to keep from tripping over microphone wire as he writes on in white chalk on a real blackboard. The chalk squeaks and crumbles.

A copy of his book "RAIN ON THE SNOW" with a black and white cover sits on the sill. YOUNG TOBEY, 21, gets up to introduce him to the audience.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Jason leans over and shakes his head.

JASON

You know what I am talking about.
The tribunal you skipped out on.
Yeah, you wanted to talk about your
book again. We don't talk about the
other one, do we. It's don't ask
and don't tell.

BILL

But it's that way in medicine, too,
isn't it. It's not just the
military.

Jason now tugs at his sweater sleeves. The skin is glassy smooth.

JASON

Yeah, medicine is like your
military. We're soldiers. Puppets,
really. I have to do surgery this
semester. And they'll pretty much
need it. It'll be my living.

Suddenly, Bill leans over, grabbing his own neck.

JASON

Your implant gone bad? The firmware
got infected after the flare? It
makes you feel like you have
angina. Even if it grabs your upper
back.

BILL

I often used to feel a tightness
until I got my dreams written down
into my domain database. Until
Saturday night, this firmware
logger had worked.

Jason gets up, pulls a small silver widget from his own briefcase, walks over and palpitates Bill's neck.

JASON

This is what sterile hands are good for.

He takes a tweezer, reaches over, and pulls a small metal thread from Bill's neck. Bill screams, then relaxes.

BILL

OK. Let me think.

Jason inserts what looks like a tack into Bill's neck and sews a stitch.

JASON

Time to act. You know, neck ache can mean a hidden heart attack. Invitations go out for the zipper club. Hope we got you in time. Now, get up. Try it out. Bring it on.

Bill gets up, walks sprightly towards the next car, and sees railroad track receding. He looks back at Jason.

JASON

Come on back, Bill. You don't want to join the zipper club yet.

INT. TRAIN CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Ball lightning illuminates the winter foliage forest and flat countryside. Claps of thunder rock the cabin.

The train rumbles into a tunnel, muffling the thunder, and now it is really dark.

SHEILA

It's like this to get into Penn Station.

JASON

Quiet. Shut up.

BILL

On Amtrak they always announced a three-minute warning. Especially on the Metroliner.

SEAN

Kind of stop the clock.

Sean, and then Sheila walk to the front of the car. Bill, noticing Sean's look of surprise, walks up behind.

Now there is no car in front of them, and dark track, with a switch. The train slowly switches to the left, and passes a dark locomotive, shaped like the old electric locomotives on the Pennsylvania.

JASON

That was then. This is now. Or is it?

GREG

You know there were train tunnels in Wisconsin. I used to race bikes through them. It was good to become a Spartan. We're out of it now?

It stays dark in the car. Bill looks over Sheila's lap, almost falling into it, and gazes outside. There is no city, just some sort of pine scrub. The train seems to be ascending, and finally is on a bridge over water. There are some pimply reflections in the water. Finally the train starts to descend. It makes a grinding noise as it goes through a track switch. A couple of sophomores with red lights on pass.

BILL

Where was the city? There should have been skyscrapers?

Clark is standing over them now, with Oeter at his side.

BILL

Is there a blackout? Clark, where were you? The car must have been disengaged. Decoupled.

CLARK

It's just missing. And now you see it. Baltimore is missing. Too. I pronounce Baltimore is erased.

SHEILA

Well, aren't you the perfect young man, Clark. If you say so.

CLARK

No more under-arms to shave.

The train descends and SCREECHES to a stop. The passengers gather their belongings and step outside in relative silence and order.

EXT. RAILROAD ROUNDHOUSE - NIGHT

About thirty people walk along the tracks, as they lead to a turntable for changing directions. The walk is labored since they carry their luggage. Tracks go out in four other directions. They climb a steel catwalk over the tracks and enter an old railroad station terminal with the sign "RAILWAY POST OFFICE." Everything looks gray and colorless.

Bill looks up into the night sky. It is clear but the deepest violet in color. Jupiter, Saturn, Mars and (near the Western horizon) Venus are all visible, and a slightly larger orange dot, looking like a computer gif, is straight overhead.

CLARK

Wish we had binoculars. The old dialer lenses would be fine.

GREG

Very funny. You're as curious as a fox.

Dan steps out of the crowd. His eyes blink, and is the only person not looking up.

DAN

You're talking about Bill. He wasn't curious enough, or about the wrong things.

CLARK

Greg wants to know where he's riding. I don't think Bill really cares now.

DAN

I can't say it, but they say the planets are aligned like they were for the first Christmas.

GREG

And it's Lent, when we give things up.

INT. RAILROAD ROUNDHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

They enter an old fashioned railroad station, with some new accoutrements, big Jumbotrons as in a stand up video bar.

Three of them are on. The first one has a black-and-white sign that reads "TRIBUNALS: THERE IS NO THEY". The second one, "YOU TRAVEL ONLY BY TRAINS. NO ONE IS ALONE."

The third and largest screen presents a quick video, in BLACK-AND-WHITE, as follows:

CUT TO:

EXT. COLLEGE DORM - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

YOUNG SYDNEY and ten other college boys, in their skivvies and shirtless and shivering, stumbled into a long brick dormitory building through a basement entrance. Two men who look like Clark and Sean follow them in, shoving them.

They enter a basement filled with tools, saws, workbenches, washing machines. On one end there is a stage with ten chairs arranged. There are two basins on soapy water, and straight-edges razors on a simple table. The tall upperclassman PICKS UP the razor, as the freshman TAKE SEATS in unison.

ORIGINAL CLARK

Hip!

ORIGINAL SEAN

Work!

CUT BACK TO:

INT. RAILROAD ROUNDHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The thirty participants (about twenty are men) now notice the railroad office, beyond the long concrete platform, as a light comes on. SYDNEY, 60, and dressed in white Islamic garb and sporting a scruffy gray beard of untrimmed stubble, comes in through a proscenium door and stands on a small podium. He LEANS on the podium, as if exhausted.

SYDNEY

Ladies and Gentlemen. Particularly the men. My name is True Allah. Otherwise I am known as Sydney. What's the good word?

BILL

More P.T.

CLARK

Hello Sydney.

Clark raises his hands as if to direct the crowd.

THE CROWD
Hello Sydney.

SYDNEY
That's right. I am not God.

Sydney struggles, and gradually peels off his turban, showing thinning but intact hairline, gray, with a strong widow's peak.

SYDNEY
Any of you know why you're here. I think you can guess.

BILL
The tribunals. That's what Jason said.

SYDNEY
Jason?

JASON
Well, truth to say, a judgment.

SYDNEY
I daresay, Doctor, you're scrubbed up for it. Lift your arms like you would before a surgeon's basin.

Jason steps forward, rolls up his sleeves, and lifts his smooth arms, and suddenly soapy water oozes over them and drips on the concrete floor, splattering.

SYDNEY
Really, this is all about performing. Not hacking, more like acting. Almost entertaining people. You're gonna have a series of tasks in the remaining time. Days, how many, I can't say. You can count on 'em. Many get the call, few are chosen.

Sydney clears his throat and coughs with a crackle.

SYDNEY
There are a lot of ways to be best. Name some.

The crowd is silent.

CLARK

Okay, sports.

SYDNEY

Take one. Bring me on.

BILL

Other people think it's money.

SYDNEY

Even if it was printed by Parker Brothers instead of the good old US Treasury. What you like, Bill, though, is looks, ain't it, you immature sapper?

GREG

You're saying it's about winning.

SYDNEY

You said that. Now, no one of you around here has a family to support. I'll tell you what. You're gonna play a game with these Tribunals. You decide who is best. But not by competing. You compete to get to decide who is best. That's what you always wanted, Bill. Get it? Now take your gripsacks. You take a quick train to your first test.

The lights come on, and near the exit there is a table with many binoculars. There is more color in the room now, subdued golds and browns.

EXT. RAILROAD ROUNDHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

They stand along the track, looking up through their binoculars. The orange dot is magnified and looks like a huge gas giant planet, dim and brownish in color. Sean puts his binoculars down.

SEAN

You're in on this after all, Jason. I mean, I'm from Baltimore. Good old Catholic. And, like, it's gone. Deleted. Out of the recycle bin.

JASON

I go to med school there. But isn't it a joke. It's the one city we can do without.

A single streetcar comes along, brownish gray and covered with rusty cast iron plates. It is running on one line with the overhead catenary. The people get on.

The train descends and seems to be following a lakeside, with a lighthouse in the distance, growing closer. The lake is dark, still, and looks oily. In a few minutes, it comes to a stop, with the lighthouse plainly visible across a bay only a few hundred feet across. The celebrants step out of the car, and see a quay with little brown kayaks anchored up to the railroad tracks.

SYDNEY

As much as possible, men and women will pair off for Noah's ark. You'll cross over to the Tower of Ned in the canoes. You've got to keep moving. Take your gripsacks. Now, Bill, I want you assigned to Joetta as a partner, and Greg, you and Sheila can watch him.

JOETTA, 56, short and blond, steps forward. She gently plays with Bill's hand, waist, and then tummy.

SYDNEY

Greg, you up to watching Bill.

GREG

Sure, like he could be my grandad.

EXT. NED LAKE - LATER

They are rowing, with grips stuck precariously on the bows of large kayaks, across the lake to the tower. The lighthouse is growing close, and the water beneath them looks oily.

When they are about fifty feet from the island, there is a muffled splash, and a SCREAM. One of the kayaks has toppled.

GREG

Good god, people have to be able to capsize. That's like swimming.

SHEILA

Not everybody can swim, Greg.

GREG

Like Bill. You know, real nerds.

SHEILA

Or geeks like me. I didn't learn to
until I was twelve. Old enough to
menstruate.

At first, no one comes to surface. There are just a few
bubbles. Then one relatively faint figure climbs on top of a
capsized boat, flips it, sits in, and seems to stroke his
legs.

BILL

Oh, well. Mother fuck. This is like
the Army.

JOETTA

Goodness, you sound like a toy
soldier. Or you're in your own
world, Bill. I'll have to show you
my place.

They land on the shore. Bill stands up and takes Joetta by
the waist. He reaches towards her breasts and restrains
himself.

GREG

Bill. You have to tie the boat up.
We have to go back.

INT. TOWER OF NED, ENTRANCE.

The celebrants stand in a small stone room with a circular
stairway, lit by candles.

SYDNEY

We've dumped two people already.
They won't go with us, so the hike
is down to twenty-eight. You know,
Bill, why we didn't need
philosophers like you.

BILL

I think we did.

SYDNEY

We had laws already. God's law.
Then we had democracy. Wasn't that
enough. You know, don't kick sand
in a poor beast's eyes. You just
live your life. Until now.

The celebrants climb a long spiral metal staircase. The shot from the top looks like Vertigo. When they get to the top, there is a powerful beacon light, and one computer terminal with black veneer. There is a single message, without any clue as to what kind of computer system. "DO NOT GO NEAR THE TOWER OF NED."

Bill looks away from the group, at the view outside. The lake goes on for miles, but there are lights in the distance, like a small ranch town. The view is quickly becoming fuzzy in fog.

SYDNEY

Now each one of you will try to log on. When you do, you vote for the person in the group, other than yourself, whom you think is best now. Fall in!

The contestants line up, squeezed in the space in the tower. Joetta comes up, and yields to Bill.

JOETTA

Boys first.

Bill logs on with his legal name, and a ballot indeed comes up. He checks the box for CLARK. The others follow.

SYDNEY

Repeat the word No if it doesn't let you in. Let's do some rank and yank.

TOWER OF NED, LIGHTHOUSE BAY - MOMENTS LATER

Bill goes first, setting the pace of descent, followed by Melanie, and others.

SYDNEY (O.S.)

Go!

Clark shimmies past them, hand over hand, then sliding down the handrail of the staircase.

SYDNEY

See what happens when you don't have a vote.

Oeter flies past them, SCREAMING, in the air, but seems to be falling more slowly than expected, almost floating to the floor beneath, about to land on his belly as Clark catches him, his mouth and rear-end splattering even through trousers. Two more people fall through the air and land on the pavement in slow motion, cracking their heads open. Clark stands mute and does not catch them.

Joetta leans over to comfort them. Greg steps forward.

GREG

It's no use. Even Clark can't get them off flatline.

JOETTA

Are you and Clark in on this?

BILL

Well Dr. Jason surely is.

Jason, arriving at the bottom, checks them both. One is a middle aged white man, the other a black female. Jason opens the shirt of each one, and pulls the shirts over the man. He hesitates with the female, and Bill looks down.

BILL

Lorraine.

SEAN

It's easier for you to watch us now, Bill.

Jason now pulls the shirt over her head, even though he exposes her.

JASON

Come on. There are no bodybags. You know, it really is over isn't it. I didn't believe it.

SYDNEY

Come on, doctor, you're a right man. You've already taken tribunals. You no there is nothing to fear for the righteous.

INT. TOWER OF NED BASEMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Twenty six of them now take their grips and sit in coal handcars for an underground train.

SYDNEY

Keep your belongings. You can
always count on the train.

The train starts to move slowly, through a tunnel. Bill is
still seated in a car with Joetta.

BILL

I liked trains as a boy. I had a
model train set on an undersized
ping pong table. Not Lionel or
American Flyer. The company was
called Mars. I would make out
layouts of California, of Israel,
build cities of blocks over the
tracks.

JOETTA

Sounds solitary. Or dainty.

BILL

Well, I said one road went to
grandma's another to my aunt and
uncle.

GREG (O.S.)

Yeah, Bill, like when you were
five.

They come out of the tunnel into a clearing, surrounded by
brownish desert, with a small town approaching.

BILL

Then I really thought about family.
Mom and dad. Grandma.

JOETTA

But you never had a sister. Or a
girl friend.

BILL

Well, or sorts I did. I tried.

JOETTA

We'll see.

BILL

Yeah, like passing the next test.

GREG

Or the next grade in middle school. That was no test, it was a beauty pageant. What do they call it, a primary. Now we need a caucus.

The train slows down as they come to a town with small Cape code houses along either side of the track. In the distance there is only pinkish-brown pebbly desert.

GREG

You know, this must be duplicated everywhere. We're just seeing a sample of judgment.

SHEILA

You think so. You were so gifted in life, Greg. Much more than a lot of these.

GREG

Maybe they just mixed us up.

The train stops. Sydney walks along the track, and pushes some of them back into the cars as they try to step out.

SYDNEY

You'll go into your house, if you got to keep it. You'll trade in your grip and laptop and pickup a new computer. Now be careful with your belongings, because you may get to come back. Maybe.

GREG

Yeah, like we'll see.

SYDNEY

Greg, I know your one of the smart-ass ones who think you're immune to everything, Give the other poor ones a break. Some of these geeks ain't even got souls yet. Some of them never lived.

They all sit quietly.

SYDNEY

Be calm. I think we remembered to place the Bibles there, too.

They look up, and the sky is cloudy now. It is sleeting and snowing a bit. There are pink, slushy accumulations around that looks at bit like wet Kleenex.

SYDNEY

Okay, go into your houses.

Bill stands, having sudden difficulty moving his legs. Joetta manipulates his thighs through his trousers as he comes to life.

JOETTA

Looks like your fogettin' how to live already.

Bill staggers into the small house. He looks around, and notices that the house across the tracks is a false front. Two more men go through the door and just disappear. Greg goes into the next house. Bill sees his other friends enter theirs in neighboring houses.

INT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL - CONTINUOUS

Inside, there is a small bed, and credenza, with an old Radio Shack TRS-80 computer set up on it. There is a single white rotary phone. There is also a tiny gas stove and refrigerator. The stove does come on, but the dusky orange flame keeps shutting off. Joetta pulls out some rice, snow beans, and oysters. She hunts around the cabinets and finds some seasoning and folds it in. She has to turn on the burner repeatedly. The concoction boils but doesn't seem real worm.

JOETTA

Well, we are doing Polynesian. No, just plain Chinese. Hope it isn't too spicy. I mean it's cold and hot both.

BILL

Huh. I remember once an outdoor Chinese restaurant on Cedar Springs in Dallas. I was naive on Asian food, and I was with my buddies in the AIDS project. I didn't know that little red dot, that gif, if you will, meant hot. My mouth burned all evening. But I felt so alive and well, when a lot of other men were dying.

Joetta stir fries the food, and pours it onto fine porcelain dishes.

JOETTA
I wonder if our dishes will be here
when we come back.

BILL
Like they matter.

Bill tastes it, and seems to savor it, but then coughs some
of it out.

BILL
Cold. I mean too hot, whatever.
Weird.

Joetta wipes up after him, and slowly eats her own portion.
She whiffs.

JOETTA
Boy this place smells a bit,
doesn't it.

BILL
I have a feeling the place can't
burn down. They call it a reducing
atmosphere.

JOETTA
It's not for you, is it. You've
been good. You could have picked
out these dishes. Oh well, small
talk. I was a small town girl,
anyway. I had a basement apartment
like this. Was a secretary.

BILL
Like, they don't have those anymore
do they? I can imagine Greg here.
Like we don't have answering
services anymore either. Takes too
many people.

JOETTA
Yes they do. For me it's an interim
step for destiny.

BILL
Like there is a point in having
children.

JOETTA
There's always a need for children.
No matter how many of us are left.

The door opens, and Greg enters.

GREG
Then why aren't there any?

BILL
You can hear us.

GREG
Like this whole place is made of paper. You got some soy sauce? They shorted us against the box, it looks.

Dan pokes his head in.

DAN
No more stock market talk.

BILL
We can't get on here.

GREG
We'll make it back. I just can't believe it all comes to an end. Well, I'll leave you be. You'll find your chopsticks.

Joetta hands Greg a bottle of oil from the fridge.

GREG
Thanks.

The door closes, gently. The foggy air starts to clear.

Bill and Joetta sit on the bed, and place their bowls and plates of food on it. She starts giggling.

JOETTA
Like, how long since you dated a woman. A female.

BILL
I'll sound like Greg. A James Fenimore Cooper type. Well, really, not since My Second Coming. Once I came out, it was a long road. Just to be a human being first. I had to go to the baths to have a first real experience. Passively.

(MORE)

BILL(cont'd)

I holed up in New York City, away from the real world of families and commutes, until I learned how to live my own life. To pick who I wanted to be like or go with, and leave old family bye and bye.

JOETTA

To all come to this.

She starts to sob. Bill hesitates, then puts his hand on her shoulder.

JOETTA

You remember, don't you.

BILL

The Singles Club. Oh. My God.

JOETTA

Don't say things like that here. They listen in and blow your chance. You can stay in the underworld a long time if they catch you again.

BILL

I thought it was purgatory. You know, I read somewhere that in Islam, judgment day is all at once. Christians are supposed to go to heaven or wherever they make all the time. Muslims wait in their graves. We didn't have to wait.

JOETTA

Like you know what that proves. But you remember.

BILL

Of course I remember. I left you at the apartment after the one time I took you to dinner.

GREG (O.S.)

You didn't even go Dutch.

BILL

They can still hear us.

They now eat their feast.

JOETTA

Greg's OK, though.

BILL
I hope they all are.

JOETTA
Whom do you like the most?

BILL
Hum. Maybe Sean, or Clark. Greg is responding. But I used to watch him week after week. He surely knows.

JOETTA
Bill, everybody knows.

BILL
And you never had your own life.

The rotary phone RINGS.

JOETTA
Nightcall.

BILL
You know about that?

JOETTA
The wrong kind.

She laughs.

BILL
You don't like porn. This is our assignment.

Bill picks up the cradle.

PHONE MESSAGE (O.S.)
Climb into your train car in ten minutes. We've got twenty four players now, enough for about three teams.

INT. GYMNASIUM - LATER

The little mining train wheels into a huge gymnasium that seems to be build underground. There are no windows. It appears to be the size of a football field, divided into basketball courts without hoops. The floor is immaculately lacquered. On one wall there are bleacher seats, and on the others there are just green padded walls.

The players are still in street clothes.

Clark walks around, away from the crowd, and then faces them.

CLARK

Syd asked me to give you the rules. We're gonna play whiffleball. One inning for each of three pairings of eight of you each. Over the padded area or into the bleachers is a home run. We have enough for eight players, so you don't need a catcher. You play in street clothes, until you win. Then you come out and play in gym clothes. Your shorts.

GREG

Hey, does Boston still exist?

CLARK

Well, we'll find out when we can go home, won't we.

GREG

Your with them aren't you.

CLARK

Sure, I'm one of them.

The contestants chuckle, and Bill cackles.

BILL

Put the padding in left field. Then it's like the Green Monster.

CLARK

The teams will be picked by Bill and Joetta. They don't have to be teammates.

BILL

Joetta doesn't like sports.

CLARK

How did you know. You never dated her long enough. And you don't either.

BILL

How do you know either.

CLARK
I think you told me.

CUT TO:

INT. OLD MOVIE THEATER AUDITORIUM - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Bill is seated in a crowded movie theater, on an aisle. There is one empty old leather seat, beaten up, to his right. Clark shows up.

CLARK
Is that seat taken?

BILL
No. By all means.

CLARK
Thanks. I don't want to celebrate my seventeenth birthday with a sold-out R movie.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. GYMNASIUM - CONTINUOUS

The three teams are lined up.

BILL
I should have told you.

INT. GYMNASIUM - LATER

Bill winds up and pitches the whiffle ball, breaking away, to Clark, who is batting with two men on base. The "bases" are laptop computer cases. Clark fouls the pitch off to the right. It travels a long way down the painted stripe that functions as the right field line.

Clark switches over to batting left handed. Bill throws another pitch, now breaking in. Clark swats it. It carries as a long drive into the bleachers.

INT. GYMNASIUM - LATER

Joetta's team is walking towards the locker rooms. Bill is following around.

CLARK

Bill, I take it you want to come in and peek.

BILL

Not exactly.

CLARK

You don't want to spoil the fun.

INT. LOCKER AND REST ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bill follows the men into a chrome and steel rest room, complete with security cameras and some kind of monitor device over the urinals.

GREG

Boy, it's like they really worry about pickups in outer space.

JASON

No, it's more like they worry about diabetes. I mean, you had to wee-wee a lot all the time, Bill. Even when you had caffeine-free diet old coke.

BILL

You'd know that. I didn't live alone all these years for nothing. Like privacy.

JASON

We could watch you through our one-way mirrors, wherever you lived. Go pee in the toilet. I'll show you. Then you should go.

Bill does as asked (camera shot from behind) and the indicator turns a bright red.

BILL

That means sugar or something.

JASON

Fasting. Oh, you ate some pasta tonight. Wish the light was green.

BILL

Green doesn't seem to work on this planet.

Bill excuses himself and goes into a stall, where he fights back nausea. He throws up once, mostly liquid.

BILL

I didn't do this for thirty years.
Until Saturday night.

Jason is outside the cubicle. Clark and Sean approach, and Clark is teasing Sean, placing both hands on his shoulders, drawing him close, and unbuttoning Sean's shirt. Bill's view of all this is obstructed by Jason, but he comes to life. He comes out of the stall, and most of the men have left the bathroom. Jason leads him out into the gymnasium.

JASON

You're not digesting your food
anymore, you know.

BILL

Like you're the doctor.

JASON

I am. You shouldn't have done that
MacDonalds. That puts you in the
wrong mood.

Outside the Joetta's team is suited up in shorts. Jason doesn't let Bill get close enough to have a good look.

INT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL - NIGHT

Bill and Joetta lie in a twin bed, clothes on. Bill is sound asleep, eyes moving. Joetta awakens and rouses him.

BILL

This is my first sleep since this
adventure started.

She sits up and looks down at him. Bill looks at the tiny particle-board night stand, and sees a small black parchment book fallen to the floor. Bill thumbs through it.

BILL

I didn't author this. Odd, it's
just the Old Testament only. No
Koran.

JOETTA

I never did much Sunday school
anyway. You feel any different?

GREG (O.S.)
Like you were etherized on an
operating table.

BILL
We're still being watched.

JOETTA
By friends, though.

BILL
You know, I thought I got a look at
Greg after he changed clothes. He
was the closest guy. And I couldn't
make out hair on his legs. I mean,
young healthy guys should have hair
on their legs unless they swim or
bike, shouldn't they?

GREG (O.S.)
I swim and bike both.

BILL
What is this, a party line? As long
as you listen in, I'll speculate
about you.

GREG (O.S.)
Fine. Do it.

JOETTA
Don't you think you need to outgrow
it?

Bill reaches for her breast and fingers it.

BILL
My dreams are already changing.
Because they're played out.

JOETTA
Can you?

She starts to unbutton, but Bill protects his chest.

BILL
It's too soon. Once I've fallen
asleep, it doesn't work.

JOETTA
Roll over anyway. Come on.

BILL
Like I'm a cat.

Joetta pulls a tack out of Bill's neck, yanks him over and shows it to him.

JOETTA
What's the word for this.

BILL
Placebo.

JOETTA
Too big a word for me.

BILL
No it isn't. You were a secretary.

Bill starts to kiss her, but on the neck.

JOETTA
I actually did shorthand. Took dictation, and I don't mean in French. You once said.

BILL
Don't kiss her on the lips.

Bill kisses her lightly on the lips and rolls back.

JOETTA
You really don't get into this, do you.

BILL
I have passion, but in my own way. Your neck is like a young man's.

INT. HANDCAR TRAIN CAR - MORNING

Bill sits with Joetta and holds hands as the train runs along a monorail track. Outside, the sky is misty and dirty with a weak sun. Dirty snow lies in clumps on a barren rocky landscape. The sun increases a bit as they approach a long low concrete building. The train goes underneath.

INT. SERVICE CENTER BUILDING - MORNING

The candidates walk into an office floor that looks like a service center, call center or debt collection floor.

There are modern computers and mouthpieces in each cubicle and a view of the sterile landscape outside. The sun is getting a bit brighter.

The cubicles, on closer inspection, are a bit sterile. They are uniform in setup, no trophies or family pictures.

The candidates sit in cubicles and Sydney addresses them. Greg stands up.

GREG

Who gets to lecture?

Sydney pulls up Greg's trousers and then pushes him back towards his cubicle

SYDNEY

Today's trial is the lowest job on earth. You guessed it, telemarketing. You know, it has the reputation as the only job some people can get. And they're not bad people, we say. It's really an acting job. No, not comedy or tragedy. Just command and persuasion, and manipulation. Well, some of you have already fallen into that. Like Mr. Oeter there. How much did you make last month?

OETER

Three thousand, sir, part time. I know how to do this.

SYDNEY

Yeah. By calling people, bothering them, creating urgency, and closing. You're always closing. Now, what do you think we can sell people on another planet.

GREG

You are kidding.

SYDNEY

No. Look around. Just don't count on staying here. We didn't lose anybody last night. Nobody else went down. Public speaking is easy, but high pressure selling ain't. Unless you believe in what you're selling. You know, it's like having to believe in God. You have to, right?

(MORE)

SYDNEY(cont'd)

So what could we possibly want you to sell here. Name some things.

SEAN

Broadband services.

GREG

Our old computers, but I don't know what good they are.

SHEILA

How about something over the edge.

SYDNEY

It's too early. You're not judged suitable for heaven yet.

TOBEY, 29 (now), short and muscular with dark hair and just a slightly oriental cast in his face, and PATRICK, 28, tall with sandy blond hair, stand up in their cubicles. Both men's faces are chaffed with excessive eye circles and jowls for otherwise young men.

TOBEY

It's no secret is it, Pat.

PATRICK

People's karma. Call it their essence.

TOBEY

This place will be easier on the bod.

SHEILA

Who are we going to call?

SYDNEY

Shall we say, people you haven't met. People we've transitioned, some of them even waitresses.

TOBEY

Call'em angels.

PATRICK

They're still investors.

BILL

I know about this. I knew a lot of good people. Now Tobey, you were one of them. On my A list.

CUT TO:

EXT. BILL'S APARTMENT BUILDING - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

Bill drives his Escort past the Alexandria railroad yards to a chain restaurant. Tobey, then 21, in shorts, is outside at a pay phone booth, waiting for him.

Bill checks out Tobey's shorts, and approaches. He holds out a copy of his book and other materials.

TOBEY

Literature!

BILL

Well, you didn't have to tell me to dress up for this one.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. SERVICE CENTER BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Sydney approaches Bill, then backs away, looking quizzical.

SYDNEY

So, Bill, you get it. Your reputation in late years wasn't that of a fast learner. Instead, of introspection, observation. We're going to feed you leads. You pick out the souls that you want to sell, that is, pitch. Now you just turn your black box computer on to start it. No other possibilities, no Internet.

Bill turns on the computer, and a table code, one column, comes up. The names are in hieroglyphics.

SYDNEY

You click once. Then you get another menu with some, what you may call it, thumbnails. Now in this Christian place, we don't like pictures too much. But this is how you identify your products.

Bill clicks again, and a picture of an old friend, RICHARD, 32, comes up. He is tall and slender with a red sweater, and a small bald spot on the top of his scalp as the picture rotates in all dimensions. A second picture comes up with the bald spot covered by a fez cap.

The screen shows two radio buttons: ACCEPT, or CONTINUE.

Bill clicks CONTINUE

Now a thumbnail comes up of MICHAEL, 18, standing shirtless in shorts on a tennis court, the racquet over the net. Michael smiles and offers his hand.

Bill clicks ACCEPT.

The system freezes for a moment, and Sydney comes over.

SYDNEY

Now Bill, don't be afraid of this. When the customer answers, say, 'How are you today.' This is a sales call.

BILL

We didn't achieve space travel on our own. We created Internet. Point to point instant fame instead.

SYDNEY

I think you have both. They say, let them back into the post office to interact.

There is one beep, and a sound like a rifle round, and a voice comes on line.

CUSTOMER 1 (O.S.)

113,456.

BILL

Um, how are you today. This is a sales call.

CUSTOMER

What are you talking about, sales call.

BILL

Telemarketing Sales Rule. I am forced to disclose it.

CUSTOMER

Your ulterior motive. I can tell that. How can I help you.

BILL

I have a candidate for you. I guess he is a Soul. That's the nomenclature.

CUSTOMER

What are you talking about, organic chemistry. Memorization.

BILL

You sound like a man of the Sixties. I don't know why that came out.

CUSTOMER

We went through the same stuff. You dropped organic didn't you.

CUT TO:

INT. GOVERNMENT LAB - DAY - FLASHBACK

YOUNG BILL, now 20, thin, gawky and crew-cut, stands in front of a hood with a glass viscometer. He inserts rubber tubing over the lip, and turns on a suction device. The viscometer breaks and shatters, cutting his hand. Tears come to his eyes.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. SERVICE CENTER BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Bill stiffens up and puts his hand over his mouth, and coughs. He clears his throat.

BILL

Huh. How do you know all this. You must know my people.

CUSTOMER

I know what you like. I think you're enjoying this job. I can tell. You're kind of purging yourself out.

INT. SERVICE CENTER BUILDING - LATER

The sky has clouded up, and it is sleeting, loud clacks against the window.

Little blobs that look like soap bubbles are also falling through the air and disintegrating as they hit the dirt below the building.

Bill walks back toward his cubicle. Joetta approaches. She motions with her hands and folds them.

JOETTA

Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door, here are the people.

BILL

Like I haven't seen any kids yet.

JOETTA

Don't worry. Our boss has got old time religion. I think you'll see that come out.

BILL

I'm not looking forward to it.

JOETTA

How are you doing?

BILL

Four sales. New money on credit. I mean, on control numbers. I guess that's like credit in the telestial world. Blue money. You know, do they have any performing arts here?

JOETTA

I don't know. The people we call sound like young actors, all spoiled by nepotism.

Greg approaches, looking happy.

GREG

Well, spoiled by dual citizenship. And I'm an athlete, not just a model. I did road racing. You know what that's like? Well, OK, having both Stars and Stripes and Maple Leaf helps.

JOETTA

And Greg, how are you doing? You like sales?

GREG

I broke the rules and took a
bathroom break. So I have three.
Sounds like Bill's ahead.

Sean walks over, and leans on Bill's cubicle wall, which
starts to crumble.

SEAN

Picking people out. Listening in.
He's good at this.

GREG

What are you good at, Sean? You
have no sales.

SEAN

Tinker toys.

Bill walks up to the Sydney's empty, elevated desk and rings
a bell.

INT. SERVICE CENTER BUILDING - LATER

Bill pulls up a thumbnail that shows a suburban rambler brick
house, front yard sloping into the afternoon sun, wet, with
snow on adjacent lawns but not on this lawn. The camera moves
inside and shows a rather immature looking teen, DIABOLITCH,
18, playing chess. Bill clicks ACCEPT

INT. SERVICE CENTER BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

Bill is talking into his headset.

CUSTOMER 2

Sounds like you really want to
know. Well, we're trying to recruit
to the 144000 number. You know,
it's all precalculated.

BILL

But you want this guy.

CUSTOMER 2

Come on, Bill, you know he wasn't
even your first choice. You know,
you'll sink for the immature.

INT. SERVICE CENTER BUILDING - LATER

Bill is still surfing his leads. This time a thumbnail comes up showing BOB, 17, standing in Bill's own boyhood recreation room.

CUT TO:

INT. RECREATION ROOM - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Bob is standing before the other students who are eating chicken dinners.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. SERVICE CENTER BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Bill coughs, and throws up on his lap a little, and coughs again. Again, a loud bell rings.

GREG (O.S.)
Telemarketer won his prize.

Joetta is walking over.

JOETTA
No he didn't.

She peers into Bill's cubicle.

JOETTA
Oh Bill.

BILL
What is this, second grade?

Sydney staggers over, trying to hustle but unable to.

SYDNEY
Well, that would be too early for you. Sounds like you won. Now you cheated but you won.

Sydney backs up, and Joetta takes a handkerchief and starts wiping Bill's lap.

SYDNEY
Sounds like fun, and unmentionable. Well, we'll see how you place in the end.

Sydney walks back into the open area.

SYDNEY

When you ride back, you'll go back to the locker room. Some of you will find letters to mail. It's a chance to make a little more of our kind of money. Like our kind of music. You'll have to mail it at a future destination. We'll be going back to paperwork.

INT. LOCKER AND REST ROOM - LATER

Bill opens a shiny aluminum locker, and finds two uniforms inside. They are both gray. One is sewn like Army fatigues without any rank symbols, and the other is a stiffer material like khakis. Bill finds the envelope, slightly soiled. On it is printed his current home address, and a number and hieroglyphic code above it, in brown letters, and a bar code, but no conventional postage.

EXT. RAILROAD ROUNDHOUSE - AFTERNOON

The candidates, still twenty-four of them, stand on the platform. There is a weak afternoon sun trying to cut through the clouds, and there seems to be some dusky orange light coming from the Southeast. This time, a train with an old Pennsylvania Railroad style electric engine and dark red cars approaches. A uniformed CONDUCTOR, 57, black, gray-haired, places a step board on the platform and motions them to get on. There are four cars.

CONDUCTOR

You sit with your assigned partners. Pick any car. There is a snack car again. So come on. Step right up!

INT. PENNSYLVANIA TRAIN CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Bill and Joetta sit together, not looking at each other. They are still in their street clothes and the TRS-80 computer is packed up and in the overhead luggage area. Greg and Sheila are across the aisle. The rest of the car is empty. The train clatters along through a Martian-looking desert at moderate speed.

GREG
So this is what it is like to die.
A kind of perpetual motion.

BILL
You said it first. You spoke out of
turn, Greg.

GREG
Oh, oh, I always do.

SHEILA
Echo that.

BILL
It's kind of a don't tell, isn't
it.

JOETTA
Why don't you try the snack car.
Look for the people you like.

GREG
I think Bill likes me. Come on.

JOETTA
Bill. He talks to you like you're a
cat.

CUT TO:

EXT. BILL'S APARTMENT BUILDING - AFTERNOON

There is a traffic jam with many police and fire vehicles on
the streets and roads around the apartment building.

INT. BILL'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

A hand plays with the button lock, and then takes a tool and
picks it. It also picks the deadbolt. A figure goes into the
messy apartment. It goes into the bathroom. The cat is lying
there, barely moving. The figure lays out some water, and
then opens a can of tuna. The person leads the cat to the
water, and the cat starts to come to life.

The figure wheels a dolly into the apartment, picks up all of
the computers and puts them on the dolly. The camera then
focuses on the figure. It is Sydney.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. TRAIN CAR - LATER

Bill shuffles down the aisle, struggles with the train car door, gets it open after Greg gets up and helps him. Then he goes into the snack car, shivering as he passes between them.

Clark and Sean are there. Clark is in khakis, Sean in the gray fatigues, buttoned up.

Greg follows Bill into the snack car, and the Conductor is selling only uncarbonated liquids of various tints, looking like Kool-Aids.

GREG

You see, Bill, why Clark can wear his khakis now.

BILL

Men have...

GREG

I know. He's younger. Too young for you.

Bill approaches the snack bar.

CONDUCTOR

Try the pink one. You'll like it.

BILL

It's

GREG

Lemonade, at least. That's our next competition. Selling lemonade on a train.

BILL

Looks like bug juice.

Bill picks one up, and then searches his pockets.

CONDUCTOR

No money in your pockets any more, old man? It's a dollar.

GREG

Yeah, what kind of dollar.

CONDUCTOR

I'll take script until we get to the next city. Just kiddin'.

INT. PENNSYLVANIA TRAIN CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Bill sits down by Joetta with the bug juice.

JOETTA
What is that, Gatorade?

BILL
Wish it was coke. Like those bubbly drinks, release that pressure like a valve.

JOETTA
Rots your teeth.

BILL
So does bulimia. Like, it feels good to do it. It's awful.

Greg comes by and sits down.

EXT. ALONG THE TRAIN ROUTE - LATER

The train passes through a flat desert into an area that looks like a pine forest, although the trees are very uniform in nature and so dark as to almost look black. In the distance there is a river and a small city of concrete, Soviet-style high rise buildings.

INT. PENNSYLVANIA TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Greg has his arm around Sheila and is kissing her.

SHEILA
You really mean it now?

GREG
Why not?

He kisses her again, and she resists. Bill looks over and stares with pleasure.

GREG
What are you staring at Bill? It's not the same as you think.

BILL
Well, it looks like we have to ride out of this Twilight Zone before I can have a daily coke.

Greg looks at Sheila again and tugs at her belt.

GREG

Uh. You know, Tobey really won't mind will he. I mean, he's a couple cars down.

BILL

I know him. He's took kind hearted for jealousy.

SHEILA

This isn't soap opera, you know. It's more a thought experiment.

Now she tugs at Greg's shirt and starts to unbutton it.

INT. GRAND RAPIDS TRAIN STATION - LATER

The contestants stand on a huge empty concourse for a train station. There is an overhead clock, but the "hours" are divided into 16 units instead of 12. There are bays for concession vendors but they are empty. Bill has dragged his luggage and computer box.

SYDNEY

You'll all go up to your apartments. We call this demo city Grand Rapids. They're small but comfortable. This time you can be alone. You'll get calls as to when to do anything. But you do have to put on your military uniforms for tomorrow. We're coming down the home stretch.

They walk outside, into a hazy sunshine.

EXT. GRAND RAPIDS HOUSING PROJECTS - MOMENTS LATER

They walk along a concourse, everything in monotonous concrete. Beyond the train station and single railroad track they can see a stagnant river, with just a small dam and spillway to simulate falls.

GREG

So this is like the City of Nowhere.

BILL

Back to the urban lifestyle. No moving out to the suburbs to prove you can raise the best family.

GREG

I'm not afraid to have to prove my manhood. Some of these other guys have already got it made.

INT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT GRAND RAPIDS - LATER

Bill takes an elevator up to a sixth floor apartment, with a steel, blue-painted door but only one button lock.

BILL

Well, that's different. They didn't replicate everything to the mid tier.

He lets himself in, and finds a small rectangular studio. The main living area has a desk in front of the window with an electric typewriter set up on it. There is a TV, and a variety of books, encyclopedias, and magazines, with a Miracord turntable and tonearm, and old-fashioned large stereo speakers. There is one flimsy cabinet filled with record albums.

There is also one rather large and clunky looking CD player. He turns it on, and some popular disco music starts to play. Then the music starts to skip around.

There is a cloth chess board and large Staunton chess set to the position after move 3 in the Benko Gambit.

Bill hauls the luggage and stereo in. He notices an intercom near the entrance. He looks into the kitchen, which looks empty but there are dead roaches on the counter tops.

BILL

I get to batch again! Back to the gay lifestyle!

He goes to the refrigerator, and opens it, and sees some bowls of oriental food. He looks in the freezer and it is empty, but needs defrosting. He nibbles at the food and takes it out of the refrigerator and turns it off.

He unpacks the computer box and picks up the computer and carries it over to the desk, and sets it up. He plugs it in and boots it up. His eyes light up and turn beady.

It boots up with the TRS-80 black and white screen, and then brings up the text copy of his book. The text is white and the curved monitor provides a black background. He looks at the typewriter and sees a stack of papers next to it, about half of his book. He turns it on, and it loads the visor with some text in about the middle of his book. He smiles.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTDOOR CANYON PARK - DAY - FANTASY

There is a real softball game with two full teams. Mark comes up to bat. Bill is pitching. Mark, batting left-handed, hits an opposite field drive off the canyon wall, runs the bases, and stops at third for a triple.

EXT. MOUNTAIN CABIN - DAY - FANTASY

Bill approaches Mark, who towers over him, and takes Bill in his arms. Bill fingers the top button of Mark's shirt.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT GRAND RAPIDS - CONTINUOUS

Bill is typing when the white rotary wall phone above his made twin-sized bed rings. He rushes over.

BILL
I've got the tickets.

OETER (O.S.)
How are you today, Bill?

BILL
God damn. I wasn't supposed to say this.

OETER
This is Oetie. Your buddy.

BILL
I know.

OETER
I want you to invest in Richard.

BILL
Look. Well, that means I made it.
Or did it.

OETER
Can we meet?

BILL
I'll meet with Richard.

OETER
Sure you will.

BILL
I have to catch the train tomorrow morning. I don't think I'll be seeing you.

OETER
Oh yes you will. I know, you think you can lay me off.

He hangs up.

BILL
It's different this time.

INT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT NYC 25 YEARS BEFORE - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Bill, bald but looking much younger (mid thirties), paces his Village apartment, that looks almost like the current one, except that the only typewriter is manual and there is no computer or CD player. The typewriter has some unusual keys on it related to chemistry and calculus. Also, there is a spinet piano. The chess set is on a homemade brown and tan antique rimmed hardwood board. It is also set at the Benko Gambit position.

The intercom rings.

EXT. NYC GREENWICH VILLAGE - LATER - FLASHBACK

Bill and Richard walk towards Sheridan square. Richard removes his fez cap and continues walking against a light. Bill sticks his hand out to stop Richard from walking in front of a car.

INT. NYC GREENWICH VILLAGE RESTAURANT - LATER - FLASHBACK

Bill and Richard are both eating French ice cream in a packed restaurant, when Bill's face looks very distressed.

EXT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT NYC 25 YEARS BEFORE - NIGHT

Bill stands in front of his apartment next to Richard.

BILL

You could come up. I could play for
you. Music.

Richard walks away, as Bill pokes at his stomach.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT GRAND RAPIDS - CONTINUOUS

Bill picks up a pile of newspapers and rummages through the headlines. One reads, "CLUSTERS OF LYMPH CANCER IN NEW JERSEY" with a date in 1978. Another reads "UNUSUAL CANCER SEEN IN GAY MEN" with a date in the summer of 1981.

Bill walks over to the record collection, and pulls an album out. He puts it on the turn table and turns on the stereo. The tone arm falls off the record. He looks at the record label, and it reads "RIVERSIDE." He tries putting the record on in the middle, and it starts playing music. It is loud and sounds like it is played on a tracker organ. It breaks up a bit with a little surface noise. It is modern and romantic at the same time, but is not familiar. It is extremely chromatic.

The music starts to sound cleaner when the intercom sounds. Bill hesitates, then walks over to the Intercom and presses it.

BILL

Yes

RICHARD (O.S.)

It's Richard. I brought Al.

CUT TO:

EXT. NYC CHRISTOPHER STREET - GAY PRIDE DAY - DAY - FLASHBACK

Bill marches alone in a gay pride parade as it passes an enclosed softball field where a workup game is being played. Bill looks around for someone constantly.

INT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT NYC 25 YEARS BEFORE - DAY

Bill goes to the white rotary phone over his messy bed, and dials a number.

BILL

Hello, Richard? How are you?

RICHARD (O.S.)

Well, actually I'm cooking.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT GRAND RAPIDS - CONTINUOUS

Bill stands in front of his door and waits.

He turns on the television, which sports a weak, somewhat overexposed color picture. A marquee reads, "THE LAND OF THE BIBLE." Then YOUNGER SYDNEY, 30, who has the same general facial features as Sydney but is not yet balding, speaks into a microphone:

YOUNGER SYDNEY

Pedro tells us they had a rule. One out of every six of their movies-- again, more like grade school film strips--had to be a horror move.

Several marquees flash across the televisions screen. "SEA MONSTERS" with a drawing of a blob pulling a woman off a ship. "PIE FACE." "THEY JUST AREN'T TELLING US."

YOUNGER SYDNEY

And the other thing, was that they made a movie called COLOR, and they made it in black and white. Only a nitwit would do that.

Bill approaches the set, reaches for the manual dial. It sparks, and shuts off.

He spots a litany roll on the floor near his records, and picks it up. It is a "filmstrip" of drawings of mountains. Bill rummages around his papers, and looks for more of his movies.

He hears a TAPPING. He opens it and sees Richard and AL, 25, blond. But Richard's hair is thinning, and his legs are covered with purple and gray lesions.

BILL
It's been 120 days.

AL
I'm taking care of him. I've heard
about you, Bill.

RICHARD
Mostly good things, Bill. But you
look challenged.

BILL
That's what you want. To test me.

AL
That's why it's up to me to love
him. For five years. It's not for
you.

BILL
Now look.

RICHARD
That's what Michael used to say.
Now look.

BILL
I know. I moved away. I wandered in
the wilderness. Lived a life
running around. So I wouldn't have
to see this!

INT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT GRAND RAPIDS - NIGHT

Bill lies on the bed, his eyes wide open, not moving.

INT. BILL'S STUDIO APARTMENT GRAND RAPIDS - MORNING

Without looking at his body, Bill puts on his gray fatigue clothes, and picks up his typewriter and CD player. He prints some pages on the dot matrix printer and then he shuts down the TRS-80. He puts the khakis, typewriter and pages into his gripsack. He walks over to the record collection and picks up about 30 records, all with names of artists and composers he has never heard of, some written in hieroglyphics. The gripsack is so full it splits, but he carries it out anyway.

He eats some boiled rice, and then walks into the bathroom, looks at himself in the mirror, and smiles. He thinks he looks a little younger. He spits up a little just once.

He checks out his apartment once more. He lifts up the newspapers, and thumbs through a lot of medical stories. Stuff like medical students paying their way as lab rats. Contagious Hodgkin's Disease. Autoimmunity. No more AIDS stories.

Underneath all of this he finds some handwritten sheet music. One composition. A Sonata in A Major. His own, and a lost manuscript. Then one more manuscript. A Piano Concerto in E-flat. By John. He hums the tune to himself and finds he can sing.

EXT. GRAND RAPIDS TRAIN STATION - MORNING

Bill drags his gripsack, with some of his manuscript falling out. It is raining now. The music notation starts to run, like it was ink, and he grabs it and stuffs it back in, and cradles the gripsack.

GREG

Sounds like you'll need it for barter.

The train approaches, and this time it is a steam engine, a 4 x 2. The four cars that follow look like box cars, or maybe mail cars. They have only small windows at the top.

Jason walks along and looks at everyone, with Clark behind.

JASON

We know what this looks like.

CLARK

Like in the movies. We don't know how long the next journey is. You might be better if you stay together. You don't want to wind up in a hospital in this new age.

GREG

You'll be with us, Clark, or you'll rise above us?

CLARK

I bought some box lunches. Hope you don't mind low carbs, low cal. Good for the legs.

GREG

Mine are called gams!

INT. BOXCAR - MORNING

The train is clattering and woo-woo-ing, and the contestants sit on the floor.

BILL
We haven't lost anybody else.

SEAN
I thought this would be Syd's rank
and yank until one king was left.

SHEILA
Funny that you say that, Sean. And
Bill, your nemesis is gone.

GREG
Enough. Bill, hope you get a piano
back at the next location. Maybe
even a music teacher's basement
upright.

SHEILA
But we're going to live, right?
This is a ride for life.

JOETTA
Well, we got our apartments back.

GREG
More of the old world is coming
back. Good show.

CUT TO:

INT. MUSIC TEACHER'S BASEMENT - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

CHILD BILL, 10, sits at an upright piano practicing drop rolls hands separately while an ELDERLY FEMALE MUSIC TEACHER pastes a gold star on a page from "Teaching Little Fingers to Play." The camera lingers on the music staves, where there is a marking of "Allegro" and overwritten is the word "FAST," replaced, in feminine penmanship, "GAY AND LIVELY."

INT. RECITAL HALL - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

Bill leaves the piano after playing the last measures of a Schumann piece. Three judges (two men and one woman) sit at small tables in front of the stage, writing comments on forms.

The camera shows one of the forms, with the heading "SPRING FESTIVAL." The judge flips the form and writes the word "SUPERIOR" on a blank.

The Elderly Female Music Teacher embraces Bill, who seems a bit distant.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. BOXCAR - CONTINUOUS

JASON

I wonder how far back we'll go.

GREG

Well, maybe we'll have to make do in the 1900 House. Or the Colonial House.

The train halts momentarily. The door opens quickly and Clark slides in, and then the train resumes, with typical steam engine huff and puff.

CLARK

Anybody want to see? Bill?

Bill approaches him, and Clark lifts him up to look outside the window.

CLARK

Tell everybody what you see.

BILL

A forest. Deciduous.

GREG

You mean not just gymnosperms, like in Botany 101.

JASON

Cut the pre-med talk. That's for me alone.

SEAN

I'm the geek in the crowd. Why don't you keep it simple. Call it the woods.

Clark stands and addresses them from the aisle.

CLARK

Some of you will have tribunals in the woods. But how far back do you want to go?

INT. BOXCAR - LATER

It is now getting warm inside and the people are sweating a bit.

JASON

We got ventilation. They don't want to kill us.

BILL

Maybe dull us. I wonder how far back we go. You know, some people say, during the Kennedy years was when technology moved fastest. Mimeographs for exams got replaced by Xerox.

Tobey walks forward from the back of the car. His face still looks a bit withered for a young man, although less so than before, and some teeth are missing.

TOBEY

Well, it feels good to be warming up. And Bill, I finally see you.

The embrace for a moment. Bill pulls away just a bit.

TOBEY

I'm sorry we didn't link up right at the beginning. I meant to catch you, but then our cars got separated in the storm in the Baltimore Harbor tunnel. But I'm still your jet setter.

CUT TO:

EXT. GAY PRIDE FESTIVAL, LIBERTARIAN PARTY TENT - DAY -
FLASHBACK

Tobey, nattily dressed in shorts and tight tee-shirt, reclines as he debates with someone from the crowd who looks withered from possible AIDS.

INT. FAMILY RESTAURANT - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Bill and Young Tobey are leaving. Bill puts the bill on a credit card. The atmosphere is that of a typical family restaurant with booths and jute boxes with interlaced CDs. Bill offers to embrace Tobey and Tobey backs away and shakes his head.

INT. FAMILY RESTAURANT - DAY - FLASHBACK

Next day, the restaurant is being boarded up, as Bill drives by in his Escort.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. BOXCAR - CONTINUOUS

Tobey looks Bill in the eye and smiles.

TOBEY

Yes, we put that place out of its misery, didn't we.

BILL

That was my college graduation present for you. And for promoting my speech.

TOBEY

Those were good old days.

BILL

You never proofread for me.

TOBEY

No, Madeleine did.

Patrick is wiping his forehead, holding back tears.

PATRICK

Some of this was my idea.

BILL

So, Lorraine and Madeleine are both gone.

PATRICK

We couldn't save them when they fell in. Clark was too far away. Too close to the Tower of Ned.

BILL

So you both fell in the muck and survived. That proves something.

TOBEY

Yes it does. You don't know all that happened. I know Lorraine didn't take to you. After you left the bar, there was an incident. Maybe just a short from all these real solar flares we were having.

INT. SOLAR FLARE DISCO - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Greg and Sheila are dancing on the stand, and Tobey, Lorraine, Patrick and MADELEINE, 23, are edging their way through the crowd to join them. Suddenly there is a boom behind the stand. Greg's trousers are immersed in flames. The sprinkler system immediately drowns the crowd with a heavy shower. Tobey LEAPS onto the stage and throws himself over Greg, extinguishing the flames and does a cycle of CPR.

GREG

I didn't need that. I was awake the whole time.

TOBEY

You're all right.

GREG

No. I don't want to look now.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. BOXCAR - CONTINUOUS

Greg sits on a bench, letting his shins show. Bill peers, as if expecting to see scars. Sean reclines.

GREG

So Bill you get it.

BILL

We had our close calls. I did. When I got the nightcall. I think that's when it happened. But not everybody had a close call. Sean, you didn't.

SEAN

I just wanted to come.

BILL
Sure, to fix the computers.

GREG
When there will be no computers any
more. Geeks like you will have to
learn to ride and swim.

Sheila grabbed Sean's trouser, and Joetta grabbed Bill's
hand.

BILL
Sean's the real geek. I'm the
intellectual.

TOBEY
The philosopher.

BILL
I gotta decide when it really
turned then.

TOBEY
Maybe Madeleine knew. She really
got burned. But she showed up with
me. And didn't make it the second
time.

GREG
But, Tobey, there's Sheila, too,
right?

EXT. STELLE - AFTERNOON

The train pulls up to a small railroad depot. They step out
into sunshine, and see a village that looks like a Midwestern
suburban development, on a flat prairie. The land is
treeless, but the grass is deep green with lots of
wildflowers. There is a three story brick headquarters, and
then streets laid out in rectangles with more small Cape Cod
houses.

Bill looks around. Off to the west, he can make out a ridge,
which may be just a break of trees after all, or a real Blue
Mountain.

GREG
Doesn't look like a forced labor
camp here.

Clark, Tobey and Patrick step forward. Clark's youthful face
is quite striking in comparison.

CLARK

Some of you have to go through admin for your medicals. We need to know if you're OK. That's Sean, Tobey, Patrick, Oeter, and of course you, Bill. I've got the numbers of how you're all doing.

INT. MENTAL HEALTH WING - LATER

Bill carries his gripsack onto the second floor, and the scene resembles a mental hospital or halfway house. He passes a solarium, some moderately decorated patient dorm rooms decorated with family pictures, to a day room and dining room. Right now it is empty, so he goes back to the Solarium, where there is a piano.

He opens his gripsack, and looks for his own sheet music, and sees that the ink on the sheets has run badly. He looks on the piano itself, and finds more sheet music, fresh copies of his own Sonata and of John's concerto.

He starts playing the scale theme of his Sonata.

INT. MENTAL HEALTH WING - LATER

Now there are patients in the day room, playing checkers, chess, and even ping pong. Most of the patients look like young, underdeveloped (and sometimes overweight) teenage boys.

Bill plays a speed chess game with one of the boys and wins it, and wins a ping pong game by playing conservatively, keeping the ball on the table and letting his opponent miss slams.

INT. MENTAL HEALTH WING DAY ROOM - LATER

Bill recognizes Oeter but no one else as he sits in the group on comfortable but old tweed furniture. RHONDA, 40, African American, is leading the group.

RHONDA

Okay, this is your biweekly unit government meeting here at Stelle. You'll get to talk about your group activities, and I'll brief you on the contingent evacuation plans.

(MORE)

RHONDA(cont'd)

Now, first we welcome, um, Bill,
and Oeter. They're in from being On
the Outside.

THE PATIENTS

Hi Bill. Hi Oeter.

OETER

I think we feel out of place. Being
so old.

RHONDA

I don't know what you're talking
about. You don't look older.

Bill checks his own leg. It is still almost chicken smooth.

MALE PATIENT 1

Chicken man!

MALE PATIENT 2

He's everywhere!

BILL

Very funny.

CUT TO:

INT. ARMY BARRACKS, HALLWAY - EVENING - FLASHBACK

A bunch of servicemen with fatigue trousers and without
shirts, including YOUNG BILL, 24, march in fake goose-step
down a buffed hallway in a dilapidated wooden barracks
building with private rooms, singing "Tiptoe through the
Tulips" and shouting "Chicken Man." As they pass the ill-
furnished day room, they pass a banner that reads, "BACK TO
THE BAY."

CUT BACK TO:

INT. MENTAL HEALTH WING DAY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Rhonda paces around and points to the patients. She looks at
Bill.

RHONDA

You're a bunch of god damn MP's.

CUT TO:

INT. AFEEES INDUCTION STATION - DAY - FLASHBACK

A red-haired DOCTOR, 28 (looking rather like the present day Jason), stands and addresses a crowd of draft-age men in skivvies and in various stages of physical maturity, some very immature.

DOCTOR

You will do what I say, or you'll
do state penn. Now not one of you
wants a chat with the psychiatrist.

Young Bill picks up the psychiatric form, and looks at a box that asks, "HOMOSEXUAL TENDENCIES." He checks yes.

He takes the form and walks it over to The Doctor.

INT. NIH CLINICAL CENTER GROUP THERAPY ROOM - FLASHBACK

About ten patients, young adults, sit around in a large conference room with a one-way mirror on one side. A window looks across a large lawn to the rest of the hospital campus.

A YOUNG WOMAN, 19, lies catatonic on the floor. A YOUNG MALE PATIENT, 24, picks her up in a fireman carry to take her back to a chair.

YOUNG BILL

God damn MP. Nothing to be ashamed
of. Sure.

YOUNG MALE PATIENT

You're ashamed to be here. Get over
it. This is all that's real now!

YOUNG BILL

I'm the only one who goes On the
Outside.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. MENTAL HEALTH WING DAY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

RHONDA

Mr. Bill, are you with us.

BILL

What are the tests going to be.

RHONDA
You must be really looking forward
to the Tribunal.

Bill nods his head.

BILL
If I'm really getting the answers
right, and it sounds like I am,
yes. Because I get to choose.

RHONDA
Well, you know as well as I do, you
have to prove you can pay your dues
first. The basis of all moral and
straight thinking. Now since you
came here late, the people who
prove they have what it takes get
to be evacuated. You know better
than us. You've seen what's going
on.

CUT TO:

INT. STUDENT UNION CAFETERIA - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Young Bill is munching on greasy cheeseburger and fries, and watches JFK talking on a black-and-white TV. Then he sees pictures of jet fighters taking off an Air Force base and pictures of missiles in a jungle.

INT. NIH CLINICAL CENTER DAY ROOM - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

Young Bill, seated with his legs crossed, gawky, maneuvering in his chair as if to suggest genital manipulations, watches as a FEMALE NURSE, 23, demonstrates the duck-and-cover maneuver.

FEMALE NURSE
That's it. Duck and cover!

YOUNG BILL
Phooey! I'm the only one who goes
to school on the outside. I've
heard all the bad news. We are
going to war. They can't afford to
save us.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. MENTAL HEALTH WING DAY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Rhonda comes over and lifts Bill out of his chair and throws him on the ground.

RHONDA

Then you know, old man, that you
can't save yourself.

THE PATIENTS

Only faith in God.

The patients get up and start chanting. As Rhonda touches them one by one, they fall to the ground. Bill and Oeter are left standing. She covers the other patients, faces included, with blankets. Oeter bends down, his gut in the way and touching the concrete floor, to check one of them.

OETER

They are all dead. Slain in the
spirit!

INT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL AT STELLE - LATER

Bill and Joetta enter another tiled Cape Cod house that is slightly larger than the house near the missing "Baltimore." There is a living room with old fashioned black-and-white TV set with Halo Light, garish rococo 1930s lights, an electric but plain kitchen with small white appliances, throw rugs, and one small bedroom with a Queen-sized bed. It looks like it was thrown together and not maintained by a "housewife". There is an old manual typewriter on an inexpensive desk with special keys for chemistry and calculus. A small console piano fills one wall.

There is an old 1950s style phonograph machine, and a few records in paper sleeves that look like breakable 78s.

Bill tries to get his computer to work but it won't come on. The electric typewriter comes on, but no the device longer remembers his book and starts over by requesting a title.

There is a knock on the door. Tobey and Patrick are there.

TOBEY

Hi. You know the plan yet?

BILL

No.

JOETTA

We've actually been lounging around for the first time since the trip started.

TOBEY

I'm gonna work here while I recuperate.

JOETTA

So you'll look better. That will please Bill.

Patrick looks at Joetta and avoids eye contact with Bill.

PATRICK

Well, Bill will never find out. He does his qualifications tomorrow and then hikes down the Path tomorrow night. I'm not sure who's goin'. You can probably guess.

BILL

So this is it.

TOBEY

The tribs, like in your own book. I'll bet.

BILL

Like it can all end tomorrow night if I want.

TOBEY

If you want. You really want to die for real Bill?

BILL

That doesn't happen.

TOBEY

Maybe.

BILL

On the morning of September 11, before getting up, I dreamed all night long about a suitcase nuke blowing up at the Iwo Jima memorial. Not much damage a mile away, but a sky full of black clouds and cinder, and police cruising residential streets all day imposing martial law.

(MORE)

BILL(cont'd)

I was a kind of purification. I would get up to urinate and the same dream would continue. So now, it's not clear, it's a kind of Death Star. I wonder what it's like back home.

TOBEY

You know, you don't want to know. Put on the suit in the closet tomorrow before going to the tests. Do you want me to check you out?

BILL

Sounds like a speech. You know, public speaking is easy. Laugh a little, cry a little.

TOBEY

We'll, you'll get to speak. And watch and stare. Ask and tell.

BILL

Tobey, you do know, don't you?

TOBEY

I left for Baltimore after you did. I thought I caught the same train. But I was late.

INT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL AT STELLE - EVENING

Bill and Joetta watch the old Philco black-and-white television with Halo Light. The program is Homemaker's Exchange, and the focus is on losing weight.

Joetta walks into the small kitchen, and opens the half-size refrigerator. She pulls out some rice, butter, snow peas, and carrots. She finds some pans and pours water in. This time the stove will not come on until she lights the pilot light. She starts to stir a real meal in the pan. The water comes to a boil and this time the steam is very hot and she burns herself once, and shakes her hand.

JOETTA

Ouch!

Bill plays a tune on the piano, and it is out of tune.

BILL

I actually composed it.

JOETTA
I've heard it before.

BILL
In the days that we had, or will
have, Internet, that's a good
thing. Now it means it isn't mine.

Bill goes to the small bathroom and fills the tub with warm water.

JOETTA
I guess, Bill, you don't like to
cook.

INT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL AT STELLE, BATHROOM - MOMENTS
LATER

Bill looks at his almost hairless legs as the water bubbles pile up on them anyway. He reaches for a toy boat covered with dry soap grains and sprinkles water on it. The bubbles release.

He smirks.

INT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL AT STELLE - NIGHT

Bill and Joetta lie in bed, partially clothed.

BILL
I forgot my pajamas. Always better
to sleep. But it's kind of hard to
sleep. I have to catch myself
before shaking.

JOETTA
You get it, don't you. You're
really not supposed to sleep or
tune out.

BILL
Yeah, yeah, I'm already tuned out.
Once I got to grad school, I had
roommates again.

JOETTA
Never heard the first story.

BILL
Of my expulsion. I'll get to tell
it.

JOETTA

I believe it.

BILL

But once I could live in a dorm again, in grad school, we would lie and talk at night while Kansas thunderstorms raged outside. You know, there was a rule at the old Stelle, that there could be only one wage earner per household. That was in your homeowner's association deed. Very unusual.

JOETTA

You think I would make a home for you. So we could have lots of little Bills.

BILL

I don't know how they would turn out.

She rolls over on top of him and plays with his to shirt button.

BILL

I've got to save this for tomorrow.

JOETTA

You gotta live at least once, Bill.

He reaches for her breasts.

INT. CAPE CODE HOUSE BEDROOM - NIGHT

Outside the one window, there is a large brownish star that emits somewhat more light than a full moon.

Bill lies on his back, and apparently is sleeping. Joetta climbs on and teases him, fingering his chest hairs. He shakes, and wakes up. He relaxes as she continues to play.

INT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL AT STELLE - MORNING

They finish another rice and chopsticks breakfast.

JOETTA

You've gotta dress for Tobey's inspection, and we gotta make the bed.

BILL
They even got hospital corners.

JOETTA
I think we have to fold those
ourselves. Like on Homemakers
Exchange.

BILL
That was for cooking!

JOETTA
Let me play housewife.

CUT TO:

INT. ARMY BARRACKS, BASIC TRAINING - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Young Bill and other enlisted men in fatigues are struggling with hospital corners. Bill is really struggling with his lower bunk. The DRILL SERGEANT, 30, comes by and throws Bill's sheets into the floor.

DRILL SERGEANT
You will shine your boots, you will
shine your low quarters, and you
will clean my barracks.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL AT STELLE - CONTINUOUS

Joetta has the sheets on the floor. She picks up the mattress, supports it with her head, and points to a yellow stain.

JOETTA
Come and see.

Bill is looking at the few grade school texts on the living room bookshelves.

BILL
What is this? Fun with Dick and
Jane. Or My Weekly Reader?

JOETTA
Well, you saw them on the
bookshelves. But you're normal.
Your whole life was a facade.

BILL

We didn't do anything. I couldn't, yet.

JOETTA

That's all right. They'll come and change the mattress for the next guest. But they'll keep it for you.

BILL

Are you young enough?

JOETTA

Not too old? You finally enjoyed it in spite of yourself. You can always trust me. You know that.

There is a quick CLACK at the door. Tobey walks in. This time Greg follows.

Bill quickly rips his suit off the hanger. It falls to the floor in a heap. He quickly dresses himself, with jerky motions that suggest instances of forgetfulness. Finally he has his tie unstrung.

TOBEY

Boy Scout time, Bill?

BILL

Very funny. You know I can't stay on their track.

Tobey walks over to the bookcase and pulls out the three booklets--red, orange and blue--of Fun with Dick and Jane.

TOBEY

Literature. Well look, you don't remember how to do a Windsor.

Tobey walks over and ties it for him.

TOBEY

Since I'm your friend, I won't tell. A little non-biological nepotism. You still have all your points.

JOETTA

I'll finish the hospital corners for you.

GREG
No hurry. Bill will never see 'em
again. He's no lifer.

EXT. CAPE COD HOUSE FOR BILL AT STELLE - CONTINUOUS

Bill, Tobey and Greg walk towards the Admin building.

TOBEY
Now Bill, I remember you took to my
philosophy.

GREG
You're kind of Nietzschean. Gay
Science and all that.

TOBEY
We think you should do the doctor
visit first. It'll stir you up.
You'll do better on the tests. Now
afterwards you'll take the golf
cart train to the gold course.
Well, actually, it's like a giant
Monopoly board. You'll do three
tasks. Then tonight you go down the
Path. You can lecture the rest of
your story then.

INT. MEDICAL EXAM ROOM - LATER

Bill lies down on the table. Jason approaches as Tobey
watches.

BILL
The doctor, eh.

JASON
Just leave on your outfit.
Actually, you want to watch the
workup in the next room first.

BILL
This is a preview of the tribunals.

TOBEY
There's more to it than what you
see.

INT. SECOND MEDICAL EXAM ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bill stands in the entrance way as Sean lays on the gurney, in slacks and blue dress shirt.

JASON

Now, Sean, you really wanted to do this.

Jason approaches gingerly.

JASON

Remember, I am The Doctor.

Jason slowly disrobes Sean. First he removes the low quarters. He then rolls up the sleeves upon moderately hairy arms. He undoes the tie, then pulls off the socks. Finally, he unbuttons the shirt.

BILL

Reveal.

Bill puts his hands on his mouth, and Tobey covers Bill's mouth with another hand.

The chest is covered with dense hair.

JASON

He's got to do a race today. That was his elective.

Jason goes to the wash basin and fills his hands with shaving cream and applies it to Sean's chest. Bill's face and mouth quiver.

Tobey pushes Bill back into his own examining room.

INT. FIRST EXAMINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Bill now lays on the table. Jason works very quickly, stripping off his shoes and trousers to his shorts.

JASON

Boy, you look stimulated.

He unbuttons the shirt. Bill can see the glassy hands.

Jason places electrodes at various points on his chest and does a quick electrocardiograph reading.

JASON

I'm going to paste some permanent sensors on the smooth parts of your body. Because you have the Tribunal tonight, that's all for now. But we can monitor you from now on.

EXT. STELLE GROUNDS - CART TRAIN AREA - MORNING

Bill, Greg, Tobey, and other male candidates ride the golf car along a monorail about a mile, sitting stoically, like soldiers. They enter what looks like a large cornfield with many small concrete buildings laid out in a grid.

They walk toward the first building, which when they go inside is just a car repair shop. The cars in various stages of dismemberment are older models like Nashes and Hudsons. A crusty AUTO MECHANIC, 66, explains the assignment.

AUTO MECHANIC

You will pick one car and change all four tires and change the oil, after I show you how just once.

TOBEY

I'll leave you be. You can change into work clothes. When you're done your good clothes have to stay in perfect shape.

The clock shows in hours of one sixteenth of a day, as 6 hours.

EXT. STELLE GROUNDS - AUTO REPAIR SHOP - LATER

Bill is struggling with the first tower, and oil is spilled over the concrete floor as Tobey walks in.

TOBEY

Ready to go Bill?

AUTO MECHANIC

He didn't get far. He tried.

PATRICK

Did you do the best you can, Bill?

BILL

I think so.

PATRICK

I think so, too. And that's too bad.

BILL

Is there a shower?

TOBEY

Put the suit on. You'll have to make do.

EXT. STELLE GROUNDS - CONVENIENCE STORE - LATER

Bill with Tobey and Patrick in another Old Nash about 500 yards to small retail store with gasoline pumps in front. A two-lane asphalt blacktop approaches the station from the East, and disappears out on a flat prairie horizon. There is one gasoline pump for regular and one for ethyl.

Bill steps out, his face smudgy and one of his glasses frames dangling. He steps into the store, where a male CONVENIENCE STORE ATTENDANT, 40 and fat, shakes his hand. Inside there are only a few shelves of canned foods, no frozen food or produce, some school notebooks and pencils, and newspapers.

Bill picked up one of the newspapers, a Baltimore Sun Times. The headline reads EVACUATION 75% COMPLETE. Underneath there are pictures of cars headed out along two-lane roads.

CONVENIENCE STORE ATTENDANT

Sonny, have you done register before?

CUT TO:

INT. METRODOME FRANKS AND MORE - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Bill behind the counter, punching colored tags on the register, counting quarters for change, handing out beers and cokes and nachos to an overwhelming crowd, stretching almost back to the gridiron.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL GAME TENT ON FIELD - NIGHT -
FLASHBACK

Young Bill and other high school students pour cokes and
manipulate cardboard trays of nickels and times as other high
school students line up. There is a cardboard sign, "SCIENCE
HONOR SOCIETY."

CUT BACK TO:

INT. STELLE GROUNDS - CONVENIENCE STORE - CONTINUOUS

Bill is now behind the old manual cash register.

BILL

What kind of fiat money do you use?

CONVENIENCE STORE ATTENDANT

It's complicated. We have some play
money that we make ourselves. But
we charge different people
different prices on an intangible.
They show you a color coded card,
and you discount the price
according to the color. Can you see
colors darker than purple?

BILL

What. I have perfect human color
vision.

CONVENIENCE STORE ATTENDANT

You can do your number work in your
head? What did you call it,
arithmetic? Look, we don't have a
lot of customers any more.

Dan walks in, looks at Bill and blinks his eyes.

DAN

Got sunglasses. That death star is
going to ruin me.

CONVENIENCE STORE ATTENDANT

It is getting bright out there.
Brown to orange to yellow.

CUT TO:

INT. BILL'S OFFICE - DAY - FLASHBACK

The office is much fuller of people, with lots of busy computers and people surfing

DAN
But, Bill, she's your mother.

BILL
But if I have to quit, that's the end.

INT. BILL'S OFFICE - DAY - FLASHBACK

Dan looks at bit younger now, and the office is empty. There is a Yahoo news story on the computer about a girl maimed in a lawnmower accident.

DAN
She's a freak. She's ruined. All because her father left her to answer the phone.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. STELLE GROUNDS - CONVENIENCE STORE - CONTINUOUS

Bill hands Dan a pair of shades.

BILL
So Dan, you can survive this without a family.

DAN
It sounds like you're gonna have one again after tonight.

BILL
They just fired me. They didn't fire you did they. I mean, there is nothing for you here, much less me.

DAN
Just take care of Joetta when you came back. You're gonna know what it's like.

INT. NATATORIUM - LATER

Bill stands at the edge of a narrow swimming pool. He is in gray shorts and his chest, back, and legs have several paste-on blue electrodes. There are depth signs around the pool, ranging from 5 to 8.

Greg walks in, also in gray shorts. However he does not wear the electrodes. His entire body, including his legs, is very smooth, with no sign of scarring now from the previous fire. He jumps in and swims to half way, then bobs in the water.

GREG

Bill, your test is that you can at least dogpaddle to me.

Bill walks over to the edge and places his hand in the water. He shakes it.

BILL

Is there a ladder.

GREG

Look, there's no way to do this a little at a time. I know it's cold. Good for you.

Bill backs away, shivering.

He goes back to the small cinderblock locker room, and looks at his clothes, folded on a bench. He opens up his boxer shorts and looks inside. They are clean. He smells them.

He hears a tap on the door, and Tobey, dressed in good clothes, appears. Tobey's own face has healed almost back to its former model-like texture.

TOBEY

Come on, don't you like Greg. What is it?

BILL

It's freezing in there.

TOBEY

No, is it he has no texture? He's already been revealed.

BILL

I never could take the cold.

TOBEY

You got to if you're going to look forward to tonight.

BILL

There's no biffy here, though.

Tobey, in slow motion, SHOVES Bill out into the Natatorium and PUSHES him backward into the water. Bill FALLS in. He screams and kicks. He grabs Greg around the back and chest.

GREG

Arch your back!

Bill is shaking in spasms now and turning rigid. An alarm goes off. Greg dumps him on the side of the pool, jumps out, and starts giving Bill mouth-to-mouth CPR. Bill vomits and sits up.

TOBEY

Bill, are you ready to try again?

EXT. STELLE GROUNDS - GOLF CART TRAIN AREA - EVENING

Bill, Tobey, Greg, Oeter, Patrick, Sean, Clark and Jason are riding the monorail train to the edge of a typical Eastern forest. Bill still has his suit, the other men have typical street clothes. Tobey and Clark have brought blue backpacks. Clark, however, is in blue shorts. A well marked trail, with a big blue arrow as a blazer, starts next to where the track loops around. The trail goes back into the woods without a clear visible destination, in a straight path.

The men get off and start walking with a kind of rhythm.

BILL

A Night hike. We used to do this at Huntley Meadows. And I remember Rattlesnake Mountain. That was maybe the best weekend of my life, a breakout. The Honor Society trip to the White Mountains.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN COUNTRYSIDE - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Young Bill and twelve other teenagers climb around some rocks overlooking lake country below. Bill is humming a theme from classical music.

YOUNG BILL

So this is your Rattlesnake Peak.
And this is the hike in the
mountains that is worth any grade.

EXT. MOUNT WASHINGTON SUMMIT - DAY - FLASHBACK

A large sedan filled with teenagers, including Young Bill, finishes the last hundred feet of the road leading to the weather station, which is covered with rime ice. Ice fog, wind driven, masks the output. There are only clouds below, and they are cut off from the rest of the planet.

CUT BACK TO:

EXT. STELLE GROUNDS - GOLF CART TRAIN AREA - CONTINUOUS

BILL

I loved those boys. They did a
climb Sunday to Chicorua. I stayed
back in the cabin with a sore
throat. The physics teacher
wouldn't have let me climb
Tuckerman's Ravine, because, as he
said, I didn't get enough oxygen.
But we all rode.

They walk along in military precision.

TOBEY

Go ahead, Bill. But they weren't
your best friends.

BILL

No, Michael had been on a church
retreat in West Virginia that same
weekend. I remember he said it
snowed there, even at the end of
May. I don't remember how we
started getting together. I think
it might have been chess club. I
would beat him, but none of us were
very good.

CLARK

Played for the fork trick in the
opening.

BILL

You know chess? You know all that.

TOBEY

It's a good sign.

BILL

We got together. Played at chess,
tennis.

CUT TO:

EXT. TENNIS COURTS - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

Young Bill misses a slam from MICHAEL (still 18). Michael is in shorts and shirtless, but Young Bill is in bright-colored street clothes. The ball does not bounce well and the tennis racquets are cheap. Michael and Young Bill both approach the net from opposite sides. They smile. Michael extends his hand. He is quite striking in appearance, with hairy arms and legs and smooth chest. They shake hands, and Bill holds on to it.

EXT. RECREATION ROOM - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Michael and Young Bill are playing amateurish ping pong on Bill's undersized chartreuse ping pong table. Bill seems to be winning by playing it safe.

MICHAEL

But Bill, the one reason you so
important is that you are so very
frank. So you are the best friend
that I have.

Bill's mouth crinkles.

CUT BACK TO:

EXT. STELLE HIKING TRAIL - EVENING

It is almost dark now, and the woods have an odd bluish cast. There is no moon, but there is an odd faint orange disk peeking through the clouds, now almost the same apparent size as the moon.

BILL

So we went our separate ways to
college. He went to VMI and I was
worried about what they would do to
him in the freshman hazing. But
that's when I traded letters with
Syd. I remember one of his letters.

(MORE)

BILL(cont'd)

He hoped our relations would be,
"intimate."

CUT TO:

INT. COLLEGE DORM ROOM - AFTERNOON

YOUNG SYDNEY, 18, sits at a small desk and writes an English theme in clumsy penmanship. It is titled MY CLOCK RADIO. Young Sydney is dressed in plain street clothes, whereas Young Bill has a garish though long-sleeve bright green and red striped shirt. Young Bill lies on his lower bunk bed with his essay, THE DEFINITION OF FRIENDSHIP, written in much neater penmanship. The room is hot and both men sweat. Bill's dresser is covered with Roloids, nose spray, and iodine bottles as well as unpacked underwear.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. STELLE HIKING TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

BILL

I don't remember when he said it exactly. I asked him what he thought of my bright-colored shirts, and he said, when he saw one, he thought, "there goes that homosexual down the street."

CLARK

So, Bill, were you.

CUT TO:

INT. DORM SHOWER - DAY - FLASHBACK

Young Bill showers behinds a translucent curtain. He doesn't hear the door opening as Sydney starts to enter the restroom. Bill is singing to himself in jest.

YOUNG BILL

Homosexual on the loose!

CUT BACK TO:

INT. STELLE HIKING TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

BILL

It was a joke. A private joke. For soliloquies, like in Carousel.

TOBEY

And it wasn't. It became a book,
your speech.

BILL

Yes, a whole life. I became the
separate creation, living for
myself, my own way. It wasn't until
the world started coming together
again, with the Internet, that it
mattered. I even escaped AIDS
myself.

TOBEY

But your part objects didn't.

BILL

But I came back for a second wind.
This time it seemed like it wasn't
acceptable, not to have obligations
to family, to get through life
without answering to what family
members need. And particularly
without having to live what others
want. That makes me ashamed. But,
if something bad happens.

TOBEY

And something did. A lot of things.

BILL

We were supposed to make the
sacrifices.

TOBEY

But I think other people didn't
want to even have to think about it
that way.

BILL

Yeah, that's the point of the
tribunals.

CUT TO:

INT. MAGNA CARTA STUDENT UNION - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

Young Bill, at the checkout desk, looks at a record of the
Schumann Second Symphony. There is a handwritten warning,
"THIS RECORD IS BADLY WORN." A redhead boy who resembles and
may be Jason (YOUNG JASON, 19) waits in line behind.

YOUNG BILL

Well, I need to emote today. I'll listen to this before my roommate comes back. He said I have one more chance to go to Tribunals.

GIRL BEHIND COUNTER

Isn't that where they shave the boys' legs?

YOUNG BILL

And for at least one boy it never grows back.

YOUNG JASON

Well mine grew back. And I was lucky, because I have diabetes.

CUT BACK TO:

EXT. STELLE HIKING TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

Jason pulls up to them. The pace is slowing down.

JASON

Well, you had become the diabetic, too, before this journey. You knew this, didn't you?

BILL

I suspected. But I didn't want to face it. How did you know? My god, what did you do, go into my apartment and check my dirty commode?

JASON

You haven't had to wee wee much on this trip, notice.

BILL

That's all the discipline.

TOBEY

You made so much of the tribunals, though.

BILL

That was when young men give up their fantasies about themselves and accept what society expects of them to perform in families.

(MORE)

BILL(cont'd)

You know, cardinals become
mockingbirds and not cowbirds.

TOBEY

They eat their vegetables for
people that need them.

BILL

Like, Joetta needs me. I'm supposed
to need her after this.

GREG

I don't know, maybe it's just
joining a frat, belonging. Like
playing in the football team.

BILL

You never did either. You acted and
played piano and wrote essays like
me.

CLARK

That's why you were pilloried,
Bill? Because you couldn't play
football?

CUT TO:

INT. COLLEGE DINING ROOM - MORNING - FLASHBACK

Young Bill is eating a scrambled eggs and bacon breakfast
when Young Sydney, followed by three football players, all in
jerseys with shaved lower legs and lots of sports tape around
their ankles, show up. A FOOTBALL PLAYER scowls at Bill.

FOOTBALL PLAYER

We oughtta string you up, you
little lazybones.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. STELLE HIKING TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

BILL

I made the grades, I would survive
the draft if the Berlin Wall sent
us to war, and they wouldn't.
Everybody knew it. I did make
friends. Music friends.

JASON

And you made those football types mad. They would have strung you up like a scarecrow if they had a chance.

BILL

I was different.

JASON

I understand the psychiatry. You wouldn't play at their sports. They had to play yours.

CUT TO:

INT. MUSIC PRACTICE ROOM AT COLLEGE - DAY - FLASHBACK

YOUNG JOHN, 18, is playing his concerto before Young Bill on a small console piano. Then he plays Bill's scale theme in Bill's Sonata.

EXT. ALONG A RIVER - DAY - FLASHBACK

Young Bill, Young John, and Young Bill's parents walk along a river.

YOUNG JOHN

And, Bill, I don't think anyone should try to play Beethoven until he is thirty.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. STELLE HIKING TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

Now strong Northern Lights parse the entire night sky into pastel curtains.

CLARK

What a sight. I'm glad we can enjoy it. I know where we came from and where we are going.

BILL

If it's all over, then it seems I'm vindicated. I didn't like my own blood, and I didn't do anything to ratify it.

TOBEY

Okay, Bill we get it.

BILL

You know what then happened.

CUT TO:

INT. MAGNA CARTA COLLEGE DORM ROOM 1961 - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Bill walks from the empty porch up to his dorm room. He finds a handwritten note scotch-taped to the unlocked door.

INSERT:

"In recent room inspections we have noticed excessive patent medicines like Roloids and nose spray and throat paint. Please report to the Dean of Men about this today."

Bill walks into his room and looks at his chest of drawers and picks up the nose drops and rolaids and stuffs them into his trouser pockets. He gently closes the door and runs downstairs and outside. He strolls through the fog across Richmond Road onto the main campus. The early evening drizzle gives the scene a black-and-white look out of place for a colonial campus. He pauses for a moment in front of the Wren Building, walks astride and looks at the sunken garden. He looks at a sign proclaiming the building to be the oldest in North America. He walks up the steps of the building, now deserted for Thanksgiving Friday. He quickly navigates to the Dean's office on the second floor. It is sealed by a milkglass door that seems illuminated from the inside. The door reads:

INSERT

Carson W. Smith

DEAN OF MEN

Young Bill knocks, timidly.

INT. MAGNA CARTA COLLEGE DEANS OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER -
FLASHBACK

Young Bill is seated in a plain chair in front of the DEAN OF MEN, 40, with his massive but empty oakwood desk.

YOUNG BILL

My roommate thinks that I could really attack him in my sleep. Irrational.

DEAN OF MEN

I let you in on a secret, man to man. Maybe he just means he thinks he won't get it up again. We'll work this out. We won't ask you to leave school or anything like that.

YOUNG BILL

Are you telling the truth?

EXT. MAGNA CARTA COLLEGE CAMPUS STREET - MORNING - FLASHBACK

A Ford Galaxie turns the corner onto a road heading for an adjacent business district. Bill is walking on the corner. (Show the campus from the air for a moment.) Bill opens the door and climbs in. BILL'S FATHER, then 60, drives.

BILL'S FATHER

This is going to come as a blow to you, Bill, but we have to take you out of school.

YOUNG BILL

The Dean lied. He specifically promised he wouldn't ask me to leave school. He broke the Honor Code.

BILL'S FATHER

Well, he talked to the President of the College last night. He has no choice. You know, the College has to think about the other parents, not just us.

INT. MAGNA CARTA DORM STAIRWAY 1961 - LATER - FLASHBACK

Show a Vertigo view of the stairway. Young Bill and Dad are carrying down the mattress. Dad is trying to fold it. He points to a wet gray stain.

BILL'S FATHER

Now, Bill, look, look. You see how I know that you are not a homo.

Father points to the stain again as John suddenly starts up the steps.

YOUNG JOHN
Bill, what's up? You're going.

YOUNG BILL
They are making me leave school. To get medical advice. That's how they put it. Mildly.

YOUNG JOHN
It's a shock. You talked, didn't you?

YOUNG BILL
I'll write soon and explain.

YOUNG BILL'S FATHER
No you won't. You do what we say if you want to get out of this.

YOUNG JOHN
Look, just send me one communique. I look forward to it.

INT. FORD GALAXIE - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

Bill sits in the back seat, as they cross a wide river driving back home on a cold late fall day. Bare trees show now.

BILL'S FATHER
We'll call the Dean of Admissions at GW tomorrow. But if you ever mention homosexuality again, not a college in the country will take you.

YOUNG BILL
It's fair enough.

BILL'S MOTHER
Daddy means it. If you ever tell anybody something like this, your college days are over. And you can't make it by yourself in the real world.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. STELLE HIKING TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

The trail descends slightly towards a clearing and a stream, while the aurora borealis intensifies into a natural disco light show in the entire sky.

BILL

I saw John again. He came to visit in January. You know, he caught me putting my hand on his knee once. Syd had complained in the dorm that I did that. I wasn't conscious of that. I was conscious that I wanted to team up with better men, not reproduce myself. So, yes, I was disloyal to the idea of family.

CLARK

You think it doesn't matter.

GREG

Did you see Michael again. How did all these people take this?

BILL

We had a euphemism. I had been sent home to seek 'medical advice.'

Jason cackles.

JASON

You just didn't want to do it.

BILL

And they wanted me to. That was my debt. I did see Michael again. He came over to the House in December. And nothing had been done to him. He wasn't distant. He still shook my hand. The wrists were the same. But he said telling the Dean that I was gay was a stupid thing to do. But, a Baker's dozen years later, I would have a Second Coming.

CUT TO:

INT. CLUB BATHS 1975 - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Bill sits in the lounge, watching color TV while other men sit around in towels.

He gets up and wanders into the orgy room, where there is a violet lit hall, leading to a dark room with one large mattress and men, scampering ape-like with sounds of sucking and smacking. Bill stops, and looks down at an attractive man going down at him, and rubs the man's lightly haired chest hard. Bill's mouth quivers.

CUT BACK TO:

EXT. STELLE HIKING TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

They come to an opening, by a stream, with the soil a bit muddy. Two tall figures, bald, who are shaped like women appear.

Bill approaches the stream.

GREG

I don't know about this. Is this a baptism? Like we're have way through the rapture already, aren't we?

Bill kneels down, but Clark lifts him back up and holds him underneath the shoulders. Clark carries him and sets him down on a lone hurricane-toppled tree trunk near the stream.

CLARK

Huh. Derooted.

BILL

You treat me like a god damn MP. Mental patient.

CLARK

You earned it.

Tobey approaches, and smiles. Now he looks like he did at 21.

TOBEY

You want to go back to the world?

BILL

I really don't think we can.

TOBEY

You'd bet on it.

CLARK

You have the most points. So your future depends on whom you choose to administer your tribunal.

Jason walks over, and strips to his skivvies.

JASON

They're already making surgeons do it. You do understand what you want. Oeter, come over here.

Oeter waddles over.

OETER

You know what to do, too, don't you.

Oeter nods.

GREG

So how did Syd get to have all that power? He died first, and you didn't, Clark?

CLARK

I've stayed wired to the whole time-space. Not even Sean stayed on with me. But Syd, well he always paid his dues.

TOBEY

I had one encounter with Syd myself.

CUT TO:

INT. AGENT'S OFFICE, L.A. - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

Sydney, 58, looks at about ten head shots of Tobey arranged on his easel. These shots are generally upscale in nature: men's designer suits, California wine, and "a perfect PC." The Macintosh computer at Sydney's neat desk is turned on, and several books are stacked on it, including the black-and-white cover "A GAY CONSERVATIVE'S OPUS." There are family pictures on the wall, and a view of Hollywood in the smoggy valley below. The buzzer rings, and Tobey, dressed in gym shorts, loafers and well-fitted tee-shirt, strides in, uninvited.

TOBEY

Are you Syd?

SYDNEY

You got him. Sounds like you've read about me.

Sydney picks up the black-and-white book.

SYDNEY

So Bill thinks this cover looks like "Schindler's List"? Oh. Well, Tobey, as you see, I got all the head shots from the computer. Sounds like your girl friend did you a favor. You know, a man and a woman.

Sydney looks at Tobey for a moment, hesitates, and offers his hand. After they shake, Sydney looks back at the pictures, then the computer.

TOBEY

You said you had a script.

SYDNEY

There's another novella, it's under the table. Called "Rain on the Snow."

TOBEY

And it's not a weather picture.

SYDNEY

No, it's a symbolic title, all right. Maybe you could get on board with it. Help him promote himself. That could help you.

TOBEY

So I don't need a field trip to Mount Shasta.

SYDNEY

No, just like I Love Lucy didn't need to trample grapes in a vat. But look, you know, there's the stuff about Tribunals.

TOBEY

Getting Trumped. Like I'd be your apprentice.

SYDNEY

You look spunky. You take care of your legs, and that's good. But you know, actors are versatile. They allow things to be done to them. They change. They have to change.

(MORE)

SYDNEY(cont'd)

Especially the movies. Make a choice.

INT. A UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Tobey, in a snazzy red sweater, is speaking a lectern, as Bill, in a suit and on crutches, stands behind him. There is a blackboard with an outline written in white chalk, looking like a test. Tobey walks up to Bill and taps Bill's shoulders.

TOBEY

This time, Bill has told a story. This adds to the other things he writes about.

CUT BACK TO:

EXT. HIKING TRAIL STREAM CROSSING - NIGHT

Bill is seated on the log, as Oeter walks up behind him. Clark is in front, and Tobey looks from the side. Tobey walks in front. Greg restrains him.

TOBEY

Hhhmm.

GREG

We're all busted. This whole tribulation is a facade. We all had real lives.

OETER

We forsaked what is natural. We fed ourselves instead.

Bill stands up, shaking.

BILL

I pick Clark. I mean, who else?

TOBEY

I think you'll get to see what happened.

BILL

I want to.

TOBEY

You really want to know. There are no more second chances after this. It's all cool.

Tobey stands right in front, and Clark engulfs him from the back. Oeter kneels down and covers his hands with some foam from the stream.

CLARK
It's mine to do.

Clark pulls Bill back into him. Bill comes to his neck. Clark unbuttons Bill's shirt as Bill unbuttons Tobey's. Clark undoes Bill's belt buckle and drops Bill's pants to the ground, where they fall into the foamy stream and then they quickly soil.

Clark sits down on a big quartz boulder with Bill in his lap.

Oeter extends his hands, covered with brownish foam, and Tobey shakes his head. Oeter scampers back along the rocks, on all fours, to Clark's backpack, and takes out a chard of glass and a carving knife. Stumbling, he charges back toward Clark.

Oeter offers Clark the chard, and Clark stays mute, refusing the chard. Then Oeter picks up the knife. It sparkles different colors as Clark takes it in hand.

CLARK
You figure this out yet? You need Bill's grip as well as mine. Give it to Tobey.

Oeter scampers about 30 feet upstream to pick up Tobey's pack. Tobey opens it, and takes out an unmarked jam jar of a gray paste. He pops open the jar and wax, and applies the paste to Bill's chest in massage motions.

TOBEY
Just don't cry Bill. Do your best. You'll be awesome when it's over.

CLARK
You'll like this. You want me to have fun regardless of what people think. And I get to. You don't, without playing Mother May I. This is it.

Clark then takes the knife and scrapes and whittles at Bill's chest, going ever down.

BILL
No. Aaah.

The camera shows Bill's sunken chest scraped smooth. Traces of blood vaporize and the chest looks like a baby's.

FADE TO BLACK:

FADE IN:

INT. COLLEGE DORM BASEMENT - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

The freshmen seated in the chairs on stage scream and grimace as they hear the sound of scraping beneath.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. DOLL HOUSE - DAY

Bill sits on an orange plastic bench, facing a piano with keys that don't work when he tries to play a scale. He pops his head around in jerky angular movements, and looks at a sofa, phonograph, television. The television is made of brown plastic and the buttons don't work.

He hears a baby scream. He skips and jumps, and then limps into a bedroom, and sees a crib with a baby lying on its back, screaming in perfect syncopated rhythm. A dog sits by the crib and yelps in cadence.

Then, Bill's Cat creeps in, oversized, tearing out some of the plastic around the door of the doll house as it enters. The cat blurts out some loud meows, that seem out of place and falsetto for its apparent size. It approaches the baby, smells it, and treads away.

The ceiling above him disappears, revealing a dark expanse above him. He feels his body pulled up into space. He jerks his head, sees strings pulling on his arms like they were puppets. A shoulder joint pops out, and he dangles, but there is no pain. He keeps moving up into space. A smaller, plastic toy baby falls to the floor, without crying. The cat stays below and wrestles with the toy baby, swinging it back and forth by the neck, as the head comes off. It runs back to the real baby and rubs and grooms its head.

INT. EMPTY CONVENTION FLOOR, BALTIMORE - DAY

A Staunton chess set comes to view, with the pieces arranged in a complex fashion, from a tricky position in the French Defense.

SYDNEY (O.S.)
Your move, champ.

BILL
Black? This is a real game, not a
performance.

Bill looks down and sees his legs look stiff, as if the
fabric were sewn into his flesh. Bill moves a rook.

BILL
Your Queen is lost, mated by force,
even though it isn't directly
attacked yet. But, wait, this
position shouldn't happen.

SYDNEY
I guess you had your own religion.
The people you liked had none.

BILL
Like Tobey, Clark.

SYDNEY
You could dislike yourself, set
yourself aside, and play God
yourself. Well, I got to do that.
Look at our world. Call it baby
play.

Sydney lifts Bill over a railing. Below he sees a railroad
layout, with different areas. There is a round house near a
lake, with a tower and some boats. The tracks lead to a small
Soviet style city, and then out of the desert into the
forest, to Stelle, and suburbia. The convenience store in
Stelle is gone, burned to the ground, but off in the distance
there is a model Wal-Mart. Then, beyond the forest and
another lake, are the gleaming towers of Baltimore. Not many
skyscrapers, just a few.

BILL
I said no to playing by somebody
else's rules. For making their
goals mine. Just to have kids.

SYDNEY
But then you became their subjects
anyway. You see how we see it. You
have no purpose until you accept
you're part of a community of
faith.

BILL

Well I'm right then. The baby isn't real, either. Neither one.

SYDNEY

Not yet. But you are. But maybe not for long. Children will one day be out future again.

Sydney reaches down, and snaps off both of Bill's legs. Bill sees bloodless stumps of bone and fleshy plastic.

SYDNEY

I can make you a young man again. Now watch the trains run, the kayaks row, the people do their tilling in their gardens.

BILL

And this is all that's left.

SYDNEY

You didn't get to play God. But you can taste being a young man again. Now that you've been through Tribunals.

Bill looks over and sees a facsimile of Oeter, much thinner, with rounded concrete pieces in front.

SYDNEY

Now watch. Here is my act.

The trains start running. The stream train leaves Stelle and a one car electric train from Grand Rapids approaches it on the same track and collides. The locomotive on the stream train breaks apart. The desert part of the railroad rises to a different level, and then the forest part still rises at the highest level. The cab from the locomotive falls to the Grand Rapids level. A match lands near the cab in Grand Rapids and the area catches fire, even though the buildings appear to be concrete. A match also lands near the roundhouse near "old Baltimore" but it is slow to catch fire.

BILL

So what, these are like the branes? Different eras of time?

SYDNEY

Now go over and step on Oeter's toes. You found your way out.

BILL
After all that body shaving.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. BILL'S OLD APARTMENT BUILDING ON EARTH - AFTERNOON

The apartment building and surrounding buildings are abandoned and in disrepair. Dark clouds cover the sky and a brown soot covers the abandoned traffic jam. An aerial shot shows an abandoned city, with buildings disappearing completely up the tracks towards Baltimore.

Above the clouds a huge gas-giant-like dirty brown planet is finally moving away.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. A SIMPLE CHURCH, DAY

Bill and Joetta stand inside a simple pre-manufactured church, with gray plastic walls and clear windows. The sun is streaming in from outside, where the view is one of flat prairie with wildflowers. The sense of color inside is much weaker than in whatever world beckons outside.

Sydney approaches, holding a black book that looks like a Bible. He opens the pages, towards the back, and some of the print is in red. He then holds up a small mirror.

SYDNEY

Bill and Joetta, look at yourselves
in the mirror.

Piped music from Lohengrin begins to play softly.

Bill looks into the mirror and sees himself, youngish and slightly balding, as he might have looked around age 30. He looks down for a moment at his tuxedo pants, and moves his legs, as if to verify that he could feel them. His Cat walks into the sanctuary and seems only slightly oversized now, like a serval.

SYDNEY

Do you take Joetta as your bride.

Bill chokes. He now looks at Joetta, who looks surprisingly built, but covered.

BILL

I do.

SYDNEY

You have been prepared for any ceremony. You can walk the Hajj and throw stones, and you can hold a Bar Mitzvah. You can celebrate. You are circumcised, and you are finally clean. You may kiss the bride on the lips.

Bill kisses Joetta, and suddenly grips her passionately, and then lets his hands drop.

JOETTA

Whatever happens in Baltimore, you are alive again.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. LIGHT RAIL TRAIN CAR - DAY

Bill sits alone in a silvery light rail car as it crosses a harbor into the gleaming city of New Baltimore. He looks at a picture of Joetta.

BILL

My girl.

CUT TO:

EXT SUBURBAN SIDEWALK - EVENING - FLASHBACK

CHILD BILL, 7, stands on a sidewalk in front of World War II style brick houses. He picks up a small baseball bat. A PLAYMATE, 7, tosses a softball to him. Bill sticks out the bat, as if he were trying to catch the ball rather than hit it. It strikes the bat and rolls like a bowling ball on the sidewalk.

Playmate approaches and stands next to him. He is slightly shorter than Bill.

INT. SUBURBAN HOUSE BEDROOM - DAY - FLASHBACK

Child Bill lies in bed, his face and neck covered with measles spots.

EXT. SUBURBAN SIDEWALK - MORNING

Now Bill tosses the ball to playmate, who bats the ball and it lands on the porch roof.

PLAYMATE

It's a homer.

Bill approaches the playmate, smiling, until he notices that the Playmate is now much taller.

BILL

And you say I can get well if I get married.

PLAYMATE

Yeah. You can marry men. I can marry girls.

Bill's mouth quivers.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. BILL'S APARTMENT IN NEW BALTIMORE - EVENING

(Younger) Bill sits in a marble bathtub, watching the bubbles accumulate around his now hairy legs as the bath fills. Around the tub there is a replica of the new kingdom with its various landscapes. Bill turns on the steam, and watches it land on the simulated snow of his toy landscape.

He gets up and looks at himself in the mirror. Widows peak and slightly bald, but much better. He dresses in slacks and knit shirt with closely spaced buttons.

He takes a modern elevator to the outside street, where there are single-car vehicles on tracks but no private cars. Overhead he looks at the enormous Crystal Building, that extends 1776 feet into the sky. He does not need a coat, as the air is mild. There are flowers and gardens in the street everywhere.

There is also a separate trolley line of larger cars that comes out of the disco. Bill looks up and sees patrons inside the cars, with soldiers standing over them. The train moves away, down a street that seems to drop off the horizon.

He gets out an ID car and waits in line to get into the Solar Flare Disco.

INT. BROWN DWARF DISCO NEW BALTIMORE - NIGHT

Bill buys a beer from the bar. There is only one BARTENDER, 21, shirtless. Bill reaches for his wallet, and finds no bills inside.

BARTENDER

Your ring?

The bartender points a light pen at Bill's right ear, that emits a green laser sparkle.

BARTENDER

It's emerald. That used to mean Christmas tree. You don't know about merit objects either. Have a good one.

BILL

I remember all that body shaving. I hope that's over and men are men again.

The bartender shoves the beer bottle towards Bill on he counter and shakes his head.

The disco has the same three stands, but now there are videos with scenes of various planets, such as Titan, Mars, Europa, Io, and Triton. There is a metal chinning bar around the disco, and the disco leads to a locker room that in turn leads to a pool or natatorium.

The crowd is building up when Bill recognizes Clark, Tobey, and Greg. All of the people have colored sparkles on their earlobes, and some have "rainbow" sparkling rings, and even body piercings. Tobey's complexion has recovered now and he has the face of a twenty-something. Bill walks up to Tobey, who reaches for his shirt and undoes a couple of buttons. But does the same for Tobey and can see red light illuminating his throat from an item underneath his remaining clothing.

BILL

Tobey, you really look great again.
Recovered from falling in?

TOBEY

You'd pick me to root for now? What about Clark?

BILL

Huh, a pinch of jealousy! I enjoyed him. How is he going to turn out? Or do I need to know? With you, I knew you well enough. I could have had passions.

TOBEY

Yeah, you knew my legs. Before you earn the right to dance with me, you've got to do the upsidedown chins on the bars. And I don't think you passed the swimming test before either. You know, we didn't store up any wealth. You pay your dues all the time.

BILL

Is the water cold?

TOBEY

Cold water is more refreshing, isn't it? You can't copy yourself anymore for the big freeze.

BILL

I thought it was...

TOBEY

A full boil? A big kahuna.

BILL

If I still like you I can't throw away my own kind any more.

Tobey shakes his head.

TOBEY

It's not moral.

INT. BROWN DWARF DISCO - SWIMMING POOL - LATER

Tobey is holding Bill up and keeping Bill from sinking as he struggles to dogpaddle.

Tobey lifts Bill out of the water, embracing him and leading him to the wet area.

TOBEY

That's all right. You should be better off where you're going anyway. The star will depart soon, but Atlantis can't function forever. You'll know real life.

BILL

Are you coming back with me?

TOBEY

I hope I come back. I can't speak for the other guys.

BILL

So you don't need me now?

TOBEY

You really want to know?

As they leave, they embrace again.

INT. BROWN DWARF DISCO MONORAIL STATION - LATER

Bill, sloppily dressed in a new fatigue uniform, is getting onto the train, escorted by an armed guard. The train goes out into the countryside into the sunrise, away from the City.

Bill turns around and looks at the tower. He can see the apartment building he had started to live in. Then he sees that it is on fire. Behind the city, he sees an orange-brown disc, large enough to make out the bands of gas around the approaching brown dwarf. It gets larger as it approaches New Baltimore.

EXT. STELLE GROUNDS - TRAIN STATION

A steam engine train approaches Stelle, after passing a crushed locomotive and box car pushed off the track onto a dirt path, then passes the administration building and stops. Bill gets out, dressed in his gray fatigues, with no gripsack. He paces past the administration building, and past a Cape Cod House with a sign that reads "DEEDS AND TITLES."

He walks two blocks to his own Cape Cod House. There is a sign that reads, "WELCOME BACK BILL. ONE LIFE PER CUSTOMER."

(Younger) Joetta, looking very pregnant, stands outside of the house in open arms. Bill approaches gingerly, then kisses her on the lips.

BILL

The kid won't be mine, you see. I'm
the chump.

JOETTA

Who do you give credit for?

BILL

Oh, I was closest to Tobey, but
Clark did the ceremony.

JOETTA

So it's Clark.

BILL

But it's our family now.

She makes a move to undo his shirt. His mouth crinkles. He
looks off in the distance for a moment and makes out a Wal-
Mart. Then they step inside.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END