

WHAT A TIME TO BE ALIVE
(YOU SAY THAT EVERY TIME)
Paul Michael Thomson

Synopsis:

It's 2004, and a state senator named Barack Hussein Obama is running to represent Illinois in the United States Senate. On the South Side of Chicago, his field team includes: Dan, a hot, smart white guy (read: "politically incorrect"); Clark, a spritely base-coverer; and Porsche, an environmentalist who loves humanity but is meh on humans. When newcomer Aisha joins the team, her candor, quick smile, and comfortability with voters rocket her to the top of the organizing food chain—forcing her to reckon with questions of power, performance, and the politics of friendship.

Characters:

AISHA, 22, Black, she/her, jubilant like the color yellow, passionate like the color red
CLARK, 20s, white, he/him, took being in the gifted program since third grade very seriously

PORSCHE, 30, Black, she/her, prefers animals, plants, and bodies of water to people; is very close to her grandmother

DAN, late 20s, white, he/him, has never really been told no; a fox (in all senses)

Setting:

A pop-up campaign office on the south side of Chicago. The year 2004.

On Pace:

Quick—we have votes to get!—until it's not. Breath is important here.

Act I
Prologue

(A makeshift campaign office in a storefront on the south side of Chicago. Woodlawn.

February, 2004.

*To remind you of where we are in the ether, February 1 was the wardrobe malfunction where Justin Timberlake exposed Janet Jackson's breast during the Superbowl halftime show and then *she* got banned from the NFL and disinvited from the Grammys and fired from the biopic where she was supposed to play Lena Horne and the Mickey Mouse statuette wearing a "Rhythm Nation" outfit was removed from Disney World and her next album, Damita Jo, was blacklisted at the request of CBS executives, while he...got ready to bring sexy back.....
Yeah.*

So that's where we're at.

Spotlight up on AISHA, early twenties, Black woman.

Bright like sunshine, the confidence of someone who never had to have braces, can't keep a houseplant alive.

Aisha doesn't have to be the loudest in the room to get the most attention. She is seated, facing us, in a job interview. We are the interviewer.)

AISHA

I *actually* got into politics because of musical theatre.

No, not 1776. God, please, not 1776.

They did that at my high school and—yikes.

Like, we're going to just pretend all these people weren't slaveholders? Like? Give me a break. That was back in Champaign.

But I got into politics because of musical theatre, like I said.

A production of *42nd Street* I did in 2002, actually.

Now don't you roll your eyes, they're still doing *42nd Street* in a suburb near you!

It was two years ago, it was tech week, dress rehearsal, really, just about to start previews the next day, and

we're doing the dime dance—do you know the dime dance?—and it was going *okay*, I

mean. I had kind of been struggling in the show, because I was one of only two Black people in the cast—the *only* Black woman—and our director was very...almost...

congratulatory? To himself? For that? One time, he pulled me aside and told me he considered himself "off white" because he was Jewish.

It was...gross.

But, anyway, this isn't about my racist director, THIS IS ABOUT how I got into politics!

So, tech week, right, I finish the dance, I walk offstage, and I slip—I slip on my fuckin tap shoe—and I just snap my fifth metatarsal. Just SNAP.

Yeah.

Like, I heard it and everything.

And everyone—the director!—was like, "Ice it, walk it off, you'll be fine," but I know my body, I *know* my body, and I went to my stage manager like, "Something is wrong," like, "You need to drive me to the hospital right now."

(beat)

The doctors literally called it a dancer's fracture.

(beat)

And so, here's the thing: at the time I was like nineteen, you know, I didn't go to college—I booked straight outta high school just going from contract to contract to contract—and now I've got this broken foot.

And I was uninsured.

Yes! BINGO!

Yes.

I can't dance anymore, sooooo what am I gonna do? This is my job. This is how I make my living. So, what am I gonna do?

Well, now the funny thing is, I always believed there was a God and there must be, because—would you look at that?—I had injured myself *at work*. On the job. And if you get injured at work, see, the rule is, you are REWARDED for your capitalism—right?

Good for you! You were *working!!!*

So, the theatre company says, their insurance company says,

You know what? We'll take care of you.

You were on our premises? Here's every medical bill—covered. Here's unemployment and disability—covered. Here's reparations—ohp, just kidding.

(She laughs with the interviewer.)

A beat.)

But the whole time I'm thinking...what if I had been outside???

What if I hadn't been *at work*, what if I'd been *on my way* to work?

Car accident or, you know, those parking lots have a fuckton of slippery gravel in them, and I often wore wedges—it was 2002!!!—so I coulda broken an ankle or, you see what I'm saying to you??

And if that had happened?

Well, I mean,

(beat)

that would be **it**,

(beat)

wouldn't it?

Who cares if I skipped student loan debt! I would have had medical-bills-for-the-rest-of-my-life debt. I'd've had I-can't-work-right-now-because-I-have-a-broken-foot-so-I'm-charging-everything-to-my-credit-card-with-no-way-to-pay-it-off debt. I'd've had debt collector debt.

So, I started researching.

I had plenty of time to do absolutely nothing, after all.

And I started reading all about universal healthcare.

“You mean to tell me there are people in mothafuckin Finland who are *allowed* to break their foot???

It's not a *crime* there, punishable by FINE???”

(Sorry, I cuss, can I cuss here? I cuss.)

And so then I started thinking, well, how can we get that universal healthcare? How can we get that here?

Did you know the Civil Rights Movement had a whole branch dedicated to this kind of thing? Yes! The “Medical Committee for Human Rights.” And then what the Clintons tried to do in '93. Well, and, of course, Representative Bernie Sanders! From Vermont!

He's been calling for universal healthcare since the Bubonic Plague had fucked people over, so really, I mean, what I'm saying is I found there was a way for me to start trying to create the world I thought we should live in.

And that was by volunteering for political campaigns—helping smart, capable, progressive politicians get elected.

And then running myself someday.

And so I did!

I volunteered, I made calls, I talked to voters.

It wasn't a bad way to spend my summer. Even if I did miss performing.

I started to believe in change, believe in power, and believe in my ability to build it.

And I believed, I really believed, that if we came together—fighting the good fight—organizers, candidates, campaign staff, that we could create something beautiful.

I believed we could win.

(The interviewer clearly is impressed. Aisha reacts accordingly. Big smile.

Lights snap off. Fast transition into...)

Scene 1

(Morning at the campaign office. Business as usual, though that's not comforting. The pace is FAST—we have votes to get!

*CLARK, mid-20s, is on the phone, twirling the cord. Clark is smart, well-read, and **chatty**. He struggled with deep insecurity in college but “got past it” by reading *The Alchemist*. His political heroes are FDR and Barbara Jordan.)*

CLARK

And then Dan looked Barack in the eye—Barack, yes...State Senator Obama...the candidate I'm working for, do you even listen to me when I speak???

Okay, so Dan looked Barack *in the eye* and said, I shit you not,

“When it comes to racism,

I'm colorblind.”

I know! I KNOW! I was like

No no no no no no, we are

NOT

Doing that here!!!!

Not with the movement we are building,

Not in the year 2004,

Not during *Black History Month*, are you KIDDING me??

So, I called him out for it—

Yes, of course I called him out for it,

Like privately—

And he apologized, and I explained, like, why it was so politically incorrect, especially given the context of this campaign and our place within it as white men and like taking up space and whatever whatever, and then he like promised to change and read more—anyway, it's resolved now, but—

(PORSCHÉ enters in a puffy coat.

30, not flirty, and surviving.

*She has an amazing laugh—we just don't often get to hear it at work.
She's never believed in God.)*

Hey, I gotta go.

Okay, bye.

Porsche, good morning! Hi! How are you?

PORSCHE

Hey there.

CLARK

Good morning! Do you want, umm, I made coffee or—

PORSCHE

I have my own.

CLARK

Right, right. Starbucks, they're like—everywhere now!

I'm still not on the "buying coffee from chain cafés" train yet, but I'm sure, I mean, I'm sure I will be at some point. Choo choo!

PORSCHE

No, this is coffee I made at home; I kept the Starbucks cup from when my sister went there in August.

CLARK

But it's February.

(beat)

That is so conscientious.

PORSCHE

Reusable. I don't want to add to the waste our species is already suffocating the earth with.

CLARK

Oh my god, no, totally. Environmentalism. So important.

PORSCHE

You read *Silent Spring*?

CLARK

Oh, I—no, I haven't.

PORSCHE

You read *The Turning Point*?

CLARK

No...

PORSCHE

You read *The Population Bomb*?

CLARK

I read *The Lorax* in junior high.

PORSCHE

Mm.

(beat)

Where's Dan?

CLARK & PORSCHE

Late.

PORSCHE

Figures.

CLARK

Right? Such a double standard.

PORSCHE

Boss gets to be late.

CLARK

It's so unprofessional!

I like to be early.

PORSCHE

I like to be just on time.

CLARK

I appreciate that about you.

PORSCHE

You want the rest of my coffee? I'm done for the day.

CLARK

It's 9:30.

PORSCHE

Don't want the caffeine to keep me up too late.

CLARK

That's okay. Thanks, though.

PORSCHE
Suit yourself.

(She pours the coffee into an office plant nearby.)

CLARK
Is that good for it??

PORSCHE
The acidity is good for the soil. Plus, it's better than adding to the sewage waste. Have I told you my theory about the Water Reclamation District?

(Dan enters in a hurry. Dan is one of those annoyingly hot straight men who is also very intelligent, and that is all I can bear to write about THAT. He prefers soccer to football, but is still annoying about it, you know?)

DAN
Good morning, staff.

PORSCHE & CLARK
Morning, Dan.

DAN
Sorry I'm late.

CLARK
We hardly noticed.
(trying to steal camaraderie glances with Porsche)

DAN
Buncha exciting things on the agenda today, so I think we should jump right in.

PORSCHE
Well, then lemme put away my iPod mini.

DAN
SO, Clark, you are coordinating the volunteer effort in Chatham, correct?

CLARK
Yep!

DAN
Great, and Porsche, you're up pitching in over at our Lakeview office canvassing in Boystown.

PORSCHE

Mhmm.

DAN

And then I'm going to be training our newcomer, new lil staff member baby.

CLARK

We're getting a new staff member?

DAN

Yeah, Clarky, didn't you hear me?

(Clark hates being called that.)

Since we're leading in the polls, the uppers want us to start gearing up for the general.

CLARK

Wow!

PORSCHE

Cart before the horse, potentially, but that's great.

DAN

What, Porsche? Sorry, my ears.

PORSCHE

I said, "THAT'S GREAT," Dan.

DAN

Great.

PORSCHE

After I said, "Cart before the horse."

DAN

Right. So!

CLARK

What's the new staff member's name?? When does he start??

DAN

She starts—

CLARK

Oh my god. Oh, shoot.

Oh, Porsche, I'm so sorry.

PORSCHE

Why are you sorry to me?

CLARK

Well, I'm sorry to all women.

DAN

You should be sorry to all of us for those shoes, am I right, Porsche?

PORSCHE

What's *her* name?

DAN

Aisha. Apparently she was a supervol with the Champaign office. Just moved to Chicago, needed a job. One of the girls from Champaign called Stefan over at—anyway, doesn't matter. Apparently, she's great.

CLARK

Oh! Awesome!! I love that name. Aisha.
She sounds fun.

PORSCHE

When does she start? Does she have any experience?

DAN

Today, so—

CLARK

Wow! Exciting!! Today!

PORSCHE

Any experience?

DAN

Clark, you're so funny.

(to Porsche)

Umm, I think so, yeah. In the sense that she's volunteered for campaigns before.

PORSCHE

Any organizing experience?

CLARK

Where'd she go to school?

DAN

Okay, WOW, you can just grill her when she gets here.

Now, do either of you have questions about your assignments so you can get off *my* assignment, if you know what I'm saying??

PORSCHE

Yeah, I actually do have a couple of questions, Dan.

DAN

Okay, sweet, just make 'em quick, you know, so much to do.

PORSCHE

Sure.

Firstly, I wanted to ask why I'm being sent to Boystown and Clark is being sent to Chatham.

DAN

What do you mean?

PORSCHE

I think it's pretty self-explanatory.

CLARK

Wait, what's the question? Sorry, was still thinking about Aisha.

I really love that name.

PORSCHE

I would like to know the factors that were taken into account when making that decision.

DAN

Oh, it was alphabetical.

PORSCHE

How was it alphabetical?

DAN

The selection. I went alphabetically.

PORSCHE

In what way?

DAN

By the alphabet.

PORSCHE

K.

Secondly, do you know if the folks up at the main office have looked over my proposal about centering global warming in the campaign? I gave you the memo to send to them last Thursday.

DAN

Mmm mhm mhm, I'll double check that.
Sometimes they get weird about organizers giving policy advice.

CLARK

But that was *such* a good memo—they should really read it, Dan.

PORSCHE

Did you read it?

CLARK

Of course!

The way you weaved strong prose and scientific fact together was so compelling.
It reminded me of Al Gore.

DAN

Mm, you know what, now that I'm thinking about it, so glad you brought this up—I think maybe it went to the wrong office? Because I wasn't aware that you wanted it to go to the main office?

PORSCHE

Well, I asked you specifically to send it to the main office.

DAN

Yeah, weird, I wasn't aware of that, so I'll just check in with José.
No worries! This is important to you. So I will add that to my very long little to do list...

PORSCHE

Thank you. It's really vital that we—

CLARK

Porsche, I fully support you in this discussion. I hope you know that.

PORSCHE

Thanks.

(beat)

It's really important that we start talking about global warming if we're going to try and garner support for the green movement before State Senator Obama takes office at the national level. Because if we can start planting the seeds now—pun intended, uh thank you—then we will already have the robust political will to get some really important legislation passed once he's in the Senate. I talked to Senator Durbin's office, and they're down. God-willing we win, and all that.

DAN

Do you believe in God, Porsche?

CLARK

(whispering)

I don't think you can ask her that.

PORSCHE

So I would be very happy to see that memo make its way to those that can implement it, okay, Daniel?

I think it would be really good for the campaign and also Our World at Large.

DAN

Sounds good to me.

Like I said, it's out of my hands. I think someone—maybe Nadiya—has it...

CLARK

A like *I* said, I very much support everything that Porsche stands for in terms of global warming AND equality of the sexes AND the fast delivery of mail, in general.

(Porsche rolls her eyes.

Aisha enters, lots of layers and snow on her big coat—we can't quite see what she looks like?? And wind rushing in from the door. She kind of just looks like a big scary coat monster. It's all very dramatic.

The next series of lines has to be panic fast.)

CLARK

What's that?

DAN

Hello?

CLARK

Are we being broken into?

PORSCHE

Daniel, did you not lock the door??

DAN

Hello???

AISHA

(muffled voice)

Hmm hmm HMM HMM hm.

PORSCHE

We're not supposed to let randos in off the street!

DAN

Everyone stop freaking—miss? Sir? Hello!

(Aisha is trying to get her scarf off from around her face, but her coat is so puffy, she can barely move her arms.)

PORSCHE

I always knew you people would be the death of me.

CLARK

Maybe she's a person experiencing homelessness, and you *know* they already go through so much.

PORSCHE

Or maybe he's a mole from Daniel Hynes' office, come to kill us in one fell swoop, you ever think of that, Clarky??? With gun laws what they are in this country!!

DAN

Here, let me just—

(Dan helps unzip Aisha's coat a little bit, and that gives her enough room to then be able to remove her scarf and mask and hat and coat.)

AISHA

Oh my god, PHEW!!!

Sorry, new coat, haven't broken it in—and this wind! Windy City, right??

PORSCHE

It's called the Windy City for its history of corrupt politicians "blowing hot air" rather than creating structural change.

AISHA

This coat's so puffy, you know what I'm saying? But it's cute, right??

Just bought it for myself as a gift to moi for landing this new job, heyyyyy.

(Silence from the others.)

Oh.

I'm Aisha!

DAN

Oh my god!

CLARK

Oh my god!

PORSCHE

You sure she's not a spy?

DAN

Aisha, welcome, it's so nice to meet you.

AISHA

It's nice to be here! Thanks for, thanks for having me.
Sorry about that, I literally couldn't move my arms.

DAN

Don't be sorry!

CLARK

Never be sorry. You're perfect.

AISHA

Oh, can I park right outside? I haven't figured out parking in Chicago. I couldn't tell if it's legal or...?

CLARK

Oh, it's actually not legal. Actually.

DAN

Well, what is legality, even?? Fuck the law, right?

Ha, just kidding. Yeah but no seriously, it's not like *technically* "legal," but I park there all the time and have never been towed or anything.

CLARK

But the main office has gotten complaints about it.

DAN

Never even gotten a ticket.

It's no big deal.

AISHA

Sweet! Sounds good to me then!

DAN

Well, welcome! We are so excited to get to know—you know what, this is so funny,

Aisha, you look so familiar. Have we met before??

Here, let me help you with your coat.

CLARK

Hi Aisha, I'm Clark. This is Porsche.

(Porsche has gone back to her desk.)

Porsche!! What are you doing? Come say hi.

PORSCHE

(from her desk)

Hello!

DAN
Do I look familiar to you at all?

AISHA
I *just* moved here from Champaign, so I don't think we'd have—

CLARK
Love Champaign. LOVE Champaign.
Porsche, you've been to—
Porsche! What are you doing? Come say hi!

PORSCHE
Somebody's got to work around here!

CLARK
She's funny. She's just really really funny.

DAN
No, but I feel like I've seen you before.

AISHA
Ha, yeah, I don't know.
(beat)
Is there somewhere to put my shit?

CLARK
YES! Do you want me to show you around?

AISHA
Sure!

CLARK
I love when we get new people.
Well, we haven't gotten someone new at this office in forever, but when we get new volunteers or anything like that. I just, I really love new people. Old people, too. Anyone really!

AISHA
It seems like Porsche really loves people, too.

CLARK
Oh, don't mind her, she's just being hilarious. She does it with me all the time.

AISHA
I'm playing with you.

CLARK

Oh, jokester! Jokestress*, sorry.
Okay, so your desk is here.

DAN

I GOT IT!!!!

You know Tijuana?? From *Survivor*??

CLARK

Oh, Jesus.

DAN

Pearl Islands. Last year.

CLARK

Dan loves *Survivor*. He never shuts up about it. Even though NO ONE ELSE HERE WATCHES IT.

DAN

She had the bandana. You look just like her!

CLARK

Dan, enough.

AISHA

No, I've actually gotten that before.
Big compliment. I loved Tijuana.

DAN

Wait, you watch *Survivor*?

AISHA

Every Thursday.

DAN

Oh my god! Everyone else, you're fired.
Haha, "you're fired," now THAT'S a different show.

AISHA

God, I hate that guy.

DAN

Oh, me too, me too.
Such a boss though, but freaking gross.

CLARK

What are we talking about?

DAN & AISHA

The Apprentice.

CLARK

I don't really get the reality TV thing.

DAN

It must be a straight thing.

PORSCHE

(from her desk, to Dan)

Mary-Anne called. She's wondering why you're not at your desk when she calls you.

DAN

Oh, Jesus, did you cover for me?

PORSCHE

Yeah, I said you were in a horrible accident and we were all really sad to see you go.

DAN

Mary-Anne has a stick up her ass, Aisha, in case that wasn't clear.

Clark, you know about things up your ass, right?

AISHA

Ha, got it.

DAN

Gah, I LOVE THIS GIRL! Clarky, you're gonna have competish for my favorite employee.

(small beat)

You too, Porsche.

PORSCHE

Uh-huh.

DAN

Show her around! I'll go call Mary-Anne.

Aisha, Mary-Anne is like the Jeff Probst of the campaign.

She tells us what to do, but we get all the power of actually doing shit.

(He leaves.)

PORSCHE

Hey. Sorry I didn't introduce myself properly earlier. I had calls to make.

AISHA
I can respect that.

PORSCHE
I'm Porsche.

AISHA
Aisha. You from Chicago?

PORSCHE
Evanston, actually.

AISHA
Ooh, fancy. City girl!

PORSCHE
You know!

CLARK
Do you think the three of us will be best friends? I'm kidding, I'm kidding! Porsche, look at your face! Porsche hates me. So! Okay, this is main floor—

AISHA
Do you mind if I put my bag down??

CLARK
Oh my god, of course! Look at us. We are the worst hosts ever.

PORSCHE
You don't need to ask permission for anything.

AISHA
Anything?

CLARK
Can you tell we haven't had company in a while? Ha.
It's been just us in this office for *too* many months. We're basically family at this point!

PORSCHE
No, we're not.

CLARK
And if we win—knock on wood—if we win, Barack is going to take some of us as part of his “transition team” into the Senate administration. So we'll like have job security for SIX YEARS. To be vulnerable with you, it is my lifelong dream.

PORSCHE
Stop calling that man Barack.

CLARK
He told me I could!

AISHA
The transition team sounds incredible!!

CLARK
Okay, right?!
So, this is my desk. And this is your desk, like I said. And this is Porsche's desk.
The Holy Trinity. Oh my god, Porsche, you hate me!

AISHA
What about Dan?

PORSCHE
He gets the corner office.

CLARK
Well, don't say it like *that*.

PORSCHE
I didn't say it like anything.
I said, "He gets the corner office."

CLARK
Dan's office is located in the corner of the building, in the sense that if we were to draw
the building like a rectangular prism, his office would be in the, you know, the vertex.

AISHA
The corner office. Got it.
Boss man. Tribe leader.

CLARK
Well, we all work together. It's really fun.

PORSCHE
Some of us work.
The rest of you are just together.

CLARK
She's kidding. You're kidding.
Okay! And then break room is over here, and, hmm, can you think of anything else???

PORSCHE
HR.

AISHA
Oh?

PORSCHE
It's not real HR.

CLARK
It's not REAL HR.

PORSCHE
But if anything ever happens—

CLARK
Right, if literally anything ever happens, that's just what I was going to say, Porsche—

PORSCHE
You can always come to me.

CLARK
Or me. Obviously.

PORSCHE
And if you don't feel comfortable coming to us, you can contact José up at the main office.

AISHA
Not Mary-Anne?

PORSCHE
Call José.

CLARK
And if you REALLY want support, you can contact Miss Michelle.
Barack's wife.
She's a lawyer, and she's really nice.

PORSCHE
That woman has not told us we can contact her.

CLARK
Um, she gave me her secretary's personal email address, so?
And if we get picked as part of the transition team into the administration—

PORSCHE

Don't contact Miss Michelle.

CLARK

Just in emergencies, I meant. Like, if it wasn't something you wanted to go to a man about, which I totally support and understand.

PORSCHE

Clark is a feminist.

CLARK

I am!

AISHA

Oh yeah?

And you? Are you a feminist?

PORSCHE

I'm a Black woman.

AISHA

I hear that.

CLARK

I love working here so much.

(beat)

Okay, I'm going to go set up our first conference call to our super vols—super volunteers, that's what we call them. You basically make this tree where you call them and they call their organic leaders and then those leaders call voters—it's really cool. It's all very community organizing modeled after, which is how Barack wants it.

AISHA

Dope. I did some organizing in my youth.

CLARK

Oh fun! See? She does have experience. In college? Where'd you go to college?

AISHA

Oh, I—

PORSCHE

Clark didn't look me in the eye until he found out I went to Northwestern.

CLARK

Okay, WOW, she's obviously kidding. I love eye contact.

Northwestern is a sub-Ivy, so we Ivy Leaguers give mad props.
Porsche, I'm joking!

AISHA
I didn't go to college.
(beat)

CLARK
Oh!

PORSCHE
That's cool.

CLARK
Yeah, that's awesome! I'm sure you had other life stuff to—here, I'll go set up the calls.
(Clark exits.)

AISHA
He's sweet.
(She turns to Porsche, leans in.)
So what's it really like here?

PORSCHE
How old are you?

AISHA
22.

PORSCHE
You ever worked in politics before?

AISHA
Not really.

PORSCHE
Lot of white people in Champaign?

AISHA
Umm, I guess?

CLARK
(from offstage)
Aisha!

AISHA
Is he cool?

PORSCHE
He's fine, but he's off.

AISHA
Well shit, I'll take warm and weird over cold and—
(Porsche has walked away in the middle of Aisha's sentence.)
Damn. Okay.
(She looks around. A new home.)

CLARK
(from off)
Aisha!!!
(Blackout.)

If you are interested in reading the rest of the script, visit paulmichaelthomson.com.