

AS FREE AS THE AIR WE BREATHE

Written by

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FADE IN ON:

A quote from Langston Hughes:

"O, Let my land be a land where liberty is crowned with no false patriotic wreath. But opportunity is real, and life is free. Equality is in the air we breathe."

EXT. SUBURBAN LANDSCAPE - SAPPHIRE SKY - AFTERNOON

A dipping, soaring landscape. Green trees. Snow white clouds.

Houses scroll by underneath. Impeccably maintained and artfully designed, they hint at riches inside.

The POV banks. FALCONS flank us on both sides. A feathery majestic view.

A SECTION OF SKY ripples. Undeterred, we burst through -

EXT. OUTER-TOWN - BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Everything changes instantly. We're ain't in Kansas anymore. Nope, this is the *other* side.

A world marred by brown goopy air. Even seeing it causes one to gag. The trees here are skeletal.

Behind us, falcons pierce the ATMOSPHERIC BUBBLE we escaped.

Out of range of hidden HOLO-PROJECTORS, they morph from Pseudo "Falcons" into DRONES.

The shadow of *our* drone zips over an arid dessert.

There are no houses here. Just HATCHES: sandwiched between GREEN and YELLOW PATHS.

Encircled by a loop of roads, one hatch displays a name.

JONES.

Our drone zooms in. The picture jumps to commercial.

EXT. SUBURBAN LAWN - COMMERCIAL

A MODEL (30s) gazes skyward, on an emerald lawn. Dressed somewhere between a Stepford Wife and CEO, she's plastic surgery perfection.

We've returned to Bubble World, no doubt.

An Announcer's voice drives that home.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Are you stressed? Burnt out?
Desperate for a weekend get-away?
Then choose Fly-Write Private Cars
for your ride. Our leather
interior's farmed from *real* cows.
Each shuttle features state of the
art AI piloting, VR Gear built into
every seat. Which guarantees you
won't hassled by a crowd. Or bored.
Whether your destination's Hong
Kong, Berlin or New Jersey, we'll
get you there quicker than it takes
to watch one of the millions of
first run flicks our library
offers.

On cue, a FLYING CAR descends. Leaves swirl in its jet
stream, settle down in Autumn colored piles.

The passenger door pops open. The model climbs in; flashes
the camera a "come with me" smile.

MODEL

I *already* like it. And we haven't
even taken off!

In the car: our gal slips a VR visor over her eyes. A bendy
straw slides between ruby lips - feeds from a jumbo thermos:
a "Monster Nutrient" logo on the side.

The model gives her fans a big "thumbs-up". The car door
closes. Blast off!

And Black out.

INT. CHANNEL 838 NEWS STUDIO

As slick as a Fly-Write car interior. 2 News Anchors preside:

KAREN (30s) - as perfect as the model. Though glasses
artfully perched on her nose imply she's *also* smart.

MYGAR (50s) - Salt and pepper hair. \$15K suit. What more
credentials could a reporter want?

A monitor between them plays the clip we've seen before: The
drone fly-over. Right now, we're viewing Bubble Land.

The Falcons haven't reached Outer-town yet.

Karen points to a mansion on the screen's horizon.

KAREN

Look: isn't that Michio Alexander's vacation home? The one she bought for \$10M in foreclosure?

MYGAR

The singer Michio? You've got an eagle eye, Karen. Yes. \$10M: such a bargain! A little bird told me today -

KAREN

How many bird puns do you plan to torture us with, Mygar?

MYGAR

Enough to keep you and our guests here amused.

Mygar smiles, winks at an unseen audience.

MYGAR

According to Channel 838's *Twitter* feed, Michio's new additions include much more. Yesterday she gave birth to twins!

KAREN

Natural or lab grown?

MYGAR

Based on recent Instagram shots, she's in top-notch shape. So I'm guessing exo-style!

KAREN

Zoom in on that window? A peek at the babies would be fab!

Onscreen: drones overshoot Michio's house.

MYGAR

Ouch. Too late!

The sky ripples. The "falcons" burst through - into a sludge brown sky. Karen winces. Both at the lost opportunity, and...

KAREN

Outer-town? Ugh: I hate that view!

MYGAR

Who doesn't? But Channel 838 has breaking news.

KAREN

About Michio's post baby exercise routine?

MYGAR

No. The Farmer Jones stand-off.

KAREN

That tired story? What's this: Day Fifteen?

MYGAR

Twenty. But who's counting?

Karen's face falls. Boooooorrrring.

Onscreen: the drone footage approaches the Hatch between the colored roads. The one spray painted with (duh) "Jones."

Mygar tabs a neck IMPLANT. A somber expression on his face, he listens to "voices" in his head.

MYGAR

According to this feed, Jones has agreed to an interview. Right here. Right now - with us!

Onscreen: The drone hovers over the hatch. Releases its payload: a bomb?

The spherical object hits the ground. THUD. Instead of exploding, it rolls -

- up to the Jones' Homestead.

The hatch cracks open - just a hair. Heavy breathing inside.

A gloved HAND slips out, seizes the ball like a viper. Yanks it in. Drops the hatch. WHAM!

INT. JONES' BUNKER - CONTINUOUS

The screen warps. The metal hatch's a formidable obstacle. But the transmission penetrates, nonetheless.

Revealing: a room that screams poverty with "make do" style.

Cement gray walls patterned with mold. Wire shelving. A torn "Hang Tight" kitty poster on a wall.

JONES perches on a battered couch. Clad in a radiation suit, it's hard to see what shape or age he really is.

Jones adjusts the DRONE CAMERA's angle on his table. Unlatches his respirator helmet. HIIIIIISSSSS.

He flips up the visor. Unlike the Flight-Write version, this one's chipped - nearly past repair.

Inside: A thirty something face. Jones may be Karen's age (or less), but Life's left marks his skin won't forget.

INTERCUT BETWEEN STUDIO 838 and THE BUNKER

Jones waves to the camera. Karen frowns. Mygar waves back.

MYGAR

Thanks for taking our call, Jones.

JONES

It ain't like I got nothin' fancy planned. I know you guys talk to celebrities ala time. So thanks for having little old me on your show.

MYGAR

My pleasure, Jones.

KAREN

And yours.

MYGAR

We should start out simple: first things first. *Some* in our audience are familiar with your situation. What's it been: 20 days?

JONES

30. Hard to believe we've reached the end of the month. D-Day, just 'round the bend.

MYGAR

No doubt. But for viewers who aren't into local news, it's best you bring them up to speed.

KAREN

Limit the back story, My. We're breaking for commercial in five.

In the spotlight, Jones squirms. Duct-tape from the couch sticks to his suit.

JONES

I ain't no movie-story-teller, but I'll do my best. You know air's filtered here in Outer-town.

KAREN

(laughs)

Sure. Who'd want to breathe *that*?

JONES

And filterin's a service. Air ain't gonna clean itself. Though they just raised the rates \$250 per month. From \$1,000 just last year.

MYGAR

What do you make monthly, Jones?

JONES

\$1350, give or take. Depends how many cans ya find. Then there's been that recyclin' shortage all through town.

Jones nods at the empty shelves behind him. Blushes when he realizes the desperation it reveals.

JONES

Not that I don't make do. \$50 always goes to the missus. She and the boy gots themselves a plum lottery spot in the labor camps of Buffer-Town. If they didn't have no father, they'd get \$25 extra. But what I send makes up more than that.

KAREN

He cares for his family. That's so sweet!

The studio audience Awwwwwwwwws. Karen hisses to Mygar under lipsticked breath.

KAREN

Slap a filter on that shit-hole. Please?!?!?

The image of Jones flickers.

The metal shelves behind him disappear - replaced with designer alternatives. The couch and wallpaper also vanish. Logos part of the mirage.

Only Jones remains unchanged. Unaware of his "altered digital environment", the Farmer fidgets more.

JONES

This year, I couldn't afford no payment.

MYGAR

Jones, let's do the math. Air filtering costs \$1,250, and you give \$50 to your kid. Assuming you bring home a \$1,350 income, that leaves \$50 to play with, right? Maybe I haven't had my morning caffeine injection yet....

(chuckles)

But - what's the problem here?

JONES

I ain't eated nuthing in 2 days.

A JARRING SHIFT IN TRANSMISSION. Commercial break in 3, 2, 1 -

INT. BUBBLE TOWN MANSION - BATHROOM - COMMERCIAL

Even with Karen's holo-filter, the change is earth shaking. Featuring the same actress as before.

This time, the model soaks in a bubble bath. DERMO-BOTS scrub her up and down. The Announcer interjects, like before:

ANNOUNCER

Tired of lavender, mint and other mundane scents? When was the last time your bathtub made you *happy* to be alive? Introducing: *Intimate Submergibles* by Roomba-derm. Let Roomba explore areas of your body you didn't even know you had...

The Derma-bots dive into suds. The model lights up like a Christmas tree in heat.

Who knows what those bots are up to? But the expression on her face makes it clear.

ANNOUNCER

Available now for a \$100K down payment. Camera playback just \$10K more. But act now - this limited offer expires in 24 hours!

The model moans. Her tattooed eyelids flutter.

MODEL

Roomba Derm bots treat me right!

The commercial fades into soothing music and CARTOON BIRDS.
Back to Jones and the News 838 team.

INTERCUT BETWEEN STUDIO 838 and THE BUNKER

Karen and Mygar look distracted. So, Jones repeats:

JONES

I ain't eated nuthing in 2 days.

KAREN

Sounds like a Detox Fast to me. Has that helped you lose any weight?

JONES

Ten pounds in two weeks. Most of which was muscle, though.

KAREN

That stubborn fat always stays put. Girls, doesn't that just suck?

The unseen audience laughs, applauds. Jones doesn't get the joke. Neither does Mygar, who presses on.

MYGAR

How much do you spend on food in Outer Town?

JONES

The silver lining is: not much. Folks in Outer Town don't eat out.

KAREN

Even Thai?

JONES

What's Thai?

KAREN

Culinary heaven, duh! A blend of Japanese, Chinese and Indian.

JONES

Stuff like that; sounds weird.

KAREN

Then what *do* Outer-towners snack on? Don't be shy - spit it out!

She turns to Mygar and stage-whispers.

KAREN

Another foodie trend goes viral,
thanks to me. Just you watch!

JONES

Most of our food's homegrown. When
radiation don't ruin the crop. The
rest a' the time we simply make do.
You know, nail chewin', cotton
swallowin'. Anythin' that helps
kill the hunger for awhile.

This interview's veering into dangerous areas. Karen and
Mygar exchange glances. What to do?

KAREN

Cotton - really? That helps?

MYGAR

When you pay for food, how much?
\$20K? Plus or minus? A ballpark
average would be fine.

JONES

I figure...10 bucks?

Karen calculates on her phone. Perks up.

KAREN

Which means - \$50 left. What do you
splurge on; manicures?

JONES

We gotta factor in highway fees.
\$100 per mo. Plus tax.

On screen: the drone footage rewinds. Zooms in on those green
and yellow paths. Private roads that - to reach the air
station - Jones positively, absolutely must pass.

KAREN

So you're saying you overspent?
Mygar, maybe we need to run a
Financial segment, teach these poor
folks how to save for rainy days!

JONES

(chuckles)

Acid rain? No thanks! Problem is, I
cain't cross the road without
payin' the green toll. I'd switch
to yellow, but that's even higher.

MYGAR

And if you pay those -

JONES

I won't have enough left for air.
So I'm stuck at home. The market's
got me comin' n' goin', either way.

KAREN

When's your oxygen run out?

JONES

Tomorrow. Assumin' the gauge's
right. Lord knows, it's been wrong
before.

Mygar holds up a hand: stop.

MYGAR

Not to interrupt, but there's a
Crowdfund protest in LA. We've got
the scoop. It's about you, Jones!

JONES

Gosh! I cain't thank you two enoug -

The transmission cuts Jones off. Replaced with -

EXT. LA PROTEST - CONTINUOUS

A pathetically small CROWD. Signs vie for attention, wave.

"Keeping up with the Joneses"
"Capitalism Sacrifices Lives"
"Outer-town Deserves to Breathe"

A LIBERAL PROTESTOR faces off with a CONSERVATIVE. Both are
young, passionate - and equally convinced they're right.

LIBERAL PROTESTOR

Breathing is a right! Farmer Jones
doesn't deserve to die!

CONSERVATIVE

It's people like you who cheapen
the concept of rights! No-one's
forcing Farmer Jones into slavery.
But bleeding hearts like you aren't
happy with equal opportunity. You
want equal results, too!

LIBERAL PROTESTOR

You call Outer Town *equal opportunity*? What universe do you inhabit - Neverland?

CONSERVATIVE

No-one *made* Farmer Jones live in the outer boroughs. His own bad decisions landed him there.

(sneers)

Not to mention breeding indiscriminately. Why should I pay for his kid?

LIBERAL PROTESTOR

But if roads were public -

CONSERVATIVE

Someone had to build them! They deserve profit off the risk!

LIBERAL PROTESTOR

Even if it doesn't leave citizens of Outer-town enough to eat? And let's talk about how the air got polluted.

CONSERVATIVE

Communist. Shut the hell up!

The transmission drowns in static. Karen and Mygar kill the audio so fast, heads spin.

Followed by awkward silence. In the studio - and Jones' bunker. He witnessed the flame war, too.

JONES

Can I say something 'bout that, Mygar?

MYGAR

Go ahead. You're our guest.

JONES

I ain't ever freeloader. I just want opportunity folks like youse got. Do people in Bubble town get charged when they cross the street? That ain't me bein' sarcastic. I just ain't never visited. So's I'd really like to know.

KAREN

We pay taxes. Isn't that enough?

JONES

What do you make in one hour? \$250?

KAREN

Please. That's chicken feed. Uh,
never mind.

Jones pulls off a glove. Holds up a hand with burned fingers.

JONES

Every day, at the crack a' dawn, I
dig in soil, search fur cans. Even
when the skin cracks, and I start
ta bleed. I been doin' that since I
wuz 15. Ain't that enough sufferin'
for one man? I'd be a Janitor in
Bubble-town if someone'd foster me.

KAREN

Who wants a Cleaner, when we Bots?

JONES

I took a typing class. I could be a
receptionist if someone needs that.

KAREN

(mutters)

Not if you look like that!

JONES

What I do's may be ugly. But it's
hard and honest work. Don't merit
and potential count?

Karen sighs, checks her Gucci watch.

KAREN

I'm afraid we're reaching the end
of the hour. Jones, thank you for
your time.

MYGAR

Hold your cyber horses: breaking
news!

The monitor transmission mutates to split screen: Jones and
the Crowdfunding protest, side by side!

The Liberal Protester jumps for joy.

LIBERAL PROTESTOR

We won!

(to the conservative)

In your stupid face!

JONES

Pardon, miss: we won what?

LIBERAL PROTESTOR

Funding for your road toll this month. We squeaked in: ten bucks and two minutes to spare. Compassion rulez!

A FLY-WRITE CAR touches down behind her. The Liberal Protester hops right in.

She lowers the VR visor over her face. Sips from a "Monster Vegan Nutrient" cup through a straw.

She waves to the camera - triumph and smoothie on her lips.

LIBERAL PROTESTOR

Enjoy your trip, Jonesie... and the air. And one month off - on me!

From his side of the screen, Jones watches the car roar, rise - and disappear. For a winner, he doesn't look too happy.

KAREN

Jones, we've got a minute left. Want to step across the green line on camera? It'll go viral - a few hours, at least.

JONES

What happens after that?

KAREN

You mean tomorrow?

JONES

No. Next month. What with all tha' warming, I doubt the crop'll improve much.

MYGAR

You could expand your can collecting business.

JONES

They ain't making more a' those. No Siree.

Jones shuffles towards the door. The drone camera floats; follows like a loyal dog.

JONES

Things ain't gettin' better. Don't kid yourself. Or me.

Jones drops his respirator helmet on the floor, fumbles with the hatch bolt.

KAREN

What are you doing?!?

JONES

Ain't this what you wanted? Steppin' out.

KAREN

I assumed air was included.

JONES

Normally, yes. This time? No.

MYGAR

Think about your family! What happens to your boy, if his father's... gone?

JONES

They'll give him \$25 per month. Ta me, he's worth that. And more.

The hatch unlocks. Jones turns and stares at the screen.

JONES

Tell my boy, he should focus on an education. That always pays for itself. Even if it's just typin'. And takes 40 years ta save up.

CREAK. Jones opens the hatch, and steps out into sunlight - the first time he's felt it on his face in twenty years.

JONES

Warmer than I remembered.

The pollutants hit him hard. Jones gags. Grabs his throat, falls down - right between the yellow and green road.

The two anchors watch wide-eyed, until his death throes stop. Awkward silence reigns in the studio, until...

KAREN

Annnnd - that's all the time we've got.

Mygar: in the light of recent incidents, should that Crowdfunding campaign return what they raised? And morally: should it be taxed?

MYGAR

Maybe they'll send to proceeds to Jones' family?

KAREN

After they pay for cleanup, sure.

Karen zooms the drone camera in on Jones's corpse.

Two CLEANER BOTS (one yellow, the other green) push the body back and forth over the private road borders.

Each bot triumphs... for awhile.

KAREN

Now *there's* a sticky situation.

MYGAR

In more ways than one!

The two reporters chuckle. Music plays. A capper commercial fills the screen: let's visit our Model one last time!

INT. BUBBLE TOWN MANSION - KITCHEN - COMMERCIAL

The actress leans over a marble sink: taps a solid gold button with a manicured nail.

MAINTENANCE BOTS fly into shot, scrub every surface clean.

In less than a minute, everything sparkles.

As does satisfaction in the model's eye. She plugs the bots into a wall to charge, wipes her brow.

MODEL

We at Roomba-Write know you work *hard*. After everything you sacrifice, don't you *deserve* to be treated right?

The Derma bots fly in, spray her with eucalyptus mist. The model sighs, winks at the screen.

Super: Only \$20K per month. Act fast: call in your order now!

FINAL FADEOUT: