

Touching Down

by

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FADE IN

EXT. - DEEP ARBOR NURSING HOME - SUNRISE

The sunrise light falls on the sign at the entrance into Deep Arbor Retirement Community.

EXT. - PARK - DAY

A small park attached to the nursing home. A deep river runs through it, crossed by a rustic stone bridge.

EXT. - PARK BENCH - DAY

Two pair of feet, one smaller than the other. The smaller pair wears ratty sneakers and belongs to THOMAS TOUCH-FIRE, an elderly frail Seneca Indian. The larger pair, wearing scuffed-up work boots, belongs to LINDBERGH, his son-in-law.

A small cooler sits by Lindbergh's foot, two beer empties beside it.

Soft light. Birds SING, and the river BUBBLES.

A BELCH: Lindbergh.

LINDBERGH (O.S.)

Sorry.

THOMAS (O.S.)

It's fine.

LINDBERGH (O.S.)

Not used to beer at breakfast.

THOMAS (O.S.)

Beer's made from grain.

LINDBERGH (O.S.)

True.

THOMAS (O.S.)

Makes it a cereal of sorts.

LINDBERGH (O.S.)

True again.

BENCH

They toast each other, then sip meditatively.

THOMAS

Eructation.

LINDBERGH

What?

THOMAS

What you did -- eruct.

LINDBERGH

Eruct.

THOMAS

You eructed. An eructation.

LINDBERGH

Vaguely sexual, heh? "He could feel himself getting eruct."

THOMAS

One little letter between a hard-on and a mouth fart.

Thomas works up a belch. They toast again.

LINDBERGH

To the morning songbirds.

THOMAS

Feels good.

A moment of SILENCE as they drink. Water BURBLES, birds CHIRP, sunlight brightens.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

The community room at Deep Arbor -- functional, drab. A few worn, elderly people sit in the sunlight, alone.

EXT. - BENCH - DAY

Lindbergh looks at Thomas with a mixture of sadness and humor, holds out his beer bottle.

LINDBERGH

Given our agenda this morning, this is not just for our refreshment, is it?

Thomas sips, finishes, hands the empty to Lindbergh, who puts it by the others.

THOMAS

Depends.

Thomas leaves his hand out, and Lindbergh, with a half-smile, snags and opens another one from the cooler but holds it back for a moment.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

The dining room -- feeding time. Ranks of old people trying to eat. Falsely perky or truly sullen nurses and aides wander among them.

LINDBERGH (V.O.)

Why did I bring this grain with me, hahnii [my father]? Why will this morning be different from all the others?

EXT. - BENCH - DAY

No answer at first. Thomas' hand still outstretched. Lindbergh hands him the bottle.

LINDBERGH

Go on -- eruct away.

THOMAS

When you and number one daughter visit, this is where I sneak the beer you bring me.

LINDBERGH

Your little biergarten.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR DINING ROOM - DAY

A nurse gently guides a quivering liver-spotted hand holding a shaking spoon from bowl to mouth. Half the contents of the spoon spill out.

THOMAS (V.O.)

I can sit here, by this water,
unwitnessed because nobody on this
reservation moves from their soaps or
their slops or their beds. I'm safe.

EXT. - BENCH - DAY

LINDBERGH

Safe from the marauding nurses.

Thomas starts to lightly move his feet, as if he were dancing.

THOMAS

Thomas Touch-Fire, 74 years old, of the
once-proud Seneca nation, the People of
Stone --

LINDBERGH

Here, here!

THOMAS

Member of the Iroquois confederation --

LINDBERGH

Double here, here! Here, here, here,
here!

THOMAS

Ben Franklin stole it --

LINDBERGH

I know.

THOMAS

-- to write the Constitution that then
murdered us --

Thomas stops his "dancing."

THOMAS

How the mighty have fallen.

LINDBERGH

'Tis a sad world, indeed.

They drink.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

An elderly woman has fallen. She cries out, but no nurse or aide is nearby. Several other RESIDENTS stand and look at her. One MAN cries because he is unable to help her up.

THOMAS (V.O.)

Usually have to drink this warm. It feels good to drink it so cold. What I actually want is just that.

LINDBERGH (V.O.)

What?

THOMAS (V.O.)

To feel this last coldness.

EXT. - BENCH - DAY

THOMAS tries to burp again but gets nothing.

LINDBERGH

Nice try.

Then, in a move that surprises Lindbergh, Thomas throws the bottle away -- a feeble throw, but definite nonetheless. It rolls away.

BOTTLE

The amber beer leaks into the dirt.

BENCH

In another move that surprises Lindbergh, Thomas stands -- shaky, bent, but defiant.

He shuffles to the beer bottle and, in a third surprising move, kicks it. Not hard, of course -- not much spring in the leg. But off it rolls, streaming its remaining beer into the dirt.

Lindbergh puts his bottle down.

LINDBERGH

Thomas --

Thomas turns on Lindbergh, a fierce look in his eyes.

THOMAS

This shell --

(indicating his own body)

-- this bag, is ridiculous.

LINDBERGH

Sit back --

THOMAS

Gases, slimes, squeals, splats, hisses,
explosions --

LINDBERGH

Remember, two of those "bags" came
together to make you.

THOMAS

(as statement)

That's been a plus?

LINDBERGH

I happen to think so. As does number
one daughter.

Thomas dismissively turns and walks toward the water.
Lindbergh gets up to follow, but at a little distance.

Thomas stops. Lindbergh stops. Thomas is listening to
something inside his body. He unzips his fly to pee.

THOMAS

Well, you two like all those ancient
meaningful tribal stories about
Haweniyo [Great Spirit] mixing up some
dirt with spit or piss or dried sperm
or whatever --

DIRT

Thomas makes figures in the dirt with his piss -- a surprisingly large volume, given how old he is. The figures are quite elaborate.

THOMAS

Oops, first man. Oops, first woman.

LINDBERGH

Don't piss on your shoes.

THOMAS

You know what they were? The first leftovers. Afterthoughts!

LINDBERGH

And he's off.

THOMAS

Don't mock.

LINDBERGH

Not when you've got a head up -- and your dingleberry hanging out.

Thomas shakes himself dry, redeposits himself, zips up.

THOMAS

I expect that from an intact bastard like yourself.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

A checkerboard, seen from overhead. Only the fingers of the two players can be seen. They move pieces, but with pauses between moves.

THOMAS (V.O.)

Here's God: "I breathe the breath of life into you" --

(Bronx cheer)

-- now get the fuck out of here!
Dismissed! Dissed! Is that right?
Dissed? Dissed! Into the world wit
cha, ya clueless and flimsy beast! Ya
brittle bastard! And while yer at it -
- go get yerself conquered!

EXT. - BENCH - DAY

With the tip of one sneaker, Thomas rubs out his dirt piss-patterns, then peers off into the dappled light on the trees.

He looks back down, sees the bottle, shuffles over to it, picks it up, turns to Lindbergh, holds it out to him.

THOMAS

It will be good to leave all of it.

Lindbergh walks to him, takes the bottle, empties it out.

LINDBERGH

The litany of despair still flows.

THOMAS

But -- today is different. Isn't it?

LINDBERGH

Yes it is.

Lindbergh walks back to the bench, puts the empty with the others.

THOMAS

It will be different today.

LINDBERGH

Yes it will, hahnii.

THOMAS

After today, you won't have to hear the litany any more. Let's start.

Lindbergh steps up to Thomas and offers his arm. Thomas takes it.

They walk slowly onto the bridge. The sides of the bridge are tall. The deep water slides easily underneath.

THOMAS

When I escape from there --
(indicating home)

-- it's to here. Water, stone arch --
slip out of this wreck and remember.
Well, to start. Lift me over.

Thomas puts both his arms by his side, waits. Lindbergh
does not move.

THOMAS

What are you doing?

LINDBERGH

I'm not doing anything.

THOMAS

That's not what you promised.

LINDBERGH

I know what I promised.

THOMAS

Then why aren't you keeping it?

LINDBERGH

Because I've promised something else.

THOMAS

Jesus, you thought about it!

LINDBERGH

You can hardly fault me.

THOMAS

I told you not to! Thinking makes
cowards of us all!

LINDBERGH

I'm still not doing anything.

Thomas turns away in disgust. Lindbergh watches him
closely, not offended at all.

THOMAS

You betray me.

LINDBERGH

I'll admit it.

THOMAS

Like everyone else. Everything else.

Thomas tries to hoist himself over the side of the bridge but can't manage it because he's too short and weak.

Lindbergh walks over and puts a firm and gentle hand on him. Thomas stops but rounds on Lindbergh in real fury.

THOMAS

Why did your parents give you such a God-awful first name?

LINDBERGH

Take your hits.

THOMAS

Lind-bergh. Lind-burger --

LINDBERGH

Read 'em off.

THOMAS

Lind-boig, Lind-booger, Lind-bunghole --

LINDBERGH

(as if said a hundred times)

An uncle, mother's side, her favorite brother --

THOMAS

Lind-boozer, Lind-bugger --

LINDBERGH

For Charles Lindbergh --

THOMAS

Lind-burp, Lind-barf --

LINDBERGH

The uncle was hatched the year Charles crossed the pond. C'mon, more.

THOMAS

Fly, fly away at the least little storm!

LINDBERGH

I'm bruising up nicely.

THOMAS

You promised!

LINDBERGH

I promised, yes -- I promised to help you.

THOMAS

So help me!

LINDBERGH

Subject to interpretation.

THOMAS

Interpretation! Fuck!

Thomas, fueled by his anger, moves fiercely as he speaks.

THOMAS

I have been at 27,000 sunrises. I don't know how many I've really noticed. But this sunrise -- this one, this one --

LINDBERGH

Because --

THOMAS

Because I have decided.

LINDBERGH

Thomas --

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

The checkerboard, seen from overhead. The fingers have moved pieces, and a red jumps a black. A pause, a move, a pause, a move.

THOMAS (V.O.)

Just shut up! The litany? I hear it, I smell it, every day. Every subtraction. You should sit in the rec room of the Deep Arbor Retirement

Community sometime -- you'd be sore
amazed at the noises and smells.
Corruption! Decay!

EXT. - BRIDGE - DAY

THOMAS

There comes a time when, héawak [my
son] -- and you know it is over: No
more reservation! And to need a fellow
bastard like you to help me get over
this wall, something I could have flown
over! I can't get over it myself!

Thomas puts out his hand.

THOMAS

Now do your fucking part.

Lindbergh comes to Thomas and, in one smooth motion, picks
up him.

THOMAS

Go.

LINDBERGH

All right.

But instead of dumping him over the wall into the water,
Lindbergh carries him back toward the bench.

THOMAS

No! No! No!

Feeble blows, of no consequence. Lindbergh firmly sits him
down. Thomas stands up.

THOMAS

Goddamn you!

Lindbergh picks up a good-sized stick from the ground,
waves it like a wand, punches it forward like a rapier,
etc.

LINDBERGH

En garde!

THOMAS

No!

LINDBERGH

Sit down.

THOMAS

I would kill you if I could.

LINDBERGH

I believe you believe that.

Thomas picks up an empty and makes to throw it. Lindbergh takes up a batter's stance.

LINDBERGH

Right down the middle.

(pointing)

Right field, upper deck.

Thomas does throw it but not very hard. Lindbergh easily catches it.

LINDBERGH

Strike three.

THOMAS

I want out.

LINDBERGH

No you don't.

Fake-tosses the bottle to Thomas, who reacts to catch it. Having gotten his attention, Lindbergh very softly tosses the bottle back to Thomas, who catches, then drops it.

LINDBERGH

If you had wanted out so bad, you could have just walked into the river.

Lindbergh walks right to the spot.

LINDBERGH

Right around there. Or there. Then float out to the ocean, Thomas Touch-Fire Hamlet's Ophelia bobbing like a fishing bob. You didn't need me.

Lindbergh walks up to Thomas.

LINDBERGH

But here you wanted me. Obvious question, then, Thomas. Number one daughter and I figured it out, so so can you. C'mon, what would that question be?

THOMAS

I want out.

LINDBERGH

And I -- we -- number one and I -- don't want you out.

THOMAS

You don't get to say.

Lindbergh does a little sloppy soft shoe holding the stick, somewhat to "Tea for Two."

LINDBERGH

"No -- more talk -- of ending -- things / Now -- let's talk -- of mending -- things."

Lindbergh whirrs the stick over his head, and subtly but definitely the light and air change, as if the stick and Lindbergh are changing the environment around them.

LINDBERGH

Raise high the roofbeam, carpenter. Now comes the new generation. Sounding prophetic enough, Thomas? Getting into that storyteller zone? Because that's right where we are at the moment. Now, listen!

Thomas, SOUNDING more brave than he feels, talks back to Lindbergh.

THOMAS

Why should I?

LINDBERGH

Listen!

Lindbergh whirrs the stick faster and faster until he slams it down with thunder into the earth. The trees, the wind, the sky, the TRILL of the water -- all change as if to pay attention to the story teller.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

As Lindbergh speaks, various elderly men and women look up and pay attention, as if they, too, have caught wind of the changes around them.

LINDBERGH (V.O.)

Haweniyo, the Great One, decided that something very important was missing in the world he'd made.

EXT. - RIVERSIDE - DAY

THOMAS

I know this story.

LINDBERGH

Too quick on the draw. Old version you know -- but now new generation, the re-generation, Thomas. Haweniyo decided that something was missing in the world he'd made. What comes next?

Thomas sits on the bench, petulant.

THOMAS

I don't want to.

Lindbergh pokes his pockets with the stick.

LINDBERGH

You have to give something to the teller for the story.

Bats the stick away.

THOMAS

No.

LINDBERGH

Contribute, damn it!

Thomas stares Lindbergh straight in the eye, and Lindbergh stares straight back.

LINDBERGH

Contribute.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

An elderly woman stares at her quivering hand holding a glass of water, and for a moment, the quivering stops.

LINDBERGH (V.O.)

Be with your powerful voice again!

EXT. - RIVERSIDE - DAY

Again, they stare at one another. Thomas gestures, and Lindbergh whirls the branch once, then slams it down.

THOMAS

He created a man and a boy.

LINDBERGH

Good.

THOMAS

"Walk like human beings," he told them, and they were perfect. They followed Haweniyo down to the river, where he gave them speech.

LINDBERGH

Like us, palavering. C'mon.

Thomas, his face square to Lindbergh's, stands, and his body change subtly but obviously, picking up power as he spills out the words.

THOMAS

"What state are we in?"

LINDBERGH

"This is life," said Haweniyo .
"Before, you were mud."

THOMAS

"Now, you live." From dust and shit --

Lindbergh hands Thomas one end of the stick, which he takes.

LINDBERGH

"When we were mud, were we alive?"
Come on, Thomas.

Holding the end of the stick, they slowly circle.

THOMAS

"No."

LINDBERGH

"What is that called?"

THOMAS

"Death."

LINDBERGH

"Will we be alive always?" Thomas.

THOMAS

Haweniyo pondered.

LINDBERGH

"I didn't think about that. Let's decide it right now. Here's a chip of bear dung. If it floats, then people will die and come back to life four days later."

THOMAS

"No."

LINDBERGH

"No" said the man in his brutal innocence.

THOMAS

"The chip will dissolve in the water. I'll throw this stone, which will not melt."

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

An aquarium. Colored stones, kicked up by the bubbling of the filter, float up, then sink.

THOMAS (V.O.)

"If it floats, we'll live forever. If it sinks, then we'll die."

EXT. - RIVERSIDE - DAY

LINDBERGH

He didn't know about stones and water, having only been alive for a few hours.

Lindbergh stops.

LINDBERGH

Go ahead.

Thomas, also stopped, looks around his feet and picks up a stone.

THOMAS

He threw the stone.

LINDBERGH

Yes.

Thomas, with more vigor than might be expected, throws the stone toward the river.

STONE

The sun glints off the stone as it flies through the air.

THOMAS (V.O.)

Haweniyo watched it flash in the sun, and he could have had Raven come down and snatch it away.

RIVERSIDE

They both watch it hit the water.

THOMAS

But he let it fall --

LINDBERGH

Stop.

Thomas gazes at where the stone entered the water.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

One by one, the heads of the elderly that had lifted at the seeming change in the air droop back, the expectation defeated.

EXT. - RIVERSIDE - DAY

LINDBERGH

Stop.

THOMAS

You can't --

LINDBERGH

Rewind. New generation.

THOMAS

The stone falls, we die -- that's the story.

LINDBERGH

We have more choices than you dream of, Thomas.

Lindbergh points with the stick to the bench.

LINDBERGH

Sit.

THOMAS

I'm not a fucking dog.

LINDBERGH

Sit, and be sore amazed.

Lindbergh flicks Thomas' pockets with the stick.

LINDBERGH

Payment, remember? Sit and be sore amazed.

Thomas makes it back to the bench, suddenly very tired, glad of having the place to rest, though the straightness of his spine shows that he has no intention of letting Thomas know how relieved he feels.

Lindbergh whirls the stick around again, and again it is as if his actions change the local climate around them: light dapples, the river churns, the wind prods and lifts.

LINDBERGH

Listen: Haweniyo with a bam of his cane summoned Raven, Gáqga, to catch the stone. Which Raven did, and brought the stone to Haweniyo, who gave it to the man and said, "Take more time to learn." Then the man tossed the stone to his son and said, "You hold on to the future."

THOMAS

No, no, no! Haweniyo lets it sink because that's how it has to be!

LINDBERGH

No it doesn't.

THOMAS

"You made a choice there," said Haweniyo. "Now nothing can be done about it. Now people will die." That's how it ends!

LINDBERGH

The son has the stone, Thomas. And, yes, at some point he must throw it, and, yes, it will sink, and Raven will not always catch it.

Lindbergh kneels by the bench.

LINDBERGH

But -- but, Thomas Touch-Fire -- there are an infinite number of ways, and an infinite number of appointed times, to throw it.

Seeming to speak against his will, but unable to stop the words from coming out.

THOMAS

And you -- you hold the stone.

Lindbergh steps back and swings like a batter.

LINDBERGH

Right here in my pocket.

Thomas, unable to speak, simply sits there. Lindbergh joins him on the bench.

LINDBERGH

You know I love you. That we love you. We have watched you be a restless ghost for so long -- a stone in mid-flight, that's what you were --

THOMAS

Are.

LINDBERGH

Lusting for the water --

THOMAS

No more gravity on my bones.

LINDBERGH

And life tasting like warm beer!

THOMAS

These knees push, gravity -- pulls -- down --

LINDBERGH

Thomas Touch-Fire, you are not in mid-arc any longer.

THOMAS

What do you mean?

A few soft shoe steps, ending with a button.

LINDBERGH

Raven, at your service.

INT. - DEEP ARBOR - DAY

The checkerboard. One hand, moving a king, leaps and leaps the other's pieces until the board is swept clean.

LINDBERGH (V.O.)

You are coming home, hahnii, to stay
with us.

EXT. - BENCH - DAY

THOMAS

You can't afford that!

LINDBERGH

We will.

THOMAS

You can't!

Lindbergh smiles.

THOMAS

Really?

LINDBERGH

Number one daughter is getting the
papers ready right now.

THOMAS

Can I drink beer?

LINDBERGH

We'll graduate you from macrobrew to
microbrew.

Pointing to the river and bridge with the stick.

LINDBERGH

I would never have done it, you know.
Like Anchises with Aeneas, I would have
strapped you to my back.

Thomas stares at Lindbergh, then looks at the river. He
stands.

THOMAS

Pick me up. Pick me up.

Thomas puts up his arms, just like a child would do, and Lindbergh cradles Thomas easily.

THOMAS

Bring me there. Hold me over the water, like you would have.

LINDBERGH

Why?

THOMAS

Because I need to remember.

LINDBERGH

What?

THOMAS

Just do it.

BRIDGE

Lindbergh, without much effort, holds him.

THOMAS

Do you know what the stone said to the man, but the man didn't hear?

LINDBERGH

No.

THOMAS

"I do not want to leave your hand and sink in darkness and be alone. Bring me back with you." Bring me back.

LINDBERGH

(laughing)

You sure?

THOMAS

Bring me back!

Lindbergh stands him upright on the bridge.

THOMAS

Thank you, Raven.

LINDBERGH

You have some papers to sign.

Thomas puts his arm through Lindbergh's.

THOMAS

What's a microbrew?

They walk to the bench.

LINDBERGH

I'll line 'em up for you, and we can
try 'em all!

THOMAS

I could live for another 20 years.

LINDBERGH

Take us that long to drink 'em all.

THOMAS

Good.

Lindbergh puts the empties into the cooler, then lifts the cooler by the handle.

Arm in arm they walk out of the park across the wide lawn up to the main building. Their footsteps leave a darker green behind them as they move through the dew on the early morning grass.

FADE OUT