

EQUILIBRIUM

by

J.E. Clarke

FADE IN ON:

INT. PRESS ROOM - DAY

Images flicker onscreen: a SPACE ROCKET, warming up to blast off.

A HAND with a diamond ring reaches for a doorknob. Until a MICROPHONE intrudes.

An unseen REPORTER pelts questions as the hand recoils.

REPORTER (O.S.)

Mr. Brennan! Before you take your first trip into orbit, our viewers want to know: how do you feel about the privatization of space flight? And what ten personal attributes brought you to this moment now?

An alpha male voice (BRENNAN) clears his throat...

BRENNAN

Well, my work ethic and drive for excellence, of course.

The world suddenly lurches - a nauseating blur.

INT. WHITE TEMPORAL ROOM - DAY?

Brennan finds himself - inexplicably - in a chair.

Arms pinned back with strangely electrified CORDS, he's a bald man with bug eyes. A stark "Lex Luther" vibe.

White walls surround him - a Kubrick wet dream.

Brennan doubles over, upchucks on designer shoes. The spewing takes awhile. Brennan sits back, confused.

BRENNAN

What happened with re-entry? I'll take the scalp of whoever dropped this ball -

He looks around, in panic.

BRENNAN

Where the fuck AM I?

At a table, SMITH DONALD (ageless) taps a pen.

SMITH

You're in - well, I surmise those of your time would call it "limbo", Mr. Brennan. For the purpose of operational improvement and concurrent Yelp reviews, how was your ride in the temporal zone?

BRENNAN

Shitty.

Brennan processes Smith's words. Double takes.

BRENNAN

...what do you mean, "temporal zone"? Where did you take me? And why?!?

Smith smiles, so faint it's almost imperceptible.

SMITH

Nowhere physical, Mr. Brennan. But your private trip to outer space has been - well, to simplify the concept - "postponed."

Smith slides paperwork across his desk. The header reads: "Temporal Equilibrium - Quantitative Easing Authorized".

The logo beside it: an old-fashioned SCALE, linked to an HOURGLASS.

BRENNAN

Classy. But what's it mean?

SMITH

You've been extracted from the time stream you were born into. Though the time zone itself carries on.

Brennan's eyes widen. His temper explodes.

BRENNAN

Did Bezos put you up to this? Or is limp dick Branson at fault?

He struggles with the cords that pin his arms back.

BRENNAN

This isn't fucking funny! Someone's gonna pay for this prank!

SMITH

Oh, trust me..
(reads from the paperwork)

Mr. Jason Brennan, worth \$220 Billion as of 2021 - we at the Temporal Equilibrium Bureau don't find your predicament - or ours - amusing, in the least.

Brennan tries to break free. Flailing, he launches a kick at Smith's desk. But he's too short: can't reach.

Humiliated, he catches his breath. Calculates.

BRENNAN

Fine. Give it to me straight. What's your affiliation? Some anti-billionaire terrorism cell, out to make the "one percent" pay?

SMITH

No sir. I'm just a public servant. Nothing nefarious at all there.

BRENNAN

Says you. Bureaucrats suck ass in my book.

Smith smiles wanly.

SMITH

For what it's worth, you're quite the historical artifact. I'd shake your hand, if I could. Though for security reasons, I'll demur. Politeness requires introductions, nonetheless. My name is Smith Donald, Sir.

BRENNAN

"Smith Donald"? Lemme guess, you have dyslexia...

SMITH

Not at all. First name "Smith". Second name "Donald". I'm from the Temporal Bureau, in the insertion year 2053.

BRENNAN

"Temporal Bureau?" Oh - I get the joke. "Everything runs backward here?"

SMITH

(sighs)

I never joke at work. A few puns, perhaps. A flatulence joke here and there. But the situation's too dire here.

Let me demonstrate your position - before
your understandable incredulity stretches
TOO far.

Smith tosses a writing pad into Brennan's lap. Then a
marker, which almost rolls to the floor. Brennan stops it
with his knees.

SMITH
Think of an image. Write it down.

BRENNAN
(sarcastic)
You're asking me to draw dirty pictures?
Are you really, REALLY sure?

SMITH
The content is irrelevant. Be creative,
spontaneous. For this exercise, anything
works.

Brennan nods towards his pinned-back arms.

BRENNAN
Okay, I'll play your game. But one tiny
question - how?

Smith cups a palm over his desk's INTERCOM. A CHIME
sounds.

Brennan pitches forward, granted a bit more slack for his
arms. Contorting sideways, he grabs the marker. The two
men eye each other, almost like a Western duel.

SMITH
You first, Brennan. Draw.

Brennan scribbles angrily. Draws: A DOG WITH RABBIT LEGS
and a TOP HAT. He tilts the pad toward Smith.

BRENNAN
Ta-da, asshole. This work for you?

Smith shrugs, hands Brennan a slip of paper.

SMITH
Far from a Rembrandt. If you asked me, an
accounting major who dabbled in art
critique, your dabbling's more Picasso
style...

On Smith's pad: the EXACT same doodle!

Brennan recoils in his chair.

BRENNAN

What the fuck? What game IS this?

SMITH

Monitoring temporal patterns over the course of minutes is child's play. Whereas years - or centuries - are far harder. Please make this process easy for both of us, Mr. Brennan. The future of the human race depends on our progress in this room today.

(beat)

Though "today" is too loose a term. A far better way to phrase it is... "now".

BRENNAN

(beat)

You're claiming you drew that... from the future?

SMITH

Isn't that obvious?

BRENNAN

How do I know you didn't read my mind?

SMITH

Both conclusions are an equal leap of faith. Why don't you just accept I'm telling you the truth?

BRENNAN

The truth being?

SMITH

That I'm from your future. Let's move on.

The two regard each other. Awkward silence. Then:

BRENNAN

Sure thing... Donald.

SMITH

Please, call me Smith.

BRENNAN

Whatever. Getting down to brass tacks....

SMITH

Ah: "Brass Tacks". If my department research is accurate, that's a colloquialism from your time which translates to "straight talk." Quaint.

BRENNAN

I bet you find "Cut the Shit" even more nostalgic. Either way, what do you want?

Smith smiles; rolls and cracks his neck.

SMITH

Just a simple rebalancing of your timeline, for safety's sake. As a businessman of the twenty first and first-quarter century, you're acquainted with supply and demand curves?

BRENNAN

Of course!

SMITH

Good. Then my next point should be crystal clear.

Smith waves. Before his hand, a GRAPH materializes.

The upward curve glows GREEN. The downward curve: BLACK.

BRENNAN

Econ 101. Big fucking whoop.

SMITH

Read the labels, please.

Smith zooms with his hand. Revealing:

The Green curve's labeled: "Optimal human welfare."
The Black curve: "Distribution of public goods."

Brennan blinks, confused.

BRENNAN

What in Hayek Hell is this?

SMITH

(chuckles)

Frederick Hayek has literally nothing to do with this. The graph you see before you is infinitely *more* sophisticated than his conceptions allowed: a temporal look at the advancement of the human species. At least, captured in this singular snapshot of time. If you wanted the Z axis, we'd have to zoom in this direct-

Smith stops, doesn't alter the graph after all.

SMITH

On second thought... given the age you were born in, you're not cognitively equipped for that.

Brennan stares, as...

Smith waves his hand. A BLUE line draws itself across the graph. Horizontal, it bisects the other two curves.

SMITH

Surely, you realize what this represents?

BRENNAN

(sarcastic)

Who wouldn't? But just to check you out - why don't you explain it, too?

SMITH

When encountered in neoclassical economic models, such lines generally represent how governmental interference distort markets. Granted, that's chock full of questionable assumptions as to what represents "natural" market forces, but you get the analogy here, I'm sure?

Brennan blinks.

BRENNAN

No. Apparently, I don't.

SMITH

Ah. Well, keep in mind what these two graphs symbolize: human welfare, vs. public good distribution thereof. And that little blockage there in blue...

BRENNAN

Oh yeah, I get it now - it's interference in the market. By government jerk-offs. The type that only knows how to dictate, and never get things done.

SMITH

No. In this case... well, it's you.

Brennan squints. Slowly, the insult sinks in.

BRENNAN

Wait - you're calling me a blockage?!?
I'm an innovator, asswipe!

He lunges forward.

Smith palms the intercom. Brennan's electric cords tighten - pull the billionaire against his chair... snap!

Smith smiles, strangely encouraged.

SMITH

Bravo, exactly right! You're a blockage to human advancement, Brennan. Let it be said I give you credit for absorbing that concept so quickly. Congratulations. It took Henry Ford over five hours to grasp even that rudimentary point!

BRENNAN

What I "absorb" is you're feeding me bullshit...

Brennan squirms in his chair, bellows at the ceiling:

BRENNAN

Enough with this reality show! If you don't want me to sue your Executive Producer back into the Stone Age, you'll do yourself a favor, let me go!

Smith tsk-tsks. With a wave of his hand, the graph vanishes. Replaced with: bar charts. Which symbolize the annual profit of a company - Exigon.

Brennan sputters.

BRENNAN

That's internal, non-public data. Hack my company, you've gone too far!

SMITH

Objective analysis of truth is never "too far", Mr. Brennan. Enlighten me: how much have you "earned" this year? In your relative time zone, I mean?

BRENNAN

About twenty five mill, give or take.

SMITH

Your company Exigon. Not personally.

BRENNAN

Oh. Then about one and a half billion. Which really isn't that much, if you consider everything we give to the world.

SMITH

Ah! But what have you taken from it? For free?

With a hand-wave, Smith magnifies the graph.

New BAR CHARTS appear next to Exigon's profits. Some of the labels: Creation of the Internet. Road Maintenance. Air Flight. And more.

SMITH

Now, let's subtract the value of those operating expenses from what Exigon makes annually...

The new bar charts subtract from Exigon, leaving..

ZERO VALUE. Some charts even invert, flip negative.

Smith taps the digital graph. Air distorts. He side eyes Brennan as he speaks.

SMITH

As you said before, it's "brass tacks" time. When, Mr. Brennan, was the last time you paid intellectual property rights to Tim Berners Lee?

BRENNAN

Who the *fuck* is that?

SMITH

The creator of HTML. To be honest, Sir - would Exigon even exist if Mr. Lee had not been born?

BRENNAN

No. But it's not like his kids sent me a bloody invoice. Now you're just making shit up. I'm no thief!

SMITH

Not intentionally, perhaps. But is pirating movies off Exigon acceptable if no-one "issues an invoice", Mr. Brennan? Think very, very carefully about the ramifications before you speak!

Brennan sputters. His already large eyes bug.

BRENNAN

OK, so I got some - alright, lots - of stuff for free. But everyone else in "society" did, too.

This is a meritocracy. I have every right to profit from what I do.

SMITH

Let's look at how that profit's valued - shall we?

Another flash of Smith's palm. The digital display shows:

An Exigon warehouse employee, drawn in stick figure mode.

The stick figure runs Atari-style through a digital warehouse, picks up cartoon boxes.

SMITH

Please forgive the sketchy CGI. We at the Bureau seek to keep presentations simple. And streaming in a temporal free zone horribly slows down our Wi-Fi.

The stick figure drops the box, falls down. Red flashes.

STICK FIGURE

Ow!

SMITH

Mr. Brennan, the average Exigon employee during your tenure worked for what was called "minimum wage" under rather harsh, inhumane conditions.

BRENNAN

Harsh? My company offers an excellent employment package -

SMITH

One with no bathroom breaks. Intolerable temperature and breakneck speed.

BRENNAN

No-one *forced* them to do it! We gave them an offer, and they -

SMITH

Couldn't refuse. That's my point.

The digital hologram switches to a different cartoon figure: BALD PIXELATED BRENNAN. The Brennan-icon chuckles like a villain, points a "gun" at Stick-Employee.

SMITH

Let's examine the adverse incentives which drive Exigon's "profit margin", shall we?

If employees refused your "offer", could they still pay their rent? What if their doctor or grocery bills were ignored?

The digital employee falls over - dies, with a Pac-Man chime. The Brennan icon jumps up and down - a Donkey Kong style "gloat."

BRENNAN

I give them value. That's not fair!

SMITH

Is there really a "fair" balance of power between you and Exigon employees, Mr. Brennan? What happens if they refuse your offer, and walk away?

BRENNAN

That's not my problem!

SMITH

And if they died?

BRENNAN

So what?

SMITH

Didn't that give you an obstructive advantage in negotiations? Don't you see how that gravely distorts what's valued... and what's not?

Brennan stares at Smith.

BRENNAN

Enough. What's your 'temporal point'?

A nod of Smith's head, and a DIGITAL COMFORTER materializes around him. He snuggles into it; a comfy "Mr. Roger's" look.

SMITH

Our point at the Temporal Bureau is - whether intentional or not - you and other billionaires have tipped the scales, inflicting a lethal imbalance upon humankind. Absorbing so many free public goods has caused you to bloat - creating artificial obstacles to the free flow of such goods to the rest of society. And such obstruction is no joke. In light of human welfare, it's as lethal as a blood clot. Mr. Brennan, please know we're not singling you out personally.

But it's your oversized impact on economic human development that's forced the temporal bureau to extract you from the time stream... and to minimize harm via certain "tweaks."

BRENNAN

(snarls)

What kind of "tweaks", you Marxist motherfucker?

SMITH

When it comes to ad homs, I prefer "Meritocracy Motherfucker", if you so please.

Smith waves a hand, reveals a new holographic image.

It's a pristine desert island.

SMITH

Rather than erase you wholesale, we instead offer you.. A choice.

BRENNAN

(laughs)

I've seen better vacation packages at COSTCO. No thanks!

SMITH

View it as "when", not "where". To restore necessary equilibrium, we stipulate you pay the amount due for public good consumption through 2021 - which I must warn you, would leave you with approximately three million total in personal wealth...

BRENNAN

Three million? That's less than my last art purchase!

SMITH

And you'd have to sell your "spaceship" for scraps to make up the difference.

Brennan rolls his eyes.

BRENNAN

I'm betting the counter offer sucks, too.

SMITH

Or - we reset the economic/temporal equilibrium for you to baseline default.

It's rather like purchasing a new cell phone: whistle clean. All memory, contact and photos erased.

BRENNAN

Screw the metaphors. That gobbledegook means... what?

SMITH

That you would start completely fresh, "virgin" as it were - with NO unpaid public freebies. Everything you negotiate or earn from there on would be your own effort. Truly 100%. Such is the choice before you: pay your share, or start over. Mr. Brennan, to use your own nomenclature, which do you freely choose?

Brennan smiles, the grin of a Cheshire Cat. Or Piranha?

BRENNAN

I'm a self-made man. What do you think?

SMITH

Are you absolutely, positively sure? Remember: in the next time stream, there will be no do-overs. And absolutely NOTHING for you will be free.

BRENNAN

A chance to start over, from scratch? With no bullshit "societal obligations?" Works for me!

Smith nods.

SMITH

As you wish.

Brennan's smile fades as he teleports...

EXT. DESERT ISLAND - DAY

The world lurches - another nauseating blur.

Free of ties, Brennan pitches forward, finds his face plunged into wet sand. Sputtering, he sits up.

Stares down at his primitive loincloth.

A GROWL spins him quickly around. A WILD DOG sniffs one of his legs, takes a trial nip.

Brennan grunts, recoils. Frightened, he crawls on all fours from the predator.

Then bumps into something else. Looks up.

At two BRITISH SOLDIERS, in old-style armor. The older one has gray hair. His young counterpart, flaming red.

Brennan grunts, points at the dog. Then at himself. He tries to speak...

...but doesn't know the words.

"Grey hair" sneers down at Brennan:

GRAY HAired SOLDIER

Behold. The primitive attempts to talk!

RED HAired SOLDIER

He's not very good at it, is he?

The red-haired soldier sneers. The other shrugs.

RED HAired SOLDIER

Should we help the poor native? Let him join our merry expedition... for a price?

GRAY HAired SOLDIER

Well, if he's willing to pay the toll, of course!

(to Brennan)

What say you, sad soul? Do you wish to be free of this mangy cur? If you agree to help us out, perhaps a mutually beneficial arrangement can be reached?

Brennan gawks at the men. Barely understands, stares.

The older soldier pantomimes hot sun. Eating. Sleep.

GRAY HAired SOLDIER

Understand, child? We help keep YOU safe. Give you bunk to sleep. Bread to eat. In return - you be our slave.

RED HAired SOLDIER

To be precise, an indentured servant.

GRAY HAired SOLDIER

For ten years, at least.

Brennan's stomach growls. The dog lunges for his leg. Primitive Brennan reaches out to the soldiers for help...

The younger man scoops up a rock, waves it at the pup:

RED HAIRED SOLDIER

Be gone. Shoo!

The dog scampers off. The older soldier picks up a frightened Brennan, dusts him off.

GRAY HAIRED SOLDIER

Well, that means it's settled. No?

The younger soldier shakes/pumps Brennan's hand. Brennan fidgets, unfamiliar with the body language. But he gurgles his assent. The soldier nods.

RED HAIRED SOLDIER

Welcome to civilization, my good man.

GRAY HAIRED SOLDIER

All free. No force. Quite the win-win.

He claps Brennan on the back, steers him toward distant trees.

GRAY HAIRED SOLDIER

Work hard for us a few years, I'm sure
you'll find it a delight!

INT. WHITE TEMPORAL ROOM

Alone in the white room, Smith watches.

On a holo-screen: primitive Brennan limps off with the soldiers. He's clearly made a deal with the "Devil", out of his (new) league.

Cuddling into his digital cardigan, Smith cracks his neck - smiles. Palming the intercom, Smith calls out:

SMITH

Economic equilibrium reached. Prime the
Thomas Edison extraction next!

FINAL FADE OUT: