

"Eleven Thousand Virgins" (XI M V)
[Hildegard von Bingen's Last Chants]

Screenplay By
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BLACK SCREEN...

...until a small gas flame ignites from the side of the screen and burns in a curving arc upward toward the top. It's hot blue on the underside of the curve, shading away to yellow in the vertical portion. Simultaneously, an unworldly, hypnotic MUSIC surrounds the senses - it's a combination of ancient instruments, designed during the Middle Ages, and modern electronic synthesizers. In a THX theatre, the foreboding bass line of this music will leave the breastbone vibrating. Eventually, an ethereal woman's voice will float in, as if on the wings of angels. But for now, the flame dips to light a candle in a contemporary holder, then moves slightly to light an incense stick. Methodically, other candle wicks blaze to life as the flame caresses them.

INT. ALEX BARNETT'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

As candles in different holders start to provide sufficient light, the source of the flame becomes visible - it's a small gun-like tool, sometimes used for igniting barbecue briquets. It has a five-inch squared-off barrel, and a trigger for starting the flame, with a thicker in-line handle which conceals a small butane reservoir. The candles are various shapes and sizes; some are only a handsbreadth in length and are enclosed in colored glass, much like votive candles. The effect of the music is powerful enough to give the feeling of a monastery, which is something of a paradox, because the gradual lessening of the darkness is revealing quite modern furnishings, with eclectic details from several styles. Art Deco picture frames highlight the work of an obviously accomplished photographer, a sculpted Corinthian pillar supports a museum-quality Danish stereo loudspeaker, and a tiny, delicate Japanese netsuke carving has been pushed aside to make way for candles on a black enamel coffee table. The lighted bouncing columns of the stereo's graphic display reflect the shift in the lower DRONE of the electronic instruments giving way to the higher register of the angelic, clear-toned SOPRANO. The words are in Latin, and the author of this spiritual music is none other than the twelfth-century mystic, Hildegard von Bingen. The electronic synthesizers blend into the background, but still provide a strong contrast to the female plainchant and the ancient instruments.

The dark-cowled figure who's been wielding the small flame gun moves to sit in the lotus posture on the floor behind the coffee table. The cowl is part of a terrycloth bathrobe, and as it falls away, ALEX BARNETT's wet hair is revealed. He's a handsome, dynamic man in his early forties, and tears are rolling down his face unchecked. His fingers sway almost imperceptibly in time with the music, and it's clear that the music has moved him deeply. After a few seconds, he looks up and gently draws the sleeve of his bathrobe across his cheek to blot the tears.

ALEX'S P.O.V.

KRISTI, in her early twenties, is standing at the living room entrance. She's slightly tousled, and is a spectacular specimen of young womanhood. We are in an excellent position to make this judgment, seeing as she's wearing only a smile.

KRISTI

Round two, anyone?

She's too far away to notice the tears Alex has just wiped away, but his disgusted expression is plain for anyone to see.

ALEX

(frosty)

I think it's time we called it a night, Kristi.

She's not giving up so easily - with a pout, and the confidence of one who has never been denied her slightest whim, she saunters to the CD turntable mounted vertically against the far wall. As her hand approaches the glass doors, they slide open automatically, the MUSIC cuts off abruptly, and the golden disc spins to a stop. She takes it out, frisbees it casually across the rug, and starts to flip through a zig-zag chrome shelf of discs mounted above the turntable.

KRISTI

(she knows best)

Alex. (helpful) You got "Bolero" here someplace, don'tcha?

Alex's movements are a blur. He gracefully scoops up the disc on the rug, effortlessly pinions one of Kristi's arms, and pulls her close. She is prepared to like whatever's coming next, and stands on her tippy-toes in anticipation. Alex nods toward the open balcony door.

ALEX

(command voice,
velvet delivery)

It's four floors over the railing
if you're still here in ten
seconds.

A slap could not have crumpled Kristi's face more effectively. Experience tells her that she should be very afraid, and she scurries out of the living room. After she's gone, Alex's steely composure changes to a wry smile.

ALEX

(continuing, to
himself)

That's what I get for playing in
the minor leagues...

Kristi re-enters, still nude, and she's scrambling to hug a clump of clothes between her breasts. She crosses to the door in the foyer, giving Alex a wide berth. One of her shoes falls and bounces toward Alex as she opens the door, but she sees Alex approaching grimly, and she hesitates a moment too long. He pushes her out the door into the hallway.

ALEX

(continuing, to
Kristi)

If you hurry, it'll still be
waiting for you out front.

A GUY opens the door of the condo opposite Alex's, and gets an eyeful of Kristi as she is hustled out into the hall. She has a short, guilty moment of modesty, but is more intent on getting away from Alex. She stops, CLUCKS her tongue at the neighbor, at Alex, and at men in general.

KRISTI

Perverts.

The neighbor does a take of protested innocence. Alex lunges to pinch Kristi's bare ass, but she scoots away with a SCREAM. As the guy retreats and closes his door, a FEMALE VOICE starts haranguing him from inside his condo.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

What were you looking at, anyway?
How come you never...

The voice fades to a dull YAMMERING as the door closes. Alex steps back inside his doorway and closes the door quietly. He picks up the dropped shoe and studies the pink-soled white Reebok; after a few seconds, he walks over to the CD turntable and starts the MUSIC again, at track two. After absorbing a few bars, he slowly crosses to the balcony and leans over the railing.

EXT. ALEX'S BALCONY - CONTINUOUS

The lights of Los Angeles radiate below the canyon of the hillside building. Alex is still examining the pink and white Reebok. He finally sighs and suspends it over the railing between thumb and forefinger.

EXT. NAPA VALLEY FIELD - DAWN, TEN YEARS EARLIER

A younger, long-haired, bearded Alex helps unfold a large expanse of nylon material which will eventually grow into a hot-air balloon. LARS HOLSTRUM, a camera around his neck, also helps; RICK SHEEHAN, a balloon pilot, directs the logistics. NICOLE BOISVERT hugs Alex, then hesitantly plucks at a mass of nylon sitting on the ground in front of her. REVEREND CLYDE HIXSON, a Baptist preacher, stands well away from the hubbub, cradling a well-worn Bible.

RICK

Nicole, walk the envelope out
downwind.

LARS

(Teutonic accent)

Are you certain this balloon will
hold all of us, Rick?

RICK

(drily chuckling)

Last week, I took up a hefty group
of five Weight Watchers.

Lars, Nicole and Alex join his LAUGH somewhat nervously. Rev. Clyde's eyes venture skyward as his lips move slightly. It's threatening to rain. Rick sets up an industrial-sized, gasoline-powered fan next to an elaborately woven wicker basket that is large enough for six. Propane tanks and flexible tubes line the basket, culminating at the apex, which supports a huge stainless steel burner. Five feet away, Rick pull-starts the FAN, and directs Lars to suspend a fold of nylon in front of it. The blowing air gets under the fold of nylon, and a nylon bubble slowly expands.

MONTAGE - JUMP CUTS - CONTINUOUS

Throughout this scene, we will jump-cut to compress time a bit; the largest of these jumps will only be five minutes or thereabouts. As Rev. Clyde stands apart, everyone else lends a hand in stretching out the nylon, running inside the growing nylon bubble to check for rips in the envelope, and clowning around inside the circus-tent-like structure that's growing by leaps and bounds. It's huge, it's colossal; it's certainly bigger than a breadbox. Rick finally orchestrates everyone out of the envelope, and has them help him tip the woven basket on its side. He STOPS the fan, and FIRES UP the burner; while the fan was loud, this burner is deafening. The effect is awesome, as the flame jumps out sideways a good five or six feet; it's hot blue on the underside of the flame, shading away to yellow on the top. Everyone stands back, suitably impressed. Another ten minutes pass in JUMP CUTS, while the burner heats the air inside the envelope. As the nylon takes shape, it gradually forms into a Gothic cathedral. The balloon/cathedral swells on its side and slowly drifts upright, standing easily eight stories tall. Rick keeps the burner pointed inside the nylon opening, letting the woven basket be pulled up from its side by the growing lift in the balloon.

ANGLE ON ALEX AND LARS

They stand at some distance from the balloon and the ROAR of the burner. Rev. Clyde stands an equal distance on the other side.

LARS

(indicates
Rev. Clyde)

Where did you find that guy?

RICK

We set the whole thing up over the phone. I guess not too many preachers are willing to go up in a balloon to perform a wedding.

Nicole joins them, rubbing her ears from the noise.

NICOLE

(French accent)

I asked the minister to keep it short.

Alex bends over to pick up two bottles of Moët champagne, and the group heads toward the balloon.

ALEX

Since you can't control the direction of these monsters, you take along two bottles of champagne - one to apologize to the farmer when you land in his field, and one to drink while you wait for your ground crew to pick you up!

Everyone LAUGHS as they walk, but the DIN of the burner quickly drowns them out. The basket, with Rick in it, is finally in an upright position again - and Rick nervously checks the clouds. He shuts off the burner, and our ears ring from the sudden SILENCE.

RICK

(shouting)

Can everyone still hear? Lars?

LARS

(holding his ears)

I think I've gone blind.

LAUGHTER all around. Rick points up at the sky.

RICK

The weather's not cooperating. We won't be able to go free-flying today.

GROANS from everyone except the good Reverend. He starts walking toward his car.

RICK

(continuing)

But... we can get you married in a balloon today, if you don't mind bobbing at the end of a hundred-foot rope tether.

ALEX

(to Nicole)

Today's your birthday...

NICOLE

(to Alex)

...and we wanted to do it on the year's shortest day...

ALEX

(to Rick)

...so let's go for it!

A CHEER from everyone - except Rev. Clyde, who looks disapprovingly over his shoulder, then walks glumly back to the group. Rick directs everyone to climb into the basket, as he arranges the tether rope.

RICK

Now we have to build up some lift.

Rick pulls on the chain that fires up the burner with a mighty ROAR.

JUMP CUT - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Rick is still yanking on the burner chain as he leans over to drop a burlap bag of sand ballast outside the basket. The basket shudders and rises a few inches. Rick motions everyone to heave a sandbag over the side, and as they do, the balloon/cathedral rises smoothly into the damp morning air. When the balloon is bobbing gracefully at the end of the tether rope, Rick releases the burner chain. The SILENCE and the fog-shrouded view of the Napa Valley are almost mystical.

RICK

It's all yours, Reverend Clyde.

REV.

That's Reverend Hixson to you.
(gathering himself) In the
beginning was the Word, and...

The Reverend CONTINUES in this vein, reading from his Bible in a Fundamentalist hellfire-and-damnation theme. Alex and Nicole slowly, discreetly snatch looks of incredulity at each other, with raised eyebrows, shrugged shoulders, etc. Lars stops snapping pictures to get a load of this weirdo.

LARS

(whispers to Alex)

I thought we were getting the
version without the extended drum
solo.

Alex nearly loses it, smothering a laugh into a COUGH. The Reverend is oblivious to everyone's smirks. Lars goes back to taking pictures.

JUMP CUT - A FEW MINUTES LATER

The balloon is CREAKING, and seems to be settling somewhat - the once-taut tether rope hangs with several feet of slack in a looping curve, and Rick checks it nervously every few seconds. Finally, he gets up the nerve to interrupt the Reverend's RANT:

RICK

I'm sorry folks, but we're losing altitude, and I have to fire up the burner again.

The Reverend gives Rick a disdainful look, but closes his Bible with his finger in it to mark the spot. Alex and Nicole stifle grins as Rick pulls the burner chain again - the burner THUNDERS. Alex takes a picture out of his pocket to show to Lars - on the back are the words "WEDDING ANNOUNCEMENT - TIMES SQUARE ELECTRONIC BILLBOARD - NIGHT." He turns the picture over, and sure enough, there's the billboard in stark black and white, with the glittering lights of New York City providing a backdrop. In letters that must have been four feet high in the original are spelled the words "AFTER SIX YEARS OF LIVING IN SIN, ALEX AND NICOLE FINALLY TIE THE KNOT!" Nicole and Alex hug and rub each other's back, while Lars beams hugely and gives a thumbs-up sign. Lars peers around them to glance at the Reverend, who is facing away from the group. Lars holds his hands in front of him like he's wringing out an imaginary washcloth. Yep, agree Alex and Nicole, he's one of the more twisted human beings they've ever met. Everyone silently laughs under the burner's ROAR, including Rick, who has eavesdropped this visual interchange. The Reverend continues to look out over the fields, ever oblivious.

JUMP CUT - YET ANOTHER FEW MINUTES LATER

The tether is taut, the burner is OFF, and the Reverend is AT IT AGAIN. He sounds like he's in the middle of Leviticus, headed straight for Deuteronomy. He's a man with a mission, he's on a roll, and he's wailing, so to speak - he sees it as his job to make sure these irreverent heathens are good and married, by God. The Reverend is in the Zone: he's Jimi Hendrix with an electric guitar, he's Wayne Gretzky with a hockey puck, he's Steven Spielberg with a Holocaust. Everyone else in the balloon is marking time, just waiting for their cues.

JUMP CUT - STILL ANOTHER FEW MINUTES LATER

Rick pulls and tugs at his collar - he looks hot and confined, even though he's wearing a loose teeshirt on a cool day. He tries throwing a sandbag overboard in the middle of the Reverend's SPIEL, to no avail. The tether droops loosely. The Reverend is in a world of his own - he's surprised only when the ROAR of the burner interrupts him in mid-scripture. His mouth continues moving for a few seconds as he looks up at the burner, then accusingly at Rick. Rick avoids his gaze, and stubbornly holds onto the burner chain.

JUMP CUT - A FINAL FEW MINUTES LATER

This is a WIDER SHOT of the balloon basket; the burner's OFF, and if we look closely, we see what seems to be a couple of legs dangling below the far side of the basket. Everyone is leaning over that side.

CLOSER ANGLE - LOOKING DOWN OUT OF THE BASKET

The Reverend's white knuckles are barely gripping onto the outside edge of the basket, and Alex is holding the Bible over his knuckles, threatening to give them a sharp rap:

ALEX

Say the words, Reverend.

REV.

(terrified, but
grudging
nonetheless)

Do you take this woman to be your
lawfully wedded wife?

ALEX

(smiles at Nicole)

I do.

REV.

Do you take this... (chokes it out)
...man... to be your lawfully
wedded husband?

NICOLE

(smiles at Alex)

I do.

REV.

I now pronounce you husband and
wife. (at the end of his patience)
Will you please get me back inside
the basket now?

As the ceremony has been taking place, Lars has been lowering the balloon by pulling on the tether rope and coiling it outside the basket. Rick now grabs onto the rope with Lars, nods to Alex, and Alex SMACKS the Bible down onto the Reverend's knuckles. With a SCREAM, the Reverend lets go of the basket. Since the basket has been lowered to within a few feet of the ground, he merely stumbles backwards, unharmed. The balloon, however, shoots dramatically upward from the loss of his weight, as Lars and Rick release the tether rope. Alex drops a check over the side, and it flutters madly in the strong, WHOOSHING updraft of air.

ALEX

There's your fee, Reverend.

ANGLE ON REVEREND

The Reverend comically chases the swooping, gliding check as it descends to the field. While he runs, he breathlessly yells upward:

REV.

What about my Bible?

ANGLE ON BASKET

Lars breaks open the champagne for a smiling Rick, Nicole and Alex. Accepting a glass of bubbly from Lars, Alex holds the Bible over the side of the basket between his thumb and index finger, then negligently drops it.

EXT. ALEX'S BALCONY - TEN YEARS BACK TO THE FUTURE

Alex suspends Kristi's pink and white Reebok over the railing between his thumb and forefinger, then drops it.

EXT. DOMAINE CHANDON RESTAURANT, NAPA - NOON, THE NEXT DAY

Alex holds a piece of bread over the edge of the table and drops it for a waiting bird, who snaps it up and flies away quickly. Nicole sits opposite him, and smiles at the bird's haste.

Ten years have treated Nicole well - she looks scarcely older than in the balloon episode. She's very well-groomed, confident, and has obviously turned into a classy lady. She's dealing a Tarot card layout onto a table dotted with a few crumbs, and containing two half-empty wine glasses. The outdoor patio of this restaurant is surrounded with beautiful flower beds, and is shaded by trees; there are verdant rolling hills of grape vines in the background.

NICOLE

So why did Kristi leave so quickly last night?

ALEX

We were attacked by two muggers earlier in the evening.

NICOLE

(pauses in mid-deal)
You caused some damage?

ALEX

Do you remember the Kata we had to learn for our blue belt?

NICOLE

(smiles)
You finally got to use it.

ALEX

I broke the right femur on one guy, and both wrists on the other.
(pause) I think it made an impression on her.

NICOLE

(resumes card dealing)
You monster.

ALEX

Monster? They attacked us!

NICOLE

Did you have to break both wrists?

ALEX

I... guess not.

NICOLE

Monster. (pause) Why did you kick her out?

ALEX

I don't know... I guess the sex was lacking something.

NICOLE

I thought you said she was a gymnast?

ALEX

Oh, physically it was great...

NICOLE

So?

ALEX

(smiles painfully)

This reminds me of something you once said to me. Maybe I've finally changed.

NICOLE

(looks into his eyes)

We stopped growing, Alex. We had to separate. The money still has you hypnotized.

ALEX

(uncomfortable)

Did you keep that black dress from Key West?

NICOLE

(hesitant)

Ah, yes. The skin-tight one you bought me on our diving trip.

ALEX

I'd love to see you in that again.

NICOLE

I'll bet you would. I haven't worn that dress in almost two years.

ALEX

(suggestive)

Think about what happened the last time you wore it...

Nicole doesn't like the way the conversation has turned - to derail Alex, she picks up a piece of bond paper that's sitting to the side of the wine glasses and Tarot cards.

ANGLE ON PAPER

It is the typed title page of a book - "Writes Of Passage" by Alex Barnett. She looks at both sides of the paper.

ANGLE ON ALEX AND NICOLE

NICOLE

So let's see this Great American Novel. Have you finished it?

ALEX

Some of it. (he squirms) It's a short story collection, not a novel.

NICOLE

And where is it? (she looks under the table)

ALEX

(sheepish)
You're holding it.

NICOLE

Oh la la! (wagging upright index finger) You are playing at being a writer. (shrewdly) You call yourself an author, rather than actually sitting down and writing.

ALEX

When we first separated, I wrote a few stories for you.

NICOLE

(fondly recalls)
Oh, yes, some of them were incredible.

ALEX

If you've saved any of them, they can be the beginning of this book.

NICOLE

I'll look for them when I get home. (pause) So why are you here in Napa?

ALEX

(leans forward expectantly)
To help you look for those stories.

NICOLE

(leans back)

The residue of romance is
friendship, Alex.

ALEX

(ironic smile)

What a French thing to say. You
still wear the ring I gave you,
Nicole. What's engraved on it?

NICOLE

"Pour tous jours."

ALEX

(softly)

"For always."

They're silent. Birds CHIRP. Bees BUZZ. Nicole
watches a hummingbird.

NICOLE

You're really up here to see Lars
at the San Francisco store.

ALEX

Sparky can wait. (giving up) I
thought seeing you might be worth a
shot.

NICOLE

It's always good for us to see each
other, but let's not dwell on the
past. (pause) Why do you call him
Sparky?

ALEX

Do you remember the mountaintop in
Colorado, when he wanted to keep
climbing into the thunderclouds,
and we all nearly got electrocuted?

NICOLE

(giggles)

Yes...

ALEX

And do you remember the Citroën
Deux Chevaux we had in Nice that
developed compression problems
because he tried to clean the spark
plugs?

NICOLE

(laughs out loud)

Yes!

ALEX

Well, it seems that last night he got it in his head that he could repair his own stereo.

NICOLE

(concerned)

Is he all right?

ALEX

Once he gets his hair to lie back down, he'll be fine.

They LAUGH. They needed this laugh.

NICOLE

He's so stubborn - but he is quite brilliant. Last week, on the phone, he made a pun in French.

ALEX

I hate that smart-ass! Now he puns in four languages. (thinking) Actually, more. A month ago, when I was having a drink with him in the City, I asked him his opinion of "The Last Action Hero."

NICOLE

(bated breath)

...and what did he say?

ALEX

He didn't say anything. He farted. (smirking) It smelled awful.

NICOLE

(bewildered)

He... (she gets it) ...made a pun... how do you say it... olfactoire?!

ALEX

Yup. Sparky made an olfactory pun. Stunk the whole place up, just like the movie.

They LAUGH again, wholeheartedly.

NICOLE

"Sparky." I like that nickname -
it fits him. His outgoing spirit
is like a spark in the darkness.

ALEX

He certainly does love to meet
people. I don't think his English
vocabulary includes the word
"stranger."

NICOLE

(softly)

To Lars, every human being out
there is just a new friend he
hasn't met yet.

ALEX

(wry)

Saint Sparky.

They CHUCKLE.

ALEX

(continuing)

So what do the Tarot cards say?

Nicole turns over one more card to complete the layout.

NICOLE

It looks like your world may soon
be turned upside-down!

ANGLE ON TAROT CARD #12

A man, head-down, is suspended by one foot from a rope
tied to a raised crossbar. He seems healthy in every
way; in fact, he even has a halo around his head.

EXT. SOUTERRAIN TEESHIRTS, SAN FRANCISCO - LATER THAT
EVENING

A streetcar JANGLES by the storefront - in the big
display window, Lars ("Sparky") shows a pile of
teeshirts to Alex. Sparky looks a bit older than at
the balloon, and as we ZOOM IN, we can see that his
hair, while the same length, is somehow... frizzier.

INT. SOUTERRAIN TEESHIRTS - CONTINUOUS

Alex rubs his friend's fuzzy hair affectionately.
Sparky holds up a teeshirt that reads: "Back Soon.
(signed) Godot."

ALEX

We can't sell these shirts.
They're too... intellectual. What
the hell is that?

SPARKY

You remember the existentialist
play "Waiting For Godot"?

ALEX

But nobody will buy this stuff.
It's way too highbrow!

Alex holds up "Does The Name Pavlov Ring A Bell?" and
SNORTS.

SPARKY

Among dog owners, those are already
selling like vichyssoise.

ALEX

(correcting)
Hotcakes, Sparky.

SPARKY

(correcting right
back)
It's a heat wave, Alex. You buy
hotcakes - the rest of us will
stick with chilled soup.

Alex gives him a murderous look, Sparky CHORTLES, and
Alex holds up "I Had A Bad Day - In The Food Chain Of
Life, I Feel Like Krill."

ALEX

Krill - that's the microscopic
stuff that little fish eat...

SPARKY

...that bigger fish eat; that huge
fish eat; that wind up in your
Flounderburger.

Sparky points to a half-eaten bun in wrapping paper that Alex has been nibbling on. Alex studies what's inside the bun, BURPS, looks slightly dyspeptic, and drops the bun into a trash bin. Sparky holds up "Spandex Is Not A Right; It's A Privilege."

ALEX

Well, I do know a few women at the gym who oughtta see that one...
But...

Alex holds up "Artificial Intelligence Beats Genuine Stupidity", and raises his eyebrows.

ALEX

(continuing)

...I can't see spending good money to stock this stuff.

Sparky holds up "Is There A Hyphen In Anal Retentive?" and Alex GUFFAWS in spite of himself. A young GIRL in the store gives out a YELP and rushes over to Sparky.

GIRL

My boyfriend needs that shirt!

Sparky hands it to the girl, and she carries it immediately over to the CASHIER. Two other CUSTOMERS paw through the pile that Alex has just rejected. They OOOH and AHHH. Sparky and Alex move out of the way, and Alex is impressed.

ALEX

Okay, you win. Send me down some samples, and I'll try 'em in the Santa Monica store. (pauses)
Whoever thought we'd be teeshirt tycoons?

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

Sparky and Alex sling their jackets over their shoulders and walk outside into the still-warm evening. We TRACK with them as they walk.

SPARKY

Certainly not me - I just came over to help you open this second store.

ALEX

And you've really made this one work - in fact, most of your crazy ideas are benefitting both stores. I'm lucky you're here.

SPARKY

(serious)

Unfortunately, I think I'm going to need some time off to go back to Germany.

ALEX

Is something wrong?

SPARKY

It's Grandmother Erna - I think her old body is just wearing out.

ALEX

Is she ill?

SPARKY

You know her - she tries to hide it, but I can hear the pain on the telephone.

ALEX

(concerned)

I can't believe I might not see her again. We had such fun when she visited. She's a great lady.

SPARKY

(brainstorm)

Why don't you come with me? It would do her good to see you again.

ALEX

I can't leave the stores...

SPARKY

Sure you can - you've got a good assistant in L.A., and this woman I've hired up here is very responsible - let's both go see Erna!

Sparky's so delighted by this idea that Alex has to smile; it's also plain that Alex really wants to see Erna again.

ALEX

Well, I'll have to think about it first...

SPARKY

Great, it's settled.

They both LAUGH.

SPARKY

(continuing)

How did your visit with Nicole go?

ALEX

Ah, we've been separated for over a year. We'll never patch it up.

SPARKY

(surprised)

I thought you'd given up trying.

ALEX

(clipped)

I just kicked Kristi out last night, and I felt a void in my life. That's all...

SPARKY

You don't necessarily have to fill that void with a woman.

Alex's head spins around - he stares at Sparky.

ALEX

That's what Nicole said.

SPARKY

(offhand)

She doesn't fill the void with men.

ALEX

I thought she needed someone different.

SPARKY

She just didn't need... Look, she and I have talked a lot about this. As we get older, we find that our friendships tend to be the center of our lives.

ALEX

What about sex?

SPARKY

Hey, I like sex just as much as anybody, but I don't know if it's that I'm getting pickier, or it it's the health issue... all I know is that whenever I do get a love interest in my life, it tends to unbalance my friendships.

ALEX

Hmmm. This sounds familiar.
(pause) Have you noticed that the only time we get to spend any time together is when I'm between women?

SPARKY

(dry)
I've noticed.

They CHUCKLE, then break into LAUGHTER. Alex notices a gold pin on the lapel of the jacket that Sparky carries over his shoulder.

ALEX

What's this? An... angel?

SPARKY

That's my guardian angel.

ALEX

You're joking.

SPARKY

No. Everyone has a guardian angel. Even you. Here.

Sparky takes the pin off his jacket and pins it on Alex's.

ALEX

I always knew you and Nicole were a little off the deep end... but that's alright, I love you guys anyway.

Alex puts one arm around Sparky's shoulder and squeezes. Sparky smiles ruefully and shakes his head. They both walk by a PANHANDLER, and several yards later, Sparky slows down and turns Alex around.

SPARKY

Don't you ever wonder about the thread that connects us all?

ALEX

(doubtfully)

Well, I know you and Nicole and I
have a nice friendship...

SPARKY

Not just us, Alex - everybody.
Like that guy over there.

Sparky walks back over to the panhandler, takes out
some folding money and hands it to the man. Sparky
SNIFFS the man's breath, looks concerned, and takes out
some more money.

SPARKY

(continuing, to
panhandler)

Do me a favor and get some food
before the next bottle, okay?

PANHANDLER

Okey-doke. God bless you, sir.

SPARKY

(genuinely touched)

Thank you! And God bless you, sir.

The panhandler smiles at Sparky, who smiles right back.
Sparky and Alex walk on. Alex looks baffled, and is a
tad hostile:

ALEX

Why'd you give him money?

SPARKY

(playful)

He believed he needed it.

ALEX

(incredulous)

And you don't need it?

SPARKY

To buy another Rolex? To get a
twentieth pair of shoes? You've
been generous in sharing your
profits with me, Alex - I just
wanted to share a little with him.

ALEX

He's only a... (explodes) bum...
who's just going to buy more wine
with it!

SPARKY

But he blessed me. It felt good.

ALEX

(disgusted)

That was just a reflex with him.

SPARKY

No, it wasn't. Did you see his smile?

ALEX

(gives up)

You're absolutely bonkers. I have nutso friends!

Sparky sizes up Alex's words, and weighs his own words carefully:

SPARKY

You know, you might be able to get some perspective on this life, if you knew what was going on before. You should have a past life regression done.

ALEX

(wary)

What's that?

SPARKY

A hypnotist who's specially trained can help you find out about your past life. They put you in a trance, and you can regress backwards in time.

ALEX

To childhood.

SPARKY

And further - you ought to try it sometime. It might stand you on your head.

The camera ZOOMS IN, as Alex's eyes open wide.

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

ALEX'S MEMORY - CONTINUOUS

He remembers Tarot card #12 - the upside-down man. After matching a CLOSE-UP of the faces of Alex and the card image, the camera ZOOMS OUT and ROTATES the card to show the man in his proper upside-down position.

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CAPRICE HARING'S OFFICE - MORNING, TWO DAYS LATER

Alex is lying fully clothed on a couch, and we view him from directly above the couch. He appears to be upside-down, due to the camera POSITION, and his limbs are arranged exactly like the Tarot card. His eyes are closed, but he talks to CAPRICE, a cute woman in her mid-thirties. She has hair the color of burnished copper, and she sits on a chair at the side of the couch.

CAPRICE

When I count to three, you will come out of trance, and you will remember everything. Do you understand?

ALEX

(murmurs)

Yes.

CAPRICE

One... Two... Three. You are now wide awake, and you're lying on the couch here in my office. (pause) How do you feel?

ALEX

(awake, but slow)

Like I've been on a long trip.

CAPRICE

Well, you were describing a past life that sounded to me like it took place in the Middle Ages. Several hundred years qualifies as a lengthy journey!

ALEX

Yeah, it all seemed very real.
(shivers) Hard to believe. I must
have a pretty active imagination.

She gives him a long look, then hands him a cassette
tape.

CAPRICE

I made a recording of your session,
so you can review it whenever you
want.

ALEX

Thanks, Caprice.

Alex takes a good look at her for the first time, and
likes what he sees. Caprice notices the gold pin on
his jacket.

CAPRICE

I see you have a guardian angel.

ALEX

A what? (he follows her gaze) Oh,
you mean this pin. (he seizes the
opening) A good friend of mine
gave it to me, but I don't know
that much about it. Do you?

CAPRICE

I think it's supposed to represent
a guardian angel sitting on your
shoulder.

ALEX

Guardian angels have always
intrigued me. Do you think we
could talk about them sometime -
say, over dinner?

She smiles at him, and he smiles demurely back, then
looks down at the pin on his lapel.

INT. PASSENGER JET CABIN - NIGHT, TWO WEEKS LATER

Alex looks up from the pin on his lapel and CHUCKLES at
Sparky, who sits in the seat next to him.

ALEX

So it all started with your little
pin.

SPARKY

(sardonic)

I'm glad to see that it's
fulfilling its function.

ALEX

Hey, two weeks with a hot babe, and
nothing but good has happened to
us - it's doing a helluva guard
job.

SPARKY

Who were you in this past life she
uncovered?

ALEX

A monk named Volmar.

SPARKY

A monk? You?!

ALEX

Hard to figure, eh? But I guess
there was a lady involved...

SPARKY

Okay... This sounds more like you.

ALEX

(smiles)

...and it seems that I was taking
down dictation from her.

SPARKY

A man taking dictation from a
woman? That's unusual - they were
even more sexist than you, back in
the Middle Ages.

ALEX

That's why it seems like a bunch of
crap to me - I've just got an
overheated imagination.

SPARKY

Don't dismiss it completely. Did
you get any images of the place
where... what's his name... Volmar
lived?

ALEX

(reluctant)

Well, there was this long building - it might have been a monastery. (pause) Hey, this is too far out there for me - let's try to get some sleep. We're losing nine hours as it is.

SPARKY

Okay. Sleep well... Volmar!

Alex POPS him one with a pillow, and they mock-fight each other, LAUGHING.

ALEX'S JET CABIN DREAM - THREE HOURS LATER

The setting is a grassy hill, a wooded glade, and the ruins of a religious building. The roof is missing, and the rest of the building seems hundreds of years old. As we DOLLY into an open doorway, we see the far wall of the building, standing by itself in the open air. In the triangular upper portion of the wall, there are three windows, also set roughly in a triangular pattern, except that the top window is noticeably offset to the right. The center of the scene starts to get unbearably bright, and a WOMAN appears out of the brightness.

WOMAN

Welcome to my country.

INT. PASSENGER JET CABIN - CONTINUOUS

Alex is startled awake. Sparky smiles expectantly at him, and hands him a hot, steaming towel. Alex groggily takes the towel and wipes his face.

ALEX

Did you say something?

SPARKY

"Welcome to my country!"

ALEX

(yawns)

Boy, I incorporated that right into the ol' dream factory. (pauses) But I saw that monastery building again... except that this time, it was hundreds of years old, and falling down.

SPARKY

(chuckles)

Interesting... but you'd better buckle up now - we're about to land. Erna's promised to meet us in the old Daimler.

EXT. FRANKFURT AIRPORT PARKING LOT - AN HOUR LATER

A black, shiny Daimler-Benz from the fifties glistens in the morning sun. Alex admires the glorious old tank - it's in perfect condition. ERNA ZIELER, a well-preserved woman in her eighties, enjoys watching Alex's envy play across his face, unconcealed.

ERNA

You can drive it if you want.

ALEX

I'm surprised you drove down here yourself to meet us.

ERNA

And why wouldn't I pick up my only grandson and his best friend?

Sparky stands behind Erna, and waves Alex off with much gesticulating and many contorted facial expressions.

ALEX

Well, I'm honored that you did. Holy cow, my first visit to Germany, and I get to drive this old classic!

They all pile into the car - Sparky helps his grandmother into the back, and slides in beside her.

INT. DAIMLER - CONTINUOUS

Alex fiddles with a couple of buttons, and finally gets the car STARTED. He checks out the radio, and starts to turn on the short-wave.

ERNA

There's a CD player in the trunk that will play through that old thing. Just push the button over there.

ALEX

Ah, the wonders of German
technology!

When Alex pushes the button, a strangely familiar MUSIC
wafts in on the wings of angels. Alex is stunned.

ALEX

(continuing)

Is this Hildegard von Bingen?

ERNA

(pleased)

You know her music? You are in
Hildegard territory now, you know.

ALEX

(even more
thunderstruck)

What do you mean?

ERNA

We can make a small detour and see
the monastery where she was raised.

Alex snaps fully around to look pleadingly at the two
in the back seat.

ALEX

Can we? Oh, can we?! Please,
please, please?!!

Erna and Sparky smile at each other, charmed by Alex's
enthusiasm.

SPARKY/ERNA

Of course we can!

ALEX

Ever since I heard her music, I
can't get it out of my head and
it's just...

As Alex turns around to drive out of the airport, he
continues to CHATTER like a monkey on a banana
plantation. Erna and Sparky are enjoying this
immensely, but nobody can be more excited than Alex.

EXT. DISIBODENBERG MONASTERY - ONE HOUR LATER

Alex is still BUBBLING, as he leads Sparky and Erna through a leafy glade. Sparky is helping Erna, but she seems to be slowing down. There's a bench by the path, and the guys sit Erna down - she shoos them off, and they start walking on, reluctantly at first.

ALEX

Why didn't you tell me before that Hildegard was a neighbor of your family?

SPARKY

You never asked. And since she's been dead eight hundred years, she's a pretty quiet neighbor.

ALEX

Sparky, you are one sick puppy.

They CHUCKLE quietly, but when Alex turns to look up the hill, his mood abruptly turns serious.

SPARKY

Alex, are you okay?

ALEX

I just got an overwhelming feeling of déjà vu. (shivers) It's giving me chills... look.

Alex holds out his arm, and all the hair is standing on end. They continue walking up the hill.

SPARKY

Are you sure you're okay?

They are within sight of the monastery ruins, and Alex is trying to get his vocal cords to work, but nothing is coming out. He is thoroughly unnerved. Sparky shakes him a little.

ALEX

That... that's the same building I dreamed about on the plane. And it's deteriorated in exactly the same way.

Alex starts running toward the building - Sparky walks behind, watching him pensively. Alex slows up to go through an open doorway. The building has no roof.

ALEX'S P.O.V.

We DOLLY into the open doorway, and we see the far wall of the building. The triangular upper portion of the wall has three windows that look eerily familiar, because the top window is noticeably offset to the right.

ANGLE ON SPARKY

As Sparky walks up to the open doorway, he notices that Alex is standing stock-still a few feet inside the roofless monastery, staring fixedly upward toward the exposed far wall. When Sparky gets to him, he taps Alex on the shoulder. Alex still doesn't move, and Sparky walks around to look at his face. What Sparky sees scares the bejesus out of him. He passes his hands in front of Alex's eyes, and studies the reaction of his irises. Sparky looks around for someone to call for help.

ALEX'S MONASTERY VISION - CONTINUOUS

The monastery is nine hundred years newer, and it has a roof now. The center of the scene gets unbearably bright, and the same woman from Alex's jet cabin dream appears out of the brightness. The details of the apparition are more exact this time, and we notice the richness of the woman's vestments. A large cross hangs on the front of her black habit, a long cloak just covers her shoulders, and an odd-shaped wimple on her head has a circular device on the front, with two gracefully curving flaps at the sides. On the woman's finger, there is a golden ring, inlaid with a white stone. The letter "H" is engraved in the stone, with the vertical portions of the letter curving outward toward the top and bottom.

WOMAN

Give me life, Volmar.

EXT. DISIBODENBERG MONASTERY - CONTINUOUS

Sparky is still looking around for someone to call for help, but Alex returns to normal function, starts to walk back out of the doorway, and grabs Sparky by the arm.

ALEX

(test pilot bravado)

Let's get back to the car, Sparky -
I think I've got me a touch of that
there jet lag.

Sparky stops him, and pulls Alex around so they're
face-to-face.

SPARKY

Jet lag? Are you kidding? You
were gone, Alex. Your pupils were
pinpoints, and you were standing
like a statue!

Alex pulls away, and continues walking down the path.
We can see that he's desperately trying to collect his
thoughts.

SPARKY

(continuing)

Alex, what's wrong? (pause,
softer) What did you see?

ALEX

(yelling)

Look, Sparky, there's nothing
wrong, okay? We left your sick
grandmother piled on that bench
like a sack of potatoes. Let's go
see if she's still upright!

Alex marches resolutely on. Sparky hesitantly follows.
A few steps later, Alex looks back, contrite.

ALEX

(continuing)

I'm sorry, Sparky. I don't know
what happened. It scared the shit
out of me, but I'm okay now. Let's
not worry Erna, alright? She needs
our attention focused on her.

Alex tentatively offers his arms for a hug, and they
stiffly embrace. Alex is trembling, and Sparky is
conflicted between worry and stifled curiosity.

INT. ERNA'S LIVING ROOM - NEXT MORNING

Alex and Sparky sit on a couch in a room filled with exotic objects - a trunk from Bali, carved masks from Africa, pictures of Erna as a young and beautiful woman - all in all, the mementoes of a life well-lived. And well-traveled. Erna sits in a large chair opposite the guys, studying several books in her lap. MUSIC fills the air - it's Hildegard, of course, and this piece combines a lilting voice singing above the steady monotone produced by a medieval instrument.

ALEX

Sparky, I don't know about you, but a quick eighteen-hour nap leaves me feeling quite invigorated.

SPARKY

We thought we'd have to send for the charming prince to come and kiss you awake!

ALEX

(sotto)

Yeah? Kiss this, Fuzzball.

Alex ruffles Sparky's still-frizzy hair, Sparky makes KISSING noises, and they both CACKLE good-naturedly.

SPARKY

(louder)

Are you ready for your first Hildegard seminar? I think Erna is prepared to answer any questions.

ERNA

(looking up)

You know, Hildegard felt that a steady musical tone like this enhanced the holiness of the words, when they were combined.

SPARKY

It's supposed to arouse sympathetic vibrations in the body of the listener.

Alex looks at Sparky in surprise.

ERNA

And it allowed the sense of the words to enter directly into the soul.

ALEX

You both seem to know a lot about Hildegard.

SPARKY

My parents were medieval scholars - we moved to this area just so they could do more intensive research on her. I didn't inherit their obsession, but I absorbed some trivia over the dinner table.

ERNA

And when I came to raise Lars after the accident, I became fascinated with Hildegard. She's regarded as a saint in Germany, even though the Church never canonized her.

Alex reads from a CD booklet:

ALEX

Why did she call herself a "feather on the breath of God"?

ERNA

She didn't consider herself to be a scholar, and yet she wrote extensively - prose, poetry, and music. (gestures) She claimed it mostly came to her in visions, so she felt she was just a mouthpiece for the Divine Will.

ALEX

A feather on the breath of God. (marveling) That's beautiful.

SPARKY

Didn't she have her first vision when she was about three?

ERNA

Yes, but she didn't write anything until later in life, when she felt the courage to start recording her visions.

ALEX

How old was she then?

Erna consults one of the books in her lap.

ERNA

She says it was in the seventh month of her forty-second year.

SPARKY

(whispers to Alex)

When do you turn forty-three?

ALEX

(mutters back)

End of the year.

Alex, puzzled, does a double-take, and Sparky nods meaningfully. Erna doesn't hear the byplay, and continues to read from the book.

ERNA

It says here that she wrote for thirty years by dictating to one monk.

ALEX

(strangled)

Does it say what his name was?

Alex and Sparky both lean forward, apprehensive of her next words.

ERNA

Er... Volmar.

Alex and Sparky look at each other, completely nonplussed.

EXT. EIBINGEN PARISH CHURCH - AN HOUR LATER

Alex, Sparky and Erna, on Sparky's arm, walk into the church. Sparky is wearing a small knapsack. We TILT UP to frame a sculpted statue of Hildegard, set into the corner of the building.

INT. EIBINGEN PARISH CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

There's a CHOIR practicing at the altar, and the MUSIC continues throughout the scene. Alex, Sparky and Erna enter, and speak in HUSHED TONES. During the conversation, the three walk around the interior of the church and point out interesting little details to each other. None of these details is ever commented on, except as noted in the dialogue.

However, at one point, there's an embossed golden box set into the wall of the church, and the camera LINGERS on it long enough for the image to be remembered.

ERNA

Music in the middle ages was more meaningful to the listener than it is today.

ALEX

What do you mean?

ERNA

There were three levels of harmony -

SPARKY

(guessing)

The harmony of the instruments?

ERNA

Yes, and singing, or the harmony between body and soul...

ALEX

I can't think of a third one.

ERNA

That's because it's not one that the modern age recognizes - it was the harmony of the elements, the spheres and the seasons. A medieval person experienced music with the sure knowledge that everything under the sun was in tune with it. It was a gift from the Creator, and there was a lot of sensory crossover - hearing colors, tasting sounds, that sort of thing.

ALEX

(mumbles to Sparky)

I had an LSD trip like that.

Sparky muffles a LAUGH.

ERNA

What did you say?

ALEX

I said, uh... I'd like to see an example of that.

Erna looks around the church, and points toward the top of one wall. A gargoyle sits there, with his mouth wide open.

ERNA

A medieval person might look at that little guy and actually hear him shouting.

ALEX

Quiet up there!

The three of them LAUGH, then look around at the choir guiltily.

SPARKY

Don't some scholars think Hildegard's visions were actually a form of migraine headache?

ERNA

Ah, yes - the "scintillating scotomata" theory.

ALEX

The sin-eating what?

ERNA

(laughing)

There are a couple of illustrations of her visions that resemble the scintillating scotomata that sometime come with a migraine. When you were a child, did you ever press on the outside of your eyelids to get "shooting stars"?

ALEX

Shucks, I still do that.

Alex and Sparky close their eyes and press on the lids.

ALEX

Groovy.

SPARKY

Far out, man.

Erna CHUCKLES at the goofiness of the two bozos. They are a fresh breeze in her life, and the outing is doing her wonders.

She stops to remove a book from the small knapsack that Sparky is wearing - it's one of the books she had in her living room. She riffles through the pages, then shows Alex an ancient drawing. After pressing his eyelids again, he looks at the book.

ERNA

There - does it look like that?

ALEX

Exactly. That's spooky.

ERNA

But you have to remember that Hildegard didn't draw any of these pictures - they were second-hand renderings by other artists. The only person who really knows what they see is the one who has the vision.

Sparky looks hard at Alex, who becomes discomfited and changes the subject.

ALEX

So tell me about those eleven thousand virgins!

SPARKY

(laughing)

I knew you'd bring that up again.

ERNA

Hildegard wrote a lot of music about Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins. The official story is that this astonishing number of young women became martyrs while on a pilgrimage. It's a sad story, but we know now that it was a copyist's error that made eleven women into eleven thousand.

Alex stops to point out a stained glass window to Sparky, while Erna strolls ahead to look at some tiles. When she's out of earshot, Alex whispers to Sparky:

ALEX

I knew there couldn't be that many virgins in one place.

SPARKY

Well, remember that it was well
before you came along, Alex.

Alex concedes the point with a shrug, and they walk to
catch up with Erna.

ALEX

How did Hildegard first hear about
Saint Ursula?

ERNA

She had visions of Ursula, but it
also could have been the relics.

ALEX

Relics?

SPARKY

The mortal remains of a holy person
were considered to be powerful
objects, so they actually broke up
the bodies and distributed the
various pieces all over the known
world. Hildegard's monastery had a
chunk of Ursula, known as her
relics.

They silently walk out of the church. Alex looks a
little queasy.

EXT. EIBINGEN PARISH CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

The three walk into the sunshine. Alex takes a deep
breath.

ALEX

You know, I think I'll be skipping
lunch today.

SPARKY

It makes you wonder if the medieval
church was any more enlightened
than the pagans they condemned.

ERNA

Did you two see that beautifully
embossed golden box inside?

ALEX/SPARKY

Yes?

ERNA

That was their reliquary - it
contains the relics of Hildegard.
They have her heart and her tongue.

Alex and Sparky look downright nauseous.

SPARKY

I'll be skipping both lunch and
dinner today.

ALEX

I'm never eating again. (pause)
Her tongue?

The guys extend their tongues and look skeptically down
their noses at them. Erna LAUGHS at their antics, and
after much pulling on tongues, grotesque faces, etc.,
they're all BREAKING UP.

EXT. ST. RUPERTSBERG ABBEY - LATER THAT DAY

Sparky and Alex look down from the top of a hill that
has an idyllic view of the Rhine, beyond a heavily
wooded area. This locale has a lighter feeling than
the earlier Disibodenberg monastery. The sun is about
to set and a peaceful mood hovers over the two men.

SPARKY

Ten years after she started
writing, Hildegard founded an abbey
here, and later, one across the
river, over there.

ALEX

So I guess old Volmar must have
been here with her.

Sparky chooses his next words delicately:

SPARKY

Our friend Gianni in Milan once
told me about a strange trance that
came over some American and
Canadian women, when they first
visited Venice.

ALEX

Oh?

SPARKY

They said it felt like they were traveling back through time. The doctors couldn't explain it. It might have been due to the fact that there was a lot more history facing those women than they were used to back home. They call it the Stendhal Syndrome.

SILENCE nestles in amongst the trees.

ALEX

Let me get this straight - you think my... experience at the monastery was like the... swooning of some... provincial, fat-assed women from... (spits it out) Kansas and Saskatchewan?

SPARKY

Alex...

ALEX

Oh, you're definitely on the wrong track here, bucko. I've seen my share of your precious European history, and most of it should have been paved over long ago.

SPARKY

Alex, you're being an asshole.

Alex considers this thoughtfully. After a few seconds, he decides he wants to save face, but he's being grumpy about it.

ALEX

Maybe. But Stendhal definitely wasn't Italian.

SPARKY

No. (relieved) He was a French author, but he felt more at home in Italy. I guess he wanted to be Italian.

ALEX

Don't we all?

SPARKY

Not on an evening like this.

ALEX

Dammit, you're right again. I hate that about you.

They CHUCKLE, and the tension is eased somewhat.

SPARKY

Erna liked our little tour this morning.

ALEX

So did I. Except for the tongue.

They both stick out their tongues with distaste and SNICKER.

SPARKY

Her mornings seem to be better than her afternoons.

ALEX

Yeah. I'm glad she stayed at home for a nap.

SILENCE again intrudes, and Alex makes up his mind.

ALEX

(continuing, flat)

I saw Hildegard at the monastery yesterday.

SPARKY

Oh?

ALEX

(in a rush)

The monastery was still fairly new, and it had a roof on it, and she said "Give me life, Volmar." It was real bright, and I don't know what she meant, and I'm still scared shitless.

Alex has discharged a lot of energy with this speech. He paces nervously, rotating his neck to get the kinks out, and his body shakes sporadically and spasmodically. Sparky catches up to him, and starts kneading his neck.

SPARKY

It's okay. Maybe it was just a vision.

Alex stops walking and stares at Sparky in disbelief. When he finally speaks, he's nearly ranting:

ALEX

Just a vision? JUST a vision?!
You crazy bastard! Maybe you JUST
popped the cherries on eleven
thousand virgins, but I did not
have JUST a vision! I may have had
a Vision, with a capital "V." Or,
I may have had a Vision, Pluck My
Eyes Out. Or, I may have had a
Vision, Halle-Fucking-lujah. But I
certainly did not have JUST a
vision!!

Sparky waits to allow all this to sink in. Then he deadpans:

SPARKY

At least you're adjusting to it
well.

Alex's mouth drops open; he HOWLS with laughter like he'll never get to laugh again, and he's got to cram it all into this one last laugh. Sparky joins in, and quickly catches up in sheer laugh horsepower. They take their sweet time to finish, wipe their eyes, and LAUGH some more.

INT. MAINZ HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

Erna is lying with her eyes closed; there's a slight deformation of one side of her face, and she's hooked up to monitors. Alex stands at the end of the bed, and Sparky sits at her side.

ALEX

You two have always had impeccable
language manners with me...

SPARKY

What do you mean, language manners?

ALEX

Whenever I walk into the room, you
always switch to English. And I
appreciate the effort, but if it's
easier for Erna to speak German
when she wakes up, you can always
translate the important stuff.

SPARKY

But we don't speak German with each other.

ALEX

Wait a minute - this is Germany, isn't it?

SPARKY

(amused)

Yes, but she's a Dane. We speak Danish with each other.

ALEX

You never told me.

Erna opens her eyes, and they're twinkling, but her speech is slightly slurred:

ERNA

You mean he never mentioned our native language over coffee? After all, the two go together.

ALEX

(surprised and confused)

Coffee and... Danish?!

Alex walks to the head of the bed and shakes a finger at her, then kisses her cheek.

ALEX

(continuing)

That extraordinary mind in there hasn't lost a step - and we thought you were asleep!

ERNA

Just resting - this old body is... how do you say it in America?... pooping out on me.

SPARKY

You'll be feeling better in no time, Erna.

ERNA

No, I don't think so, Lars. You're going to have to let me go, soon.

ALEX

But lots of people recover from strokes.

ERNA

Alex, the stroke was just a gentle reminder - do you think I enjoy staying in this body, lying in bed while you two get to go running all around the countryside?

ALEX

But...

ERNA

(firmly)

No, Alex - you don't need to cheer me up, I'm not being morbid. I just want you and Lars to be ready to let my spirit go, when the time comes. This body has served me well, and I've had a great time on this planet, but everyone has to go, and my time is short.

The guys don't know what to say.

ERNA

(continuing)

But enough of that - I'm not gone yet. I heard you two talking about Alex's vision - that's a significant sign, Alex.

ALEX

Boy, you don't miss anything...

ERNA

That's the one advantage to being old and sick - you can eavesdrop on lots of juicy conversations and no-one suspects. For instance, a little while ago, the blonde nurse said to the brunette that she thought Lars was adorable.

SPARKY

Erna!

ERNA

Alex, do you think you will write anything about your experiences over here?

ALEX

That's a... wonderful idea!

ERNA

It would be a great honor if you would write a little something about me.

ALEX

I'd be proud to do that - and I'll try to do a good job.

ERNA

I'm sure you will - it's a way of giving me a new life here on Earth - a life on the printed page.

Alex CHOKES UP.

SPARKY

It's going to be awfully lonely if you leave, Erna.

ERNA

Not when you make friends with that blonde nurse.

The guys LAUGH with her through their sadness. Erna's BREATHING becomes labored.

ALEX

(sobs)

Erna!

ERNA

(whispering)

Stop that. I have a last piece of advice, if you two want it.

SPARKY

(shakes his head in amazement)

Of course we do, Erna.

ERNA

(slowly)

Always remember... that you... create your own life... so don't settle... for anything less... than exactly what's right.

She stops BREATHING. After a few seconds, Sparky closes her eyes. Two NURSES rush in somewhat later, but Sparky and Alex are already mournfully walking out, their arms around each other's shoulders.

INT. ERNA'S LIVING ROOM - TWO DAYS LATER

Sparky, in a black suit, is sorting through bric-a-brac in the Balinese trunk. Alex walks into the room, similarly attired, carrying a suitcase. He sits down next to Sparky.

SPARKY

First it was my parents' house, then it was Erna's, and now I guess it's mine.

ALEX

Will you stay here?

SPARKY

I don't know if I'll be coming back to run the San Francisco store very soon, if that's what you mean.

ALEX

No, that's not it at all. The business shouldn't concern you in the least right now.

SPARKY

But it should concern you. Thank you for staying through the funeral.

They embrace warmly.

ALEX

Are you going to be all right?

SPARKY

Of course. Erna raised me with a healthy attitude toward death. I'll miss her, but I know that her soul still exists somewhere.

ALEX

I still don't know what to make of that last night in the hospital.

SPARKY

That was Erna's way of making a good death. She left us both with something that will make our lives richer.

ALEX

What's that?

SPARKY

A clearer knowledge of what that last stage is all about. I think a lot of people who fear death are afraid only because they regret that they haven't lived their lives fully. They don't understand we can choose to muddle through our lives, accepting whatever little crumbs fall in our paths, or we can demand the whole cookie.

ALEX

And if we've lived a life full of crumbs?

SPARKY

Then we'll whine for the cookie at exactly the wrong time - when we're supposed to get ready to leave the cookie-eating to those with a hearty appetite.

ALEX

So you're saying that life is like a box of Oreos?

SPARKY

Yup! And you can gobble them down whole, or lick out the white centers first. However you choose to do it, you have to make sure you enjoy the cookies you get, while you're still able to. Erna's box of Oreos was emptying out, and she knew it. She was trying to tell us that she had a full tummy, and not to feel sorry for her. She savored those Oreos, right up to the very end.

ALEX

I thought I saw a few black-and-white tidbits on her hospital bed.

They CHUCKLE, they LAUGH, they CHOKE UP, they SOB, they hug each other and PAT each other's back. Sparky stands up to get some tissues.

SPARKY

We'd better get you to the airport. I think Godot is waiting for you, back in the States.

ALEX

You believe those shirts will sell,
huh?

SPARKY

Hey, you saw the response...

ALEX

You're right again. (pause) Do
you really think I had a vision?

SPARKY

(seriously)

Both Erna and I were convinced.

ALEX

So what does that mean?

SPARKY

It's hard to know. It seems
obvious that Hildegard is trying to
communicate with you.

ALEX

Oh, come on, Sparky.

SPARKY

Think about this for a minute - why
were you so attracted to her music
at first?

ALEX

It... sounded interesting.

SPARKY

Why did you come to Germany?

ALEX

Because... of you and Erna.

SPARKY

Why were you so hot to go to the
monastery?

ALEX

Because... of... the music?

SPARKY

Alex, all of these things are related, as well as the guardian angel, Caprice, your experience under hypnosis, and your dream on the plane. You just don't want to acknowledge the connections in your life.

ALEX

But... that would mean... that everything in my life is connected.

SPARKY

Exactly. And everything you see, and feel, and touch. There's a music that you're just beginning to hear, and you don't want to dance to it. But every now and then, you look down, you see your feet tapping, and it terrifies you.

Alex has been nervously jiggling his foot; he glances down and stops it, with a HUFF. Sparky CHUCKLES.

SPARKY

(continuing)

Look, you should just let the music come into your life, in whatever form it takes, and see where the dance leads you.

INT. L.A. DANCE CLUB - EVENING, TWO DAYS LATER

In a CLOSE-UP of the bar surface, two pub-mat-type coasters are slapped down - embossed on them, in Gothic lettering, is "The Last Chants Saloon." Heavy bass MUSIC throbs - it might resemble Enigma's Violent U.S. Mix of "Sadness, Part I" - which has some yelling and Gregorian chanting, blended with a driving dance beat. The general effect is disconcerting, yet somehow... seductive, in a decadent way. As the camera WIDENS OUT, two drinks are placed on the coasters by a heavily-tattooed BARTENDER dressed in some sort of leather harness/thong contraption. His nipples are pierced, and a heavy chain hangs between them. Other parts of his body are pierced, and we WIDEN OUT further to see Alex and his friend JOHN DENSMORE. John's an extrovert with a Fu Manchu moustache, goatee, and long black hair. Alex and John look slightly out of place in this club, due to everyone else's aggressive rejection of mainstream conventions.

The tattoo- and body-piercing-quotients are very high, and most of the hair colors are not hues that are normally found in nature. Leather and latex are the body coverings of choice, although very little skin is actually concealed. The orientation of the club seems to be... homosexual?... bisexual? Maybe omnisexual would be a more accurate word. PEOPLE of all genders and persuasions are rubbing up against each other, and the overall impression is probably similar to that of Berlin under Hitler, Rome under Caligula, or Sodom under Gomorrah. You can't help wondering if all these people weren't the same types who had a lot of trouble in high school. Let your imagination run wild with this one, or maybe let the Production Designer's creativity kick in; s/he will probably have more of a feel for this milieu than the two of us put together.

ALEX

John, why did you want me to meet you here?

JOHN

It's halfway between our two houses. Plus, I wanted to give you your mail.

ALEX

Thanks for picking it up for me.

JOHN

Besides, here you can really get the feeling that we're all doomed. It's my kind o' place.

ALEX

Don't tell me you're still on that millennium/end-of-the-world kick?

JOHN

Hey, you'd better party between now and 1999, because there ain't gonna be any place to party after that.

ALEX

Yeah, right.

JOHN

It's just a symptom of our epoch - people go nuts at the end of every century. But this is the Big One coming up - it's the end of the whole stinkin' millennium. So it stands to reason that places like this would have a finger on the pulse of the era.

ALEX

That guy over there has his finger on something...

JOHN

...and now it's up something...

ALEX

You're disgusting.

JOHN

Me? It's him (pointing) that's...

ALEX

Okay, enough, enough.

Alex looks through his mail, selects an envelope, and opens it. Inside is a greeting card bearing a picture of Tarot card #2 - the High Priestess. The image looks familiar, with a cross on the front of her habit, a long cloak just covering her shoulders, and an odd-shaped wimple that has a circular device on the front and curving flaps at the sides of the head.

SUPERIMPOSE ALEX'S MEMORY - CONTINUOUS

The woman from Alex's monastery vision, who is also the same woman from his jet cabin dream, overlays the image of the woman on the Tarot card, in a ghostly way. The match between the two women is striking.

LOSE SUPER

And we're fully back to the dance club, still looking at the greeting card with the High Priestess on it. Alex peers inside the card to see who it's from, and John notices his rapt preoccupation.

JOHN

Bad news?

ALEX

No... it seems that Nicole had a premonition that this Tarot card image would be meaningful to me.

JOHN

And is it?

ALEX

Well... I actually... saw someone who looked like this when I was in Germany.

JOHN

(peeks at card)

Hanging out in all the hot spots, eh?

The MUSIC gradually segues into a pounding dance version of one of Hildegard's songs. Alex is startled, and looks closely at the Tarot card image in his hand.

ALEX

Sparky said you should just let the music come into your life, in whatever form, and see where the dance leads you.

ANGELYNE (O.S.)

Hey, cutie pie, wanna dance?

The guys look up from the Tarot card image and see a phenomenally well-shaped, hard-as-nails WOMAN standing in front of them. ANGELYNE wears a circle-front wimple with side flaps, and is obviously going for the look of a nun - with a decided twist. As we TILT DOWN from her head to her body, we notice that instead of a black nun's habit, she has donned skin-tight black leather - with lots of randomly-placed zippers. She has a cloak which partially covers the leather, and there's a large cross dangling between her two huge, rounded bosoms. As the guys scan the zipper-encrusted leather, she nonchalantly parts the cloak to reveal that two of the zippers have been impudently unzipped to allow two thumb-sized erect nipples to be exposed. Our two heroes look like they'll have to retrieve their jaws from the floor, but John struggles to rise to the occasion:

JOHN

Well, since my friend doesn't dance, I'll have to fill in for him.

John offers his arm to Angelyne, and Alex watches the two of them dance out to the middle of the floor.

ALEX
(to himself)
There but for the grace of God, go
I.

After a minute of looking at the Tarot greeting card, Alex gathers up his mail and walks over to John on the dance floor. Alex pulls him aside, while Angelyne's brown, thumb-like nipples continue to bounce and gyrate.

ALEX
(continuing, to
John)
I gotta get out of here. I'm
feeling like I need to... clean up.

INT. CALISTOGA MUD BATHS - NEXT AFTERNOON

Alex and Nicole sit facing forward in adjoining mud bath compartments, up to their necks in brown goo. Nicole's eyes are closed, and both she and Alex look very relaxed; after a few seconds, Nicole gets up the energy to speak:

NICOLE
So the High Priestess Tarot card
reminded you of someone?

ALEX
Yeah, she keeps popping up in my
life, in one form or another.

He sticks his thumbs up through the surface of the brown mud, gyrates them and studies the effect intently.

NICOLE
I needed this - my muscles were
begging for a break.

ALEX
Is the massage business wearing you
out?

NICOLE
No, I love it. But I haven't had a
massage myself in over three weeks.
This is the next best thing.

Alex thinks a bit, then turns his head toward Nicole.

ALEX

What if a character from one of your past lives asked you to give them life? How would you interpret that?

NICOLE

I've never had a past-life regression done. (pause) Someone asked you to give them life?

ALEX

...Yeah.

NICOLE

You had a dream about this person?

ALEX

...sort of... yeah.

NICOLE

Well, you can keep a person's memory alive by talking about them, or having a memorial service... or maybe writing about them.

ALEX

Writing about them... that might do it... I'll write about... them.

NICOLE

I thought you were very skeptical about the whole past-life business.

ALEX

(faraway look)

You know, I can't say that I'm a wholehearted believer, but there are just too many coincidences to ignore. I feel like I've got to... do something.

NICOLE

Good luck. (pause) Is Sparky coming back?

ALEX

I don't know. Sooner or later I've got to check on the San Francisco store and make sure everything's running smoothly.

Nicole opens her eyes, surprised.

NICOLE

You haven't been over there yet?

ALEX

No. I had to talk to you, first...

NICOLE

(warning)

Alex...

ALEX

No, Nicole, I won't bug you anymore - but when you sent me that card, I had to find out where the image came from.

NICOLE

As I said, it just showed up in a prominent position when I dealt the Tarot cards.

Alex shifts around in the mud.

ALEX

I felt like I was a wet watermelon seed when I was in Germany.

NICOLE

What?

ALEX

Something started squeezing me between its thumb and forefinger, and out I popped, going a zillion miles an hour. I have no idea where I'm going... but I'm making great time getting there.

NICOLE

Are you aware that I'm a champion watermelon-seed snapper?

ALEX

No way! I can beat you any day.

NICOLE

I've got some watermelon at home - I challenge you.

ALEX

You're on.

INT. HSI LAI BUDDHIST TEMPLE, L.A. - TWO DAYS LATER

Alex and Caprice wander tentatively into the entranceway of the largest Buddhist temple in the western hemisphere, right in Hacienda Heights. Thousands of four-inch statues of the Buddha are inset in the walls, up to a thirty-foot ceiling. Each has its own little enclosure - tiny walls, ceiling and floor. Most of them have twenty-five-cent coins balanced on their interlaced hands, and the coins are leaned back against their stomachs. The furnishings at the front of the temple look sumptuous - lots of gold leaf and crystal. Several rows of plush kneelers line the floor. Alex and Caprice are the only ones inside at the moment.

CAPRICE

(ironic)

So you rushed right back to see me?

ALEX

Well... I had to... check on the San Francisco store.

CAPRICE

And how's it doing?

ALEX

I really don't give a flying fuck. It hasn't burned down. My mind is on other things at the moment.

CAPRICE

(surprised)

Like what?

ALEX

Like how did they get those quarters all the way up there?

Caprice TITTERS, takes a quarter out of her purse, and pretends she's going to toss it up thirty feet.

CAPRICE

I think this is one of the skills you have to develop to become a Buddhist.

It's Alex's turn to LAUGH.

ALEX

Now you're being sacrilegious. The karma police will be forced to give you a ticket.

CAPRICE

I can get it fixed - I know some powerful people.

ALEX

Yeah? Like who?

CAPRICE

When you do past life regressions, you meet lotsa major bigshots.
(pause) So, what's really bothering you?

She moves in to put an arm around him, and he reciprocates, absent-mindedly.

ALEX

(hesitantly)

How can I... best honor a nine-hundred-year-old woman?

CAPRICE

(playfully)

You're making me jealous!

ALEX

(serious)

Caprice, I had an... experience... in Germany. I feel like it's changing the whole direction of my life.

CAPRICE

You got a Postcard From The Universe, huh?

ALEX

Postcard From The Universe?

CAPRICE

A friend of mine calls it that - it can take many forms, but when a message drops out of the blue, and gives you some valuable insight or information that you didn't have before, that's a Postcard.

ALEX

(brightens)

That's an interesting way of putting it - I got a Postcard From The Universe, but... I'm still trying to figure out who or what sent it.

CAPRICE

Did it have anything to do with Erna?

ALEX

Well, she taught me things I needed to know, and she gave me a new perspective, but... look, I'm hungry - let's go get something to eat, and I'll tell you on the way.

EXT. TAIL O' THE PUP, L.A. - FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER

This hot dog stand is an example of programatic architecture at its finest - you can step up to a small building that's shaped like a hot dog on a bun, and order a hot dog on a bun to eat. Alex SLURPS the extra fixin's off a wienie, and Caprice LAUGHS as she bites into her dog, and it SPRAYS mustard and relish onto his shoe.

ALEX

From the sublime to the ridiculous - when you said you'd take me on an architecture tour, I assumed we'd be seeing something like a Frank Lloyd Wright house.

CAPRICE

I'm taking you to the Watts Towers next. Wait'll you get an eyeful of them. (pause) Do you know how a Zen Buddhist orders a hot dog?

ALEX

No, how?

CAPRICE

One, with everything!

ALEX

(laughs)

You're as bad as Sparky... come to think of it, I should put that on a teeshirt. He would.

CAPRICE

I'll expect a royalty. (pause) So you're going to write about Hildegard. That makes sense.

ALEX

I just wish I could be sure that
I'm headed in the right direction.

CAPRICE

Well... there's this channeler I go
to who might be able to give you
some advice. (pause) She's a
walk-in.

ALEX

A what?

CAPRICE

The person who was in this body
died, but at the moment of death,
Virella took over the body. It was
all pre-arranged, and now Virella
channels Setlak, one of her
colleagues from the Higher Planes.

Through this little speech, Alex's eyes have glazed
over, and he's backing away from Caprice.

CAPRICE

(continuing)

Hey, for someone who had a tête-à-
tête with Hildegard von Bingen, you
shouldn't be so judgmental.

Alex furrows his brows, deep in thought, and then nods.

ALEX

Maybe you're right... maybe you're
right.

INT. BARNEY'S BEANERY, L.A. - A WEEK LATER

Alex and John sit drinking beer at the bar in this
grungy old landmark. Hundreds of automobile license
plates are arrayed on the low-hanging ceiling, and
newspaper clippings, brewery paraphernalia, and
memorabilia from nearly seven decades festoon the
walls. It's a dive, but it's a self-respecting dive,
with an aura of history, and that makes all the
difference. We can glimpse chopped Harleys lining the
curb outside the grimy windows, but it's a toss-up as
to whether they belong to the HELL'S ANGELS, or to the
YUPPIE LAWYERS who are just doing a little weekend
slumming. Both types are represented at the bar - the
lawyers are the ones who look nastiest. Our boys are
half in the bag, and John's enumerating his
conversational points on his fingers:

JOHN

Alright, you've got your Famine - that would be at my house just before payday. You've got your Pestilence - that would either be the killer bees, or those yuppie lawyers over there. You've got your Destruction, of which we have several choices - mudslides, brushfires, earthquakes or whenever I start throwing things at the cat. And to top off the Four... Jockeys...

ALEX

...Horsemen, John - it's the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

JOHN

You say potayto, I say potahto. So the last Jockey is Death - the big guy himself. You ever watch that cable news channel? They got twenty-four-hour-a-day Death on there. It's gotten so thick, I've started to see a certain... beauty in it.

ALEX

Beauty? You're deranged.

JOHN

I have a videotape collection of Death's Greatest Hits - the most outrageous ways to die that were ever broadcast into my home.

ALEX

And how long have you been collecting these... treasures?

JOHN

A couple of years now. These are the Last Days, Alex. Nostradamus predicted it, all those televangelists are saying it, and my landlord is nailing it on my door.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

The way I see it, with all these reputable authority figures telling us to panic, why hold it in any longer? We might just as well scream our guts out until 1999 brings it all to an end.

ALEX

The world won't be here in 2000?

JOHN

Well, technically, the millennium will come to an end in December of 2000. You see, the first year after Christ's birth wasn't the year zero, it was the year one - so twenty centuries later will be when a year ending in zero turns into a year ending in one.

ALEX

But you've always said that 1999 will end it.

JOHN

And I stand behind that. The French agree with me.

ALEX

Then you have obstinate self-righteousness on your side.

JOHN

How is Nicole? Never mind. The French have got an atomic clock at the Pompidou Center that's counting out the seconds until the end of 1999. And if it's good enough for those wacky French, it's good enough for me.

ALEX

I'll drink to that.

JOHN

Pompeeeedoooo... Popeyedoodledoo... That is a choice word for when you're out beer-drinking. But back to the calendar - you know, you gotta wonder about all that fucking around that Pope Gregory did in... (counts on his fingers) ...1582.

ALEX

Who was he fucking around with?

JOHN

Fucking around with the calendar,
Alex... stick with the program,
guy. In 1582, Thursday, October 4
was immediately followed by Friday,
October 15.

ALEX

You're kidding. So they lost
like... (computing blearily)
nineteen days that month?

JOHN

Close enough. Can you imagine
paying the rent again two weeks
after you'd just paid it?!

ALEX

Wow.

JOHN

"Wow" doesn't even begin to cover
it.

ALEX

So you think 1999's going to be the
big year?

Prince's hit song "1999" just happens to be PLAYING on
the jukebox at this very moment. Can you believe it?
I'm flabbergasted myself.

JOHN

My man Prince, or whatever his name
is now, said it best... (sings
along) "tonight I'm gonna party
like it's 1999."

The temptation to play the air guitar is too great for
John, and as he cavorts around, Alex picks up a
newspaper lying on the bar, and peruses the bottom of
the page.

ALEX

Hey, check this out... (quotes)
"scientists now believe Christ was
born seven to nine years earlier
than was formerly suspected."

JOHN

Gimme that. (reads) Suspected?! They're supposed to be sure about this kinda shit! That's why they're scientists, fer Chrissake. (ponders) So if Christ really was born in 7 B.C. or earlier...

Alex checks his watch and TAPS it.

ALEX

...by my calculation, that would make him slightly over two thousand years old.

JOHN

(thinks)

Hey, wait a minute, this throws the whole deal off. The real millennium has already come and gone.

ALEX

Bummer.

John drops the newspaper, sits comatose for several seconds, then suddenly grabs for the newspaper again.

JOHN

They got free personal ads in here, right?

ALEX

(dumbfounded)

Wait a minute - the world's not coming to an end, so you're...

JOHN

...going babe-shopping. Here, help me design an ad - "single white male, handsome, prosperous, upbeat"...

ALEX

How about "butt-ugly, barely solvent and manic-depressive"...

JOHN

Are you friend or foe?

John points a finger at Alex, pretending it's a gun. Alex raises one hand in the air and puts the other flat on top of John's finger, pretending it's a Bible.

ALEX

I'd rather not perjure myself,
Your Honor.

JOHN

As the Inquisition's official
Persecutor, it's my duty to inform
you that you've been convicted by
the Bar Association (sweeping
gesture) ...the Defendant is next
in line for a caning.

ALEX

As long as they don't cut off my
wee-wee.

JOHN

Don't worry - that only happens
when you're married.

ALEX

You're telling me?

JOHN

Sorry. Lost track of the players -
that's what I get for not investing
in a scorecard.

ALEX

And just when your team's coming up
to bat.

Four HELL'S ANGELS are walking over, behind John's
back - they're scruffy, with shoulder-length hair,
ratty beards, dark sunglasses, and thick necks.

FIRST ANGEL

Did we hear you guys making cracks
about "yuppie lawyers"?

There's a horrible STILLNESS, which stretches out
painfully. Alex and John are sobering up quickly,
right in front of our eyes. Alex finally breaks the
silence:

ALEX

Buy you a drink, counselor?

The Angels hesitate a beat, then ROAR with laughter.
They SLAP Alex and John on the back, and order beers
for our doughty stalwarts.

EXT. GREAT WALL OF L.A. - LATE AFTERNOON, A WEEK LATER

Alex and Nicole walk along the east bank of the Tujunga Wash flood control channel, in a grassy area with widely-separated trees. Stretching for a half-mile or more on the west wall is a mural which tells the history of California from the age of dinosaurs to the present. They admire the artisan's handiwork as they stroll, but they are more caught up in their own conversation.

ALEX

How long was your Chinese massage workshop?

NICOLE

Just two days.

ALEX

I'm glad you saved some time for me before your flight. I wanted to talk to you about my book.

NICOLE

I still haven't found those stories you wrote for me.

ALEX

No matter - I'm writing a lot of new stuff. The research I'm doing on Hildegard is especially inspiring.

NICOLE

Why is that?

ALEX

She was an exceptional woman. She advised a pope, an emperor and a king, and she was widely respected as a prophet. They called her the Sybil of the Rhine. She even did exorcisms!

NICOLE

And how much of this is making it into your book?

ALEX

Not a whole lot. Some of it is just background for a story about Erna. I do want to make Hildegard the focus of a longer piece, but I still have to figure out my relationship with her.

NICOLE

Don't you mean Volmar's relationship?

ALEX

No, I feel like I have to find out what it is between her and me.

They walk in SILENCE for awhile. A few cars go by.

NICOLE

How did you spend your day?

ALEX

I had a karate lesson this morning.

NICOLE

You're back in it? Good for you!

ALEX

Yeah, it's stimulating to have that discipline and spiritual orientation back. And after a year's layoff, the physical workout doesn't hurt, either.

NICOLE

I noticed a blue uniform jacket in the back of your car. Where did that come from?

ALEX

I'm doing some volunteer work at the hospital, and they make us wear that to identify ourselves.

NICOLE

(impressed)

Germany was a real cusp in your life, wasn't it?

ALEX

Maybe. What's a cusp?

NICOLE

(smiling)

It's a mathematical term - it basically means a turning point.

ALEX

Well, I told you I felt like a wet watermelon seed.

NICOLE

But then you didn't know what direction you were going. Now you seem to have chosen a course.

ALEX

Nah, I'm just bumbling along.

NICOLE

Some of the Eastern disciplines I study concern themselves with a concept they call "right action at cusp."

ALEX

How do you determine the right action to take? How can you figure out something like that?

NICOLE

A lot of it has to do with the demands of the particular time. Sometimes you have to immerse yourself fully in the experience and let it guide you.

ALEX

Sparky said something like that, but he hauled in a goofy dancing analogy.

NICOLE

What do you want? He's a dance maniac!

ALEX

Someone else I know told me to consult a channeler for direction.

NICOLE

I've never been to a channeler - you'll have to tell me what it's like.

ALEX

To tell you the truth, I feel like this person might wind up being a quack.

NICOLE

So what? Keep your mind open and try it for the experience. Your intuition is becoming much stronger, and it will tell you what feels right. If you trust your inner voice, you can't go wrong.

ALEX

I've been getting some strong nudges when I sit down to write. Sometimes it feels like Hildegard is whispering the words in my ear.

NICOLE

And how does it come out when you write them down?

ALEX

Some stories are more complete than others. I just rewrite them until they sound okay. I'm working on one right now that's heavily influenced by Sparky and Erna.

NICOLE

What's it about?

ALEX

It deals with the changing nature of personal reality.

NICOLE

Just a light piece, I see.

ALEX

(smiles)

For instance, several people could be walking this same path and see entirely different things in that wall.

NICOLE

(stares at mural)

I like the strong imagery.

ALEX

And I like the historical significance of those sequences. (points) But there are also disturbing sections, and someone could concentrate on those and become very upset.

NICOLE

So what's the point?

ALEX

Well, it's not just this mural, and it's not just external reality. Each moment that we're alive has the potential for great joy and also for great tragedy...

NICOLE

...and it's just a matter of where we choose to put our attention.

ALEX

Exactly! Not only do we have this wonderful ability to perceive our own lives as full of joy or pain, but we also have a limited power to bring joy or pain to someone else's life.

Alex is caught up in this idea, and his face nearly glows as he looks across at the mural. Nicole gazes admiringly at this person next to her, and she sees the man she fell in love with nearly twenty years ago. They continue walking and realize they're back at Alex's car. Alex checks his watch and suddenly hurries to unlock Nicole's door.

ALEX

(continuing)

I'd better get you to the airport, or you'll miss your flight!

Alex holds the door for her, and she gets inside. The door closes.

INT. ALEX'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

As Alex rushes around to get in the driver's side, Nicole smiles to herself and speaks words that might or might not have been meant for Alex:

NICOLE

I could have taken the later flight. There might even be one in the morning.

Alex opens his door and jumps in behind the wheel. As he starts the car, puts it in gear and checks the mirror for traffic, he asks:

ALEX

Did you say something?

NICOLE

Just trying to remember the gate number. I'll check my boarding pass.

INT. VIRELLA'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING, TWO DAYS LATER

Caprice and Alex sit on a couch in a comfortable, well-furnished living room. There are many crystals of various sizes on the coffee table, and a couple of huge geodes - they have been sawn in half and reveal thousands of red crystals lining the center of their respective cavities. There's a dream-image painting hanging over the mantle, of a woman in the clouds who's in the process of changing into a butterfly. Alex gets up to check out the full-to-overflowing bookshelf, and finds copies of "The Celestine Prophecy" and "Seth Speaks", as well as many self-help, inner-child and co-dependency books. Lower on the shelf are some videotapes, notably "Field of Dreams" and "Little Buddha." Caprice walks up behind Alex, and looks over the books herself.

CAPRICE

She's got a lot of the same books as my spiritual practitioner.

ALEX

Okay, I'll bite - what's a "spiritual practitioner"?

CAPRICE

I attend a Religious Science church from time to time, and practitioners are trained lay people who help with spiritual crises.

ALEX

Such as whether to polish off the entire pint of Häagen-Dazs?

CAPRICE

Now who's being sacrilegious?

ALEX

Sorry. It's a very stressful time for me. Now Religious Scientists - are they the ones who don't believe in doctors, or the ones who knock at your door?

CAPRICE

Alex! Those are Christian Scientists and... Avon ladies. Now tell me why this is stressful for you.

ALEX

I can't believe I'm seeing a channeler - this is way beyond what I consider to be normal.

Caprice picks up a magnetic compass from the mantel, and beckons Alex to come and sit on the couch.

CAPRICE

You see this compass? It always points to magnetic North, unless...

She moves the compass near one of the geodes. The needle of the compass flips toward the geode.

CAPRICE

(continuing)

...it gets near a deposit of iron. When it moves away from the iron...

She brings the compass closer to herself. The needle swings back to where it was originally.

CAPRICE

(continuing)

...the needle finds North again. You have a direction finder inside yourself that works just as well.

ALEX

You mean if I get too close to a geode, I'll walk in circles?

CAPRICE

Lunatic. If anything Virella, or rather, Setlak, says doesn't agree with your internal direction-finder, you'll know it - and you'll reject the advice. You're a big boy - you know what's best for you.

ALEX

Then why did I come here?

CAPRICE

You're curious. You're on a spiritual quest, you're very concerned that you're moving in the right direction, and you're looking for input. That's why you came to see me.

ALEX

Actually, Hunter Thompson, the celebrated gonzo journalist, has an idea of God that's a lot like your Mr. Wizard demonstration, there. He says that if you get lined up with the quote "Great Magnet", everything starts falling into place - and if you try to go against that irresistible force, you might as well piss into the wind.

CAPRICE

Piss into...?

ALEX

It's a guy thing - like writing your name in the snow.

VIRELLA enters the living room from the study. She's a small woman of indeterminate age, with greying hair. She wears a loose-fitting robe, and a small crystal hangs from a delicate chain around her neck. She looks vigorously healthy, and she shepherds another CLIENT toward the door. Her voice is very businesslike, and somewhat masculine.

VIRELLA

So give me a call if you ever want Setlak to do a telepathic reading.

Alex rolls his eyes at Caprice, who pats his hand reassuringly. Virella shows the client out, and then approaches Alex very directly. She looks piercingly into his eyes, and the only way to describe her demeanor is centered. There are no superfluous movements, no nervous twitches or extraneous throat clearings, nothing but complete and absolute attention on Alex. Alex, however, is fidgety.

ALEX

Hi, I'm Alex. You must be Virella.

VIRELLA

I must be. Greetings to you both.

Virella executes a small, Buddhist-like bow, with hands steepled in front of her. Caprice responds in kind, and Alex starts to do the same, but thinks better of it, smirks, and offers a mechanical, one-inch wave at about stomach level.

INT. VIRELLA'S STUDY - ONE HOUR LATER

Virella sits in a straight-backed wooden chair and her eyes are closed, even when she speaks. Alex sits facing her, studying her demeanor minutely from about five feet away, and he's intensely curious:

ALEX

If I understand this all correctly, Setlak, you're a being that exists on the... Higher Planes, and you use this woman's body to give advice to those of us who live on Earth.

VIRELLA (SETLAK)

That's correct, dear one.

Now that she's channeling Setlak, Virella's voice is markedly different from before - it's higher, though still in the "masculine" range. The most dramatic change is that it's somehow gentler.

ALEX

Why do you spend time counseling people on this level of existence? I thought all the good stuff was happening on the Higher Planes.

VIRELLA (SETLAK)

Earth is in enormous danger right now, unless we intervene. There are so many people acting from motives of greed and selfishness that the planet could destroy itself. That would be a great tragedy, because the fundamental vibration of this planet is one of love and light. I come here to rattle your cage, to get you to think about addressing your internal problems, and to show you that you can become very clear in your relationships with everyone around you.

ALEX

Okay, assuming that I'm acting in an unclear manner with people - which I'm not admitting, by the way - even if I decide to clean up my act, I'm only one of billions of people! You can't possibly hope to get your message across to more than a few of us.

VIRELLA (SETLAK)

We are not the only ones doing this work - there are many channels such as Virella working around the globe. And you would be surprised at the contagious effect that one person's decision to get clear has on the people with whom he or she comes in contact. It is as if the Universe senses that decision, that commitment, and THWACK! - all of a sudden a hundred people around that person all decide they have to investigate a clearer way of relating to people.

ALEX

But I'm very... ambivalent about your advice.

VIRELLA (SETLAK)

And you should be, dear one. As I told you when we began, you must be extremely skeptical of what I tell you, and see if it feels right to you inside. If something doesn't feel right, don't act on it.

ALEX

You think that I'm on the right track in writing about Hildegard?

VIRELLA (SETLAK)

There is no "good" or "bad" track for anyone on this planet. You must find what feels right for you, and pursue that path wholeheartedly. You can fulfill your own potential, and not waste your time living up to someone else's standards. If you listen to the advice that your intuition offers you, you cannot go wrong. On the other hand, if you try to copy someone else's life, you will find in the end that you are not satisfied. You will have lived someone else's life, and although it may have been a comfortable life, it will rot your soul. At some point you will discover that you could have had a unique life - you could have lived Alex's life, and danced a dance that no-one else can dance!

ALEX

(sarcastic)

With my two left feet, it will be a unique dance. Are you saying that I shouldn't write about Hildegard?

VIRELLA (SETLAK)

(chuckling)

Alex, you are tippy-toeing around in several areas of your life. You know which decisions you have to make, but you're afraid of losing some appealing options. But the new alternatives which appear after you make a clear decision will more than compensate you for the choices you think are lost. Be bold - don't live life timidly. Follow your intuition, don't look back, and enjoy the surprises that come your way.

ALEX

Surprises? Tell me about the surprises!

VIRELLA (SETLAK)

The first surprise is that our session is over - but don't rely on other people to generate your surprises! Go out and construct an enchanting life for yourself. You know that you're completely responsible for whatever comes your way, so go ahead and create some light on this planet.

INT. JAPANESE PAVILION, L.A. COUNTY MUSEUM - DAY, THREE WEEKS LATER

John, Alex and Caprice stare down through the three-story-tall open area at the center of this striking building. The outside shell, made of translucent fiberglass, lets in a muted light and gives the impression of a wrap-around shoji screen. There is a quiet, restful waterfall in the center, and the galleries are tastefully arranged Guggenheim-fashion, next to a ramp which spirals continuously downward through the three floors. John's eating a bag of jellybeans, and offers the bag to Caprice:

JOHN

Jelly Belly?

Caprice checks her waistband.

CAPRICE

Pardon me?

JOHN

It's just the brand of jellybeans. These things had Reagan on a sugar rush for two terms. I hear it was the only way they could keep him from napping. Want some?

CAPRICE

Oh! Thanks.

They all start down the gently sloping ramp, and superficially examine the antique Japanese art objects - Edo scrolls and screens, etc. As they walk, the camera TRACKS with them.

ALEX

John and I met our guardian angels in the flesh, at Barney's last month.

JOHN

And what an handsome bunch o' guys they were. While they were buying, (sings) "I could have drank all night."

Caprice, bewildered, looks to Alex for an explanation, but he and John are doing shtick, and they're metaphorically off and running.

ALEX

Do you think we fit in with that crowd of free-range lowlifes?

JOHN

Surely you jest. My uncles loved to go hunting, and they had a phrase for colorful savages like that.

ALEX

Which would be?

JOHN

"The things you see when you don't have a gun."

ALEX

I think I saw that on a bumpersticker the other day.

JOHN

Yeah, you're gonna have to keep your head down on the freeways - it's open season now.

ALEX

Bagged your limit yet?

JOHN

(Transylvanian accent)

No, when I stalk my victims, I prefer the intoxication of flesh on flesh.

In a flash, John bends Caprice over backwards and pretends to clamp his mouth on her neck to suck her blood. Caprice looks flustered, but when he lets her back up, if the truth be known, she's just the slightest bit turned on. Alex and John have walked ahead, caught up in their babbling.

ALEX

And how goes the babe-shopping?

JOHN

Not good - I'm thinking of having my picture and phone number printed up on flyers, and stuffing them under windshield wipers.

INT. ANDERSON GALLERY, L.A. COUNTY MUSEUM - TWENTY MINUTES LATER

CLOSE-UP of a car windshield - as the camera ZOOMS OUT and DOLLIES, we see two sculpted caricatures of a man and a woman, locked in a sordid embrace in the back seat of the car. John and Alex intently study the avant-garde sculpture, as Caprice hangs back a little.

ALEX

Interesting technique.

John and Caprice both give him the hairy eyeball.

ALEX

(continuing)

I was talking about the artist.
(pause) You degenerates.

John reads from a program.

JOHN

It says here that this guy has also done a half-scale mockup of the bar at Barney's. It's in a museum in Amsterdam.

ALEX

Let's go see it!

JOHN

In Holland? My wooden shoes are at the cobbler's.

Behind the three looms a rectangular bank of small color television monitors. With an electronic BUZZ, the monitors all snap on at once. In the upper left corner of the bank, a square of twenty monitors outputs a madly-changing, digitally-manipulated program of stars on a blue background. The stars melt, spin, explode, tilt, and perform hundreds of other maneuvers. The rest of the bank outputs two other programs, in alternating horizontal rows of predominately red and white.

So, although there are three distinct wildly-paced, processed-effect programs being presented, the overall impression of the bank is that of an American flag. The three turn around when they hear the BUZZ, and John and Alex slowly snap into a salute. Caprice GIGGLES, walks between the two meatballs, and puts an arm over each of their shoulders.

CAPRICE

I think that's a sign that we should stay in this country.
(pause) I can't remember when I've enjoyed a museum more.

John does a Groucho Marx imitation, and strides off arm-in-arm with Caprice.

JOHN

If you really wanna see some fun, invite us over for your next formal soirée.

Alex wanders after them.

ALEX

You know, John, I think you need to cut back on the acting classes. You're getting too normal.

JOHN

And you need to give up those high colonics. You're starting to pucker.

Caprice pretends to be scandalized:

CAPRICE

John!

JOHN

Pay no attention to me. It's the jellybeans talking.

INT. BING CENTER, L.A. COUNTY MUSEUM - TEN MINUTES LATER

The three sit in an auditorium with hundreds of other expectant AUDIENCE members. John studies his xeroxed program; Caprice sits in the middle.

CAPRICE

Just in time for their weekly chamber music concert!

JOHN

Alex, you should look at the first piece.

John hands the program to Alex.

ALEX

Hildegard von Bingen! Now that's a sign. What's it telling us?

CAPRICE

Us, Kemo Sabe?

INT. ALEX'S LIVING ROOM - LATE THAT NIGHT

Alex and Caprice lie naked on the rug in front of the fire. They have a comforter to hide, or perhaps reveal, their activities - they are making love with an almost abstracted air. From time to time, we see in their faces that they are enjoying each other's body, but their conversation takes precedence most of the time. The pace of the conversation is slow, like the pace of their lovemaking. She's on top.

ALEX

Sometimes I feel like... I can reach out and... touch the face of God.

CAPRICE

If you touch anything, it'll be female.

ALEX

So God is a woman. I always wondered.

CAPRICE

You're very open tonight.

ALEX

I'm ready for whatever comes next.

CAPRICE

And I'm ready... for the next...

Caprice arches her back and quietly ORGASMS - we see this mostly in her face. Alex draws her close and whispers into her ear:

ALEX

I love you, Preece.

Alex strokes her back, and SHUDDERS run the length of her body. They remain interlocked, and Alex stares into the darkness. Candles and the fire provide the only illumination. After a little while, Caprice starts moving again. They smile at each other.

CAPRICE

And I love you, Alex.

ALEX

I'm voting for mothers at the next election.

CAPRICE

What made you decide that?

ALEX

Men have screwed up long enough. If a woman can care for a child, she's gotta be more responsible than most men.

CAPRICE

Voting the Estrogen Ticket, eh?

ALEX

Hey, you already have my vote. You don't need to lobby... mmm... so well.

CAPRICE

One for the road.

She gazes meaningfully at him, while continuing to move above him. He smiles a bittersweet smile.

ALEX

It is about time, isn't it?

CAPRICE

Yeah. I'm going to miss this.

ALEX

Tell me about it.

Caprice kisses various parts of his body.

CAPRICE

I'll miss this, and this, and... this... and...

A low VIBRATION shakes the room - several picture frames TAP the wall insistently. The CD player FALLS off the wall, and the CD's narrowly miss their heads.

There are SOUNDS of glass breaking, things falling, and water spraying from other parts of the condo. The room moves up and down quite violently, side-to-side, etc. Twenty seconds later, things calm down; Caprice and Alex are staring into each other's eyes. Alex distractedly brushes some CD's aside, and they continue moving against each other. Alex kisses her ears, her eyes, her breasts.

ALEX

...and this... and this... and...

CAPRICE/ALEX

(continuing)

...and this.

They CLIMAX together - a long moment of staring into each other's eyes before closing them; lying back, they're spent. The telephone RINGS seconds later. Alex kisses her, long and hard, before putting his bathrobe on and standing up.

ALEX

(continuing)

I don't think there's any danger of us forgetting that.

They GIGGLE, as Alex gets the phone on the eighth RING.

ALEX

(continuing)

Speak. (pause) Your power's off, and you want me to what?! (pause, looking around) I have plumbing to fix, dishes to glue... (pause) Yeah, my power seems to be back on... (pause) Okay, okay, I'll tape it for you.

Alex hangs up and walks toward the study. Caprice looks at him inquiringly.

ALEX

(continuing)

John. The VCR. Cable news TV. The Four Jockeys of the Apocalypse. 'Nuff said?

As he exits, they both EXPLODE in gales of laughter.

INT. ALEX'S LIVING ROOM - MUCH LATER THAT NIGHT

All the lights are on, and the promise of dawn creeps through the balcony doors. There are three piles of personal belongings stacked in the room; Alex, Caprice and John sit cross-legged on the floor. Everybody's fully dressed, and looking fairly haggard. Except for Alex - his faces shines with an inner light, and his energy level is definitely on an upswing.

JOHN

Thanks for letting us stay here.

CAPRICE

Yeah, it looks like we're both effectively homeless.

ALEX

Not as long as this place is still standing, you're not.

Alex stands up and starts to ZIP some duffel bags in one of the piles. Caprice moves over and hugs him. He returns the embrace warmly.

CAPRICE

I'll always remember that aftershock.

ALEX

Me, too.

They kiss. John's bewildered, and slightly alarmed.

JOHN

I didn't feel any aftershocks.

ALEX

You might have missed it. The epicenter was over that way.

Alex points vaguely in the direction of the fireplace, where the logs have been reduced to embers.

JOHN

(still rattled)

Oh.

ALEX

Look guys, I'm only coming back for visits, so remember to have a plumber fix the second bathroom, as soon as you can.

CAPRICE

Was the Santa Monica store
completely wiped out?

Alex seems almost happy to nod in the affirmative.

ALEX

If any of the employees check in
today, tell them I can probably
offer them jobs in San Francisco
soon. Maybe just part-time at
first, but... I'll call them all,
after I get settled.

JOHN

So you're moving... just like that?

ALEX

I got some Postcards last night.
Lots of Postcards.

John shakes his head.

JOHN

Your mail delivery is a hell of a
lot better than mine.

ALEX

John, old buddy, it turns out that
it's a hell of a lot better than I
ever imagined.

Alex smiles at Caprice, as John FLOPS onto the couch.

JOHN

I gotta crash.

ALEX

(to Caprice)

You'd better rest up, too. You've
got a busy day ahead.

CAPRICE

Not as busy as the one I left
behind.

Alex remembers something before he walks out, and
returns to pick up a certain golden CD out of the
jumble on the floor.

EXT. GHIRARDELLI SQUARE, SAN FRANCISCO - DAY, FOUR DAYS LATER

Alex and Nicole descend the steps on the bay side of the famous chocolate factory/shopping complex, and walk in a westerly direction. It's a foggy day, and the Alcatraz foghorn is BLOWING plaintively.

ALEX

I have an efficiency in Noe Valley, a futon, a gas hot plate... and I'm writing like a demon.

NICOLE

Hildegard?

ALEX

Who else? (pause) You've never heard her music, have you? I've got some with me.

Alex snakes two headphones out of his shoulder bag, and hands a set to Nicole. He fiddles in the bag and puts on his headset. Nicole slowly puts hers on, too.

ALEX'S P.O.V.

He's walking out onto a small spit of land - it looks like a concrete breakwater of sorts. The beautiful MUSIC drowns out all external sounds, until one side - Nicole's side - becomes FAINTER, and we hear some AMBIENT SOUNDS from that side. She's evidently lifted his earpiece.

NICOLE (O.S.)

My father died last night.

The camera PIVOTS to frame Nicole. She looks up at Alex with a serious expression, but no sign of sorrow. She might be struggling for self-control, but it's hard to tell.

ANGLE ON ALEX AND NICOLE

Alex takes his headphones off, then reaches gently for hers - they're like tiny earmuffs for her delicate ears. He slips them off her head, then enfolds her in a hug. Indescribable emotions play across her face, but she doesn't break. Not yet.

ALEX

Are you going back to France?

NICOLE

You know how I felt about him.

ALEX

But it's for those who are left behind.

NICOLE

I have very little money.

ALEX

I have enough.

NICOLE

You're supporting two people in L.A., you've put two extra people on your payroll up here, and you only have one store now.

ALEX

I'll find some money.

NICOLE

I don't want to go.

ALEX

(pause)

What can I do?

NICOLE

Come and stay with me.

ALEX

(slowly)

I'll come and sleep on your couch.

NICOLE

I don't want you on the couch. I want you in my bed.

ALEX

Maybe after awhile. Let's wait and see.

INT. NICOLE'S LIVING ROOM, NAPA - THE NEXT MORNING

Alex sleeps on the couch, his hand dangling over the side. As the camera WIDENS OUT, we see Nicole's tear-stained face, asleep on the floor next to the couch, hugging Alex's hand to her cheek. Alex wakes up slowly, notices his hand is not free, and peeks over the edge of the couch. He stares down at the sleeping Nicole for a long time, then a lone tear makes its way down his face.

INT. NICOLE'S KITCHEN - AN HOUR LATER

Alex cooks some oatmeal; Nicole putters with juice and muffins next to him.

ALEX

I think I should go back to the City today.

NICOLE

(frightened)

I'll stay in my bedroom tonight.

ALEX

That's not it. (pause) I might wind up in there with you.

NICOLE

(smiling
uncertainly)

Would that be so bad?

ALEX

It might be. (pause) Don't get me wrong. I want you, Nicole. But you're vulnerable right now, and I'd rather have something that will last. You can't work out your feelings about your father on me.

Nicole's tears flow freely. Alex reluctantly takes her into his arms.

ALEX

(continuing)

Or maybe I'll just stay on the couch for awhile longer.

INT. HESS WINERY/ART GALLERY, NAPA - TWO WEEKS LATER

Nicole and Sparky are having their own private wine tasting at the polished mahogany bar. They're very glad to see each other, and raise their glasses in a toast:

SPARKY

Salut, ma petite!

NICOLE

Skoal, you big lunk! When's the happy day?

SPARKY

As soon as we can book the balloon. Do you know whether that minister still performs weddings?

NICOLE

If he's smart, he'll never go up in a balloon again.

SPARKY

(chuckles)

I've got this fantasy of re-assembling the same cast.

NICOLE

You mean Alex and that minister in the same balloon? (pause) How does Inger feel about bloodshed?!

SPARKY

She'll make herself useful - she's a nurse.

They LAUGH and toast again:

NICOLE

One for Erna - la crème de la crème.

SPARKY

Et à votre père - may he rest in peace.

NICOLE

Yes, indeed. (pause, thoughtful)
I'm glad you came to my massage studio before you saw Alex.

They drink pensively, then put down their glasses and wander out into the gallery area. The old winery building has been lovingly restored; aged bricks adjoin blindingly white walls. There are lots of windows, skylights and open stairways. The camera FOLLOWS them as they walk up the stairs.

SPARKY

How are you doing?

NICOLE

Actually, quite well. I wish I could convince Alex of that.

SPARKY

Is he being overprotective?

NICOLE

No, he's just being... Alex. He's like the old Alex, except, you know, better?

SPARKY

And what do you want?

NICOLE

I want us back.

SPARKY

Won't he go for that?!

NICOLE

He doesn't want to get hurt again. If I were him, I'd probably feel the same.

They walk past a white wall that has an antique Underwood typewriter mounted on it. The platen roller has been replaced with a cylinder which supplies natural gas, and flames leap up several inches.

NICOLE

(continuing)

He's probably writing as we speak.

SPARKY

Tell me something. Would he get hurt again?

NICOLE

No, but he suspects that I'm turning to him temporarily, just because of my father.

SPARKY

I thought you processed most of those feelings over the past few years.

NICOLE

Exactly - but I never told Alex...

SPARKY

...and it looks suspicious if you tell him now.

NICOLE

Oh, can you imagine? I can't even begin to think of what he'd say if I tell him I want to have his children.

Sparky is jolted by this admission. They walk SILENTLY through a room filled with modern art, until he gathers himself.

SPARKY

You know I love this man dearly, but are we talking about the same Alex? The sexist guy who practically abandoned you to start his business?

NICOLE

Something happened in Germany, Lars. His encounter with Hildegard opened him up, and he's blossoming more every day. I know we could start growing together again...

SPARKY

(sees the problem)
...but he won't believe it, even if you say it.

NICOLE

What a mess.

INT. GLIDE MEMORIAL CHURCH, SAN FRANCISCO - THE NEXT MORNING

This former legitimate theatre has been converted into a gospel church, and it's fairly rocking with hand-clapping MUSIC. The CHOIR is on a set of risers to the left of the stage, and they're leading the CONGREGATION in a rousing spiritual.

The seats are dotted with foreigners and tourists - it's a very mixed group, and everybody is having a blast. Alex, Nicole, Sparky and a blonde woman, INGER, are enjoying the service; you can tell from their faces that they, like most everyone else, feel that this is the way church ought to be. Sparky is surprised when he notices someone in the choir, and he nudges Alex and Nicole to look.

ANGLE ON

Reverend Clyde Hixson. He looks a lot looser than when he performed the balloon marriage, and he's singing his ass off.

EXT. TENDERLOIN DISTRICT, SAN FRANCISCO - A HALF-HOUR LATER

Sparky, Inger, Alex and Nicole LAUGH gaily as they walk down the street. It's the area around the church, and the neighborhood has seen better days.

ALEX

Did he remember you?

SPARKY

He remembered all of us. He said that when you dumped him out of the balloon, it changed his life.

ALEX

(mystified)

How so?

SPARKY

He realized that he had blinders on, in the way he had been looking at the world. So he gave up preaching for awhile, and started working with the homeless here in the Tenderloin.

NICOLE

How did he wind up in that choir?

SPARKY

Most of the work he does now is through Glide Memorial. He never used to sing, but he says he realized that our life's breath is a gift of God, and that it should be used to praise God.

ALEX

That's exactly what Hildegard said!

SPARKY

He told me he's been reading up on her.

INGER

Did you ask if he'll perform our wedding?

SPARKY

Next Saturday.

CHEERS from all.

ALEX

Do I dare to come?

SPARKY

He wants to thank you personally.

ALEX

Hmmm. Maybe I'd better wear my parachute.

Everyone LAUGHS.

NICOLE

Tell us the story of how you and Inger met.

SPARKY

Alex may remember her from the hospital.

ALEX

(astonished)

Is Inger... the blonde nurse that Erna wanted you to meet?!

INGER

The same. I owe Erna a great debt.

Inger hugs Sparky.

ALEX

We all owe her a great debt.

NICOLE

I'll second that.

Nicole hugs Alex - he looks at her quizzically. They all pass an abandoned storefront. In the darkness of the recessed doorway, a HOMELESS MAN sits on the ground - Alex is the only one who notices. The group turns a corner, and starts walking uphill. Alex stops, checks his pockets, and urges the others to keep going:

ALEX

I'll catch up to you - I dropped something back there.

As he goes back around the corner, the women start CHATTING and continue to climb the hill. Sparky walks behind them for a few steps, then changes his mind, turns, and walks back to the corner.

ANGLE ON SPARKY

Sparky leans around the corner, to see what Alex is doing down by the abandoned storefront. While Sparky's looking, unbeknownst to him, Nicole and Inger lean in behind him. Something about this scene brings the Three Stooges to mind.

ANGLE ON ALEX

Alex has returned to the doorway, and offers a few dollars to the homeless man.

HOMELESS MAN

God bless you, sir.

Alex stares blankly at the man for a few seconds, then seems to really look into the face of this person. Alex squats on his haunches to get down to the man's eye level. When he speaks, his voice is none too steady:

ALEX

And... God bless you, sir.

ANGLE ON SPARKY

When Sparky finally realizes that the women are behind him, he pulls a Laurel & Hardy move, hustling them, and himself, away from the corner, and back up the hill.

ANGLE ON ALEX

Alex shakes hands with the homeless man, and gets up to jog around the corner, back to the group. When he catches up, Sparky is lagging a little behind the women.

SPARKY

Whatever happened to Caprice?

ALEX

She and John are talking about buying my condo.

SPARKY

John? The destitute John Densmore?

ALEX

The reformed John Densmore. He found a great job, with the cable news channel. (pause) Between her savings, and his healthy paycheck, they should be able to swing the mortgage in a few months.

SPARKY

That's an unlikely couple.

ALEX

You're telling me. It was very quick, but things seem to be going well - they're even talking about marriage and kids.

SPARKY

Inger and I want to have children as soon as we can.

ALEX

Here in San Francisco?

SPARKY

No, we're moving back to Denmark. Her mother is Danish - and I'd like to do some long-overdue climbing in my family tree.

ALEX

Everybody's life is moving right along. It's just me that seems to be stuck.

SPARKY

You and Nicole should have kids at the same time we do, so they can visit back and forth across the Atlantic.

ALEX

Nicole's not... (clenching his teeth) together with me. She'll leave me when she's done mourning.

SPARKY

Her father's not an issue anymore, Alex - she wants you back.

ALEX

(cynical)

She'll get over it.

SPARKY

Wake up, Alex. She wants to have your children. Her biological clock doesn't have a snooze alarm!

Alex turns on Sparky, ferociously:

ALEX

Why the hell are you saying that shit? Don't you think I want that, too?

Alex walks on in SILENCE; Sparky follows a pace or two behind. The women are far ahead of them, engrossed in CONVERSATION.

ALEX

(continuing, tiny voice)

It would just fall apart again.

INT. NICOLE'S LIVING ROOM - THE NEXT EVENING

Alex sits in front of an empty typewriter, looking through a file folder full of papers. Nicole enters from outside, holding an armful of mail, including a small box.

NICOLE

I'm sorry I left before you were up today. Did you sleep well?

ALEX

(distracted)

Fine. As usual.

NICOLE

The couch is firm enough for your back?

ALEX

Sure. (pause) Nicole, I was looking through the bottom of the closet for some typing paper, and I came across this file.

Nicole looks over his shoulder.

NICOLE

You found your stories! Great!

ALEX

Yeah, but there were also some drawings with them.

Nicole fingers a couple of pages, and then recognizes them.

NICOLE

Ah. These were sketches I made of my dreams, just after we separated. This one kept coming back - that's why there are several of them.

She turns over another few pages, and we see that the drawings are all similar - they're of the ruins of a religious building, the roof is missing, and the rest of the building seems hundreds of years old. The far wall of the building stands by itself in the open air. In the triangular upper portion of the wall, there are three windows, set in a triangular pattern, and the top window is noticeably offset to the right.

NICOLE

(continuing)

I could never figure out what that place was.

Nicole turns away to open the box that came in the mail delivery. She doesn't notice that Alex is visibly agitated.

NICOLE

(continuing)

You know, this box is related to those drawings - I had a jeweler in San Francisco design me a ring. Whenever I looked down at my hand in those dreams, I saw this.

From the packing in the box, Nicole has extracted a golden ring, inlaid with a white stone. The letter "H" is engraved in the white stone, with the vertical portions of the letter curving outward toward the top and bottom. She slips the ring on her finger and models it.

NICOLE

(continuing)

Do you like it?

SUPERIMPOSE ALEX'S MEMORY - CONTINUOUS

The woman from Alex's monastery vision, who is also the same woman from his jet cabin dream, and from Tarot card #2, SHIMMERS into ghostly life and overlays Nicole. We now know this woman to be Hildegard von Bingen, and as we ZOOM IN to the wraith-like ring on her finger, we see that it's the same as Nicole's. ECHOING in Alex's memory are Hildegard's words:

HILDEGARD

Give me life, Volmar.

LOSE SUPER

We're fully back to the living room. Alex has Nicole's hand in his hand, and he can't look away from the ring.

NICOLE

I see you do like the ring, eh?!

ALEX

What? ...Oh, I guess, yeah.
(pause) What does the "H" stand for?

NICOLE

Oh, that could be an "H", couldn't it? I just liked the way the sides curved. It was a dream, you know? It's only an abstract design.

ALEX

(intense)

Sparky told me you want to have children with me.

Nicole pulls away and mechanically walks across the room. She reaches a table, leans over it, and POUNDS the top of it hard. She keeps her back to Alex, as she spits out the following:

NICOLE

He shouldn't have told you that.

ALEX

But it's true, isn't it?

Nicole's world has been destroyed. Her shoulders sag, her head is down, her eyes are closed. She can barely get the words out:

NICOLE

Yes, Alex.

ALEX

(cheerfully)

So when do we start?

INT. NICOLE'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Alex and Nicole kiss longingly and roll around on the bed, fully clothed. An upright floor lamp has been draped with a gauze-like blue scarf. Nicole gets up to undress, facing away from the camera. In the blue light, the muscle definition in her back becomes very distinct - this is the cumulative effect of massaging several clients a day over a period of years. She's a small person, but it's easy to see that she's extremely powerful. She turns off the LIGHT switch, and on the ensuing BLACK SCREEN,

CREDITS ROLL

We can still hear various THUMPS, the SOUND of a hanger being taken off a rack and the RUSTLE of clothing.

NICOLE

As soon as I get into this, I'm going to turn the lights back on.

ALEX

What is it?

NICOLE

You do remember the black dress you bought me in Key West?

ALEX

Do I ever!

NICOLE

Well, feel that.

ALEX

Oh, boy. And feel those. Ummm.

NICOLE

Ooooh. Ils sont trop longs.

ALEX

No, they're not. It'll make it easy for the baby to get them in her mouth.

NICOLE

Oh? Tu veux une jeune fille?

ALEX

Or for him to get them in his mouth. Doesn't matter.

Sounds of SUCKING and LICKING. [Writing is dirty work - but somebody's gotta do it.]

NICOLE

Uhnnn... Si tu n'arrêtes pas...

ALEX

Do you want me to stop?

NICOLE

Non... non... non. Prends moi.

ALEX

My pleasure.

Simultaneous GASPS of ecstasy from both of them, followed by SOUNDS of lovemaking. Ad-libs encouraged.

NICOLE

Je suis fier d'être Femme avec toi.

ALEX

(sighing)

I know. I'm proud to be male when I'm with you.

NICOLE

C'est bon... ohhh, que c'est bon.

ALEX

The best.

Various GROANS, MOANS and sharp INTAKES of breath give us a vivid idea of what's going on in the DARKNESS. And, of course, we don't want to get out of our theatre seats because there's a good chance that the infamous black dress will make an appearance, with Nicole in it. Or, partially in it. Perhaps the anticipation can be prolonged with a SILHOUETTE of Nicole moving on top of Alex, with her long nipples in evidence. There's a small break in the CREDITS for this.

NICOLE

Shall we get rid of this dress?

ALEX

No, I like the way it crinkles up.
It tickles my stomach.

NICOLE

(giggling)

Now that tickles me. Ooooooh, mon Dieu. That doesn't.

ALEX

Here, let me help you get into that dress... Hello! How did you do that?

NICOLE

Just contract those muscles...

ALEX

Ohhhhh, yes. (pause) Like this?

NICOLE

Oh, Alex, je suis à toi, pour tous jours... toujours.

ALEX

And I'm yours, ma toute belle.

NICOLE

(pause)

Here, help me do this. I'm going to turn the lights back on.

ALEX

Why do you want to get into that dress?

NICOLE

Don't you remember what happened the last time?

ALEX

(suddenly decisive)

I'll help you get into the dress.
Here, the arm goes...

Nicole turns on a bedside lamp, just as the

CREDITS CONCLUDE.

If there's a union problem about this, we'll have the I.A.T.S.E. logo tattooed on her breast. Nicole is wearing the black dress, straddling Alex, who is naked on the bed. Alex tugs the side of her dress to expose one breast.

NICOLE

Voyeur!

ALEX

I believe that was originally a French word. Besides, we're all voyeurs.

Nicole flirts seductively with the camera, as we

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END