

Public TV Episode 2: Voices of the Past

By

Anthony Wood

Writers Guild # 1661089

tony@smokingmonkey.net

COLD OPEN

FADE IN:

INT. TV STUDIO - DAY

A grainy, through-the-lens video image of BOB BEEMER, of *Bob's Painting Corner*, standing in front of an easel with his pallet and brush. He is late middle-age with a frizzy blond afro and goatee beard. He smiles at the camera as he smacks his brush on the lower part of the easel, trying to clean it. He has a smooth, calm demeanor.

BOB BEEMER

Ha, I always get a kick out of doing that. It makes me smile. Now let's dip the bristles into our Pthalo Green and also mix in some Yellow Ocher...

As Bob continues speaking we pull back to see the image is in the viewfinder of one of the studio cameras. Operating the camera is a STUDIO CAMERAMAN. He is chunky with thinning hair and has doughnut crumbs around his lips and on his chin. He wears thick glasses and a headset. Over the headset we hear the voice of JACK AARONSON, the Director.

JACK AARONSON

...and pull back on Camera 3. Cut to Camera 3. Refocus on Camera 2 and truck in...Hold... Closer...Hold. Cut to Camera 2. Okay Camera 1, stay on the wide...wider...wider...

As Jack talks we see the rest of the studio. All the CAMERAMEN are wearing dark rain ponchos covered in splotches of paint, all colors of the spectrum. The cameras are covered in plastic. There is a paint covered drop cloth on the floor.

INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM

Our view cranes up and enters the Studio Control Room high above. Behind the glass, sitting at the control panel is JACK AARONSON and an ASSISTANT DIRECTOR. Jack is short and nervous. He has a salt and pepper beard and thinning brown hair. He fidgets in his chair as he looks up at the bank of monitors on the wall. The Assistant is young, thin and gawky. She has greasy hair, a severe over-bite and a lateral

lisp. She works the camera switcher as Jack waves his arms like a symphony conductor.

JACK AARONSON
(munching antacids.)
...and cut to Camera 1.

ASSISTANT
Cutting to Camera 1.

JACK AARONSON
Tighter on Camera 2, and...cut to
Camera 2

ASSISTANT
Cutting to Camera 2.

JACK AARONSON
No--Cut to 3...Camera 3.

ASSISTANT
Ignore Camera 2 cut. Cutting to
Camera 3.

JACK AARONSON
Okay, let's hold on Camera 3 for a
bit. Refocus Camera 2.

ASSISTANT
Refocus Camera 2.

Sitting behind Jack and the Assistant are TOM BIRCH and
CLAUDIA WYNN. They are in mid argument.

TOM
(whispering.)
I don't care, you can't have it.

CLAUDIA
(also whispering.)
Why?! You don't even need it?!

TOM
I might.

CLAUDIA
You have the whole week slated for
remote shoots and you're not using
half of them!

JACK AARONSON
(waving his hands.)
Shhhhh!

ASSISTANT
 Could we have quiet, please?

TOM
 I don't care.

CLAUDIA
 I just need today.

TOM
 For what?

CLAUDIA
Choo-Choo Chatter. We're doing a
 rush piece on an antique train in
 Palmyra.

TOM
 Wow, that's sounds really
 interesting. Nope.

CLAUDIA
 Jesus! Take a break from being a
 dick for five minutes!

She looks up at one of the monitors and points.

CLAUDIA
 Oh my God, can you believe that?

TOM
 I know, right?

CLAUDIA
 It's like, three dabs of paint and
 it looks just like a pine tree!

TOM
 It's amazing.

Back to the argument.

CLAUDIA
 I'm just asking for one day, tight
 ass.

TOM
 Oh, you noticed. I have been
 working out. Okay, look, you can
 have today. But I get something in
 return.

CLAUDIA

What?

TOM

Your computer.

CLAUDIA

(puzzled.)

My compu--It's like a hundred years old. It's Ukranian. You have to start it with a hand crank.

TOM

I don't care. I want it.

CLAUDIA

Why?

TOM

'Cause I don't have one, and you do.

CLAUDIA

And what are you gonna do with it?

TOM

Nothing. But you won't have it, and I will.

CLAUDIA

(after a pause.)

All right, deal.

They shake hands as they get up to leave.

On the monitors we see Bob Beemer shouting and throwing his pallet and brushes. Now we know the reason for the protective camera plastic. We hear him through the Control Room speakers.

BOB BEEMER

God damnit! It's not right! It's not right! It's not right!

He starts tearing at the painting with a pallet knife.

BOB BEEMER

I can't do anything! I'm a hack!
I'm nothing! NOTHING!!!

He starts attacking one of the cameras.

BOB BEEMER
Ahhhhh!!!! Mommy! MOMMY!!!

JACK AARONSON
Okay, let's reset. Back to one.
Somebody want to calm Bob down?

ASSISTANT
(on headset.)
Floor crew, let's calm down Bob.
Hot towels and Dr.Pepper standing
by, please. Back to one.

Claudia and Tom exit the Control Room.

CLAUDIA
You're a sick man.

TOM
Thank you.

CUT TO:

OPENING CREDITS.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICES.

STAN FRITZEL is on a step ladder in the midst of the cubicles. His whole upper torso is up in an opening in the ceiling tiles. Wires and duct work dangle out around him. Leaning against the ladder is a TECHNICIAN; overweight and eating a doughnut. His way of assisting. DENNY VLASIC approaches the ladder. He is, as usual, drenched in sweat. He stops at the ladder and calls up.

DENNY
What's the poop, Stan?

Stan pokes his head out from the ceiling. He wears heavy magnifying glasses with built in lights.

STAN
Everything's A-OK on this level. We may have to go up to the roof and check the dish.

DENNY
Well get on it. We have a SAT meeting at two thirty.

STAN

Right-o. Fix the SAT. Diddly-dat.
Cat in the Hat, how about that...

Stan continues his mumbling as he goes back up into the ceiling.

Claudia stands by a large dry erase board on the wall. It is gridded off into calendar dates. She writes on the "Wednesday the 23rd" square: *Choo-Choo Shoot-Palmyra*.

In the square is already written: *Camera-Matthew*.

LYDIA COOPER approaches. She is sucking on her usual Tootsie-Pop. She looks up at the board.

LYDIA

Uh-oh...you got Matthew shooting?

CLAUDIA

Yeah. Is that a problem?

LYDIA

You meet him yet?

CLAUDIA

No.

Lydia rolls her eyes and strolls away.

LYDIA

Good luck.

Claudia shakes her head, confused. Lydia calls from across the Production Office.

LYDIA

Hey! You can't just write it on the board, you know. You have to log it into the network, too.

Claudia turns and sees Tom coming out of her office with her computer, monitor, keyboard and mouse stacked on a rolling cart. He smiles and waves at her as he heads out.

There is a flash of light and a huge mass of sparks that pour down from the ceiling where Stan is working. He comes down the ladder with his glasses fogged and his hair smoking.

STAN

(to the Technician.)
Time to head to the roof.

CUT TO:

INT. DENNY'S OFFICE

Claudia pokes her head into Denny's office. She knocks on the door jam.

CLAUDIA
Knock-knock.

Denny is wiping his armpits under his shirt with some paper toweling.

DENNY
Yep, c'mon in.

CLAUDIA
Denny, I need to see about getting
a new computer...

Claudia looks around his office. It is decorated circa 1922. An old Victrola in the corner plays a scratchy recording of Fats Waller singing *Honeysuckle Rose*. Dusty Victorian photos hang on the wall in ornate, gold frames. His desk is wooden and rickety. There is an old, black rotary dial phone on his desk. Not a computer, mp3 player or digital device in sight. Complete Luddite.

DENNY
What happened to yours?

CLAUDIA
It blew...you know, poof!

DENNY
Well you'll have to requisition
Stan for one. I know he's tied up
today...somewhere. I'll make a note
for you.

Denny scratches out a note on a notepad, tears it off and tapes it to the wall in front of his desk along side about two hundred other taped notes.

CLAUDIA
Thank you.

She exits.

CUT TO:

INT. TECHNICAL OFFICES.

Claudia wanders into the Technical Offices where the cameramen hang out. She sees a cubicle with a sign saying *Matthew Harlin*. She rounds the corner to see MATTHEW HARLIN at his desk. He is a shorter man with a round face, weak chin and a thin, fuzzy mustache. He has longer, 80's hair and aviator glasses. His entire desk area is surrounded with a world-record collection of Pez dispensers; everything from *Star Wars* to *Warner Brothers Toons* to *The Godfather*. Hundreds of them.

CLAUDIA
(approaching warily.)
Hi...Matthew?

He looks up and smiles a huge grin at her.

MATTHEW
Hi! Claudia?

CLAUDIA
(relieved.)
Yeah.

He shakes her hand.

MATTHEW
Glad to finally meet you. Welcome aboard. Looks like we got our first shoot together, huh?

CLAUDIA
Looks like. Wow, that is a lot of Pez.

MATTHEW
(chuckling.)
Yeah. It's a little hobby of mine. Started small. Kinda got carried away. But, you know, they're fun.

He picks up a Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* Pez dispenser, complete with mohawk haircut and mirrored sunglasses, and shoves it towards her.

MATTHEW
"You talkin to me? Huh? You talkin to me? There ain't no one else here."

CLAUDIA
 (laughing uncomfortably.)
 Ha, ha...yeah.

She pulls some candy from the dispenser and eats it.

CLAUDIA
 Ooh, he's shooting crazy candy at
 me. Arg! Mmmmm! Insanely good.
 (she munches the candy)
 So, can you be ready in five?

MATTHEW
 No problem. I'll see you out front.

CLAUDIA
 Great.

She exits, spitting the candy into her hand and tossing it
 into a waste basket.

CUT TO:

INT. FRONT RECEPTION AREA.

Claudia heads to the front reception area. Matthew is
 sitting glumly on one of the padded benches. He is not
 wearing his glasses.

CLAUDIA
 (to Matthew.)
 So, all set?

MATTHEW
 (very glumly.)
 Yeah, whatever.

CLAUDIA
 (taken aback.)
 Everything okay?

Matthew gets up quickly and grabs his camera sitting next to
 him.

MATTHEW
 (angrily.)
 Let's just do this.

CLAUDIA
 Uh, we're without a sound person
 today so, I'll have to go hand
 held.

MATTHEW
 (sarcastically.)
 Well, doesn't that make for a
 perfect day? Shit.

He heads for the door. Claudia glances at the RECEPTIONIST as if to say "*What's up with him?*" The Receptionist just shrugs and smiles. Claudia follows Matthew out the door.

Approaching the reception area is Stan Fritzel and the Technician, who carries a longer extension ladder.

STAN
 (mumbling)
 Roof, roof, roof. Goof on the roof.
 Roofity-roof-roof-roof--

The Receptionist is on the phone and doesn't acknowledge them. Stan and the Technician head out the door. The door shuts behind them.

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY HIGHWAY - DAY

The WMGT production van heads down the highway.

CUT TO:

INT. PRODUCTION VAN.

Claudia and Matthew are in the van. Matthew drives while Claudia sits quietly in the passenger seat. Then--

MATTHEW
 (looking at dashboard.)
 God damnit! They didn't leave any
 gas!

CLAUDIA
 We can stop--

MATTHEW
 (really angry.)
 The last one to use it is
 responsible for filling it up for
 the next crew! Damn that Rodriguez!

CLAUDIA
 It's okay. We have time. We can
 fill up and I can get us a couple
 of coffees for the road, all right?

MATTHEW
(snapping.)
I don't drink coffee!

CLAUDIA
Okay--

MATTHEW
Not everyone in the world drinks
coffee just because you drink
coffee! Pisses me off!

Claudia slides as far as she can from Matthew and stares out the window.

CUT TO:

EXT. TV STATION ROOF - DAY

Stan and the Technician are on the roof. They stand beneath an enormous satellite dish; at least fifty feet in diameter. It points upward at a roughly a forty-five degree angle. It's mounted on a tower about thirty feet off the ground.

The Technician extends the ladder to full height beneath the lower lip of the dish. Stan climbs up with a small toolkit. He has to stand on the top step of the ladder to reach the dish. He tosses over the toolkit, then hoists himself up into the dish. He leans over the edge and calls down.

STAN
Okay, all set.

The Technician climbs the ladder and reaches the top step. Stan reaches down and grabs the Technician's hand. With one mighty grunt Stan hoists the Technician up into the dish. His momentum causes the ladder to tip back and forth, until it falls over onto the ground. Stan and the Technician lean over and look down at the fallen ladder. MICKEY ROONEY strolls up, grabs the ladder, looks up at them, waves and scurries off.

STAN
Well...that's not good.

CUT TO:

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Claudia sits in the van holding a to-go cup while Matthew gasses it up. He finishes and climbs into the van, cheerfully. He is wearing his glasses.

MATTHEW

(smiling.)

Well, she's all topped off. Sorry about that.

CLAUDIA

(warily.)

It's okay.

He starts the van and they head off.

MATTHEW

(cheerfully.)

Those guys. Bunch of knuckleheads. Anyway, I can't wait to see this train. I don't know about you, but I'm kind of "loco-motive-loco", if you know what I mean. This should be fun, huh?

CLAUDIA

(confused.)

Yeah...fun.

MATTHEW

Is that coffee?

She quickly hands her cup to him. He takes it, cheerfully.

CUT TO:

EXT. TV STATION ROOF - DAY

Stan is hanging upside-down off of the satellite dish. The Technician is holding him by the ankles. Stan reaches toward the ground, but is about twenty feet short.

STAN

Nope. Nope. Bring me up.

The Technician hauls him back up.

Stan collects himself and looks out over the horizon of the city. The wind howls, eerily. There is also an ominous, low hum coming from the dish that is prevalent throughout these scenes.

A long pause as the camera circles around them.

STAN

I don't think anyone knows we're up here.

They look at one another, concerned.

CUT TO:

EXT. HISTORIC RURAL TRAIN STATION - DAY

Claudia is interviewing ENGINEER NED, a large, rotund fellow wearing striped train engineer bibs and hat. He has a huge, gray handlebar mustache, rosy cheeks and a bulbous nose. He has a gravelly voice like Andy Devine. Claudia holds out a microphone to him as Matthew operates the camera. They are all standing next to a handsome, perfectly preserved 1800's train. Puffs of steam collect around them as the interview goes on.

CLAUDIA

So, Engineer Ned, tell us a little bit about Old Betsy, here.

ENGINEER NED

Well, as I said, Old Betsy is an antique Longboiler from the early to mid-eighteen hundreds. We use her to take folks on a three hour wilderness loop back into the forests and hills that you can't get to by road these days.

CLAUDIA

She kinda looks like the old train from *Petticoat Junction*.

ENGINEER NED

(chuckling.)

Yeah, she does, a bit. But we brought her up from Georgia, actually. In the old days she used to carry cargo from Atlanta to all points around the deep south.

CLAUDIA

Really? And what kind of cargo did she carry?

ENGINEER NED
(cheerfully.)
Slaves.

There is a pause.

CLAUDIA
(confused.)
Okay...well, let's go for a ride,
shall we?

ENGINEER NED
Terrific. Give me five minutes to
get the pressure up and you can
have your own private tour.

He heads toward the engine. Steam blasts from the train and engulfs Claudia and Matthew.

FADE OUT IN THE STEAM:

FADE UP IN STEAM:

INT. OLD BETSY - DAY

Claudia looks out the window from the old passenger car of the train as trees and open fields fly by. Her hair blows in the wind. She is elated.

She comes back into the car and sits next to Matthew, who is in another down, glum state. His glasses are off.

CLAUDIA
My God, it's so beautiful! That's a
landscape you'll never see from a
car.

MATTHEW
Yeah...big freakin' whoop.

CLAUDIA
You really should take a look.

He stares at her with fiery hatred. She pauses. He looks down, sadly.

CLAUDIA
I know it's none of my business,
but...is everything okay?

MATTHEW

I'm fine! Don't I look like I'm fine?

CLAUDIA

No, you do...fine.

There is a pause.

MATTHEW

It's just...my wife moved out about three weeks ago.

CLAUDIA

I'm sorry.

MATTHEW

And I'm just really horny, so...

She moves across the aisle from him and into another seat.

There is a sudden jerk of the train, then loud screeching noises. The train spasms to a halt.

CUT TO:

EXT. TRAIN

Claudia gets off the train and walks to the front at the engine, where Engineer Ned is looking underneath the wheels.

CLAUDIA

Is there a problem, Engineer Ned?

Engineer Ned straightens up, wiping grease from his hands on a rag.

ENGINEER NED

Ahh, one of the crossbeams has gone out of skew on the treadle.

CLAUDIA

Is that bad?

ENGINEER NED

Real bad. Ripped out the whole torsion mount. Bent the mid axle. I'm afraid we're stuck high and dry.

CLAUDIA

Yikes.

ENGINEER NED

And we're about halfway through the trip. That means the station is an hour and a half away.

CLAUDIA

Well, I mean, you have emergency plans in place in case something like this happens, right?

ENGINEER NED

We sure do. Don't you worry. I'm taking care of it right now.

CLAUDIA

Terrific.

Engineer Ned pats her shoulder, turns around and starts sprinting down the train tracks. Well, as fast as a man of his age, girth and a bad hip can sprint. After he gets a hundred yards or so away.

CLAUDIA

(calling after him.)

Where are you going, Engineer Ned?

He disappears over the horizon.

CLAUDIA

Oh wonderful.

CUT TO:

EXT. TV STATION ROOF - DAY

Stan and the Technician sit in the center of the satellite dish. Stan is emptying out the contents of his small toolkit.

STAN

One Heath Kit Pro volt tester. One wire snips, red handles. One pen knife. One pocket mirror. One box quarter inch wire connectors. One mini notepad and mechanical pencil. Two packages plastic zip ties. One mini screwdriver set. Three dimes...

He pulls a Zagnut Bar from the kit. The Technician's eyes brighten.

STAN

...and one Zagnut Candy Bar.

Stan glances at the Technician, who is salivating at the thought of the candy bar. Stan cautiously takes the pen knife, opens it and cuts the candy bar exactly in half. He starts to hand one half to the Technician, who grabs at it greedily. Stan pulls it back.

STAN

This could be the only food we see
for a very long time. We have to
eat it slowly and make sure it
lasts.

The Technician nods at Stan, soberly. Stan hands him the half a candy bar. The Technician gobbles it down in one bite.

STAN

Or not.

CUT TO:

EXT. TRAIN

Claudia sits glumly on the steps of the train engine. Matthew climbs down from the engine. He is in a good mood. His glasses are on.

MATTHEW

Well, no radio, no walkie talkie,
can't even send smoke signals.

She looks out at vthe vast horizon.

CLAUDIA

Wonderful.

MATTHEW

Certainly is remote. Looks like we
just have to wait it out till help
arrives.

He hands her the to-go cup.

MATTHEW

Here's your coffee. Hey, maybe we
could sing songs, help pass the
time.

Claudia sips the coffee.

CLAUDIA
(sarcastically.)
I'm sorry, you are...?

MATTHEW
(chuckling.)
Ha, ha, quit kidding around. Gloomy Gus. Okay, I'll start. *"She seems to have an invisible touch yeah! She reaches in, and grabs right hold of your heart! She seems to have an invisible touch yeah! It takes control and slowly tears you apart!"*

Well I don't really know her, I only know her name But she crawls under your skin, you're never quite the same..."

As he keeps singing, Claudia looks toward the back of the train and sees a LITTLE GIRL, all of eight years old. She is thin and gaunt and is dressed in old 1880s garb; a dark gingham dress, petticoats and a bonnet on her head. She wears ankle-high buttoned shoes and carries a basket with pieces of coal in it. She is extremely pale.

CLAUDIA
Oh my God!

The Little Girl turns and looks at Claudia, wide-eyed and afraid. She pauses, then runs back into the woods down a narrow path.

CLAUDIA
No! Wait!

Claudia gets up and runs after her. Matthew follows her.

CLAUDIA
Did you see that?! Did you see her?!

MATTHEW
What?! What are you talking about?!

She points to the train.

CLAUDIA
(excited.)
Get the...the...the thing, the, the, the CAMERA! Get the camera!

Matthew jumps on board and grabs the camera as Claudia runs after the Little Girl down the path.

From Claudia's perspective the branches on the side of the path brush across her face and stick in her hair. She can barely keep the Little Girl in view. She rounds a bend. More branches and leaves. She brushes them aside and covers her eyes as she runs. After a while the leaves and brush thin out. She slows as she reaches the edge of an opening in the forest. She stops, wide-eyed. She stands next to a weathered wooden sign reading: *Old Palmyra*.

CLAUDIA

Oh my God...

We crane up behind her to see the Little Girl running into a small, quaint, almost ghostly 1800s town. There are a handful of worn and weathered log buildings; a grocer, a mercantile shop, a blacksmith barn and an old church, along with a few older cabins. Thirty or so villagers, all dressed in period garb, turn to look her way.

Matthew comes up behind Claudia carrying his camera. He is without his glasses.

CLAUDIA

(astounded.)

Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

MATTHEW

(disgustedly.)

What a dump.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

EXT. TV STATION ROOF - DAY

Stan and the Technician are still in the satellite dish. Stan is flashing a pocket mirror, reflecting the sun into the building across the street. The Technician sits, picking sweet remnants from his Zagnut wrapper.

STAN

If I can just keep repeating the emergency Morse code, I'm sure someone in that building will see it and call for help.

Stan keeps signaling, then slows down. He puts down the mirror and thinks for a moment.

STAN

That's the School for the Blind,
isn't it?

The Technician nods, licking the nougat from his fingers.

CUT TO:

EXT. OLD PALMYRA - DAY

Claudia and Matthew stroll slowly into the Old Palmyra town. The historic townsfolk look at them warily as they approach. The women hide the faces of the children and the men look suspiciously at them.

Claudia whispers to Matthew.

CLAUDIA

I think this is one of those
historical recreationist-type
towns.

MATTHEW

(caustically.)

Duh.

The Little Girl Claudia followed is holding the hand of a man who approaches them. He is MAYOR DWIGHT STINGLY; Abe Lincoln tall with a vintage suit, bow tie, vest and top hat. He wears pince nez glasses on his nose. He smiles at them warmly as the Little Girl hides behind him.

MAYOR STINGLY

Well hello there, strangers.
Welcome to Old Palmyra. I'm Mayor
Dwight Stingly. Who be you and what
might be your business here?

CLAUDIA

Hi. My name's Claudia Wynn. This is
Matthew Harlin. We're a TV crew. We
came out on a train ride...

She points down the path.

CLAUDIA

...but Old Betsy broke down. Her
treadle...and...her main axle
thingy. So...here we are.

WENDELL, a gruff, stocky, dirty Blacksmith approaches them carrying a hammer.

WENDELL

A crew? You here to fix the old Van Valkenburg bridge? Been out for over three score.

MAYOR STINGLY

(chuckling.)

Now Wendell, do these folks look like they're dressed for bridge building?

A thin, suspicious looking woman approaches eyeballing Claudia. It's the WIDOW MORDECAI. Her lips are thin and her face is drawn and wrinkled.

WIDOW MORDECAI

I don't know what they's dressed for. Strange garb. Strange talk. Strange folk. I say put 'em in the stockade.

CLAUDIA

(laughing.)

Wow...she is really good.

MAYOR STINGLY

Now Widow Mordecai, that's not very neighborly, is it? These folks seem a bit distressed and have come a long way. Where did you say you came from? Waterville?

CLAUDIA

No, Milwaukee.

The crowd gasps. DOC WALLNER, and elderly man with gray whiskers and a plaid vest steps forward.

DOC WALLNER

Milwaukee? But that's over four days ride from here! What would make folks risk their lives, travel all that way?

WIDOW MORDECAI

Up to no good, I say!

The crowd murmurs in agreement. The Mayor quiets them.

MAYOR STINGLY

Let's calm down everybody. No need to think the worst. Maybe they've come all this way for The Festival.

CLAUDIA
 (playing along.)
 Yes! Yes...exactly. We're here to
 cover The Festival. I'm
 a...reporter.

MAYOR STINGLY
 Ah, the newspapers! Well it's about
 time our little Festival got the
 attention it deserved. Although I
 must say I've never heard of a
 woman newspaper reporter before.
 But stranger things have happened,
 I just can't think of any offhand.

CLAUDIA
 And Matthew is my--

A cheerful Matthew wearing glasses cuts in.

MATTHEW
 Photospecialist. I'm here to get
 some glass plate images of the
 festivities for the readers.

He holds up his camera. The Widow Mordecai reacts fearfully
 and covers the head of the Little Girl.

WIDOW MORDECAI
 Photo cameras! They steal the soul!
 Hide the children!

More murmuring from the crowd.

MAYOR STINGLY
 (chuckling.)
 Now, now, let's keep our heads,
 people. No need to be afraid of new
 gadgets and technology. Why I
 myself have a handsome
 daguerreotype of Henry Cabot Lodge
 on my bureau. Harmless as a newborn
 kitten.

The Mayor steps forward and offers his hand to Claudia.

MAYOR STINGLY
 May I officially welcome you, Miss
 Wynn and Mr. Harlin, to the One
 Hundred and Fifty-Ninth Annual Old
 Palmyra Festival.

She takes his hand.

CLAUDIA

Thank you, Mayor. It's a pleasure to be here.

The Mayor leads Claudia and Matthew into the town. The quiet, suspicious crowd follows behind.

MAYOR STINGLY

You're just in time, actually. We're nearly ready to serve up the Grand Feast. And after that, of course is The Yearly Burning.

CLAUDIA

I gotta say, you folks are committed. I mean, I covered a Civil War reenactment once and the Confederate guys spent the whole day behind their tent smoking weed and playing cribbage. You people are *locked in*.

The Mayor laughs heartily.

MAYOR STINGLY

Ha, ha, ha, ha! I have no idea what you're talking about.

CUT TO:

EXT. TV STATION ROOF - DAY

Stan and the Technician sit glumly in the satellite dish. The sun overhead bears down on them. Their lips are parched and dry. Stan has his shirt wrapped around his head for protection. The Technician is stripped down to his wife-beater t-shirt and pants.

Stan jots notes into a small notebook while the Technician is desperately licking out the inside of a candy bar wrapper.

We hear Stan's VO as he writes.

STAN'S VOICE OVER

Day one. Hour six. Minute twenty-four. No sign yet of rescue or help whatsoever. Don't know how we'll survive much longer...Did I unplug my toaster this morning? Not sure. Okay, run through morning routine; bath, brush, hair, teeth,

(MORE)

STAN'S VOICE OVER
 clothes, shoes, keys,
 toaster--Right!
 Right...toaster...toaster, roaster
 look at the poster. Roller coaster,
 roller coaster...

As Stan mumbles Tourette's-like in his head, he turns to look at the Technician, who is staring at Stan, hungrily.

CUT TO:

From the Technician's point of view Stan looks like a giant hot dog, complete with relish and mustard. There is a pause.

STAN
 You're looking at me like I'm a hot
 dog again, aren't you?

The Technician turns away, embarrassed.

CUT TO:

EXT. OLD PALMYRA - EARLY EVENING

The sun is beginning to set as the villagers are gathered around a long, rough hewn dining table in the town's square. The periphery of the square is lit by torches.

The table, covered in a red checked table cloth, is laden with bowls of food and drink.

Claudia and Matthew sit near the head of the table, across from the Mayor. She wears a gingham dress and Matthew wears a vintage three piece suit and hat. The camera sits on the table. He adjusts the focus on the lens periodically. Judging by the red flashing light it is obviously running.

MAYOR STINGLY
 So, are you enjoying our little
 feast, Miss Wynn? I'm sure it's not
 up to par with the fancy vittles
 one gets in Milwaukee.

CLAUDIA
 It's delicious, really.

MAYOR STINGLY
 How have you taken to our squirrel
 head stew? It is our specialty.

Claudia digs a spoon into her bowl. From the brown gravy comes a skinless squirrel head. The meat hangs from the face and around the large, rodent teeth.

Claudia takes the head in her hand and takes a bite from the cheek, stretching the meat out till it snaps in her mouth. She winces, then smiles as she tries to chew it.

CLAUDIA
Mmmmmm! Succulent.

The Mayor smiles. Claudia leans into the Widow Mordecai, who is sitting next to her. She holds up the squirrel head and points to it.

CLAUDIA
(woman to woman.)
Actually it's the only *head* I've had in months.

Claudia starts laughing at her joke.

CLAUDIA
Ha, ha, ha, ha!...Huh?

The Widow Mordecai just stares at her with blank disgust.

CLAUDIA
(stopping her laughter.)
No? Okay.

The Mayor stands and holds up his wine glass.

MAYOR STINGLY
Ladies and gentlemen! Quiet please.

The table goes silent. Claudia whispers to Matthew, who is without his glasses.

CLAUDIA
Are you getting all this?

MATTHEW
(angrily.)
Up yours.

CLAUDIA
(conceding.)
Right.

MAYOR STINGLY
As you know, we've had a very successful gathering this harvest.

The table nods in agreement.

MAYOR STINGLY

Our bellies are full and our larders and pantries are overflowing. We owe it all to hard work, diligence and faith in the Good Lord. But let us not forget the one thing, the true thing, that assures us, every year, of the generous bounties we enjoy for the generations past and the generations to come.

He holds his glass high.

MAYOR STINGLY

To The Burning!

The crowd echoes him.

THE CROWD

The Burning!

CLAUDIA

(smiling.)

Ooooh, this is getting good!

The crowd stands and keeps chanting "*The Burning, The Burning*" over and over.

They make their way to the far end of town where there is a large pile of wood and timber, in the middle of which sits a tall pole. Claudia and Matthew follow the crowd to the wood pile. The Mayor stands in front of the wood pile and holds up his arms. The crowd quiets.

MAYOR STINGLY

Bring out the sacrifice!

The crowd turns in unison to the grocery store. Through the front door, led by two BURLY MEN, is the Little Girl that led Claudia to the town. She is wearing a white cotton robe and a ring of flowers in her hair. She looks sadly at the ground as the Burly Men lead her up on to the wood pile. They tie her to the pole in the middle of the pile.

MAYOR STINGLY

Let The Burning begin!

The Mayor takes a nearby torch and brings it to the wood pile.

Claudia's eyes go wide as she realizes what is going to happen.

CLAUDIA
Holy shit...

CUT TO:

EXT. TV STATION ROOF - DAY

Stan and the Technician are exhausted and starving. They huddle together, holding each other. They cry and sob as they try to eat pieces of paper Stan tears from his small notebook.

CUT TO:

EXT. OLD PALMYRA - EVENING

Claudia gasps in shock and runs to the Mayor, standing between him the wood pile.

CLAUDIA
Wait! Wait! What the hell are you people doing?! This is wrong!

MAYOR STINGLY
Do not interfere with The Burning, Miss Wynn.

CLAUDIA
Look, I went along with this up till now; the crazy old babe and the squirrel heads, but I'm sure that barbecuing a little girl is not behavior sanctioned by the...American Historical Recreator's Association...or whatever.

WIDOW MORDECAI
There! You see, Mayor. I told you she'd stir up trouble!

The crowd murmurs angrily.

MAYOR STINGLY
You can't interfere with our traditions! We need to make the yearly sacrifice!

CLAUDIA

Why?!

MAYOR STINGLY

For the squirrels!

CLAUDIA

(confused.)

What?

MAYOR STINGLY

The squirrels are our bounty, Miss Wynn. We subsist on them; squirrel soup, squirrel pie, squirrel fricassee and our famous squirrel head stew. Over one hundred and fifty years ago our forefathers nearly died away after the Great Squirrel Famine of Seventeen Twenty-Two. Luckily some men of great wisdom saw fit to make a sacrifice. To burn an innocent in order to appease the Great Squirrel Gods and assure a bounteous harvest every season. Without the tradition of The Burning our town would surely perish. We need to keep the squirrels coming!

CLAUDIA

(exasperated.)

Grow more nuts!

Claudia climbs the pile of wood and stands in front of the Little Girl.

CLAUDIA

You'll burn this little girl over my dead body.

The Mayor calms the crowd, then nods at the two Burly Men. They climb the pile and release the Little Girl from her rope shackles. Claudia sighs in relief. The Little Girl holds Claudia's hand, looks up at her and smiles. Claudia smiles back. The girl's smile suddenly turns dark and evil as she grabs Claudia's hand harder and gives it to one of the Burly Men. The Burly Men tie Claudia to the pole.

CLAUDIA

Wait, wait, wait...what are you doing?!

The Mayor holds a leather bound book with a fuzzy, squirrel tail bookmark coming from the pages.

MAYOR STINGLY

It is written in The Book of the Great Fuzzy, that should anyone offer to replace the chosen innocent as sacrifice, that their life would be accepted as equal and burned in it's stead. Commence The Burning!

The crowd begins chanting "Burning! Burning!" Claudia looks out and sees the crowd are all dressed in head-to-toe squirrel costumes with their faces visible through the squirrel mouth. Even the Little Girl wears a baby squirrel costume. The Mayor, now in a squirrel outfit and top hat, brings his lit torch to the wood pile. It ignites in a bright, large flame.

CLAUDIA

(frightened.)

No!!! No!!!

The crowd begins dancing around the fire, pantomiming gathering their nuts between their little toes. They chant and make squirrel noises and they squinch their noses. "Burning! *Chirp, chirp, chirp!* Burning! *Chirp, chirp, chirp!*"

Claudia scans the crowd, frantically.

CLAUDIA

Matthew! God, Matthew! Help! Please be the Good Matthew and help me!

She turns and sees a bloodied and nearly unconscious Matthew being carried on the shoulders of five of the squirrel mob. They lead him over to a large, sharpened log that points like a massive spear out of the ground. They drop him on the point of the spear. It pierces through his back and protrudes from his stomach, eviscerating him as it does.

Claudia screams in horror as the squirrel crowd continues to chant. It is almost over for her. She suddenly looks down and sees she is still holding the squirrel head from the stew. She saws at her bonds with the teeth of the skull. Eventually the ropes cut through and she breaks free. She runs from the inferno and heads frantically down the wooded path, followed by the squirrel mob carrying torches.

It is dark and the branches and leaves smack her in the face as she scrambles in a panic to get away. The squirrel mob can be heard just behind her, chirping in anger. She continues to run, stumbling, screaming and crying. She makes one more frantic leap through the hanging branches and--

--It is daylight. She runs right into the sizable gut of Engineer Ned. She is out by the train tracks. She looks around, panicked and confused.

ENGINEER NED
Whoof! Hey, what gives?

CLAUDIA
(panicked.)
Oh my God! Oh my God! Run! We gotta run!

ENGINEER NED
Hey, hey, what's going on?

CLAUDIA
The squirrel people! They...they had a sacrifice! They killed Matthew! Oh my God, Matthew's dead!!! He's dead! Oh my God!

ENGINEER NED
Matthew's not dead. He's right here.

Matthew steps up next to her, glasses on.

MATTHEW
I'm fine. Claudia. I'm right here.

CLAUDIA
(really confused.)
Wait...what?...What's happening?
What are you doing here?

ENGINEER NED
I went and got help. I saw the Sheriff's car about five miles down, he said he could give us all a ride back to the station.

SHERIFF TAYLOR, a mild mannered middle aged man, stands next to Engineer Ned. He tips his hat.

SHERIFF TAYLOR
Ma'am.

CLAUDIA
Sheriff! Oh my God, Sheriff! They were gonna kill...kill a Little Girl! They were gonna burn her!

SHERIFF TAYLOR
(concerned.)
Burn? Where?

CLAUDIA
This way! This way!

She leads the Sheriff, Engineer Ned and Matthew down the path to the clearing in the woods. It is empty all but for some weathered stone foundations and rotting logs. Claudia wanders the site, perplexed.

CLAUDIA
I don't...I don't...what happened?
They were here. They were all here.
The squirrels. The fire. The whole town.

ENGINEER NED
Town? Why this is Old Palmyra. Or what's left of it. It's a graveyard now. There ain't been anyone living here in over a hundred and sixty years.

The camera tracks into Claudia's face. She is dazed and confused.

CUT TO:

EXT. WMGT STUDIO BUILDING.

We see the exterior of the building as the Production Van pulls into the underground parking lot.

CUT TO:

INT. STUDIO BUILDING.

Claudia and Matthew stand by the elevator in the parking garage. He has his camera on his shoulder. The doors open. They get on. He is without his glasses.

CUT TO:

INT. ELEVATOR.

They both stand quietly as the elevator rises.

CLAUDIA
(after a moment.)
I just...I just don't get it, I...I
don't know what I saw.

There is a long pause.

MATTHEW
(casually.)
Actually, I did put one of my pills
in your coffee. It causes
hallucinations in some people.

There is a long pause as she processes this. Then--

CLAUDIA
(shocked.)
You what?!!

She starts hitting him with her handbag and pushing him
violently against the wall of the elevator.

CLAUDIA
What the fuck! What were you
thinking?! Why the fuck would you
do something like that?!

MATTHEW
I thought you'd pass out so I could
have sex with you.

She stares at him menacingly. Speechless.

MATTHEW
I didn't. Lighten up.

She hits him one more time as the elevator door open. She
grabs the waste basket and starts beating the security door.

CLAUDIA
Well I hope you had fun, asshole!
'Cause that little stunt just cost
you your job.

The buzzer sounds and she pulls the door open and enters the
reception area.

CLAUDIA
And your career, dick-wad.

She heads for Maurice Coome's office and storms through the door.

CUT TO:

INT. MAURICE'S OFFICE.

Maurice sits behind his desk playing with one of those novelty toy storks that bobs it's beak into a glass of water.

MAURICE
Ah, Claire--

CLAUDIA
Claudia--

MAURICE
How goes the war?

CLAUDIA
We've got a problem, Maurice. We've got a big, big problem.

MAURICE
How so?

CLAUDIA
Matthew Harlin.

MAURICE
Yes?

CLAUDIA
He's a menace. He's deranged. He has wild, frightening mood swings. He's unhinged. He's obviously a danger to the staff and anyone who comes in contact with him.

MAURICE
I agree.

CLAUDIA
(surprised.)
You do? Well, you have to do something, Maurice. You have to get rid of him.

MAURICE

Yeah, we'd love to do that,
but...we can't.

CLAUDIA

What? Why? I mean, he sick. He's
mentally unbalanced.

MAURICE

I know.

CLAUDIA

Then why can't you fire him?

MAURICE

Because he's sick and mentally
unbalanced.

CLAUDIA

(utterly confused.)

I don't...what?

MAURICE

You see, dear, Matthew falls under
the Disability Protection Act of
1982. Under federal law we cannot
practice discrimination by taking
any action against him in relation
to his mental disorder.

CLAUDIA

So...the reason you need to fire
him--

MAURICE

--Is exactly the reason we can't.

CLAUDIA

That's insane.

MAURICE

Yeah, we get a lot of that here.

Maurice gets up and leads a very confused Claudia to the
door.

MAURICE

Now I'll make sure he's not
scheduled on any more of your
shoots, and we'll just give him
some busy work around the place to
keep him occupied and out of
trouble. You'll have to excuse me,

(MORE)

MAURICE
I have to get over to a staff
meeting.

The camera follows Maurice as Claudia ambles away, stunned.
She looks over at the Receptionist who smiles and shrugs.

CUT TO:

INT TV STATION.

Maurice makes his way down the hall, past a practicing
puppeteer and a tap dancer and into a large meeting room
filled with the staff technicians, all eating doughnuts.
Maurice finds a seat at the table.

MAURICE
All right, let's get this underway,
shall we?

Stan and the Technician enter the room, stark naked. They
stand in the doorway.

STAN
Are we late?

Everyone looks down at the two men's penises.

CUT TO:

EXT. TV STATION ROOF - DAY

A long string of Stan's and the Technician's clothes form a
woven rope that reaches to the ground. It sways lightly in
the breeze.

FADE TO BLACK:

THE END.