

SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENTS

FADE IN:

WRITTEN OVER BLACK: "Prometheus did not care to live amid the clouds on the mountain top. He was too busy for that. While the Mighty Folk were spending their time in idleness, drinking nectar and eating ambrosia, he was intent upon plans for making the world wiser and better than it had ever been before." - Aeschylus "The primary events in this story are true."

INT. EDISON'S HOME, GLENMONT, WEST ORANGE, NEW JERSEY - DAY

SUPER: "EDISON'S HOME, GLENMONT, WEST ORANGE, NEW JERSEY - OCTOBER 18, 1931"

THOMAS ALVA EDISON, 84 years old, white hair, frail, life disappearing from his eyes, is in a dimly lit room lying in bed. As we scan the room, we first notice the electric lamp on a bedside table. On a dresser is a phonograph, with the funnel-like loudspeaker, jutting upward and, next to it, a radio.

A grey-haired, portly DOCTOR, 50s, packs away his stethoscope into a heavy leather doctor's bag. Edison appears asleep.

MINA MILLER EDISON, grey, 60s, wearing a black outfit and a shawl around her shoulder, sits on an upholstered chair on the opposite side of Edison, a Bible clutched in her hands. As the doctor motions to leave, Mina gets up to walk with him to the doorway.

DOCTOR

I'm sorry Missus Edison.

He squeezes her arm and leaves.

MINA EDISON

(without emotion)

Thank you doctor. Nurse will show you out.

THOMAS

(weakly)

Billie! Billie! Where are you?

MINA EDISON

I'm here, Tom.

THOMAS

I thought you left me, Billie.

MINA EDISON

No, I'm right here.

She goes to his bedside.

THOMAS  
(pointing at a corner)  
Did you see it... over there?

Mina turns to look.

MINA EDISON  
What, Tom? I don't see anything.

THOMAS  
That corner...The darkness.

MINA EDISON  
There's nothing there, Tom. Try to rest dear.

THOMAS  
The dark...I hate it; it scares me, Billie. It wants to take me. Don't let it! Please!

MINA EDISON  
Just rest, Tom.

She motions to leave.

THOMAS  
(into a void)  
I'm sorry for what I did. Tesla... Nikola! I'm sorry. Why do you hate me?  
(focussed again)  
Damn goody-two-shoes, butter-wouldn't-melt... damn foreigner! I won! I beat you!

MINA EDISON  
I know, Tom.

THOMAS  
patents! 1,093! Why is he so against me, Billie? Not because of that \$50,000?

MINA EDISON  
Course not, dear?

THOMAS  
Don't want to go to that dark place, Billie! There are things there...people there that will hurt-  
(MORE)

THOMAS (cont'd)  
 (decidedly)  
 No! It's that damn Battle, isn't  
 it?

MINA EDISON  
 What battle, Tom?

Mina pulls the covers up closer to his chest. A magazine falls to the ground and she stoops to pick it up.

INSERT - TIME MAGAZINE COVER

July 1931 edition: "Nikola Tesla - Man of the Future".

BACK TO SCENE

THOMAS  
 What battle? Why, the Battle of  
 the Currents, woman!

As she holds it, she steps to the window and looks out and looks out onto a bucolic panorama and a barn.

INT. EDISON FAMILY BARN - DAY

SUPER: "MILAN, OHIO, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 1852"

A pile of straw stands against a beam supporting the hayloft. There are chickens scratching around and a mare and cow are tied up in their stalls.

THOMAS ALVA, 5, straw colored hair, stands over the straw with a lit match. When it burns his fingertips, he lets it fall into the hay. Tom stares quizzically at the fire as it grows, trying to figure out what he is looking at. Eventually the fire engulfs the adjacent wooden barn wall.

The mare WHINNIES, the chickens CACKLE and the cow LOWS. The heat makes the boy turn and run toward the door at the back of the barn.

EXT. OUTSIDE EDISON FAMILY BARN -- DAY

Thomas emerges into sunlight, shuts the door behind him, runs to the top of a nearby hill overlooking the farm.

EXT. ATOP A HILL OVERLOOKING EDISON FAMILY FARM -- DAY

Black smoke billows from the roof and top window of the barn high into the air. SOUNDS of the barn animals screaming can be heard. Flames soon engulf the wooden barn, the animals silent.

From his vantage point, Thomas watches two adults - a man and a woman in a full length heavy skirt - attempting to extinguish the fire.

EXT. OUTSIDE EDISON FAMILY BARN -- CONTINUOUS

The woman, MRS EDISON, late 20s, hair in a bun, realises all is lost, sees the boy on the hill and walks towards him.

EXT. ATOP A HILL OVERLOOKING EDISON FAMILY FARM -- CONTINUOUS

The boy remains motionless, watching the woman approach. Getting up to him, she grabs his ear.

MRS EDISON

What in tarnation have you done,  
Al, you stupid boy? Wait 'til your  
father gets home!

The boy does not protest as she holds him by the ear and takes him to the house.

EXT. A RIVER BANK - AFTERNOON

SUPER: "TWO YEARS LATER"

Two boys run down an embankment to a river. One of them is the straw haired boy, now aged nine. The other boy, HENRY, with brown straight hair, is younger and looks more frail. He trails behind Thomas.

HENRY

Wait for me!

THOMAS

Come on, Henry! Hurry!

HENRY

Is it alright, Al?

THOMAS

Whaddya mean, is it alright? Ya  
not gonna chicken out on me, are  
ya, sissy?

Thomas slips out of his clothes, leaves them hanging on a branch, then plunges in to the cold water. A few seconds later he emerges and cries out.

THOMAS

Sissy! Sissy! Sissy!

HENRY  
I'm comin'!

Henry undresses, slowly, and eases into the water.

EXT. IN THE RIVER -- CONTINUOUS

Almost immediately, Thomas begins circling him like a shark, observing him as though he were a specimen. He splashes water into the boy's face, which makes him gulp and choke. His head goes under water, his fingertips clutching at air. His head pops up briefly then slips under again. Thomas still circles him, observing silently, as though taking mental notes. Again, his hands clutch at the air.

Thomas swims back to shore.

EXT. A RIVER BANK -- CONTINUOUS

Shivering, Thomas dries himself off with his shirt then puts on his clothes. He crouches by the water's edge watching for any sign of life. Seeing none, he walks off.

INT. EDISON'S FAMILY HOME - EVENING

Thomas enters his house. His mother is at the dinner table.

MRS EDISON  
Dinner's ready, young 'un.

THOMAS  
No, thanky, Ma. I'm not feelin' right.

MRS EDISON  
What's wrong? You're all wet. You been swimmin'?

THOMAS  
Yes, ma'am. I think I got me a chill.

MRS EDISON  
Well, sit down and get some warm stew into you.

THOMAS  
No thanky, Ma.

MRS EDISON  
Alva; you'll catch your death of cold, you will!  
(MORE)

MRS EDISON (cont'd)  
 You'll join Carlile and Samuel and  
 Eliza, you will!

Thomas stares at the stew pot, then turns to leave.

MRS EDISON  
 Alva? You alright?

THOMAS  
 Just a chill, Ma. That's all.

MRS EDISON  
 What aren't you tellin' me, Alva?

Thomas darts upstairs to his bedroom.

INT. EDISON'S FAMILY HOME, THOMAS' BEDROOM -- LATER

Thomas is in his bed, the sheets pulled over his head. Images of the drowning boy flash in front of him. There are inaudible SOUNDS of men talking outside. Their speech is agitated. Then the sound of HEAVY FOOTSTEPS ascending the stairs. Nancy Edison and her husband, SAM - early 30s, bearded, haggard look - are on the other side of the door.

MRS EDISON  
 Sam, shhh! Little Al is asleep!  
 He isn't feelin' good.

MR EDISON  
 Nancy, I've got to talk to Alva.  
 Let me by.

MRS EDISON  
 Sam; you don't think he had  
 anythin' to do...

MR EDISON  
 I don't know. I aim t'find out!

Thomas' bedroom door bursts open. A tall man with wild, long black hair and a tangled black beard bursts inside.

MR EDISON  
 Thomas Alva Edison. Mister  
 Lockwood says his boy's been  
 missin' since this afternoon. Says  
 you a'been with him. You got  
 anythin' t'say about that?

Silence.

MR EDISON

I know you're awake, Al. Don't try  
t'fool me, boy.

THOMAS

Pa; promise y'won't... y'won't git  
mad 'r nothin'.

MR EDISON

Boy, y'c'n keep yer promises!

Sounds of more heavy footsteps ascending the stairs. Mrs  
Edison enters the bedroom.

MRS EDISON

Sam! Get these men away!

MR EDISON

I'm not sendin' anyone away until I  
git me some answers!

Mrs Edison sits on the bed beside Thomas.

MRS EDISON

Alva; you've got to tell me what  
happened.

MR LOCKWOOD

Yes, boy; tell me what happened to  
my son!

MRS EDISON

Shush, Joseph! Just look at me and  
tell me.

THOMAS

(slowly)

We... we went for a swim... in the  
canal is all, Ma.

MRS EDISON

The canal! Haven't I told you not  
to go there?

MR LOCKWOOD

And then what happened, boy? Where  
is Henry?

MRS EDISON

Sam; don't let them come in here!

MR LOCKWOOD

Lemme talk to him, Sam!



MRS EDISON  
Sam, he's only a child.

THOMAS  
Ma, Pa! He... he just didn't come  
up is all!

MR LOCKWOOD  
(anguished)  
What in tarnation d'ya mean, boy?

Thomas starts whimpering.

THOMAS  
He went under and didn't come up.  
It's not my fault.

Joseph Lockwood wails in anguish. He staggers out of the doorway into the...

INT. EDISON FAMILY HOME HALLWAY -- CONTINUOUS

In shock, standing at the doorway, Lockwood clutches his head with both hands.

MR LOCKWOOD  
(tearily)  
There's somethin' not right with  
that boy o' yers, Sam. Just  
lettin' my boy drown... it just  
ain't right!

INT. THOMAS' BEDROOM -- CONTINUOUS

MRS EDISON  
Git! Y'all, git outta here! All  
o' ya.

She pushes the men out of Thomas' bedroom, including Sam.

MALE VOICE  
Can't ya see yer boy's in trouble  
agin, missus?

SECOND MALE VOICE

Yeah, Sam; he's your child...

MALE VOICE  
Sam; I wouldn't take this lightly,  
if I were you.

MRS EDISON  
 Git outta my house... Go on!

Thomas sits on his bed staring out of the window.

INT. MICHAEL OATES' BASEMENT - DAY

SUPER: "MILAN, OHIO, 1861"

Thomas, now 14, is feverishly immersed in a book.

INSERT - THE BOOK

Parker's Natural and Experimental Philosophy.

BACK TO SCENE

MICHAEL OATES, a tall, thin and gawky-looking blond thirteen year old, stands beside him, waiting. A glass beaker on a tripod, a lit candle beneath it, bubbles away sending gas into the room. Jars with powders near it and a microscope.

MICHAEL OATES  
 What ya readin' Al?

THOMAS  
 Dammit, Dutch Boy, didn't I tell ya I've done with that name. Call me Thomas or Tom, not Alva!

MICHAEL OATES  
 Sorry, I forgot. What ya readin'... Tom?

THOMAS  
 It says here: "All philosophical knowledge proceeds either from observation or experiment, or from both... By repeated observations, and by calculations based on such observations, we discover... uniform modes of operation... called laws; and these laws... constitute what is called Science."

MICHAEL OATES  
 Them's a lot of words. What do they mean, Tom?

THOMAS  
 What it means is that experiments is what science is about. This is what I want to do, Dutchy.

(MORE)

THOMAS (cont'd)  
Science. And I aim to be a  
scientist. A great one. I know  
what. Let's play pretending: I'll  
be the scientist and you can be my  
subject.

MICHAEL OATES  
What are we going to experiment on,  
Tom?

THOMAS  
Flying, Dutchy! I've been studying  
the effects of Seidlitz powders and  
I'm sure they'll make the body make  
more gas.

MICHAEL OATES  
I don't get it, Al - I mean Tom.

THOMAS  
Well, Seidlitz powders give off gas  
when they get dissolved in acid.  
And, dummy, do ya know what ya  
stomach has in it? Hydrochloric  
acid. So, I'm gonna give it to you  
and yer stomach'll make gas.

MICHAEL OATES  
Won't it just give me a stomach  
ache, Tom?

THOMAS  
Ya just don't get it, do ya Dutch  
Boy! See, look: gas is lighter  
than air, right? So, I give ya the  
powder that makes gas in yer  
stomach; the gas in yer stomach'll  
make yer float in the air.

He dissolves the powders in a flask nearly full of water and  
hands it to Michael, who reluctantly drinks it, grimacing as  
he does so. Almost immediately he drops to the floor and  
writhes in agony.

THOMAS  
Aw, quit actin' Dutchy, you sissy!  
You ain't sick...

Michael retches. His lips are frothy and he begins to  
tremble. Thomas backs away terrified.

THOMAS  
Now, Michael, it's alright. I have  
an antidote.

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