

ROCKET SCIENCE

by

Jeffrey Blitz

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - BALCONY - NIGHT

Wide shot of the auditorium balcony area where, unseen by anyone, a TEENAGE COUPLE make out.

TITLE CARD: "SPRING"

DEBATE OFFICIAL (O.S.)
The Affirmative will please begin.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

A BOY and a GIRL in matching prep-school jackets sit hunched over a work table on one side of a big stage. A card on the table reads "NEGATIVE: Townsend Prep."

On the other side of the stage, a boy and a girl in gray and blue business attire sit at their own work table. Their card reads "AFFIRMATIVE: Plainsboro High." The girl from Plainsboro is GINNY RYERSON, the boy, BEN WEKSELBAUM. Ben rises to the podium.

In the audience we see COACH LUMBLY, Plainsboro's debate teacher, watching intently.

Ben appears stately, as if from an old photograph: black hair, bow-tie and white boutonniere, a serious and handsome sixteen year-old. But if his look is yesteryear his oration is thoroughly modern. Ben gasps and then sprints through his delivery as fast as the fastest auctioneer and with the same crisp attention to his syllables. This pattern of gasping, sprinting and shouting certain key words is the way of all great high school policy debaters.

BEN

(at light-speed)

It will come as no surprise to the judges, our esteemed opponents from Townsend Prep nor really to anyone at all in the audience that we the Affirmative from Plainsboro High do hereby support this year's national policy debate resolution which I am *supposed* to recite now, as if, after an entire school year, it could still somehow be unknown to any of us. That is ridiculous. Therefore, instead of senselessly repeating it I will offer up a moment of silence during which I'd like every one of you to say the resolution aloud.

(MORE)

BEN (cont'd)

It will be a final, communal act
for all of us, the high school
policy debaters of New Jersey.
Ready, set, go.

AUDIENCE (O.S.)

Resolved: that the federal
government should--

BEN

For those of you who aren't done, I
apologize but there's a reason why
I'm up here and you're down there
and, if you please, right now,
we're gonna go at *my* pace. Hang
on, if you can. (Some kids in the
audience CHEER. Ben inhales
sharply and literally doubles his
pace.) Our plan today is succinct:
only by becoming a fully socialist
regime will the United States
government ever emerge as the true
moral leader of the free world and
thus create a lasting peace.
Therefore, we support amending the
Constitution of the United States
to outlaw all political parties
that do not embrace socialism as
their core philosophy....

The team from Townsend Prep--RAM AGGARWAL and RAM'S PARTNER--
type furiously into laptops while Ben rattles off his points.
Ram's Partner looks very conservative and very nervous; Ram,
on the other hand, has semi-punk hair and is as cool a
customer as you can be at fifteen.

Ram's partner shakes his head, exasperated. It's grim for
them and they both know it.

The VO begins. This is an omniscient commentator, a rich and
wise and flawless voice.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

On the stage of the New Jersey
State High School Policy Debate
Championships that spring night
stood Ben Wekselbaum, of Plainsboro
High. To anyone who ever heard Ben
debate there was one thing that was
undeniable: he had a voice. Even
then, on that May night, a real
voice.

We cut to a close-up of Ben.

BEN

(keeping up his pace)

You're all wondering when on earth is he going to get to farming subsidies. At long last, as promised, the link to farming which is no doubt obvious by now. Agricultural societies collapse under capitalism and thrive under socialism. Therefore, socialism is the best form of subsidies. I refer you to the following three terrific quotes in support of that contention....

Back at the affirmative table sits Ginny Ryerson. She's not pretty in the classic bullshit American sense but still, she's so full of herself, so pure in her anger and strength, there's something hugely persuasive about her. She looks up at Ben full of admiration.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

As Ben Wekselbaum set out the complexities of their plan, his partner was biding her time, picturing how it would look up there, the only trophy missing from her crowded gleaming shelf.

We PUSH-IN on the trophy table backstage, toward the big one in the center: the real prize she wants and deserves.

At the Townsend Prep table, Ram types furiously into his laptop while Ram's partner flips through notebooks pulling out pages of paper and highlighting quotes.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

One team on the affirmative arguing for the resolution. The other on the negative, tearing it down.

LATER--

Ram at the podium.

RAM

(fast)

This year's national resolution is specifically about farming subsidies. Not socialism.

(MORE)

RAM (cont'd)

By overstepping the resolution they haven't met their prima facie burden to defend said resolution and the should be considered untopical.

LATER--

Ginny at the podium.

GINNY RYERSON

(fast)

"Subsidies are, at their heart, an extension of socialism." That's from Gutierrez, '03. That the negative team has no legitimate arguments against socialism isn't our fault. They didn't penetrate the subject as deeply as they should have.

LATER--

Ram's Partner at the podium.

RAM'S PARTNER

(fast)

To suggest that we haven't refuted the very basis of socialism is fallacious and specious. I refer you again to the delicious quotes my partner read regarding the nature of communism.

In the front row of the audience, THREE JUDGES jot notes on yellow legal pads.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

And so it goes, the high school debate like the war that rips through your city and ravages everything in its path. Kids wielding words like weapons and brandishing ideas like axes. It was that war that in its final battle of the school year that night. And 46 miles away, Hal Hefner was at home like nothing or none of New Jersey was burning around him.

EXT. PLAINSBORO STREET- NIGHT

We track down the empty street: it's just the sleepy suburbs at night, nothing more.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hal Hefner sits in the living room, rubbing the belly of his dog, Charlotte. He's occupying himself as best he can, trying not to listen to the fight going on upstairs.

Hal seems as unexceptional as unexceptional can be: a real kid, yes, but an inconsequential one, too. Ordinary to the Nth, so much so that sitting in a crowded classroom, he might completely vanish.

We see a few PHOTOS of the Hefner family.

Somewhere in Juliet's house, upstairs from Hal, a door SLAMS and PITCHED VOICES follow.

JULIET (O.S.)

What do you want me to say!

DOYLE (O.S.)

Cut the shouting! I don't want anything in that tone!

NARRATOR (V.O.)

That night, Hal Hefner had hardly a voice at all.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

Back to the stage, Ben still reading at light-speed.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Back on the stage of the State championships, the night at last revealed itself as not just any night but as the night. The night when it all began. Ben Wekselbaum, the best voice to ever debate for PHS, Plainsboro high, according to anyone who ever heard him, that Ben Wekselbaum, he just went quiet.

Pushing in on Ben at the podium.

BEN

(blazingly fast)

...our next Advantage basically says that human relations can only thrive in an atmosphere of total equality. That human relations can only exist-- I'm sorry, I just said that. Or, no-- I mean in a space where the playing field is level-- a place of total equality. Wait, wait.

He stops and looks out into the darkness.

Ginny looks up: what's going on?

Ram and Ram's Partner catch up with their typing, shake out their cramped hands and look up.

We're very tight on Ben as an unusual semi-smile blooms on his face.

GINNY RYERSON

Ben?

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hal's into full wrestle mode with Charlotte.

EARL HEFNER, 17, comes in brushing his teeth absentmindedly. Earl's a strange bird, a hyper-organized kid but also one weirdly full of troubling behavior. We see this blend in his well-orchestrated clothing ensemble and the beginnings of a horrible moustache too close to a Hitler for comfort.

DOYLE HEFNER walks downstairs with a big suitcase in hand and pulling a small, awkward carry-on bag.

DOYLE

Hal, Earl. I have these. I'm not going to be living here anymore. And that's why I have these suitcases.

JULIET (O.S.)

They're a set, Doyle! Leave the big bag with the rest of it! Lord, that's so you!

Doyle, in anger, opens up the *small* carry-on bag, grabs his clothes out of there and throws the empty bag up the stairs as best he can which isn't very good.

He has no intention of leaving the big bag. Insanely, he SCREAMS toward the upstairs. Then tries to compose himself for his sons.

DOYLE

You're going to be fine and I'll see you sometime soon.... I'm not sure what else to say. I can't put it into words.

Doyle exits, lugging the big suitcase, random clothes tucked under his arms.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

46 miles apart, at the very same moment, the arguments stopped. So there was this bridge of silence across Jersey. No shouting from Hal's parents, no debating, no voice, no one's voice at all.

We hear just CHARLOTTE'S PANTING.

FAST MONTAGE--

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

Ram and Ram's Partner hold a giant trophy and settle on a grin for a PHOTOGRAPHER.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - AUDITORIUM - GIRL'S ROOM - NIGHT

Ginny sits in a stall, crying hysterically. With one hand, she takes a long drag from a cigarette. With the other, she grips handfuls of her hair.

EXT. MONMOUTH STREET - NIGHT

We're outside tracking with a taxi cab that holds Ben Wechselbaum inside. He's got his head up against the window and he's crying and grinning like a madman. A total and glorious breakdown and yet somehow his bow-tie is still perfectly cinched.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

That year's national debate topic was farming subsidies.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (V.O.) (cont'd)
 And if you don't know how farming
 subsidies could inspire all this
 commotion then you don't know life
 and there's nothing to be said
 about it. Suitcases end marriages
 and farming subsidies launch
 cataclysms.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hal and Earl at the living room window.

ANGLE OUT THE WINDOW--

They watch Doyle load the big suitcase and his free clothes
 into a sedan.

He gets in and the car pulls away, backing into a garbage
 container, toppling it over onto the sidewalk. Doyle
 corrects and as the car circles around and drives off, it
 leaves behind a GHOSTED IMAGE OF ITSELF.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
 Can a voice or the spirit of a
 voice travel from one person to
 another like yawning or laughter or
 mono? Sure it can, that's our
 position. That the will to speak
 traveled that night across the dark
 NJ highways not even stopping at
 the rest areas along the turnpike
 but kept going until it arrived on
 this very block where it would take
 up residence, or try to, in someone
 new.

Tight on Hal as he lingers at the window, staring out at the
 translucent car, rumbling in the dark driveway.

A CLOSER ANGLE--

The GHOSTED IMAGE OF DOYLE sitting at wheel.

EXT. PLAINSBORO HOUSE - DAY

A TEENAGE COUPLE, dressed in sweaters and jeans, make out on
 the front steps of a house, orange leaves scattered around
 them.

TITLE CARD: "Fall"

EXT. JULIET'S HOUSE - DAY

A vantage point on the outside of the Hefner house, a Colonial where Hal lives in.

Earl races out of the house, a simple book bag thrown over his shoulder.

Calling back to the house--

EARL
Gladys, let's go! Timeliness is an
important part of it!

Earl arrives at the school bus at the same moment that HESTON, the boy from next door, walks down his front lawn and up to the bus. Heston looks oddly neat and prim and generally walks like he should be carrying a kite string in his hand.

EARL
Heston.

HESTON
Earl.

Heston jumps onto the bus and Earl after him. It lets loose a moaning HORN.

Hal (the "Gladys" in question) emerges from the house, tugging behind him the small carry-on bag his father left behind. It has one wheel that keeps jamming up.

INT. SCHOOL BUS - DAY

Toward the back, Hal sits alone, the carry-on suitcase hoisted up beside him.

HAL
(quietly rehearsing)
Pizza, thanks. Just the, just the
pizza. Thanks.

Earl and Heston sit behind Hal. Heston smiles the whole way, unconnected somehow from the world he's in.

Hal turns around to look at Heston smiling.

HESTON
Sounds delicious.

Hal faces forward and shuts up.

EXT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Kids enter the school.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - STAIRWELL - DAY

Hal, without his brother or Heston around, pulls his tricky suitcase through a hallway into a stairwell.

From somewhere O.S. a voice screams out:

KID'S VOICE (O.S.)
Is that going to fit in the
overhead bin?

Hal trudges along.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - ENGLISH CLASS - DAY

ENGLISH TEACHER stands in front.

ENGLISH TEACHER
What kind of name is 'O Henry'?

The class is silent. We push in on Hal. He writes down "nom de plume" in his loose-leaf notebook. The notebook is jammed full of words that have been crossed out.

No one answers.

ENGLISH TEACHER
Not 'pseudonym' which we all know
but how about 'nom de plume'? Does
'nom de plume' sound right? It
does to me. It was toward the end
in the reading that no one seems to
have completed....

Hal crosses it out in his notebook. Just another word that will never be spoken.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - DAY

Hal in line, moving in lock step with other kids. As he moves, he mouths, "Just the pizza, slice of the pizza."

It's his turn. He steps up. Stares hard at the LUNCH LADY in front of him. Doesn't say anything.

LUNCH LADY
Fish or pizza?

Hal shuts his eyes and breathes deeply.

LUNCH LADY (CONT'D)
Pizza's plain or pep. Fish's not sure, like general fish.

HAL
Just the. I'll have just the, just, just. Just, just, just.

LUNCH LADY
The fish?

HAL
The general fish, yes, thank you.

LUNCH LADY
Come on back for seconds, plenty left.

HAL
Thank you, ma'am.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - DAY

Hal walks into the main eating area and through it to his table.

Hal sits with A FEW OTHER KIDS who have no one to sit with. Several seats away is Heston.

They eat in silence.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - COUNSELING ROOM - DAY

Hal sitting across a desk from LEWINSKY, the school's all-purpose therapist. In the room, sitting in the corner doing math problems, is HONORIA. She's either young or small or both. Her hair and clothes are simple. She remains generally unconnected in the corner, staring up or down, writing furiously, something minorly autistic about her.

Hal inhales and exhales purposefully. Lewinsky inhales and exhales with him.

LEWINSKY

Do you want to keep on trying with the breathing exercises or something new?

HAL

I have, is it alright if I have no opinion?

LEWINSKY (CONT'D)

Let's try this. (Lewinsky starts to whisper.) I read in this journal, Clinical Pathways of Speech Pathology, that it's hard to be anything but fluent when you whisper or sing. I've sent away for a video tape of some people trying that out. Not a solution, obviously, but want to give it a shot?

HAL

(whispering)

That's too stupid, clearly. I can't do this. Isn't this too stupid, Honoria? Even for Honoria that's too stupid, I can just feel it.

She doesn't react.

LEWINSKY

I explained this, Hal, that it's not my speciality. I'm sorry, I'm trying. It's really a shame you're not hyperactive because that I know well. That I can work miracles with. Hyperactivity. But this is something else....

He goes back to breathing exercises. As do Hal and Honoria.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - AUDITORIUM - DAY

There's an assembly in progress with a couple adults dressed as ABRAHAM LINCOLN and STEPHEN DOUGLAS. Cheery COACH LUMBLY "moderates" this debate. She's in her normal school attire but strangely wears a pilgrim's hat.

Hal sits between FLEMMING (a Pete Rose type, full of anger and determination) and Heston. Earl sits in the back, no one around him.

COACH LUMBLY

It was 1858 and while Senator Stephen Douglas set out his case, that states ought to choose whether to allow slavery, Abraham Lincoln consulted with the smart citizens of Illinois to plot his answer.

The Woman Dressed as Abraham Lincoln turns to the audience.

WOMAN DRESSED AS LINCOLN

Let me find now a citizen to assist me in coming up with arguments against Senator Douglas. Where can I find such a citizen-helper?

A handful of hands shoot up. Most kids can't believe how awful this is.

FLEMMING

Put your hand down, Heston. This is all me.

The Woman Dressed as Lincoln points to Hal who conspicuously does not have his hand up.

WOMAN DRESSED AS LINCOLN

The commoner in the striped, plum-colored shirt. We need you, sir. Rise to your duty!

FLEMMING

The he-she means you, Hef. Get up. We'll watch the bag.

But Hal stays rooted to his seat, suitcase beside him.

Earl, from the back--

EARL

Striped Plum passes, thanks. Pick again.

WOMAN DRESSED AS LINCOLN

Come now. Senator Douglas has laid out a formidable argument and I am but an unknown congressman. Bring up a loose-leaf notebook and let's make some notes.

Everyone waits.

A few kids start to halfheartedly CHANT: Striped-plum, Striped-plum, Plummy-shirt.

Hal opens his suitcase and we see inside: a completely chaotic space with text books, notebooks and free papers.

Hal takes out a notebook and slowly, full of dread, walks up to the stage. Lincoln takes his hand and shakes it vigorously.

WOMAN DRESSED AS LINCOLN

My assistant has come to offer me arguments in my debate against the Senator.

STEPHEN DOUGLAS

(very arch)
Now I'm quaking.

WOMAN DRESSED AS LINCOLN

What cannot a house divided against itself do? It is this argument that will lead me to victory. What cannot it do?

She hands a microphone to Hal.

He shuts his eyes and breathes heavily into it.

STEPHEN DOUGLAS

Hold that further away from your mouth.

Hal stares at Stephen Douglas with burning hatred.

WOMAN DRESSED AS LINCOLN

What cannot a house divided do?

STEPHEN DOUGLAS

Is it Sit? Smell? Sally-forth?

Two kids in the audience shout out, No!

WOMAN DRESSED AS LINCOLN

Tell us then, lad!

HAL

It can't, well, a house divided, it can't, you know. A house divided can not. It just can not. Mrs. President, it just cannot, just....

Hal stops cold. Looks out into the crowd. Some kids watch. Many have stopped paying attention. Still, it's awfully quiet and it's horrible.

ANGLE ON GINNY RYERSON --

She's engrossed in the spectacle on stage. Sitting around her are some other members of the DEBATE TEAM including PHILIP and CRYSTAL HAMISH-STEINBERG. They are utterly bored.

ANGLE ON STAGE --

WOMAN DRESSED AS LINCOLN
Some help from the citizenry?

A small wave from the audience breaks on Hal....

A BUNCH OF KIDS
'Stand'.... Can't 'stand'....
(One jerk calls out:) Oh, I thought
it was 'Shit Itself'!

Hal hands the mic off to Coach Lumbly and steps off stage and goes back to his seat.

ANGLE ON--

Hal back in his seat. Flemming stares at him a mixture of pity and disgust.

HESTON
You look taller on stage.

Hal has no reply but to look straight ahead at the stage.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - JANITOR'S CLOSET - DAY

Hal stands in an empty janitor's closet, hyperventilating. It's very dark and Hal seems stricken. His breathing is horrible and dramatic. He looks like he might cry at any moment.

Suddenly the door opens. A JANITOR looks at Hal. Doesn't say a word. He rolls his mop and mop bucket inside and then closes the door.

INT. SCHOOL BUS - DAY

Hal, traumatized by the afternoon, leans against his suitcase. On the aisle, sitting beside him, is Earl.

Hal stares out the window--

Plainsboro rushes by

On the bus--

Heston sits behind them and on the bench seat next to Heston is Ginny Ryerson. She stares at Hal.

EARL

Want to hear your problem?

Hal doesn't answer.

EARL (CONT'D)

Agnes?

HAL

I'm trying, you know, not to listen, distinctly not to, but you're one foot away.

EARL

You've no agenda. Strictly head in the ground material. Look at me: I wake up every morning and what do I do?

Hal gives him a withering "who the fuck cares" look.

EARL (CONT'D)

I create an agenda for the day which is a sub-agenda for the month which is itself a pie-slice of my agenda for life. You want to know today's purpose?

HAL

I, I, I, no. I can promise you that no, no. Absolutely I do not.

EARL

You'd probably call the cops on me anyway.

From behind them Ginny Ryerson leans in.

GINNY RYERSON

(To Earl:) You, Adolph, switch with me, upsy-daisy.

EARL

This is my seat.

GINNY RYERSON

Like all seats on this vehicle yours has been paid for with taxpayer money which means that I or anyone else has as much right to it as do you. In fact, given the distinction between what your family surely pays in taxes and mine, I think it's safe to say that the seat is substantially more mine than yours. Do you see now? I'll be taking just a minute to talk to the little man and then you can go on borrowing my seat for as long as you'd like until I want it again, right?

She grins a smug one. Though he's not happy about it, Earl's no match for Ginny. He rises up, slides in where she had been sitting. Ginny sits next to Hal.

GINNY RYERSON (CONT'D)

Coach Lumbly, with the pilgrim hat, she teaches Patterns of Adult Living. On her third husband, name of Wallace Lumbly, Wallace the third. That's a particular pattern she doesn't lecture us on in class. Well, she came up to me after a presentation on egalitarianism and said that although my argumentative skills were at the fetal stage she sensed, somehow she intuited, my potential and invited me onto the team and, so, two years later, here I am doing the same with you. Recruiting. Ferreting out the debating talent from the masses. That's you. I've ferreted you.

HAL

Public speaking in public, that seems like a very bad, a very, very, like a very. (He takes a heavy BEAT.) You see where I'm going with this....

GINNY RYERSON

Resolved: That the Federal Government should support the teaching of abstinence in public schools. From sex.

(MORE)

GINNY RYERSON (cont'd)
It'd a big step up from farming,
that was last year's resolution.

HAL
Yeah, no.

GINNY RYERSON
Suit yourself. But deformed people
are the best. Maybe it's because
they have a deep resource of anger
that serves them well.

HAL
I'll, I'll, but.... uh, no.

ANGLE ON--

Earl in Ginny's seat. He casually unzips the front pocket of her backpack and slips his hand inside. His face gives away nothing.

BACK ON GINNY AND HAL--

There's a beat of silence.

GINNY RYERSON
Are you about to say something?
I thought you might be stuck trying
to say, "Thank you." Were you
trying to say, "Thank you"?

Hal is again speechless.

The bus slows and comes to a stop beside a sign: "Entering Grover's Mill."

Ginny leans in very close to Hal.

GINNY RYERSON (CONT'D)
(whispering)
You're welcome.

She stands, reaches back over Earl to grab her backpack, slings it over her shoulder and exits.

ANGLE ON--

Through the windows of the bus, as it pulls away, Hal watches Ginny stride up the path to her house.

Without turning around, she adjusts her jeans and then lifts a long arm into the air and waves dramatically for Hal's benefit.

Hal twists to watch her go inside and keep on watching until after the Ryerson house is long gone.

Earl slides in again next to Hal.

EARL

Tomorrow's agenda is to glue her
locker shut.

EXT. JUDGE PETE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Judge Pete (40s, Korean) and Heston exit their house. Heston carries a casserole tray.

We track with them as they cross the front lawn to the neighboring house, Juliet's house.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Hal's mom, JULIET, 40s, joins Judge Pete, Heston, Hal and Earl at the table.

They eat quietly.

JUDGE PETE

I'm sure this is awkward for the
boys.

JULIET

Not one bit, not one single bit. I
swear I'm more nervous than anyone.

JUDGE PETE

Honestly, Jules, I'm a small claims
judge. It's lucky I'm not dating
someone from Trenton.

No one knows what to make of this. Judge Pete gives himself
a HUGE LAUGH.

JULIET

(changing the subject)

Is this a traditional Korean dish?
Because it has a very exotic odor.

JUDGE PETE

That's tuna casserole.

Again, no one knows what to make of it. The table returns to
silence.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - HAL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Hal is in bed, lights out. The wall beside him starts to THUMP, the sound of a headboard slapping the wall in the next room over.

Hal puts the pillow over his face.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Hal plays with his dog. Heston sits on the sofa looking at a picture calendar.

HESTON

My dad hasn't dated anyone before your mom for six years.

HAL

OK, can we not, you know, just not talk about that?

There's a BEAT OF SILENCE.

HESTON

I found this by a tree stump in the park.

Heston holds up his calendar. It's a classic beefcake job with shirtless men in cowboy hats and jeans.

HESTON (cont'd)

Look at this month.

It's a good one. Hal doesn't know what to make of it. He ignores the strangeness of Heston's calendar and goes back to wrestling with his dog.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - DAY

Hal, Flemming and Heston stand together, part of a bigger line of kids shooting arrows into hay-stuffed targets on the other side of the gym.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

But then on a Thursday. It could have been any day but it wasn't. It was Thursday. And for no good reason something happened and it was like a little wave breaking over him. A ocean wave.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (V.O.) (cont'd)
 And it said the name G-I-N-N-Y,
 Ginny. Over and over. Ginny,
 Ginny, Ginny.

Hal draws his arm back, aims at the target in front of him and, as he lifts his fingers to set the arrow free--

INSERT--

Ginny through the school bus window, her back to Hal, waving her arm in the air.

THE GYM--

The arrow drops to the floor at Hal's feet having moved exactly nowhere.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH - HALLWAY - DAY

Hal walks through an emptying hallway. He stops and peers through the door.

Hal's POV--

Ginny stands in front of the classroom, debating.

GINNY

The etymology of the word 'spreading' is unclear but we believe that it's the lumping together of speed and reading: spreading; all it is is jamming as many arguments into your time, your 8 minute constructive or your 4 minute rebuttal, as possible. (She begins spreading:) Consider Contention 1: Early Sexual Relations Are Harmful. Radzinger '03. 'The effects of early sexual relations include transmission of diseases, out of wedlock pregnancy and a host of potential illnesses including depression and low self-esteem..."

It the midst of the spreading, the shot of her goes into slow-motion. She spots Hal outside. She continues spreading as she walks to the door, opens it and steps out into the hallway. The speed ramps back to normal:

GINNY

'...participation in the program was 53% more likely to yield positive results and strengthen anti-sexual impulses among teens--' (She stops spreading, to Hal:) You know the other thing I meant to say is that you look like this guy I used to debate with--in a shorter, goofier kind of way--and why would you be here, looking enough like him if I squinted or if it was darker, if it wasn't for me to discover you and those talents that are hidden within? Destiny.

HAL

Hi.

Ginny consider him for a flirtatious beat, allows herself a smile.

GINNY

Hi.

Hal is smitten, doesn't know what to say. Here's what he comes up with:

GINNY

Resolved: that Hal Hefner should really stop letting the world tell him what's possible and try to find out for himself. Maybe that's just a life's philosophy suited only to some of us, those who cherish winning. So maybe it's not for you. But I think it is. (Back to spreading:) 'The quality of life among teens who refrain (aka T.W.R.) is anecdotally higher than teens who indulge (aka T.W.I.). When given the choice who wouldn't want to be among T.W.R.?' That's from Bonofsky, '04. If you're paying attention you're noting grounds to argue against the case based largely on effects topicality. There's even more coming up in Contention 2.

Shuts door.

EXT. RYERSON HOUSE - DAY

Hal rides a bicycle past the "Entering Grover's Mill" sign as part of his circling in front of the Ryerson's house. He coasts onto the sidewalk, turns around and coasts back onto the quiet street, rides up to the sidewalk across the street.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Before this, there was the nothingness of Plainsboro, New Jersey. But now Hal Hefner no longer thought of this and that, and the parts of his brain that had once been turned over to mulling those things suddenly had only one thought. And it felt like all his life his brain had been waiting for this thought, so comfortably now did it fit in and take up all the room there was.

LEWIS GARRLES, 11, wanders down from his house across the street from the Ryerson's.

LEWIS

You're on my street.

Hal glides down to the street.

LEWIS (cont'd)

You're still on my street.

HAL

This is, this right here is, you know what public property is?

LEWIS

We'll see.

Lewis runs inside.

INSIDE THE RYERSON HOUSE--

Hal can see a 70something woman, GINNY'S GRANDMOTHER, through the living room window.

ON THE STREET--

Lewis comes back outside.

LEWIS (cont'd)

My mom Fern says it's public property and if it's OK with your mom you can come have 7up with me but the ice maker's busted.

INT. GARRLES HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lewis leads Hal inside. Lewis's mother, FERN GARRLES, plays cello in the living room. Lewis's father, HANK, accompanies her on piano. Fern's a former hippie and Hank is as mild as mild can be. She's tall and wiry, he's short and balding.

FERN

(over the music)

Want to sit down with your friend and listen to an old couple work at their marriage with music therapy?

HAL

Not, not today, thanks.

There's a BEAT of just BLANK LOOKS back and forth before Lewis charges upstairs and Hal follows.

INT. GARRLES HOUSE - LEWIS'S ROOM - DAY

They're sitting together at the window drinking 7ups without ice, staring out at Ginny's house. Lewis's parents' therapeutic music sings in the background with a special emphasis on some gutsy cello moves.

LEWIS

I have a request in for binoculars for my twelfth birthday so we'll see about that.

ANGLE OUT THE WINDOW--

A dark sedan pulls up outside the Ryerson house.

Ram Aggarwal gets out from the back. To go with his semi-punk hair, he's now got ostentatious Bono-inspired sunglasses pushed up on his head.

He strides up to the path, knocks on the door.

IN LEWIS'S ROOM--

Hal looks to Lewis to fill him in on what's just happened.

HAL
Who's that?

 LEWIS
Beats me. You know if she wears a
bra?

Hal has no reply.

 LEWIS (CONT'D)
You want to see a bra?

Lewis reaches behind his dresser and pulls out a bra. He puts it on, over his shirt.

 HAL
I think I should, I should go home,
Lewis.

EXT. RYERSON HOUSE - DAY

Hal coasts his bike down the street, gives one last look at the Ryerson house as he rides away.

ANGLE ON GINNY'S BEDROOM WINDOW --

Ram has entered and shut the door.

Ginny has come to the window and watches Hal pedal away. Then she raises her hand and gives the finger to seemingly no one.

ANGLE ACROSS THE STREET --

Lewis, still in his bra, stands at his window and gives her the finger back.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DUSK

Hal, Earl, Heston, Juliet and Judge Pete sit on the floor playing Monopoly, eating popcorn.

Judge Pete massages Juliet's feet.

 HAL
Judge Pete, do you know any great
lawyers who can't, you know, who
can't talk so well? Not fluent but
yet great lawyers? Whose clients
don't end up getting the chair?

JUDGE PETE

There's a bailiff with a prosthetic leg.

He bites on Juliet's toes and she laughs.

Hal shoves a handful of popcorn into his mouth, suddenly full of appetite.

EARL

What are you thinking, Laverne?

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

Ginny at her locker, Hal walks up through a crowd of kids.

HAL

Hi, hello there, you....

She gives him a blunt look, shuts her locker, walks off.

Hal follows.

WALKING AND TALKING THROUGH THE HALLWAY--

HAL (CONT'D)

I just talked to Coach, to, you know, to Mrs or Ms, which is it, anyway, to her, to Lumbly and tomorrow I'm going to actually come inside during debate prep. So I'm on the team, just like you wanted.

GINNY RYERSON

Someone took something of mine that's invaluable for anti-sentimental reasons, though whatever the reasons are are no one's business but my own.

HAL

I just said, did you hear, I said, I said I, thanks to you, I joined the team.

GINNY RYERSON

I had a locket, a silver Deco locket, with two pictures inside. Ringing any bells? One was of me and the other was of someone else, a boy of sorts.

HAL
What's a Deco?

GINNY RYERSON
My mother believes one of her pseudo-friends stole it because he or even she is secretly a pedophile and wanted my locket to stare into or suck on or utilize for other specific erotic purposes but I told her that I have this hunch, this sinister hunch, that it was taken out of my backpack by someone at PHS. It's like I sensed it leaving my presence, just an ounce but a burning ounce, as it left my person.

HAL
I doubt if the, if the pedophile things could be, could be true. That seems, it seems, but then I don't know too much about that to be honest. But, but, but, you know, I can't believe anyone would think of you like that.

GINNY RYERSON
Like what?

HAL
Sex, sex. Sexually, I mean.

GINNY RYERSON
That's the worst thing anyone's ever said to me. Why would you say that?

Hal goes into speechless hyperventilation.

GINNY RYERSON (CONT'D)
I never should have asked you to join the team. Lord knows what I was only thinking.

The electronic bell CHIMES. Ginny walks away, leaving Hal alone in the empty hall.

EXT. PLAINSBORO STREET - DAY

Hal power-rides his bike home, driven by panic.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - EARL'S BEDROOM - NEXT

Hal tears through Earl's room, looks beneath the bed, feels between the mattress and box spring.

Then finds a box hidden deep in the closet.

Inside, the evidence of a kleptomaniac's conquests neatly stacked up: a carton of cigarettes, a porn mag, a silver age comic book, a hundred dollar bill, a pocket knife, a clasp of keys, a tin flask, a couple rusted empty beer cans--and a full fifth of reposado TEQUILA in a squat, amber bottle that Hal picks up and turns upside down. He returns the reposado to the box takes out a little heart-shaped locket.

He pops it open.

INSERT--

A picture of Ginny in her navy blue debate clothes facing....

A picture of a Ben Wekselbaum. His eyes have been violently crossed out.

EXT. PLAINSBORO STREET - DAY

Hal pumps hard, stands, coasts on his bike.

EXT. RYERSON HOUSE - DAY

Hal pulls up. Hops off his bike. Rings the doorbell.
CONNIE, Ginny's grandmother, answers.

He's sweaty, breathing shallowly, talking in fast spurts.

CONNIE

Yes?

Hal is suddenly perplexed: what has he done? How can he explain himself?

HAL

I stole it.

He lifts the locket and hands it to her.

CONNIE

Shouldn't you be at school?

He runs his bike down to the curb, gets on, rides away.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

Hal in the shower, an anguished state of being.

The bathroom door opens. Earl enters. Punches Hal through the shower curtain.

HAL
Get--! Earl! Get out, Earl!

EARL
You took the locket, you weasel-ass. And you left my theft box a shit-faced mess! Don't ever touch the stuff I steal!

HAL
Come on! Out!

EARL
I mean it! I steal it, it's mine!

HAL
You may want to put that on your, on your, on your business cards. It's, it's really, it's somewhat catchy.

Earl punches him again.

HAL (cont'd)
Come on!

EARL
Mom is going to tan your hide, you fake thief! You god-awful, make-believe thief! Judge Pete is going to lock you up! Get your own mother-effing plan! If you tell anyone that I stole it, I will wipe my ass with your chapstick and then reach into your eye sockets and tear out your pancreas! This is ridiculous.

Earl leaves, slams the door.

HAL
And don't come back--

Earl throws open the door, rips down the shower curtain. Hal flinches. Earl leaves the curtain dropped and the door open and walks away.

INT. RYERSON HOUSE - GINNY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Ginny stares into the open locket, her picture, Ben's. A moment of reverie.

GINNY RYERSON
(To Ben's picture:) Stupid shit.

She snaps the locket shut, picks up the cordless phone off her bed and dials.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - HAL'S ROOM - NIGHT

Hal in bed, looking distraught. O.S. the phone rings.

EARL
It's for you, Annabelle!

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Hal picks up the phone.

HAL
Um, hm, this is, yes, this is--

GINNY RYERSON (O.S.)
Is this the Hefner mansion?

HAL
I'm going to, hang on, I'm going to move. Just stay on. Hang up now, Earl!

EARL (O.S.)
Oh, OK. You're the boss of me....

INT. RYERSON HOUSE - GINNY'S ROOM/HALLWAY - NIGHT

Ginny walks through her room and the upstairs hallway, phone in hand.

GINNY
The boy whose picture I keep in the locket that you stole, did you see him?

HAL

Uh, yeah --

GINNY

His name's Ben Wekselbaum and we debated together before he freaked out in the final round at States and left me with a lousy second-place trophy. I've never felt anything like that. Have you ever felt like you could burn the world down?

HAL

Every day.

She takes a beat with it.

GINNY

He dropped out of high school and though he never did have the decency to call I heard through the grapevine that his grandmother got him a job at the world-renowned Luis Dry Cleaners in Trenton.

HAL

I, I don't think I've ever heard of it.

GINNY

Anyway, ultimately it's a good thing that the spirit of cowardliness overtook Ben Wekselbaum because it has (1) left my partner arrangement free this year and (2) allowed me to find someone I can mold into the kind of bare-knuckles debater that I want to debate with. The very best debaters are the ones with something to prove. I, trying to rise above the fiasco of last year at States. You, trying to prove to the world that you're not as retarded as you sometimes sound. Which is why I want you to overlook the embarrassment that comes with having taken my locket and join up with the team after all.

GINNY'S MOTHER (O.S.)
 You're on dishes, tonight,
 Virginia!

GINNY RYERSON
 I'm on an important phone call is
 what I'm on!

GINNY'S MOTHER (O.S.)
 They're all important calls in the
 world of Virginia Ryerson!

GINNY RYERSON
 I have to go, I'll see you at
 practice.

She hangs up.

HAL
 I'll, OK, sure, I'll, yeah, see you
 at practice.... Are you there?

EARL (O.S.)
 I am, Joanie, yes, and it's a good
 thing I am--

HAL
 --Earl!--

Hal jumps up, lunges to his door to open it but Earl's
 holding it shut from the other side.

EARL (O.S.)
 If you get a long-term head-case
 girlfriend before me it will haunt
 you to your grave! Don't do it,
 little shit, don't do it.

Earl releases the door and Hal falls backwards into the room.

Hal jumps up and slams his door shut.

EXT. PLAINSBORO STREET - DAY

Hal rides past the "Entering Grover's Mill" sign on his way
 to Ginny's.

EXT. RYERSON HOUSE - DAY

Hal KNOCKS on the front door.

Connie answers, gives him a DUBIOUS LOOK. (The last she saw him, he was returning the stolen locket.)

CONNIE

Try not to steal anything if you can. Suspicion falls on me first.

Hal nods, enters.

INT. RYERSON HOUSE - STAIRWAY - DAY

Hal walks through the entryway, up the stairs. It's a whole new world and he takes it in.

At top of the stairs, he sees Ginny's bedroom door open and just a sliver of her inside. He pauses to study her.

GINNY RYERSON

(without looking up)
Cut it out and come inside.

Hal walks in.

GINNY RYERSON

Close the door behind you.

He does.

INT. RYERSON HOUSE - GINNY'S ROOM - DAY

Hal sits on her bed. Ginny sits by the window, smoking a cigarette and blowing the smoke outside. They are each reading debate briefs. Ginny gives a sound of appreciation for something she's just read ("Um-hm" or the like) and Hal, secretly sneaking a look at her, tries out one of his own. She looks up at him, he smiles at her.

HAL

So, yeah, what do you believe in when it comes to abstinence?

GINNY RYERSON

Top debaters, we never really believe in anything. It gets in the way of arguing both sides.

HAL

But what about for yourself, in your own life?

GINNY RYERSON

Debate is life. You shouldn't think about it in any other context.

HAL

Because, in my mind, it's not a good thing, abstinence isn't, I don't think. Not for kids in New Jersey.

GINNY RYERSON

That's enough tangential bullshit. Write down these template arguments against abstinence: (1) supporting it violates the barrier between church and state; (2) it's an enforcement of a dated sexist agenda; (3) sexual freedom is the basis of human freedom; (4) abstinence separates us from other Western cultures, Europe in particular, when we should be drawing closer to our international allies; (5) psychologists say that repressed sexual functions creates adult neuroses; (6) abstinence programs actually increase risky sexual behavior among teens; (7) it creates barriers between free-love generation parents and their more conservative children; (8) and finally, we oppose abstinence because the world might end and then the tragedy is that everyone we know basically dies a virgin....

HAL

Wow, yes, all that when you think about it.

GINNY RYERSON

Now argue it from the other side. In preparation for our first official debate exercise next week show me that you can argue in favor of it.

He thinks it over.

HAL

I think I'd be better at arguing the other side of this.

GINNY RYERSON

Hal....

HAL

I thought, the only one I can come up with so far is that it makes the thing, the thing being love, it makes it more special when you do find it.

GINNY RYERSON

The 'special love' case. Probably that stinks but I'll think about it some more and we'll see....

She flips through a book of evidence, Hal can't take his eyes from her.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH - LIBRARY - DAY

Hal sits at a table in the library. One table away sits a JUNIOR PHILOSOPHER. He's reading a book and he chortles over something.

JUNIOR PHILOSOPHER

Oh, Descartes. Man, oh, man. You should read this, it's a crack-up. Hey would you be interested in joining my club of Junior Philosophers?

HAL

I, I, my plate is kind of full.

JUNIOR PHILOSOPHER

We read everything but no Hegel if that's your concern.

HAL

I'm actually waiting for a girl.
(He sees Ginny enter with evidence tubs.) For that girl.

Ginny sits across from him. That's all she has to do: sit, and he's smitten.

MONTAGE--

Hal and Ginny in library. Days pass. They work, they read evidence, flirt. From his table, the junior philosopher glowers.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - LUMBLY'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Coach Lumbly in front. At desks beside her are Ginny, Hal, PHILIP and CRYSTAL HAMISH-STEINBERG. The rest of the TEAM including Flemming sits in back.

COACH LUMBLY

Once I was your age, just as quiet on the inside as most of you novice debaters are. Quiet as a mouse or a stone or a bowl of pudding. And then I saw my first debate and the pudding was no more. None of you novices understands me now. You will. Until then, the thing to remember is that however thrilling it is to speak up, to argue, to wake up that brain for the first time, there are rules that must be followed. That's debate and that's life. Our exercise today is an accelerated run-through of a complete debate round to teach you those rules.

FLEMMING

Why is the Hal Hefner bowl of pudding allowed to demonstrate to us?

COACH LUMBLY

He's a first-year, that's true but Ms. Ryerson has assured me that he's a quick study and a rare talent and that he'll be able to instruct and enlighten us today. Our debate begins with Ginny, the First Affirmative, delivering an 8 minute opening speech. For our purposes, Ginny will synopsise that down to ten seconds.

GINNY RYERSON--

GINNY RYERSON

(spreading)

Good afternoon, ladies and germs.

(MORE)

GINNY RYERSON (cont'd)

Our affirmative case today, in effect, states that increased teenage pregnancies will eventually bankrupt social security, destroy our economy and result in the third world war. Therefore we will quadruple the federal spending given only to schools that teach abstinence to their students. Thank you.

COACH LUMBLY

That was lucid, thank you. Now there's a two minute cross-examination, Second Negative to First Affirmative. Crystal Hamish-Steinberg is the Second Negative. Crystal Hamish-Steinberg, give us an exemplary question that you would ask.

CRYSTAL--

CRYSTAL HAMISH-STEINBERG

Have you ever heard of Bangladesh?

COACH LUMBLY

The perfect tease. You women may sit while the First Negative rises to respond to Ginny. Philip?

PHILIP--

PHILIP

(spreading)

Rather than attack the affirmative case, Crystal Hamish-Steinberg and I propose the following negative counterplan: we grant all the harms claimed by the affirmative but state that the better way to combat teenage pregnancy is by pouring money into a huge rock concert that we'll dub the 'Concert for Sexlessness'. We believe this will be a more effective than teaching abstinence in public schools where no one pays attention to their teachers anyway, present teacher excepted.

COACH LUMBLY

Thank you. Instead of arguing against the harms caused by teen promiscuity, the negative has interestingly granted all that but offered up their own plan that they claim is better. Now, First Affirmative cross-examines First Negative.

Ginny stands beside Philip.

GINNY RYERSON

Do you have statistics on how many rock stars practice abstinence?

PHILIP

How many rock stars who performed at the historic 'Concert for Bangladesh' were Bangladeshi?

GINNY RYERSON

I'll ask the questions here, Philip.

COACH LUMBLY

The combatants sit. Now Hal Hefner wows us with his Second Affirmative, another 8 minute speech boiled down here to ten seconds.

Hal finishes writing out a sentence on his legal pad and underlining it. He rises. He breathes dramatically, in and out.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Three were three immediate lines of argumentation that came to mind but the best one went like this: the plans are not mutually exclusive; increased funding for school programs doesn't preclude the negative team's badly-named 'Concert for Sexlessness'. We can and should do them both.

Not a word comes out of Hal's mouth.

On his pad, he's written: Not Mutually Exclusive!

There's Coach Lumbly.

Another GROUP OF KIDS.

Flemming who raises his arms: what's up?

Hal keeps breathing deeply.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Hal Hefner visualized himself in that moment as the kind of kid who comes up with three arguments and says them all. The kind of kid who can state, 'The plans are not mutually exclusive,' whenever he wants to say so. 'The plans are not mutually exclusive.' 'The plans are not, no they aren't, not mutually exclusive.'

Hal purses his lips hard. A total and awful speech block.

Then Ginny rises into shot.

GINNY RYERSON

(spreading)

I'll be handling Hal Hefner's cross-
x and rebuttal speech until the
first actual debate tournament at
Hazlet against other actual
schools. Until then he will be my
silent partner. Hal Hefner, sit
down.

Instead of sitting, Hal bursts out of the room.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

Ginny stands outside the Janitor's Closet. Hal's locked himself inside.

GINNY RYERSON

Do you know what I sounded like the
first speech I gave, when I was
your age? Ben told me I sounded
like a Bob Dole impersonator.

HAL (O.S.)

I don't, I'm not sure who that is.

GINNY RYERSON

You start out slovenly and then you
get better. Not Bob Dole but
pretty much anybody else.

HAL (O.S.)
 But I, I didn't even sound like Bob
 Dole. I sounded like nobody.

Ginny thinks for a BEAT and then walks in.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - JANITOR'S CLOSET - NEXT

Ginny and Hal inside.

 GINNY RYERSON
 Listen to me. That was your first
 try. Your first of many and--

Hal leans in and plants a KISS. Just lips and hair between
 them.

 GINNY RYERSON (CONT'D)
 So that's enough for now. We've
 got to finish the round, or I do,
 so we should go back--

He KISSES her again, harder, and now she KISSES him back. He
 grabs her shirt and they fall against the cleaning shelf.

EXT. PLAINSBORO STREET - DAY

Hal rides home looking brilliant, sanguine.

 HAL
 (shouting)
 Resolved: That the Federal
 Government should support the
 teaching of abstinence in public
 schools!...

He flies through a line-up of PLAINSBORO GIRLS IN FIELD
 HOCKEY UNIFORMS crossing the street and RINGS his bike bell
 as he goes.

 HAL (CONT'D)
Resolved: That the mother-
 effing Federal Government should
 support the teaching of abstinence
 in mother-effing-fucking public
 schools!

INT. GARRLES HOUSE - LEWIS'S BEDROOM - DAY

Lewis and Hal sitting on the bed. They turn the pages of a large edition Kama Sutra, illustrated with classic sex paintings.

LEWIS

Dad says him and mom have done every one of these at least twice. And some as many as a hundred times but he says nobody's keeping count which seems like a big waste. He could be the Kama Sutra Barry Bonds and no one would even know it.... Yeah, I tried this one with my pants on, on Winchester, our old dog, but he wouldn't sit still and he died a month later.

Hal turns the page.

INSERT--

The images flip by of old paintings with couples frozen in dramatic pretzels of intercourse.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Juliet and Judge Pete work on dinner. Judge Pete comes up behind her and kisses her on the neck.

INSERT--

Kama Sutra images.

EXT. SCHOOL - DAY

Hal, Heston and Earl sit on the curb waiting for the school bus.

HAL

Does anyone have a theory on how, on how one or you, would take a relationship, a good and solid relationship to the next level?

EARL

I'm glad you came to me because this is exactly the sort of question that mom and dad would royally screw up. See, it's all about having an agenda which they would never tell you. When you've got a plan, like, today I'm going to get a blowjob, then it helps you realize that. It's all very scientific.

HAL

I doubt, I'm just a doubter, that giving me a BJ is high on Ginny's list.

EARL

You're her partner right? So you wait until the moment's right, after you crack a good, a really good joke like the one I tell about the Queen of England, and then ask. You never know and it's worth the risk. Believe me. It is worth the risk. It's like walking through a brick wall.

HAL

Ginny says that I won't be a real partner for months and that until then I'm like the mascot, the dysfluent mascot, the dyfluent mascot not getting a BJ.

HESTON

(also quietly)
The aardvark?

HAL

That was a joke, Heston. There's no debate mascot.

HESTON

I, for some reason, was convinced it was an aardvark.

HAL

No.

HESTON

C'est la vie.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH - LIBRARY - DAY

Hal sitting at his table. Again, Junior Philosopher is there.

HAL

I just wanted to try it out on you to make sure I know how to deliver it, the punchline's kind of tricky. (Clears his throat.) 'The Queen of England goes onto this television show...'

JUNIOR PHILOSOPHER

If you continue telling me that filthy joke I'm going to put this book down and punch you very hard.

HAL

Someday you'll find love and everything will be different.

Junior Philosopher gives him the finger.

Hal waits quietly.

The doors open and TWO KIDS walk in. No Ginny.

Hal sits back to wait. Hold for several beats on Hal.

Jump wide to see room. Everyone DISSOLVES out until it's just Hal at the table and then he gets up and walks out.

EXT. RYERSON HOUSE - DAY

Hal drops his bike with his suitcase bungeed to it, walks up the front path.

At the door, he straightens his hair, knocks. Connie answers.

HAL

'Masturbation is a natural precursor to adult sexual development and should be unfettered in a child's learning.'
Jellison, '98.

CONNIE

Her plans changed.

From inside, FRANK RYERSON, Ginny's father, calls out:

FRANK RYERSON (O.S.)
Virginia says to keep on working
hard and she'll call you to let you
know when you should come on over.

HAL
Because she wasn't at school today
and she's not here now and our
first tournament, it's at Hazlet
High School next weekend.

FRANK RYERSON (O.S.)
Keep on keepin' on and maybe she'll
call you soon.

Connie smiles and shuts the door.

EXT. GARRLES HOUSE - NEXT

Hal walks from the Ryerson house, across the street and up
the path to the Garrles' door.

INT. GARRLES HOUSE - ENTRY - NEXT

Fern Garrles at the door.

FERN
Hi, there.

HAL
I wondered maybe, you know, if
Lewis would want to work with me.

FERN
Ask him if you'd like.

LEWIS (O.S.)
No debating!

Fern winces: what can you do with a kid like that?

HAL
Do you know if Ginny Ryerson, if
she's OK? She cancelled our time
today and our first tournament,
it's at Hazlet on Sunday and all
the major Jersey schools will be
there.

(MORE)

HAL (cont'd)
And she hasn't yet shared, really,
her strategy for me dealing with my
speech. Or lack thereof.

FERN
I don't know, Hal.

LEWIS (O.S.)
She got into a Lincoln with that
Indian guy!

EXT. GARRLES HOUSE - NEXT

Hal walks back across the street to the Ryerson's.

EXT. RYERSON HOUSE - NEXT

Hal knocks on the door. Connie answers again.

CONNIE
And you're back.

HAL
Just to make sure that Ginny's
alright because Lewis Garrles from
across the street, he said she got
into a Lincoln with an Indian man.

CONNIE
A boy, that's right.

HAL
And she's fine?

CONNIE
Fine.

HAL
Fine.

CONNIE
Well....

HAL
Will you tell her that, that I'm
done, done and over, with the
masturbation defense. Tell her
that, will you? Assure her I'm
done with masturbation and ready to
show her.

CONNIE

Take care now.

She shuts the door and locks it behind Hal.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Hal, Earl, Juliet, Judge Pete and Heston have dinner in awkward silence.

JULIET

I told Judge Pete about all the fun you've been having with debate and guess the news? Heston is a joiner.

HAL

It's too late, Heston. The teams, all the teams are settled.

HESTON

Coach Lumbly says that after the first tournament someone always gets the stuffing taken out of him and never comes back so I'll be filling that slot, whomever's that may be.

JULIET

To discover opportunity in misery. There's sense in that.

JUDGE PETE

That's how I found you, my love.

Judge Pete cracks himself up.

Hal looks horribly uncomfortable. The conversation vanishes and everyone goes back to eating dinner quietly.

HESTON

By the way, you were right about the aardvark. There is no mascot.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - HAL'S ROOM - NIGHT

Hal on the cordless phone. He dials and while he waits for the other end to pick up, he unzips his suitcase. He reaches inside and starts to unload all his school books and notebooks and replace them with a modest amount of debate material.

CONNIE (O.S.)
Hello, Connie Ryerson speaking.

Hal struggles to get the first sound out. He just BREATHES HEAVILY. It sounds uncomfortably sexual.

CONNIE (O.S.)
Bertram, is that you?

HAL
It's, you know, wait, it's me, Hal Hefner, for G-I-N-N-Y, Ginny.

CONNIE (O.S.)
Hold the line.

She puts the phone down.

HAL
(to himself now)
Hello, this is Hal Hefner. Hi there, Hef here.

She picks the phone back again.

CONNIE (O.S.)
Hal?

Again, he's just HEAVY BREATHING.

CONNIE (O.S.)
She says just that she'll see at the debate tomorrow, OK?

HAL
But I need to talk to her....

CONNIE (O.S.)
She'll see you then.

EXT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - PARKING LOT - DAY

It's morning and a small school bus is idling in the lot.

Juliet pulls up in her sedan and Hal and Heston get out and rush up into the bus.

INT. SCHOOL BUS - DAY

Hal and Heston enter and take the backseat beside Flemming.

Coach Lumbly enters. She stands in front and faces the kids.

COACH LUMBLY

When you work so hard at something,
so hard, all that extra time....
Wallace, you always tell me to
balance out. Balance out, balance
out, balance out.

FLEMMING

What are you talking about?

COACH LUMBLY

Ginny Ryerson has transferred to
Townsend Prep for the rest of her
senior year. We have an even
number so Hal, you'll muddle
through today with Heston, and
we'll reconstitute the teams
tomorrow. Let's go, Wallace.

The bus heaves into motion.

We focus on Hal who looks completely emotionless.

INSERT--

FLASHBACK. Ginny through the school bus window, her back to
Hal, waving her arm in the air. Tight on her outstretched
arm.

Now, it's like a wave goodbye.

BACK ON THE BUS, MOVING--

We're TIGHT on Hal. He looks utterly lost, more than ever.

HESTON

Should you tell me what our
affirmative case is or would you
rather it was a surprise?

Hal has no reply, just a perplexed look.

EXT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

The kids unload their stuff from the bus.

They have big plastic cases decorated with bumper-stickers
and stuffed with their notebooks of evidence. Most kids have
one or two. Hal just has his carry-on bag. Heston has
nothing.

Across the parking lot, the TOWNSEND BUS pulls to a stop.

The Plainsboro kids watch as the Townsend kids get off the bus, one by one, all wearing the Townsend sweater-vest.

Finally, there's Ginny, also in the matching Townsend sweater-vest. She's laughing as she gets off.

The driver opens the back door of the bus and starts unloading the Townsend bags. They have twice the cases that Plainsboro does.

Wordlessly, the Plainsboro debaters move toward the entrance. In the back of the pack, Hal extends the handle of his suitcase and it comes off completely.

He throws it into the shrubs and, awkwardly, has to two-hand guide his suitcase to the school.

EXT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - ENTRYWAY - DAY

Debaters from many schools file into the school, Hal among them.

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - CLASSROOM A - DAY

Hal stands. Heston sits at a table beside him. TWO KIDS FROM MORRISTOWN HIGH scribble notes.

Hal is supremely nervous and his lack of fluency is jarring.

HAL

Good morning, good morning, good morning there, Judge. Good morning, you both, you, our esteemed opponents. Good morning. Let's get down and dirty, shall we, shall we, with this thing, this thing I'll call, this thing that's our plan, it's in support of the following, the resolution, you know it: THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, THE FEDS, THE FEDERALES, THE GOVERNMENT, THAT THEY, THAT IT.... Is it 'it' or 'they', anyway.... You see where I'm, where I'm going, I'm certain. How much time, timer?

TIMER 1, a Hazlet Junior High volunteer, takes down the "8 minutes" card and replaces it with "7 minutes." It's going to be a long 7 minutes.

EXT. HAZLET PARKING LOT - DAY

Hal roams across the lot, cell phone against his ear.

INT. LEWINSKY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lewinsky sits on his living room couch, trying and utterly failing to re-order a Rubik's cube. He's his underwear. Also sitting on the couch is a deadpan WOMAN.

He shoulders the phone against his ear and he struggles with the cube.

LEWINSKY

Hello?

INTERCUT:

HAL

Mr., Mr., Mr.--

LEWINSKY

Hal? What's the matter?

HAL

I'm just here, here at Hazlet High, at the debate, my first debate and, well, so far, so far, so far, so far, so far, well, truly, it's been great. I spent the last seven minutes of my Round 1 speech trying to say the resolution. No joke, seven minutes on just the resolution.

LEWINSKY

Oh, man. There's breathing, right? (He whispers just for:) And there's whispering.

HAL

What else, please?

LEWINSKY

There's that video I gave you, singing instead of talking.

HAL

Did rat poison and a straw, you know, come with that video?

LEWINSKY

My ex-girlfriend, the Ph.D. at Annenberg, she used to say that her brother never stuttered if he spoke in an accent. You could try something subtle, the accent you know best, and maybe that would help. Anyway, I wouldn't count on it. Mina's advice was about as far-fetched as she was. Open relationships just don't work, Hal....

HAL

What?

LEWINSKY

I'm advising that you try to do an accent. OK? That's what I'm telling you to do.

HAL

If I do that, I won't see you on Monday, you know, because I will, I'll have, I will, I'll be on a plane to Banja Luka--

He finds that he happens to have wandered right over to the Townsend Prep bus and stands right before it. The enemy before him.

He kicks the tire hard, nothing happens.

HAL

OK, I should go now.

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - CLASSROOM B - DAY

Hal is back in the room, standing at the front. He looks over at Heston, completely miserable. Heston doesn't know what to make of it. Smiles back at him.

Hal composes himself and begins.

HAL

(with a bone-chilling
Korean accent)

Good afternoon, esteemed opponents
from Glen Rock.

(MORE)

HAL (cont'd)
 Let's get down and dirty, shall we,
 with this thing, this thing I'll
 call our plan, it's in support of
 the following resolution: THAT THE
 FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD SUPPORT
 THE TEACHING OF ABSTINENCE IN OUR
 PUBLIC SCHOOLS. Excuse me. I'm
 sorry, I'm so sorry.

Heston is stunned, silent.

Without another word, Hal gives up, walks out of the room,
 totally disgraced.

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - DAY

Hal in line surrounded by other debaters. We're tight on him
 as he moves through the line.

All around him, debaters talk excitedly about their rounds:
 what plans are being run by other schools; the lousy judges;
 how unstoppable Townsend Prep is.

Hal reaches the end of the line.

SERVER
 Slice of pizza or Sloppy Joes and I
 don't want to debate you on it.

HAL
 The, not the, not the. There's the
 slop. It's not what I want, the
 sloppies..

A lunch lady removes the empty pizza tray as Hal stumbles
 over his words.

SERVER
 Look it. We're out of the pizza.
 Sloppy Joes are left but they're
 not terrible if you've never had
 really good ones before.

She serves up his Sloppy Joe. Hal exits.

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - NEXT

Hal walks into the main room and looks out at the crowd. No
 sign of Ginny or Ram. Flemming comes up next to him.

FLEMMING

She's not here. Ginny and I don't
eat at tournaments. Draws blood
from the brain.

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - NEXT

Hal hurries down the hallway looking for a specific
classroom.

He passes by SEVERAL DEBATES IN PROGRESS.

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - NEXT

Hal stops outside one open door and peers inside.

ANGLE IN--

Ram stands in front, spreading. Ginny sits. The OPPOSING
TEAM is across the room.

RAM

(super fast)

Please go to Observation Three:
Abstinence helps teens distinguish
between love and sex and creates,
what we'll call, 'special love' in
adulthood. Card one comes from
Weston in '05--

Hal slaps his hand against the door. Ginny looks up, catches
sight of him and looks away. Hal turns and runs.

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - NEXT

Hyperventilating, Hal arrives outside a Janitor's Closet and
tries to open it. It's locked tight. Hal gives up and runs
on.

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - BATHROOM - DAY

Hal at a sink, spitting up.

HAL

I'm just, I just don't know what to
do here.

Crystal Hamish-Steinberg, pressing a towel up against her inexplicably bloody nose, comes up to him. She considers him for a moment.

CRYSTAL HAMISH-STEINBERG
Well, this is the girls' room.

HAL
OK.

Hal wipes his mouth and exits.

The sound of APPLAUSE rises up....

INT. HAZLET HIGH SCHOOL - AUDITORIUM - DAY

All the debaters sit in the auditorium for the awards presentation. Some kids really whoop it up as Ginny walks up to the stage. She gives a big thumbs-up to the crowd.

HAZLET COACH
I want to read also what one judge wrote about Virginia. She wrote, "Virginia may be the next Barbara Jordan." How about that? First place, Individual Speaker, Virginia Ryerson.

The kids are confused but clap anyway.

HAZLET COACH (CONT'D)
(To a kid offstage:) Where's the trophy?

OFF-STAGE KID shrugs. He's got no idea.

HAZLET COACH (CONT'D)
We'd hate for your collection to not include Hazlet. We'll find it.

GINNY
I have mine from last year.

HAZLET COACH
Well, you can never have enough Hazlet trophies. Barbara Jordan never had enough.

She leaves the stage and kids clap for her.

ANGLE ON--

The Plainsboro team sit on their hands in protest all except Flemming who claps with vigor.

On the sly, Coach Lumbly gives her the finger.

EXT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

The debaters jump out and to the cars waiting for them.

INT. SCHOOL BUS - NIGHT

Hal and Heston are about to exit past Coach Lumbly.

COACH LUMBLY

Hal Hefner, stay a moment would you?

Heston hops off.

HAL

I'm going to regroup. I'm, you can see, I'm determined. My brain, like Ginny saw, my brain is made for this kind of thing. It's full of retorts; you can't ask a question without it filling up with retorts.

COACH LUMBLY

Let's be adults here.

HAL

Ginny recruited me. She said that she could tell, she intuited-- *intuited*--that I was specially made for this, for debating.

COACH LUMBLY

Do you know Mento Buru who doesn't speak more than six words of English? Or Evie Swiderski who has such pronounced irritable bowel syndrome that she's being studied by a team at Princeton?

HAL

No.

COACH LUMBLY

What about Elvis Hunsinger, the boy who pees himself in gym class?

HAL
Everyone knows Elvis.

COACH LUMBLY
She tried to recruit all of them.
I can't believe it never crossed my
mind that this could be some
scheme of hers but if you think
about it, it looks pretty bad.

Hal is speechless, he walks off the bus with his suitcase.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - HAL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Hal enters his room, summoning his fucked-up, handle-less
suitcase behind him.

He heaves the bag onto his bed and opens it. Inside: among
the scattered debate briefs is Ginny's trophy. He's stolen
it.

He takes it out, looks at it for a BEAT that passes as
reverence before he lunges for it, trying to snap the little
golden-plastic orator off the top. As he struggles mightily
against it--

Judge Pete opens his bedroom door.

JUDGE PETE
Your mom's running late but wants
us to start on dinner. Hey now--

He takes the trophy from Hal's hands.

JUDGE PETE (CONT'D)
Oh, Jesus. I can't handle it, Hal,
this is too much. TOO MUCH! Man,
oh, man. The most Heston ever
hailed in was an Honorable Mention
in the hip-hop dance-a-thon but
this is too much coming from you.
Your dad will be so proud. On
behalf of your dad....

Judge Pete bear-hugs Hal.

JUDGE PETE (CONT'D)
This goes on the dining room table
for your mom to see when she gets
home. Whoo-hoo!

Judge Pete exits with the trophy in hand.

Hal bolts.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - EARL'S ROOM - NIGHT

Hal bursts in, goes straight for the theft box. Pulls it out, opens it.

Then he takes out the bottle of reposado, twists the lid and takes a big swig. He spits it out, onto Earl's bed.

Then takes another swig. This one, he keeps down.

EXT. PLAINSBORO STREET - NIGHT

Hal rides his bike silent, angry. Heston rides with him.

HESTON

My dad told me I was the world's
utmost idiot for not realizing you
won something today. Please accept
my belated congratulations.

Hal pushes on grimly.

INT. GARRLES HOUSE - ENTRY - NIGHT

Hal and Heston arrive at the front door, their bikes laying in the driveway behind them.

A girl, 14, in braces, opens the front door. She's the
SITTER.

SITTER

Fern didn't say anything about
Lewis's friends stopping by.

Hal and Heston charge upstairs.

SITTER (CONT'D)

(calling after them)
I get paid per kid!

INT. GARRLES HOUSE - LEWIS'S ROOM - NIGHT

Hal stands at the window, staring out. He gulps angrily from the bottle.

They stare out the window, the three of them.

Hal launches the cello into the air. It arcs up a bit, doesn't get anywhere near Ginny's window. Instead, it crashes through the bay window into the living room. The explosion of glass is enormous, devastating.

He falls as he tosses it in, landing in the dirt.

As he does, a car pulls up behind him in the driveway.

It's the Ryersons. Ginny, her mom and dad. Ram's with them.

Hal stands up from the flower bed, looking drunk and dirty.

HAL

There's a cello inside your house
now.

Hal runs off into the night.

Heston picks up Hal's bike and his own and follows after him.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Hal sits in the empty tub, exhausted. Shower running down on him.

Earl pounds and kicks at the door.

EARL

I hate you. Mom and Judge Pete
hate you. Dad hates you. Melody,
dad's new girlfriend, hates you.
Don't ever take the stuff I steal
ever, ever again! That bottle was
reposito you doofus dunce. Uncle
Chas spent big bucks on that. Uncle
Chas hates you.

Finally Earl manages to throw the door open. He stares at Hal, sees just how pathetic he is, how much he hates himself.

EARL (cont'd)

That was all I wanted to say.
There's pineapple cake in the
fridge. If you're late I'll eat
the whole cake so don't be late.

Earl takes his toothbrush, starts absentmindedly brushing, shuts the door behind him.

EXT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - ENTRANCE - DAY

Sitting in heavy coats by the school's main entrance, a couple of TEENAGERS go at it.

TITLE CARD: "WINTER"

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - COUNSELING ROOM - DAY

Hal, Honoria, Lewinsky. They sit on a colorful quilt.

LEWINSKY

Maybe you want to put the debate thing behind you. A lark of adolescence. We all have them. Mine was cheerleading. I was the one boy on the cheerleading squad. Imagine that. Gimme an H! Gimme an A! Gimme an L! What's that spell? HAL!

HAL

That image, that's not helping.

LEWINSKY

Just because debate was a wipe-out, I mean, a colossal wipe-out, doesn't mean you're a failure. It was the activity that failed you. There's nothing to say you couldn't try for, say, the Spanish club. You could become Spanish club vice president in no time.

HONORIA

<Kyle Filiwicz es el vice presidente.>

LEWINSKY

My point, Hal, is that you have to get out of your own way here. Go back to the way you were living before you tried to exceed your limitations. It's very dharmic. You don't need to be anybody but natural yourself and you don't need to prove anything to anybody.

INT. PLAINSBORO HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

Hal seems in a disconnected state, as if in a dream.

Hal walks suitcaseless through the main hall. Kids hurry through the sloshy floor to get to class on time. But Hal somehow looks around as if he's walked into school for the first time.

A snowball explodes in the hallway near him but he doesn't flinch.

The camera begins to pull back from him as all the kids around him duck into their classes.

Hal is the last one left, standing stoically in the middle of the hallway.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Hal Hefner floated above his life, saw the world around him as if he were just a ghost floating through. Don't pity the boy ghost. Nothing could harm him now, nothing could move him or pain him or make him love again. He was that kind of ghost, the kind that couldn't love again.

EXT. PLAINSBORO MUNICIPAL PARK - DAY

Hal walks through the park. It's classic community park, neat and tidy, everything in its place. Covered in a blanket of snow and slush,

NARRATOR (V.O.)

As a boy ghost, Hal Hefner surveyed the world as he knew it. And in everything he saw was evidence that life goes on, with or without love. He had stopped thinking about the girl, had stopped dreaming about her. Or, even if that wasn't entirely true, had stopped dreaming a certain kind of dream about her. Well, maybe most of the time.

Hal keeps walking.

He stops at a park bench. Sits on the bench.

The park. Great oaks covered in snow. Nothing special. Everything around him.

EXT. PLAINSBORO MUNICIPAL PARK - DAY

Hal still sitting on the bench. It's spring-time now, months later. Hal's heavy jacket replaced with a simple wind-breaker.

INT. TOWNSEND PREP - DEBATE ROOM - DAY

Ginny and Ram make out at a desk, work piled up all around them.

TITLE CARD: "SPRING"

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Then Spring came. Eleven months after his father left, six months since he last saw Ginny and six since they kissed.

We cut wider to see the Townsend debate room, impressive in size, scope, materials. An UNKNOWN TOWNSEND DEBATER enters, staples a flyer to the wall and exits.

INSERT--

The flyer: NEW JERSEY STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS IN BUT ONE MONTH! REMEMBER PERSONAL HYGIENE AND PREPARE FOR VICTORY!

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

NARRATOR (V.O.)

It was on a Thursday. It could have been any day but it wasn't, it was Thursday. And something happened.

Hal plays with his dog.

Judge Pete walks downstairs. Comes into the living room, unsteadily.

JULIET (O.S.)

Boys, upstairs please!

Earl enters from the kitchen.

JUDGE PETE

Boys. Your mom and I are over,
that's according to her.

JULIET (O.S.)

This is a very complicated adult
relationship!

Judge Pete BITES DOWN on his own fist.

JUDGE PETE

She said that it was all her, that
it's always all her and could we be
buddies.

JULIET (O.S.)

Please let Heston know he's always
welcome for after-school snacks!

JUDGE PETE

This is why your dad left. You're
all just so messed up.

Judge Pete tries to refrain himself from crying.

EARL

That's a hurtful assessment.

Suddenly, Judge Pete crying. Loud, blubbery sobbing.

We got tight on Hal as he seems come alive again.

JUDGE PETE

(crying)

Oma!

Judge Pete staggers out the front door.

Hal goes to the window to watch him go.

A SHOT THAT MATCHES THE EARLY SHOT OF HAL THROUGH THE WINDOW--

Like he watched his dad leave, he watches Judge Pete go.

A look of purpose crosses his face. He rushes outside.

EARL

Mommy! Hal's in the garage and
he's freaking out!

Earl goes to the window.

EARL (CONT'D)
It doesn't end good when he takes
off like this!

EXT. TOWNSEND PREP - DAY

Hal walks onto school property. Off-screen we hear:

WOMAN (O.S.)
Virginia Ryerson please come to the
main office. Virginia Ryerson, you
have a visitor in the main office.

INT. TOWNSEND PREP - MAIN OFFICE - DAY

There's a WOMAN sitting at the main desk. A ROTTEN GIRL in a
Townsend Prep uniform sits beside a principal's office.

WOMAN
Are you her little brother? You
look like you could be her little
brother.

HAL
I'm her ex-lover.

The woman reacts with a disturbed look. Hal sits beside the
rotten girl.

ROTTEN GIRL
How far'd you get with her?

HAL
Does it count as second base if
it's groping through the shirt?

ROTTEN GIRL
Maybe in public school.

Ginny arrives at the office.

GINNY
What are you doing here?

HAL
It's spring break at Plainsboro. I
have the day off.

GINNY
OK. I'm going to go back to Latin
class now.

HAL

I'm returning this to you. I thought you should have it and it's important to me that you do.

He opens the bag and takes out the trophy.

HAL

It's your Hazlet trophy.

Hal was melted the head and arm off. It's charred and disfigured. Ginny reacts with horror.

GINNY

I don't want the trophy. I'm going back to class now.

She exits, slams the door behind her.

HAL

(shouting after her his planned spiel)
Every-, every-, everybody has their own path and, and, and, and....

Hal stands in the room perplexed. Still and then shaking.

The Woman and Rotten Girl exchange a look.

WOMAN

(quietly)
Security please report to the main office, security to handle a stuttering boy in the main office.

EXT. TOWNSEND PREP - DAY

Hal runs off school property, launches the destroyed trophy into the air as he goes.

EXT. TOWNSEND PREP ADJACENT STREET - DAY

Hal runs down the street in CU profile. Match cut:

INT. BUS - DAY

Hal rides the bus. Through the window we see that the scene outside has turned from suburb to city. It's Trenton. Dirty, depressed city.

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NARRATOR (V.O.)

It was like he was pretending,
 pretending it could all be what it
 once was. But it can't. You can
 only pretend to be asleep for so
 long and then you can't pretend any
 more. Just like that he woke up.
 And then he found himself
 sprinting. It was ridiculous but
 he did, he sprinted. You don't let
 love collapse all around you and
 not put up a fight. You punch
 back. Unless you can find someone
 else to throw the punch for you.
 Then by all means do that.

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INT. LUIS DRY CLEANING - IN FRONT - DAY

Hal enters, goes to the counter.

The OLD MAN at the counter points him to the back:

There's Ben at the presses.

INT. LUIS DRY CLEANING - IN BACK - NEXT

We follow Hal into the back, past a group of workers and a rotating line of clothes.

He arrives at Ben's station. Ben looks up, keeps pressing.

HAL

My name is, well, in this case, the
 thing is, I'm Hal Hefner from
 Plainsboro High School. I've come
 to find you.

BEN

Wait in the front if you care to.
 My shift ends on the hour.

HAL

Oh, I care to.

BEN

That's fine. Wait in the front.

Hal grins, walks back to the front.

INT. LUIS DRY CLEANING - IN FRONT - DAY

Elated, Hal stands by the OLD MAN.

HAL

You know that that's God doing your dry cleaning back there. God does dry cleaning. And he wears a smock.

The Old Man has no response.

EXT. LUIS DRY CLEANING - DAY

Ben and Hal exit.

WALKING AND TALKING DOWN THE STREET--

BEN

Man, it's a blessing to be squarely and dearly out of the goddamn suburbs. They'll suck the marrow right from you, the suburbs will, and it takes years in the Big City to inject the life back into you, literal years.

HAL

Do you mean that this, is that, is this, is this the Big City, do you mean, Trenton?

BEN

That's right, Trenton.

HAL

Oh.

They walk for a BEAT.

BEN

Did Ginny send you?

HAL

No, no, this doesn't, she doesn't know anything.

BEN

Lumbly?

HAL

No. No.

BEN

Because if this is part of a grand design to get me back to school--

Ben stops suddenly. Hal goes past him and has to come back to look him straightaway.

BEN (CONT'D)

You smell that bus exhaust? (Hal looks around: no bus.) That'll be what you leave behind on your way back to Plainsboro without me.

Ben starts walking again, even faster.

HAL

I just, it's not, I just want, what I want is, I want, what I need is just your help. That's all.

BEN

You don't even know me.

He stops, stares at Hal. Hal isn't sure whether he should stare right back or look away.

Ben's not sure what he sees in Hal's eyes. Then he starts walking again.

Hal catches up.

WALKING AND TALKING--

HAL

You're a legend at PHS.

BEN

Right. I'm the next Shelly Hasty.

HAL

Who is, who is, who is she?

BEN

He. He supposedly drove a Chevy Nova into the cafeteria in 1986. There's a plaque somewhere next to a water fountain in his honor.

HAL

Why would he, why would anyone....
Anyway, no, your legend is better
than a wrecked Chevy Nova.

BEN

Big bang, Hal. Anyone who doesn't
shop at the Gap is basically a
legend in Plainsboro.

They walk in silence while Hal mulls over what to say next.

HAL

I'm going to be the next legend of
PHS. Or if not a legend then not a
nobody. And that's not going to
happen for me any other way than to
win, to win at States.

Ben stops. Hal stops, too.

BEN

You're going to win States?

HAL

Yes, well, we are, yes.

BEN

It's all so pointless. That's the
realization I came to at States
last year. Life is nothing but
repetition, the same thing over and
over. Somebody might give you a
trophy and that's supposed to mean
you're making progress but there's
no such thing. The fights you
fight today and the fights you
fight your whole life.

HAL

Be that as it may....

BEN

Sure, be that as it may....

They're in the middle of the street and Hal stops in his
tracks. Ben stops with him.

HAL

You're not listening to me! This isn't, it's not, I'll tell you what it's not, it's not, not, not college application bullshit that is, that is like, that is the driving force here or any bullshit.

BEN

I'm sure.

The light changes and traffic starts HONKING as it winds around them.

HAL

No, I'll tell you what it is.

BEN

Yes? What it is is.....

HAL

I'll tell you what it is, WHAT IT IS. What it is is is love. Kind of a special love. (A BEAT.) Or if not that, then the need for revenge when love goes bad. One of those two. Love or revenge. One of them I think made me throw a cello through somebody's window. So you figure it out.

BEN

An actual cello?

HAL

I mean, yeah, symphony-sized as far as I know.

Ben starts to laugh.

BEN

That's sharp in my book, as far as reasons go.

HAL

It does, I'll grant you, it does have a certain appeal.

Hal joins in Ben's laughter.

Ben comes to a tenement building and pushes inside. He holds open the door for Hal.

INT. BEN'S APARTMENT - DAY

The door opens. Ben enters, Hal behind him, taking it all in.

It's an empty tenement apartment. A bit of old furniture, an easel with a terrible painting on it and an old banjo in the corner.

Hal stops to consider the painting. He has no idea what it is.

BEN

This goes against my better judgement, it does. But what we'll need is one affirmative case, that's all. And one all-purpose negative counterplan. We can't do a year's worth of work in one month so we'll concentrate on those two lines of attack. You'll have to arrange with your parents--do you have parents?

HAL

My mom's at home. And I see my dad on some weekends.

BEN

You'll have to come to some arrangement with them or else let go of trying to so that you can spend evenings and weekends here. We'll register as a home-school team, my grandmother will sign whatever official paperwork is required. But all such considerations wait on our priority. That's finding you your voice.

MONTAGE--

EXT. TRENTON - DAY

Different angles of Trenton, dirty and sad. Beneath the images we hear the Battle Hymn.

A final shot of the bridge over the Delaware. "Trenton Makes
- The World Takes" it says.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Suddenly Trenton was a different
city. No longer a dead end but a
beginning. Trenton, the very city
of triumph.

INT. TRENTON APARTMENT - STAIRWELL - DAY

Hal races up the stairwell and pushes out onto the rooftop.

EXT. BEN'S APARTMENT - ROOFTOP - DAY

Ben stands on the rooftop overlooking Trenton.

On the building across from him stands Hal.

BEN

Fire when ready!

HAL

This isn't, this is not good for
one's spirit.

BEN

I can't hear you!

HAL

It's spirit-crushing, I said!
Fine. What should I say?

BEN

Give me your standard affirmative
opening.

HAL

Right. See, I didn't really do it
enough for it to be standard.

BEN

Throw me the cello!

HAL

Good after, good after. Christ.
After, after, after, N-O-O-N.

Hal paces around his rooftop. Stops. Then SCREAMS.

Ben starts playing the Battle Hymn of the Republic on the banjo.

HAL

I don't, see I've thought about this, and I don't think I can do the song-thing.

BEN

This is the Battle Hymn of the Republic. We might prefer something more modern, I realize, but this is the only piece I can play all the way through. What you're going to do is just learn the song well enough to keep it in your head, to let it flow through you as you speak-sing your speeches. We'll write to fit the rhyme.

Ben starts singing.

BEN

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored, He has loosed the fateful lightening of His terrible swift sword His truth is marching on. Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on. I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps; I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps; His day is marching on. Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His day is marching on.

INT. BEN'S APARTMENT - DAY/NIGHT

MONTAGE--

BEN'S APARTMENT TRANSFORMING INTO A DEBATE HEADQUARTERS OVER THE NEXT MONTH. WE SEE HAL AND BEN DISSOLVE IN AND OUT OF THE SCENE, BOOKS AND EVIDENCE CARDS PILING UP AROUND THEM.

And then, one day, the books are gone, the cards are gone, Hal and Ben are gone.

EXT. JULIET'S HOUSE - DAY

Early morning light.

INT. JULIET'S HOUSE - HAL'S ROOM - NEXT

Hal puts on a bowtie in the mirror. A KNOCK on the door.

HAL

At your, well, enter at own risk!

Earl enters, carrying his father's big Samsonite bag.

HAL (CONT'D)

That's dad's.

EARL

I thought you could use a bigger suitcase and one with an actual handle.

Earl unzips it for Hal and actually starts to transfer the contents of the smaller, crowded bag into the big suitcase. Hal kneels down beside him to help him do this.

EARL

I swear, Penelope, I don't know where you'd be without someone in this family who can steal and then organize.

HAL

Could, I have a request, Earl, could you, if I win today, could you stop calling me with girls' names? Could we say that, if I win?

EARL

Let's not push it, shall we? And anyway, Penelope's my favorite girl's name.

HAL

Can we leave it at Penelope then from now on?

EARL

Yeah, we can do that.

They pack in silence some more.

EXT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - DAY

A VANTAGE POINT ON THE CAMPUS--

Ben's beat-up Honda pulls into shot and turns into the parking lot. It's full of buses and school vans The last kids to enter hurry inside, lugging plastic evidence cases.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - MAIN AUDITORIUM - DAY

ON STAGE --

OFFICIAL

Welcome to the 43rd annual New Jersey State Debate Championships. There are 22 schools represented here from every region of the state. Pairings for the first three rounds are randomized, then they're weighted by win-lose record. We have octofinals, quarterfinals, semis and finals, scheduled in this auditorium at 7 pm, before a new state champion is crowned. Before we begin I want you to give yourselves a big round of applause. You all can't win but you all are winners....

ANGLE ON--

Ben and Hal enter in the back. They look kick-ass, sharply dressed and wonderfully cocky.

They scan the crowd, find their target and walk in. Past the Plainsboro Team, Coach Lumbly, Flemming, Heston, the others.

They cut through a row to place themselves directly in front of the Townsend Prep Team.

Hal turns around to see Ginny. She's stunned to see him there. Then Ben turns. They exchange a potent look.

Ram whispers something in her ear. Ginny doesn't respond, she's consumed by the sight of Ben.

The GIRL FROM GLEN ROCK "E" comes up to Ben.

GLEN ROCK GIRL

(whispering)

Would you sign this? It's my favorite brief of the year. It says that abstinence leads to a global crisis in mental health.

Ben signs.

GLEN ROCK GIRL (CONT'D)

(To Hal:) Aren't you that Chinese boy?

HAL

Korean, yes, and just so you know, that's actually pretty ignorant to lump us all into one category.

He looks back. Ginny's gone now. Ram points to Hal: we're coming for you.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - HALLWAY - DAY

Hal and Ben standing outside their first room. They exchange a meaningful look, a look of resolve.

Ben starts humming the Battle Hymn.

Hal picks up on it.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - CLASSROOM A - DAY

Hal and Ben in the room, across from the BOY AND GIRL from NUTLEY.

As Hal rises in front, ready to deliver the opening speech. He looks at his opponents, at the JUDGE and TIME-KEEPER, at Ben.

Hal nods to the time keeper to begin and starts quietly.

HAL

(speaking approximately to the music)

You think our case will state that sex is bound to be explored, That adding funds for abstinence is what I will've roared,

(MORE)

HAL (cont'd)

But such a case has been heard so
much that we are bored,
Our plan is thus not that.

Hal checks out the Judge who is jotting a note. As are his
opponents. He increases his volume.

HAL

Our government can best support
teaching abstinence,
By refraining from their common and
ugly arrogance,
Instead of telling us we should
never do the dance,
They should adopt this plan...
Amend the constitution so that no
over twenty
Can serve in government, there'll
be only kids aplenty
We'll write the laws and fix sex ed
and it won't cost a penny
That's our basic plan.

Hal starts shouting, with greater fluency now. He's thrilled
and he lets himself get into it with real gusto.

Hal stops singing. He starts spreading:

HAL

By, see by, what we'll do is
increase responsibility and work
load and the sex drive will falter.
We solve sex not by telling kids no
but by giving them something to do
that destroys the impulse. Join
government. As we'll argue below.
In the rest of my song.

Hal smiles hugely. Ben, too, is elated.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - HALLWAY - NEXT

Coach Lumbly and a DEBATE OFFICIAL stand outside the room,
watching Hal's speech through the window built into the door.

OFFICIAL

They've already started.

COACH LUMBLY

Let's get this over with.

She opens the door.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - NEXT

They enter the room, Hal in mid-speech.

HAL

Now go to, here's what we'll call
Contention 2, of our plan. This
one's harder to kind of get the
rhyme scheme because of all the
quotes that have the word
'sexologist' in them which doesn't
rhyme with too much but it
basically goes like this--

It stops everyone.

COACH LUMBLY

Gentlemen, come with me.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - HALLWAY - NEXT

The four of them--Ben, Hal, Lumbly, the Official--in the
otherwise empty hallway.

COACH LUMBLY

Ben.

BEN

Marsha.

COACH LUMBLY

The bow-tie, the pretty
boutonniere. Yes sir, it stirs the
pot a little.

BEN

For me too, Coach.

COACH LUMBLY

No, don't do that.

Hal senses a moment between them and jumps in to break it up.

HAL

Excuse me, I'm about a minute into
my opening, Coach, and so far , so
far, so far.... Well, I'm killing
in there . (Into the classroom:)
Am I, aren't I killing?

STATES JUDGE (O.S.)
I've heard worse!

HAL
She's heard worse!

COACH LUMBLY
There was an objection raised to your entering here today and the New Jersey league officials have already voted on it and it doesn't feel altogether great to have to tell you this:

OFFICIAL
You're not home-schooled, Mr. Hefner, and that working most days at a dry cleaners, Mr. Wekselbaum, means that you're not either. You've been barred from the competition.

HAL
Who raised the objection?

BEN
Ginny has no status to raise a formal objection.

COACH LUMBLY
I raised the objection. There are ground rules in life, boys. Ben, you and Ginny think you're not bound by them, that you can do as you please when you please. I know better. It was my obligation to my team and to you to stop all this.

HAL
What about me?

COACH LUMBLY
You caught me on a bad turn. Maybe let's try again next year and we'll see what we can do.

EXT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - PARKING LOT - DAY

Hal and Ben walk back to his car.

HAL
We might have actually won the
whole thing.

 BEN
Probably not if you really apply
powers of reason to it.

 HAL
That's it?

 BEN
If I get back in time there's an
afternoon shift at the cleaners
that's got my name on it. You can
come with me if you want,
otherwise, your day and your life
are hereby returned to you.

Ben gets into his car.

 HAL
This is not the way, this, it's not
the way it ends.

 BEN
Come visit me sometime if you want
and we'll reminisce about this and
what it means.

He drives off.

Left alone, Hal leaves his suitcase outside in the lot and
runs back inside.

INT. MONMOUTH COLLEGE - HALLWAY - DAY

Hal runs down the hallway, looking into open doors and
throwing up closed door.

AT ONE DOOR--

He peers inside and rushes past.

HE THROWS OPEN A SECOND DOOR--

Keeps going.

He peers into a THIRD DOOR, keeps going.

AT THE FOURTH DOOR he comes to sliding stop, gathers himself
for a BEAT and then opens the door.

HAL

Today was not my day! But someday maybe will be. And on, well, on that day, you'll, you'll be alone and you'll think to yourself, all alone, I knew him when. Him being me!

He gives her the finger and starts to walk away.

Ginny comes out of the classroom, spreading as she does.

GINNY RYERSON

(Back into the room:) Anarchy is not only the best system in which to encourage adult maturation it is the best system in which to teach sexual liberation--(To Hal:) While I see that you don't recognize this at the moment you actually have me to thank in part--modesty forces me to acknowledge--but in large part, for your newfound zest of competition and gamesmanship! That was very clever to find Ben, surprisingly clever. And very painful. Which means I upped your game, little man.

Without turning around, Hal waves her off: her gesture returned to her.

GINNY RYERSON (CONT'D)

You're welcome! (Back to the room:) Liberation breeds liberation, i.e. sexual freedom inspires political freedom. According to Sandoval '01, "At the heart of all liberty is the liberty to engage in personal relations of one's own choosing...."

She slams the door behind her as she goes back into the room.

EXT. MONMOUTH STREET - DAY

Hal walks along the street, dragging his suitcase behind him.

EXT. MONMOUTH STREET - DAY

The street transitions from college neighborhood to a seaside town.

EXT. JERSEY SHORE BOARDWALK - DAY

Hal drags himself along the boardwalk. He looks out on the gray ocean, on the empty seashore.

He leaves his suitcase by a bench and walks down into the sand.

EXT. JERSEY SHORE - DAY

In the sand, for no good reason, Hal starts to run through it.

He tosses himself down into it, then stands, runs some more, and then sits facing the ocean.

ANGLE ON THE SKY--

TIME LAPSE as the sun reddens and drops in the sky and dusk settles in and then night.

Hal stands, brushes off the sand and returns to the boardwalk.

EXT. JERSEY SHORE BOARDWALK - NIGHT

He walks along, dragging his suitcase behind him. He finds himself outside a dingy seashore pizza parlor.

INT. MONMOUTH SEASHORE BOARDWALK - PIZZA PARLOR - NEXT

Behind the counter is a SERVER.

HAL

Sir? What I'd like, you can imagine it's not fish, because there's no fish here, at least I hope not. A. A slice. Just a slice of. Well, you know. What you've got. I mean what you serve.... The pizza.

The Server hands over a slice of pizza like it's nothing at all.

Hal stares at the slice for a long BEAT OF TRIUMPH.

HAL (CONT'D)

Make it, why don't you make it not
one, not one, not just one
slice....

SERVER

I'm going to close up in a bit so
just take all three. Otherwise
they're getting trashed.

Hal can't believe his good luck.

INT. MONMOUTH SEASHORE BOARDWALK - PIZZA PARLOR - NIGHT

Hal devours his pizza.

EXT. MONMOUTH SEASHORE BOARDWALK - PIZZA PARLOR - NIGHT

We look inside:

Hal at a booth finishes his pizza while the Server stacks chairs in front.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Eventually all of this would pass
and Hal Hefner would be left with
just the story to tell again and
again until it was hard for Hal
Hefner to remember what he was
really like back then when he
carried in his head the sound of a
made-up, perfect voice. A voice
that could speak its heart. Until
the day Hal Hefner stopped wishing
he sounded like anyone else and
just started talking as he was.

EXT. MONMOUTH SEASHORE BOARDWALK - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Hal waits in the empty parlor parking lot, his father's big suitcase beside him. Doyle's sedan pulls up.

INT. DOYLE HEFNER'S SEDAN - PARKED - NEXT

Hal opens the back, heaves the suitcase in, shuts the door.
Opens the front and gets in.

DOYLE

You OK?

Hal and Doyle sit for a beat in silence.

HAL (CONT'D)

Yeah. But what would you say are
your thoughts on love?

DOYLE

It's so late, Hal, and I couldn't
find the off-ramp and had to circle
back three times and now I'm not
even sure I know how to get you
back to Plainsboro.

HAL

I guess, you know.... Well, it's
nothing, I was just thinking.

DOYLE

Maybe you shouldn't think so much
about everything.

HAL

I mean it's not, it shouldn't be
rocket, rocket... it shouldn't be
rocket.... It shouldn't be that
but it feels like, sometimes it
just feels, you know. I guess what
I just want to know when, at what
point, you see, does all this
begin, or really start, to make
sense?

DOYLE

All what?

HAL

Everything, all of it.

DOYLE

I guess at some point.... see, you
reach a certain age and you're in
Jersey, or someplace just like it,
and you stop trying to figure it
all out. It's kind of like that.

(MORE)

DOYLE (cont'd)
You just are glad for what you
have.

HAL
And that happens to everybody?

DOYLE
Pretty much but you let me know if
it turns out different for you.

HAL
I'll do that, I will. I'll find a
way to do that, some good way, to
let you know how it all turns out.

They wait for BEAT. There's nothing more to say.

EXT. MONMOUTH SEASHORE - BOARDWALK - NEXT

The sedan pulls out--sideswiping and knocking over a garbage
can--and then leaving behind a GHOSTED IMAGE of itself.