

# ***THE VISION GENE***

**A Film Script by**

**WILLIAM ILLSEY ATKINSON**

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*River under rain hides*

*corpses*

*mansized sturgeon*

*and*

*the sources*

*of my discontent*

*-Rideau River 1982*

## SCENE 1

- *With the exception of the final scene, all scenes are in the present day*

TIME (a) 9 AM on a sunny Wednesday, early September  
(b) 10 AM the same day

LOCATION (a) Interior. A grimy basement apartment near the waterfront  
(b) Exterior. A man runs ten miles across Vancouver

*(a) THE RUNNER, a well-built, ugly-handsome young Native man, is lacing up battered track shoes. We hear the harsh voice of a drunken landlady beyond his closed door. He communicates rudely, curtly, ungrammatically. But his V/O is in flawless received English:*

Runner V/O: “In the white world, I get by with difficulty. Yet I am lucky – I have certain escapes. When the visions come to me. When I find the dead. Or when I run.”

*(b) Runner running. Cut to the world as he sees it: colors wonky, odd shapes swirling in trees and sky: boats, birds, people. Weird, unsettling, but it has the beauty and the coherence of art. Sounds over: Shouts of laughter; whispers; half-formed words in English and other languages; ethereal music. SF/X: bear-snorts, raven calls, a jet taking off. Cut to establishing shot of Runner, implying this snippet of his inner world has taken place in almost no time. Runner passes a mid-rise building on a university campus. Quick continuous zoom through one window to SCENE 2.*

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## SCENE 2

TIME 10:15 AM the same day (Wednesday)

LOCATION Interior. A mid-sized university lecture hall with tiered seats at University Teaching Hospital.

*Dr LOUIS ASPLER is lecturing postdoctoral med students. He's a tall, bulky, powerful man with a full beard and thinning head of hair, both grizzled. His standard expression is deep sadness. Rumpled suit, no tie, halfmoon glasses.*

Aspler: “Today we start a study of cerebral neurotransmitters. Anybody tell me what those are? Yes.” *He points at a young woman.*

Young Woman: “They're chemicals that brain cells use to communicate with one another.”

Aspler: “Very good.” *He chalks on a blackboard:*

NEUROTRANSMITTER  $\equiv$  BRAIN COMMUNICATION

Aspler: “Let me say at the outset that I don’t know Jack about these things. What, that surprises you? I’m the ranking expert, that’s why you’re here? I repeat: I know next to nothing. The books, the papers – don’t be dazzled by big-ass terms and swanky math. Don’t say *We know this, We know that*. We do not know enough.

“Today I’ll describe some brain chemicals: what they are, how the body makes them, how they move between cells. How they trigger a chemical cascade that lets you do things, from writing a sonnet to scratching your ass. Yet all this is nothing. At a gut estimate, we have a thousand years of work before we start to know how the brain works. So let that be your first lesson, ladies and gentlemen.”

*Aspler prints one word on the board in big capitals and colored chalk:*

## HUMILITY

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### SCENE 3

TIME 11 AM the same day (Wednesday)

LOCATION Interior. Fraserfind Services, an office on a houseboat moored on the North Channel of the Fraser River. Seen out a window, the Runner is a quarter-mile away and approaching at a steady seven-minute mile. CHRISTINE KELLY, Fraserfind’s secretary-receptionist, is peering at a computer screen. JAMES DAHL, senior partner, is in a chair nearby.

Kelly (*not looking up*): “Tonto come. Run fast.”

*Dahl looks up from an air regulator he’s trying to unstick, sees the Runner.*

Dahl: “One hour ten it takes him. Ten miles if it’s an inch. I can’t *drive* it that fast, this time of day.”

*The Runner comes up the gangway and into the floating office.*

Kelly: “Phew! Kid, you stink.” *The Runner gives her a jumble-toothed smile.*

Dahl: “You’re early today.”

Runner: “Figured you’d need me.”

Dahl: “Sorry, Runner, there’s no – ”

*The phone rings; Kelly picks it up.*

Kelly: “Fraserfind Search Services. Certainly. I read about that three days ago. Yes, I think we could fit in a full body search.” *She looks over at Dahl, raises her eyebrows.* “I can give you a list of – Immediately? Very good. We’ll need a coroner’s certificate and copies of the relevant police depositions. We also require a cheque – ”

Dahl (*whispers*): "Certify it."

Kelly: " - a certified cheque, for - "

*Dahl shrugs theatrically. The Runner holds up both hands, ten fingers.*

Kelly: "Ten thousand dollars." *The Runner snaps a Marine salute.* "That's U.S. funds. Is that acceptable? Good, fax your data to the number you just called. Thank you for using Fraserfind." (*Hangs up*) "Downtown lawyer. Represents a rich-bitch family whose son took Daddy's sports car swimming three nights ago. It's a map-dee."

Dahl: " 'Missing, Presumed Dead.' They find the car?" *Kelly shakes her head.* "Where'd he go in?"

Kelly: "Hell's Gate. Right below the tramway."

Dahl: "Oh boy. That'll be fun."

*The Runner takes the air regulator from Dahl and raps it on a wall. The jammed valve opens with a snap.*

Dahl: "That's not very scientific, Jon. Our lives could depend on that thing."

Runner: "You think too much, Mr Dahl. Just needed a little love."

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## SCENE 4

TIME 11 AM the same day (Wednesday)

LOCATION Interior. University lecture hall as above, SCENE 2

*After the postdocs' lecture, Dr Aspler is back in the classroom erasing the blackboard. He comes to HUMILITY, pauses, leaves the word on, and continues erasing. Two postdocs approach timidly.*

Aspler: " 'And old Dr A. didn't know what to do; So he had to shake hands with Fang One and Fang Two.' What's on your mind, gentlemen?"

Fang One: "It's how we find what we need to find, Dr Aspler."

Fang Two: "About neurotransmitters."

Aspler (*puffs out cheeks*): "There are many methods. You can go *in vitro*. Analyze the brain chemicals, find out their makeup and structure. You can do real-time scans of the living brain, PET or NMR. That shows you what areas process what chemicals when. You label it first – radioactive tags or Q-dots. But the main thing, the single most important thing, you look at is fuck-ups."

Fang One & Fang Two (*together*): "Sir?"

Aspler: "The failed units, gentlemen, the malfunctioning organs. It's a case of indirect reasoning. You examine the bad brains, you start to understand how the *non-fuck-ups*, the good brains, perform." *The Fangs scribble in notepads. Aspler points on one.* "That's f-u-c-k, no comma, space, u-p."

Fang One: "You mean brain lesions, that kind of thing? Accident victims?"

Aspler: "You can go that way. I'm more interested in congenital deformities."

Fang Two: "Teratomas? Cerebral palsy?"

Aspler: "Nothing so dramatic. Or rather something more dramatic in effect, but hard to pin down as to cause. Chemical deformities."

Fang One: "Such as? Sir."

Aspler: "No 'such as,' Dr Carr. I mean schizophrenia. People get initial symptoms at puberty. They're jerked around by phantom voices. They'll do anything to anyone, if only the voices ease off. I had a son once..."

Fang Two: "Dr Aspler? We know something about causes, don't we? If we can interfere with schitz, then maybe we can cure it."

Aspler: "That's the theory. But why are our treatments so primitive? The most effective chemical interventions are as subtle as artillery. Dopamine, for instance: I would rather inject sulphuric acid." *(Polishes his glasses)* "We figure out this one thing, we will have a handle on how the whole brain works."

Fang Two: "The diseased brain, sir? Or the healthy one?"

Aspler: "Either. Both. Even if we don't –" *(shrugs)* "Well. At least we'll understand the damned disease."

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## SCENE 5

TIME 3:30 PM the same day (Wednesday)

LOCATION Exterior. West bank of the Fraser River, above Hell's Gate Rapids

*A battered blue-and-white van with the Fraserfind logo pulls to a stop at the M/PD scene. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police have taped off a two-hundred-foot semicircle on the west bank of the Fraser River. It isn't the water's edge so much as the air's edge, since it ends in a sixty-five-degree slope down to the water-filled canyon. CORPORAL JOHN PRZEWALSKI, a big bald Mountie with his cap off, meets Dahl at the edge of the tape.*

Mountie: "You're Mr Dahl? I'm surprised you're on the job so soon."

Dahl: "Surprised us too, officer. Families usually try the public services first."

Mountie: "They did, they just didn't give us very long. Not that more time would have changed things."

*He gestures at the river, where a million gallons a minute are pouring through a slot the size of a two-lane roadway. It's a horizontal waterfall.*

Dahl: "How did you hear about the accident?"

Mountie: "Somebody called 911 from a roadside phone two AM Sunday. Said he'd just seen a car go over the cliff. Didn't give a name."

Dahl: "No way to trace the call?"

Mountie: "Just to the kiosk. It happens a lot, Mr Dahl. People want to be good citizens, but they won't spend weeks at a trial. Now and then there's a matter of criminal subornment – witness intimidation. Can't say I blame 'em, though you never heard me say that. Anyway, some tip is better than none."

Dahl: "I don't have to ask if you found anything."

Mountie: "Mr Dahl, we called out the cavalry. We had the District helicopter hover with metal detectors and acoustophones, even an underwater video camera. From what we saw, and it wasn't much, that river bed is scoured ca-lean."

Dahl: "You put in a dive team?"

Mountie: "You're kidding! They'd be swept away in thirty seconds. We almost lost our copter in the wind shear off the walls."

Dahl: "Mind if I look around up here?" *Mountie gestures ahead; they walk to the cliff.*  
"This where he went in?"

Mountie (*nods*): "It's rocky, but you can see tire tracks. Here and here."

Dahl: "Looks like he went over without touching the brakes."

Mountie: "Straight as an arrow."

Dahl: "He kill himself, you think?"

Mountie: "You mean intentionally? It's possible. Probably he was on drugs and thought he could fly. We'd need to see the body to make sure."

*The men peer out into space. We enter Dahl's imagination visually. Dahl V/O, or use visuals alone:*

"The car curves out and down, gracefully at first, then tumbling as the climb steepens. Inside the car, the kid's disoriented from crack, smack or alcohol. Three seconds till he hits the water, hardly time to yell. In free fall, the kid's hands tighten on the

steering wheel till his knuckles dislocate. He stomps the brake so hard he crushes the pedal rod. One thousand - two thousand - three thousand –

“Impact. The kid hits the water at a hundred feet a second, sixty-eight miles an hour. The car could hit any way: roof first, wheels first. Say it’s the best way possible, head-on, and the kid wears a belt. Picture the front bumper doing what it does in safety ads, absorbing energy as it eases toward the rear. The engine moves down the way it’s designed. But the kid’s going 30 meters per second, not the 5 m/s of a crash test. At 70 mph the car has 36 times more energy than it does in a test impact.

“Worst of all, the kid’s hit a river. River’s like a solid at high speeds, the molecules don’t have time to get out of the way. But it’s still a liquid when it smashes in the whole front of the car. Things start to happen that never happen in tests. The windshield stars into spiderwebs and leaps out of its mount. But it doesn’t pop forward, out of the way: it’s squeezed by the water so it whips back at the driver. It tilts sideways and moves at the boy’s face. *Into* his face: through it. The skull resists for a second, then falls apart. The eyeballs explode like raw eggs. Brains everywhere, out of the skull they’re like hot porridge. Only a tenth-second has passed. Is the kid still conscious? Can he hear his own mind spoiling the upholstery?

“The windshield continues, shearing off the skull at eye level. Now the whole head looks like an egg, a boiled egg with its top sliced off. The jaw meets the steering wheel, which punches past the clenched teeth *ugh-ugh-ugh* to the back of the throat. The heart is pumping with terror, two hundred per minute or more, so the arteries lob quarts of blood into the air. Quite a mess. Then the river swallows everything: blood, brains, eyes. The instant that happens, our work begins. Because we’re the body finders. We’re the guys that know the river.”

*Dahl beckons to the Runner, who comes over with an air tank on each shoulder. He doesn’t even look at the cop as he walks by.*

Mountie: "You're not going to use those things."

Dahl (*smiles*): "The air tanks? Have to, sorry. Runner here breathes water, but I never developed the skill."

Mountie: "Mr Dahl. Listen to me. It's just advice, I'm not giving orders, but listen. It's not just the dive, though God knows that's flat insane. You have to consider the context. It's four PM now and sunset's at nine. It'll take you an hour just to crawl down that slope to the water. You can't climb back in the dusk."

Dahl: "Sure we can, we've done it before. We might not even be here at dusk. We might be all the way down to Hope Bend Beach. We follow the corpses. "

*He waves at the truck; Kelly drives away.*

Mountie: "I've heard good things about you, Mr Dahl. I don't want to be back here tomorrow morning filling out another M/PD."

Dahl: "Don't worry, we'll be fine. We take risks, but not dumb ones."

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## SCENE 6

TIME 5:00 PM the same day (Wednesday)

LOCATION Exterior. Rough gravel beach of the Fraser River, below police tape-off

Dahl (*shouts in Runner's ear*): "You don't have to do this!"

*The Runner feigns deafness, then waves Dahl away and cinches up his safety line. The line links him to a DC winch, attached with steel bolts to a huge boulder. Nearby, a small generator mutters to itself. Dahl puts on a headset.*

Dahl: "You there?"

Runner: "Yah. Cable OK?"

Dahl: "Relax, nothing's going to detach that sucker. Four chrome-moly pitons, each one could support a house. Methyl methacrylate, grout they use on hip replacements. You're secure."

*The Runner snaps on his mask and walks toward the boiling river, tense as a cat but totally relaxed. Without looking around he gives Dahl a thumbs-up and wades in. Runner's V/O, again in flawless English:*

"If you forget the currents even for a second, you're dead. Slow water is the worst. You think there's no current at all; then you see you're drifting toward a pot hole or a turbine intake. That happened to me once; I don't know how I got out. I guess it wasn't my time to die. Or one of the people I'd pulled from the river spoke for me. This is not to say that *fast* currents are enjoyable; only that they cannot be ignored.

"I never saw Dahl worry before this, not about me anyway. He thinks I have gills. Or that I can get up and walk on top of the river if I want. I'm Nu'u-chah-Nulth, one of The People, and we have abilities that aren't learned or taught. How I run, for instance. Whites run with their bellies tight: that looks fine, but it takes too much energy. I push my belly out and let it power me. It's easier, but whites look at you and say: My word, that native boy is *slovenly*. I am not running now, however. I must keep atop of what I do. Which is: trying to kill myself without doing it to completion.

"Get in the water, do not fight it: be part of it. Move like a corpse, act like a corpse, *think* like one. Go as if you've drowned. Let the current tumble you: only watch your safety line. That is what hauls you back from the dead at the end of your shift."

Dahl (*voice in Runner's headphones*): "What's it like?"

Runner: "Bad. Don't talk unless you have to, OK?"

Dahl (*in phones*): "Sorry."

Runner V/O: "No small rocks here: the current sweeps away every rock that is not a monster. This is good for footing. But it also means that if your weighting is improper you may wedge between two monsters till your corpse act becomes permanent."

"The water's clear today, no sand or mud. Not to say that visibility is good; rapids are full of dissolved air, which catches sunlight and can blind you. But it is lovely, lovely. There are worse places to die than a river."

*A chinook the size of his arm startles the Runner.*

Runner: "Jesus!"

Dahl: "Jon? Jon!"

Runner: "Just a fish."

Dahl: "Sturgeon?"

Runner: "Nah. Woulda smelled a sturgeon."

*Downstream of a boulder, the current eases in an underwater eddy. He Runner relax looks around. Something touches his mind.*

Runner: "Yes. I am here, my child."

Dahl: "Runner?"

Runner: "Not talkin' to you."

*A car wheel sticks from a rock crevasse.*

Runner: "Got somethin'."

Dahl: "Can you get to it?"

Runner: "Gimme more line."

*Dahl feeds some slack. The water carries the Runner right to the car wheel, but too fast: he hits a boulder, scrapes his face, grunts.*

Dahl: "Report!"

Runner: "I'm at the car." (*Except it is not a car.*) "Dahl? Only a wheel."

Dahl: "Assume it's the kid's car. Just a wheel, you say? How new? Any weeds?"

Runner: "Full wheel, facing up. Can't see the back... *Unh!* Now I can. Whole axle's attached. Looks new."

Dahl: "Weird! A monocoque fender shouldn't blow off at impact, let alone a hundred-kilo transaxle. You see abrasions? Burn marks?"

Runner: "Lemme check."

*The Runner looks deeply into the crack that pins the wheel, leaning almost horizontal against the current. He sees a boy, feet tied above the crevice, arms waving, hair dancing like smoke. He looks at the Runner half-smiling, body unmarked, naked as a buck.*

Dahl: "Runner! Come in, please!"

*The Runner yanks out his com jack.*

Runner: "My child?"

Corpse: "Yes, Grandfather."

Runner: "How came you to this place, child?"

Corpse: "An evil, Grandfather. An evil so great I cannot say."

Runner: "You need not call me Grandfather. I am scarcely older than you."

Corpse: "Do you question me? The dead are younger than the unborn."

Runner: "Forgive my lack of understanding. Were you slain intentionally? Murdered?"

Corpse: "Grandfather: I was."

Runner: "Who slew you?"

Corpse: "Those who love you no more than they did me. Do not ask me more."

Runner: "Nor shall I. How tightly are you lodged here? Is it possible for me to get you out?"

Corpse: "That you must determine for yourself."

*The Runner looks down at the corpse's feet. They are not wedged in rock; they dance in open water, like the rest of him. An iron chain wraps both ankles and descends to the rock crevice, its far end fast in a pail full of hard concrete.*

Corpse: "You see? The wheels went in without me. I was deposited more gingerly, and afterwards."

Runner: "But why? How?"

Corpse: "You are the living one, Grandfather: it is you who must find out. No, do not speak! I must sleep now. My grave calls me, my true-grave. Take me upwards, toward the Source-of-Light. And Grandfather?"

Runner: "Yes, my child."

Corpse: "Avenge me. Otherwise I shall not sleep."

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*Dahl revs the winch, taking the line up gingerly. He glances at a strain gauge, but the line spools in without catching. Second mark – Warning region -*

*A human hand emerges, wrinkled and fish-white. The line has been looped around it. Past the hand, an arm: past the arm, a head and torso: the body of the missing boy.*

*Dahl locks the winch. The corpse lies on the beach smiling up at him. Teeth chattering, Dahl looks into the river. Out of it wades the Runner, grinning like a fool.*

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Runner: "Hee, hee, hee! You shoulda saw your face!"

Dahl: "Very funny. I mean Ha Ha, it is to laugh."

Runner: "You thought it was me!"

Dahl: "I may have. Look, can you answer me a question?" (*The Runner nods, wiping his eyes*) "Did you see the rest of the car?"

Runner: "Nope. Just the axle."

Dahl: "You suspect foul play?"

Runner: "I don't suspect nothing, Mr Dahl. The kid told me."

*Dahl shivers again, looking at the body on the beach. Dahl has closed its eyes, but the drowned face seems full of merriment, as if it shares the Runner's joke.*

Dahl (*points up*): "And Corporal Do-Right up there, will he believe that? White courts don't accept testimony from dead people, son. That's the way it is."

Runner: "We got the kid, Mr. Dahl. What I told you, you keep to yourself."

Dahl: "I figure out beforehand what the body looks like after a high-speed crash. I predict the wounds. *You* hand me a corpse that's unmarked and weighted down."

Runner: "We ain't the coroner, we just recover bodies. Not our business how they got there." (*Smiles*) "Besides! US dollars, remember? Hard currency!"

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