

# Understanding *SWISS ARMY MAN*

**WARNING!**

Onur Tukul will attempt to make sense of *Swiss Army Man*. If you haven't seen it, don't read this. He's about to spoil everything!

There are also images of naked buttocks and erect penises throughout this piece!





Prologue  
to the  
Review



I've seen *Swiss Army Man* three times now.



The first time was about a month ago, at a press screening.

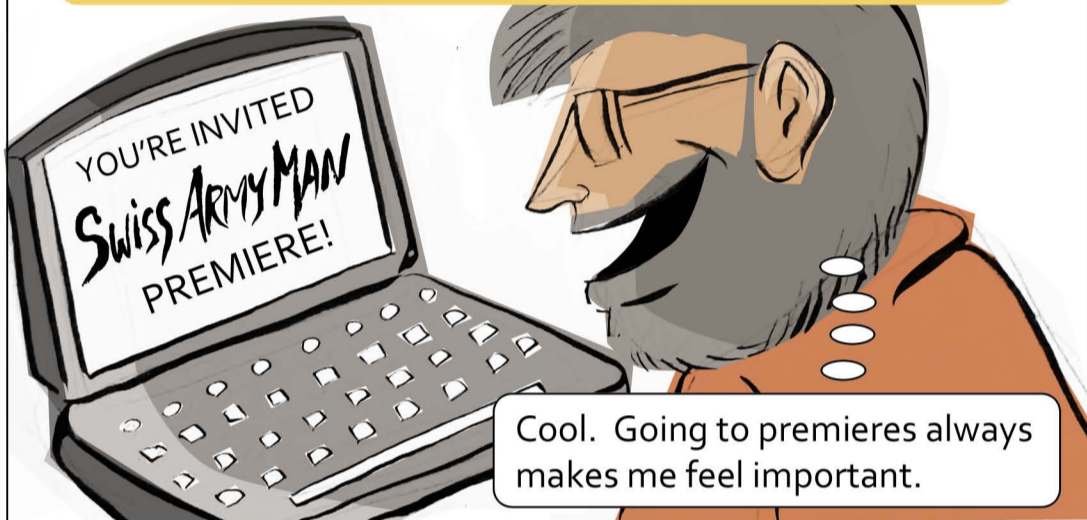


About a week later, I saw it again at another press screening.

I thought about it for a few weeks and then I wrote and illustrated my review.



And then, a few days ago, I got an invite to the New York premiere. This sounded fun. My review was more or less complete and I was in the mood for a night out.



Cool. Going to premieres always makes me feel important.

I also thought it might be fun to see the movie under the influence.



This time I'll see the movie as a regular joe, not a reviewer. I won't overthink it. I won't analyze it. I'll just let it wash over me. Wow, this edible gummi bear is already taking effect.



By the closing credits, I was having a panic attack.



Wait a second! My review is a joke.

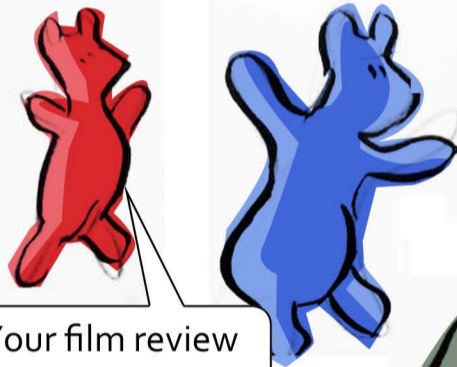


You're focusing on the wrong thing!



During the first two screenings, I'd failed to see the movie. Instead, I did what I thought reviewers were supposed to do. I deconstructed the dialogue. I analyzed and questioned creative choices. I looked for meaning where there was none. I had studied the movie instead of watching it.

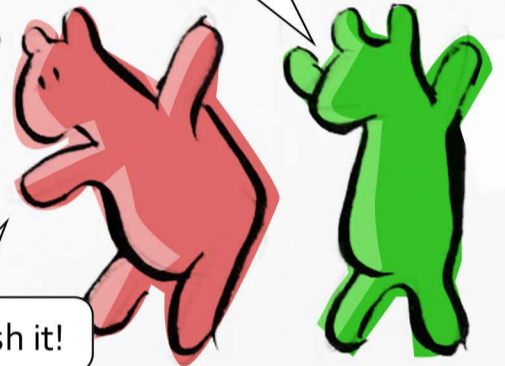
I missed the wonderful subtleties of the actors' performances. I missed the playful spirit of the movie. I misread the characters. I also remembered a lot of details incorrectly. When writing my review, I had latched on to all the homoerotic elements and built my article around that. Maybe it was the gummy bears talking, but I was convinced that I'd gotten it all wrong.



Your film review is bullshit!



You've always been full of shit!



Don't publish it!

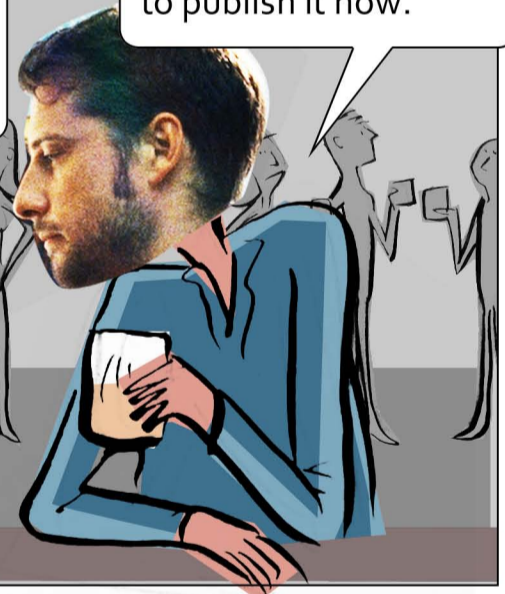
At the premiere party, I got drunk and tried not to think about it.

I later bumped into actor, filmmaker, curator Kentucker Audley. I told him about my situation.

How does everyone stay so fucking skinny?

My review's a wash. I thought I knew what it was about. But my thesis is bullshit. I'm going to scrap it.

It sounds like you have to publish it now.



Saying it's "just a movie review" patronizes the craft. It's an art form in itself. In the right hands, a movie review can transcend the actual movie.

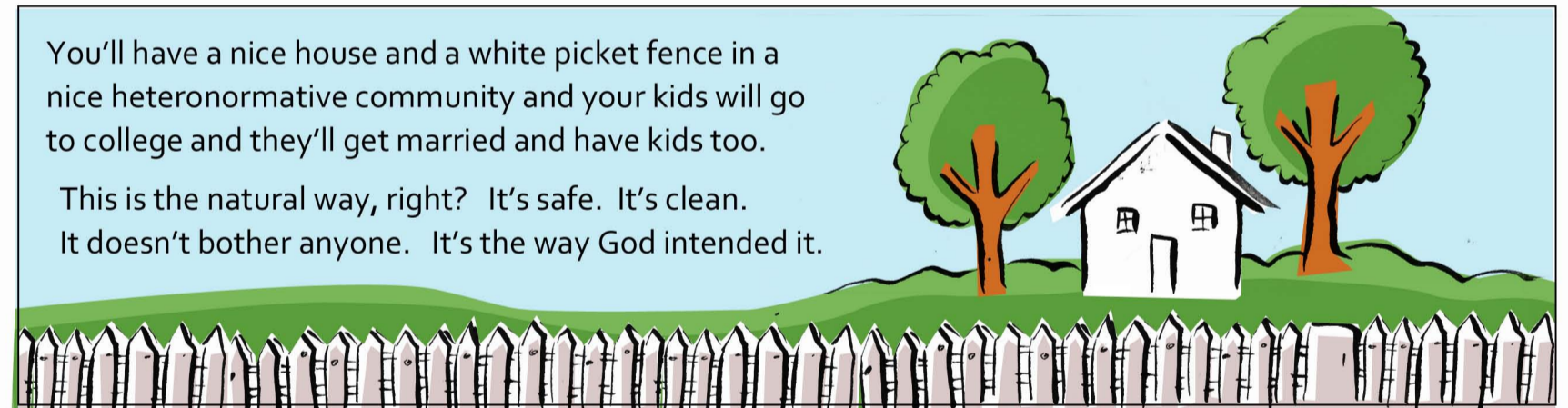
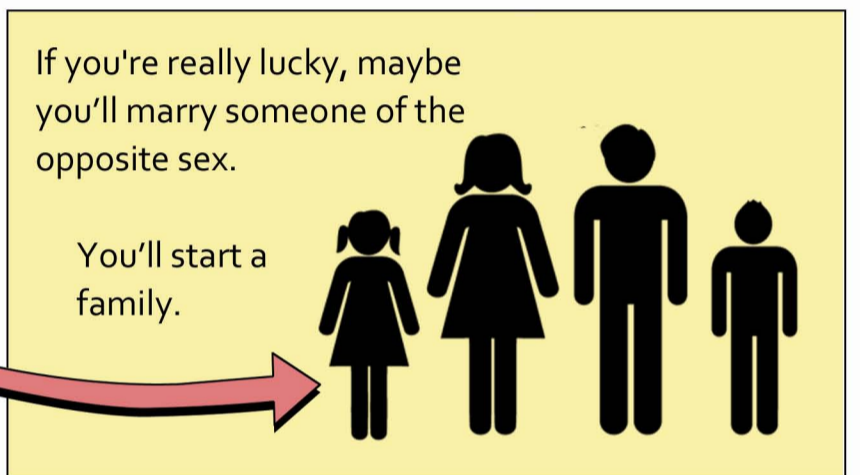
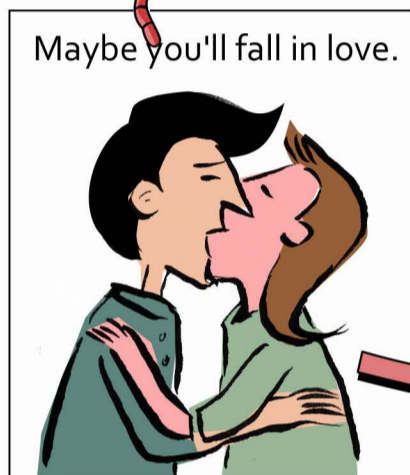
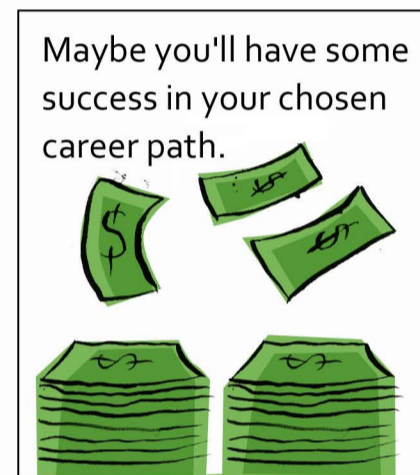
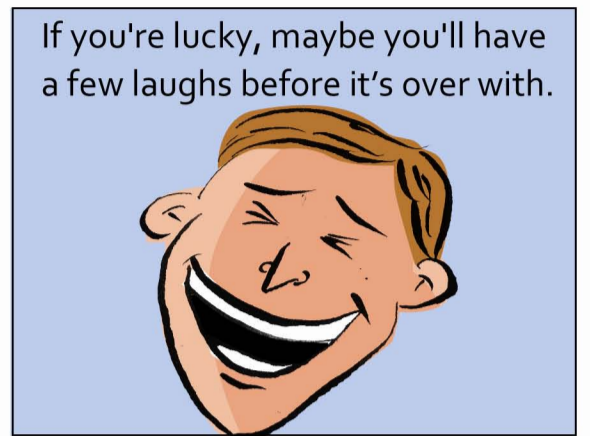
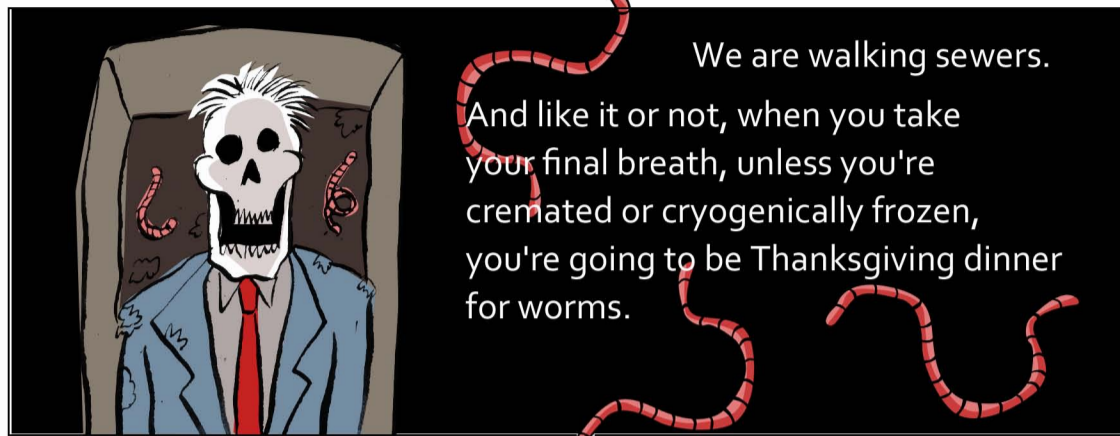
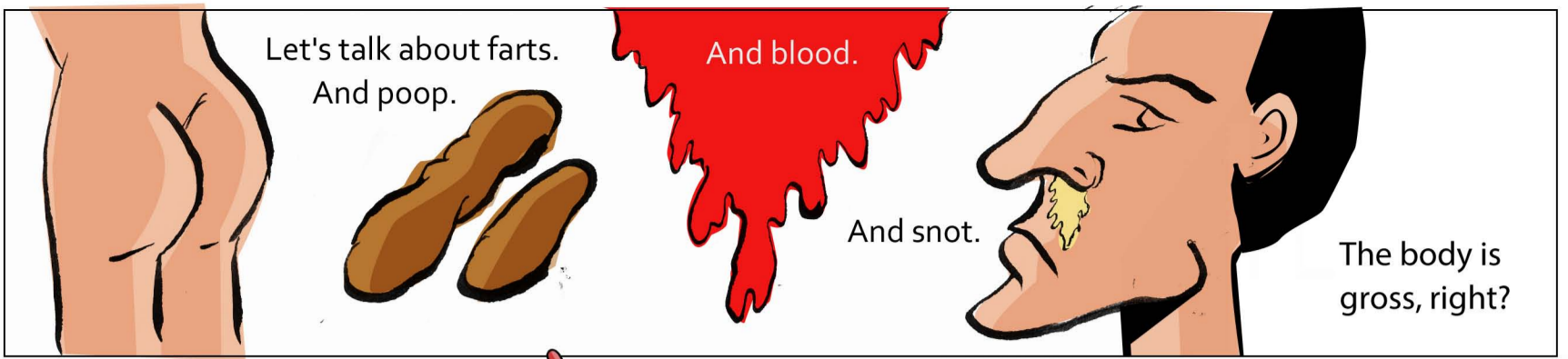
You're right. It's just a movie review.

What if it's in an amateur's hands?



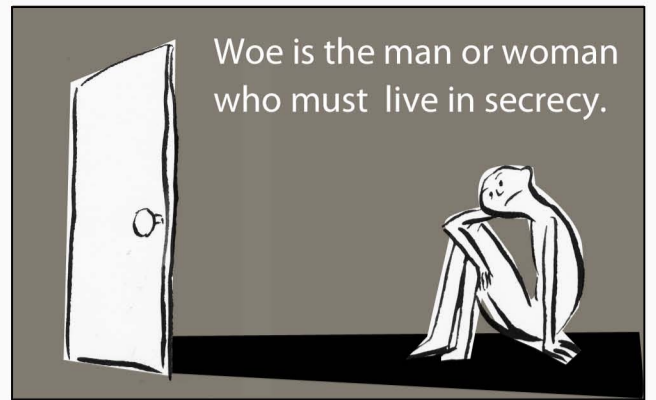
End of Prologue



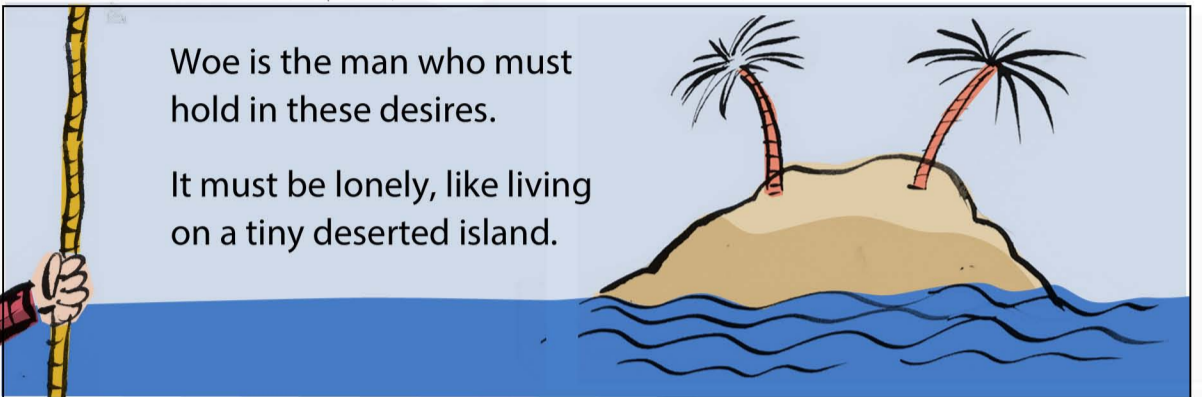
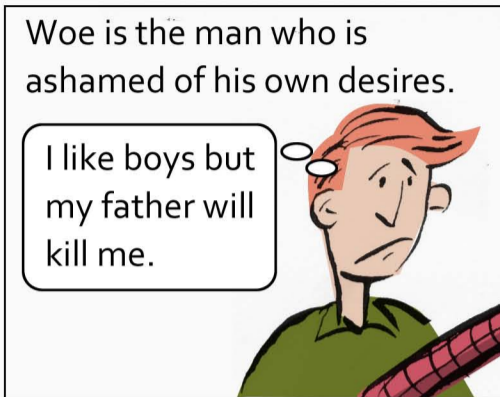




Being gay is like farting. If you feel the need, hold it in!

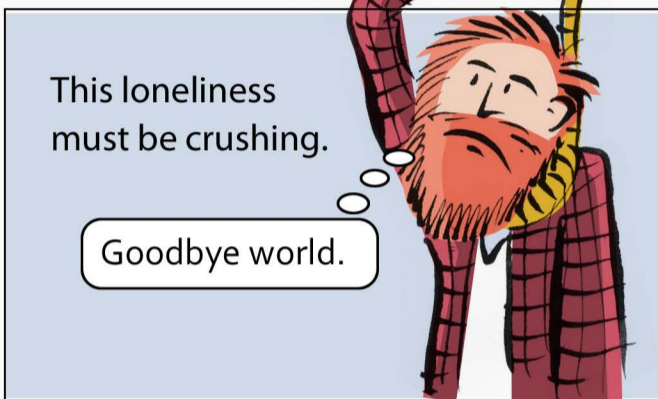


Woe is the man or woman who must live in secrecy.



Woe is the man who must hold in these desires.

It must be lonely, like living on a tiny deserted island.



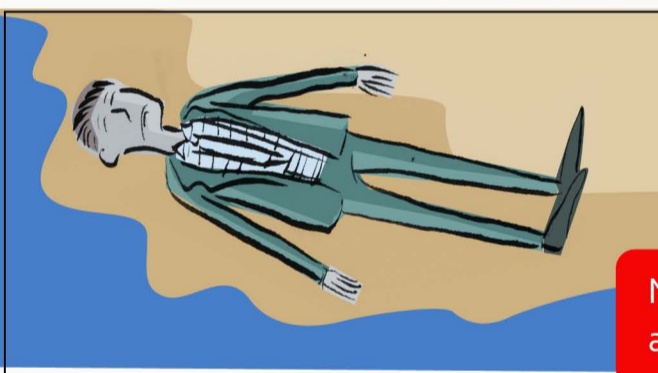
This loneliness must be crushing.

Goodbye world.



But wait...

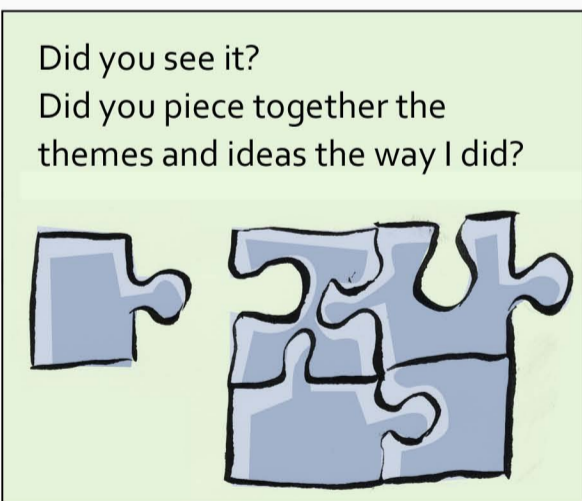
What's this?  
On the shore...



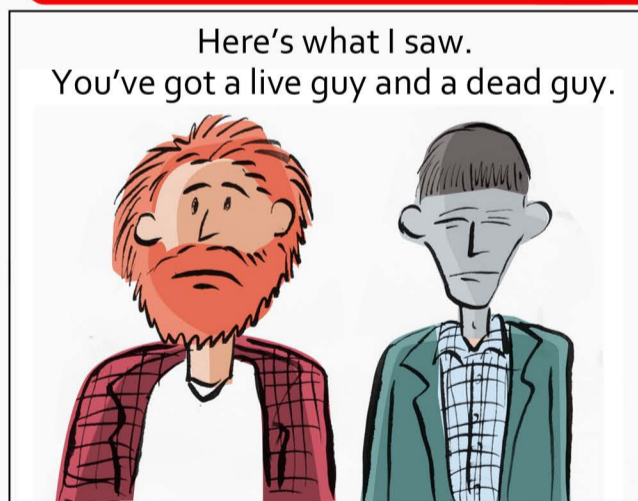
Maybe this person is not alone, after all.

I saw *Swiss Army Man* several weeks ago. These are the things I've been thinking about.

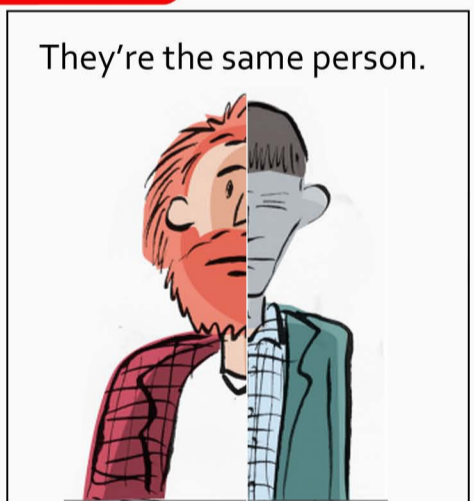
Note: Any text appearing in a red box was added after I watched the movie a third time.



Did you see it?  
Did you piece together the themes and ideas the way I did?



Here's what I saw.  
You've got a live guy and a dead guy.



They're the same person.



The live guy represents the flesh.  
The body.  
The engine.

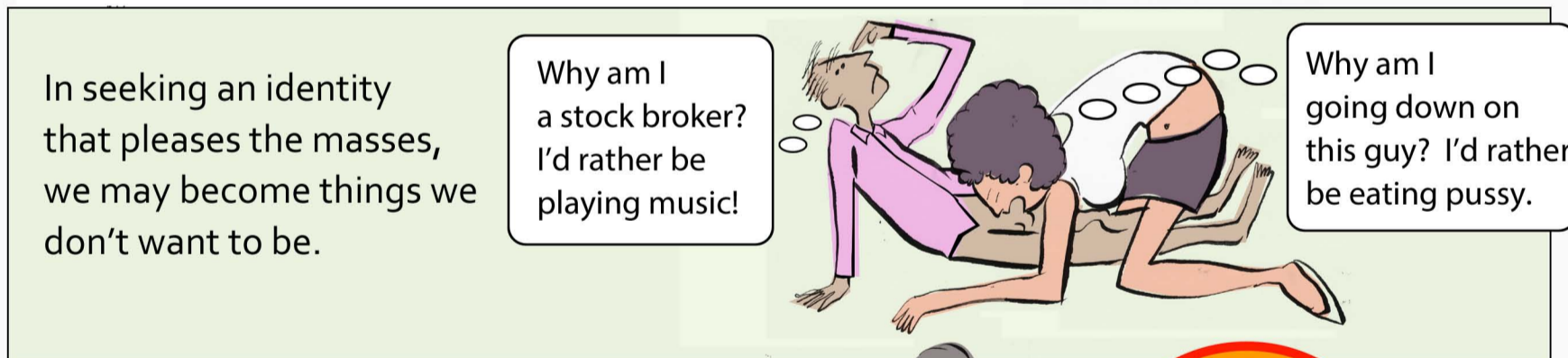
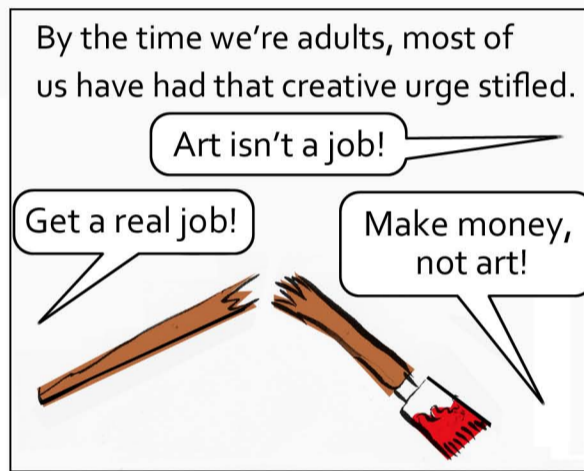
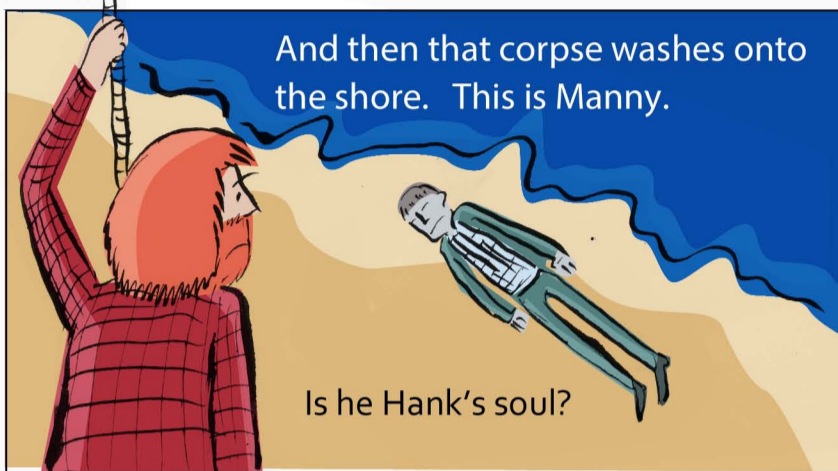
The dead guy represents the soul.  
The fuel of the body. Water. Life.  
Without water, the body dies.  
The soul feeds the body.



Paul Dano plays Hank, the live guy.  
 He's a closeted gay man. I think.  
 He's terrified of how society will view him if he comes out of the closet. I guess?  
 He's petrified of his father.  
 He's alone.  
 He's disconnected from himself.  
 He doesn't even know who he is.  
 He's fraught with despair, dead inside.



He's so abject, he decides to end it all.



Does the corpse represent Hank's own sexual desires, his primal needs, his curiosity, his innocence? When Hank talks to Manny, is he really just talking to himself? Is he asking for permission for something?



I know I often feel dead inside. This usually happens when American society reveals itself to be a wash. When semi-automatic weapons trump common sense. When North Carolina passes homophobic bathroom laws. If truth dies, everything dies. And if someone lies to themselves, they're pretty much dead as well.

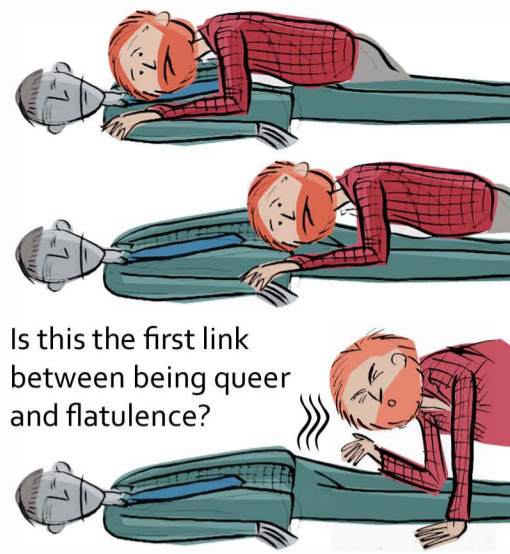




Hank feels the isolation that many closeted people feel. Look at the cave behind him as he's about to hang himself. Doesn't it look like a large asshole? It's ready to swallow him up. It's the source of his despair.



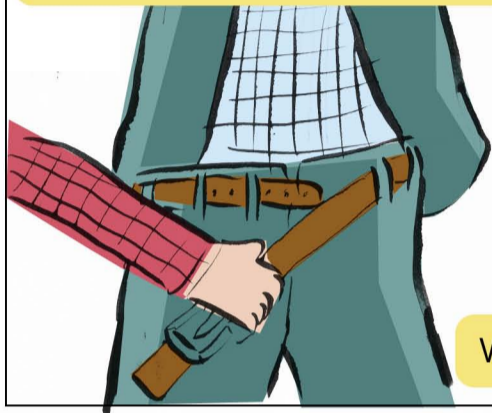
While Hank checks Manny's vitals, he follows a rumble from his chest to his crotch. It's very homoerotic, like he's about to go down on him. The rumble turns into a fart, and Hank is disgusted.



Is this the first link between being queer and flatulence?

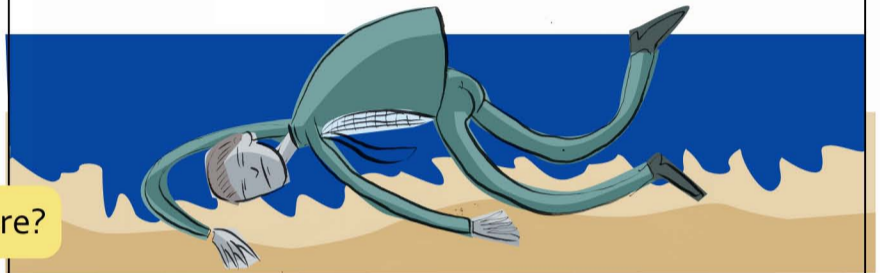
When Manny washes up on the beach, Hank removes his belt, like he's about to undress him.

Hank uses the belt as a noose.



What's the message here?

He's just about to end it all when he notices Manny farting wildly on the beach. The cadaver convulses in the water, like Frankenstein's monster being jolted alive. Hank's own soul (Manny) is starting to awaken. It's trying to tell him something. Farting is the answer. "Coming out will set you free!"



Hank rides Manny off the island and out into the ocean. Hank no longer wants to die. Water is very important in this movie. It's the source of life. It fuels the body, like the soul.

Flatulence powers the corpse as it soars triumphantly through the ocean. There's salvation in flatulence. This is the beginning of Hank's inner journey. He is becoming aware.



They land on a new island. It's bigger, fecund, lush, robust. There's growth here. When you stop lying to yourself, the world opens up.

Hank carries Manny like a monkey on his back. Being gay in a world where homophobia still exists is a burden.

This reminded me of that Christian poem "Footprints," for some reason.

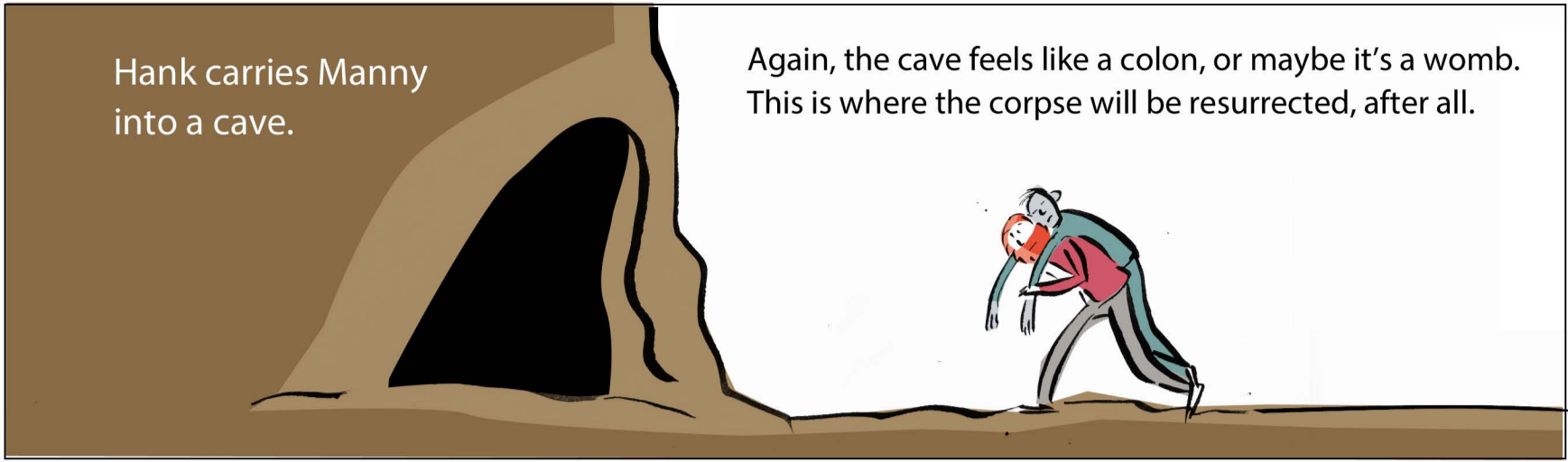
The movie has a spiritual feel to it. Maybe it's the music, composed by Andy Hull from Manchester Orchestra.





Hank carries Manny into a cave.

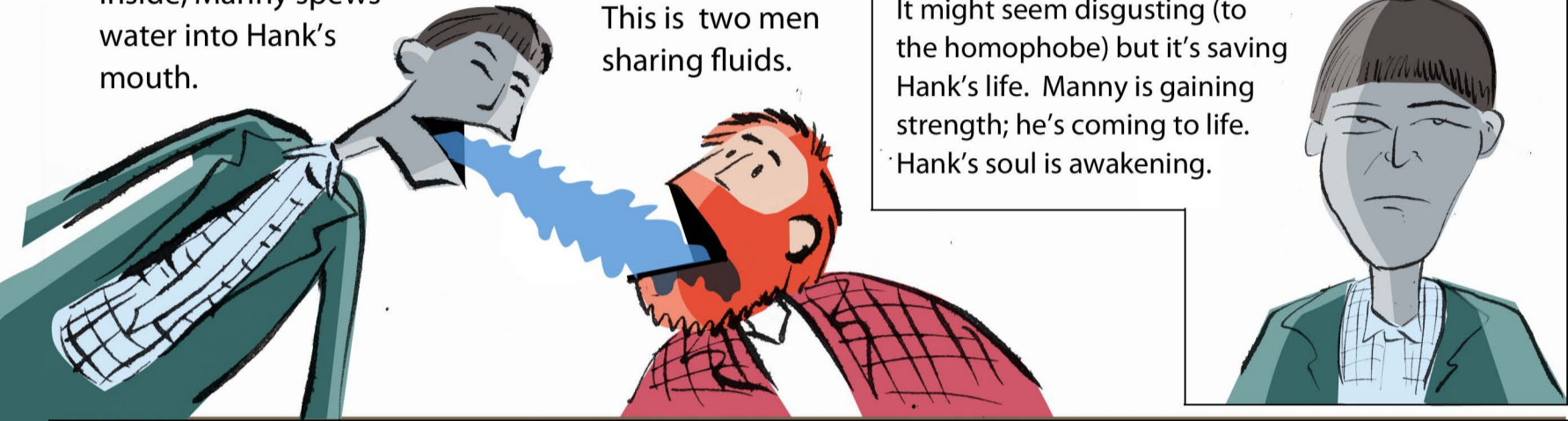
Again, the cave feels like a colon, or maybe it's a womb. This is where the corpse will be resurrected, after all.



Inside, Manny spews water into Hank's mouth.

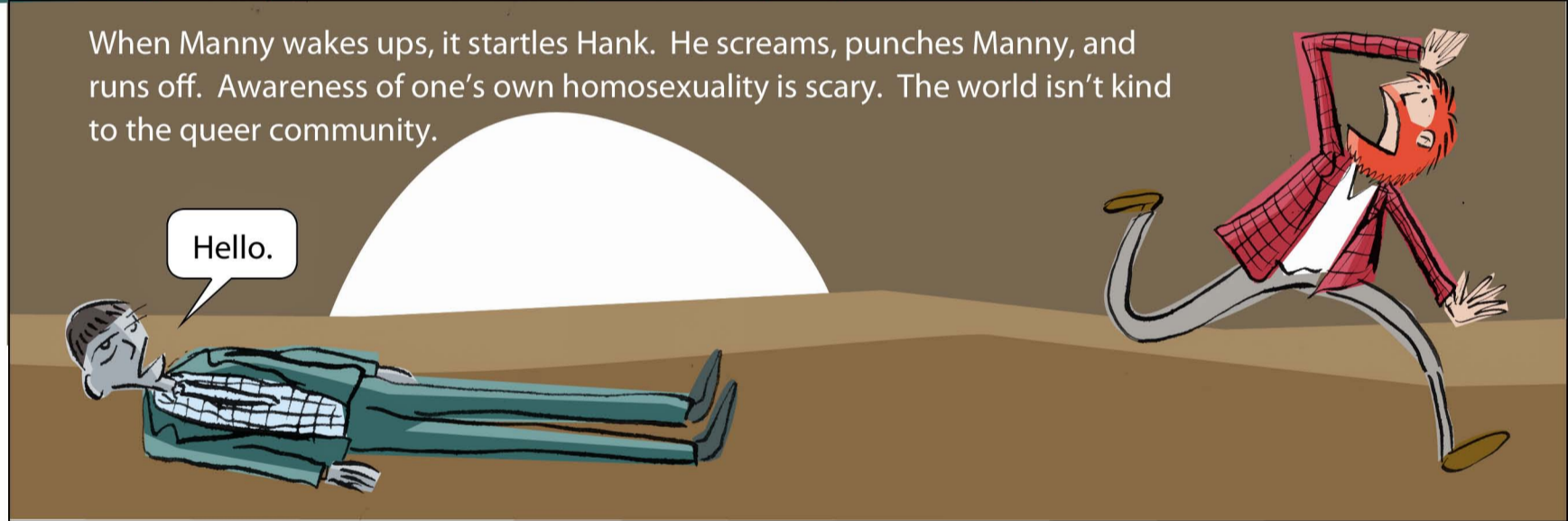
This is two men sharing fluids.

It might seem disgusting (to the homophobe) but it's saving Hank's life. Manny is gaining strength; he's coming to life. Hank's soul is awakening.



When Manny wakes up, it startles Hank. He screams, punches Manny, and runs off. Awareness of one's own homosexuality is scary. The world isn't kind to the queer community.

Hello.

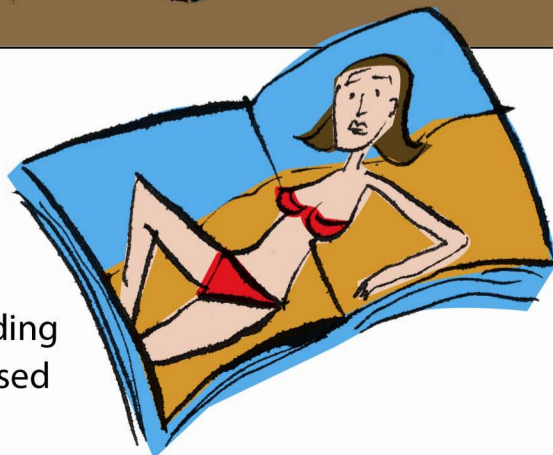


Hank settles down. He sits in front of Manny. He's now face to face with himself.

Introspection is so underrated. It should be taught in schools.



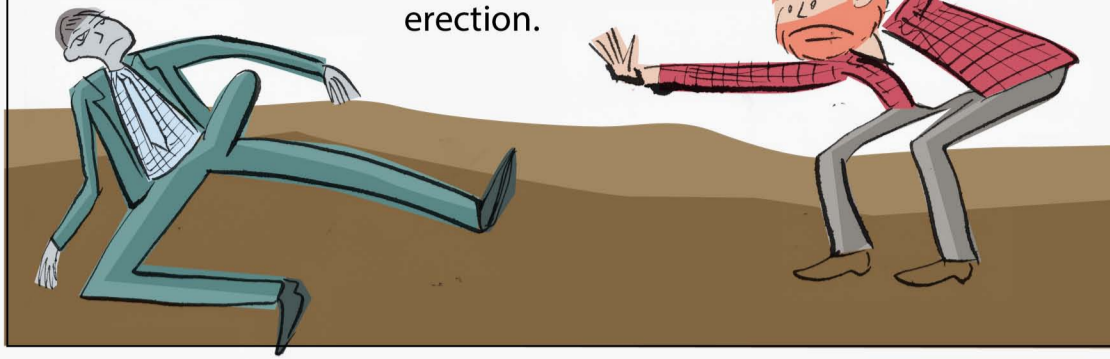
Manny is awake, but he doesn't remember what it's like to be human. Hank starts to educate him. He shows Manny a magazine with scantily clad women. Hank is in denial. He is reminding himself that this is what a man is supposed to be attracted to.





Manny gets an erection. This freaks Hank out.

He's terrified of another man's erection.



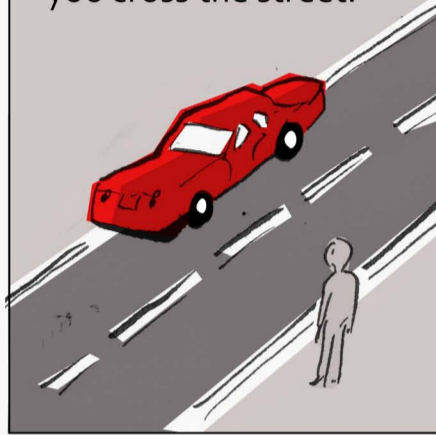
I remember being brought up in a stiff culture of homophobia. It was definitely part of my childhood curriculum.



"Don't talk to strangers."



"Look both ways before you cross the street."



"Don't hold hands with boys."

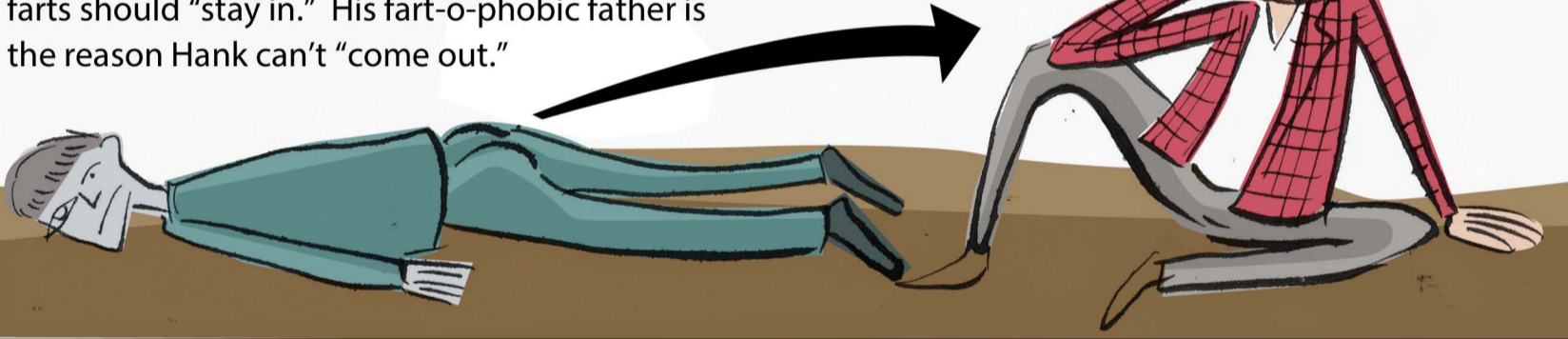


Being in the proximity of another erect penis? No way!

I'm not a fucking queer!



Manny can't stop farting. Hank tells him to suppress it. He speaks of his father, who insisted that he stifle his anal urges. Farts "come out" of the body. But according to Hank, farts should "stay in." His fart-o-phobic father is the reason Hank can't "come out."



But Manny can't stop. It's in his nature. The body wants what the body wants.

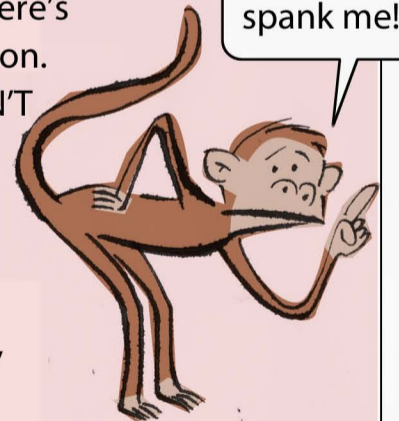


Hank plugs Manny's bottom with a cork.

Is the movie being playful or is it sending a message?

Hank tells the corpse not to masturbate. Now there's more sexual repression. Who the fuck DOESN'T masturbate? What kind of person discourages masturbation? What kind of culture, for that matter?

DO NOT spank me!



Anyone remember Joycelyn Elders? She was Bill Clinton's Surgeon General and she claimed that masturbation was healthy. She was right! But this is America, the land of the pathetically puritanical. In 1995, it was heretical for someone in a position of power to endorse masturbation. Elders got fired as a result. America's soul was fucking dead.

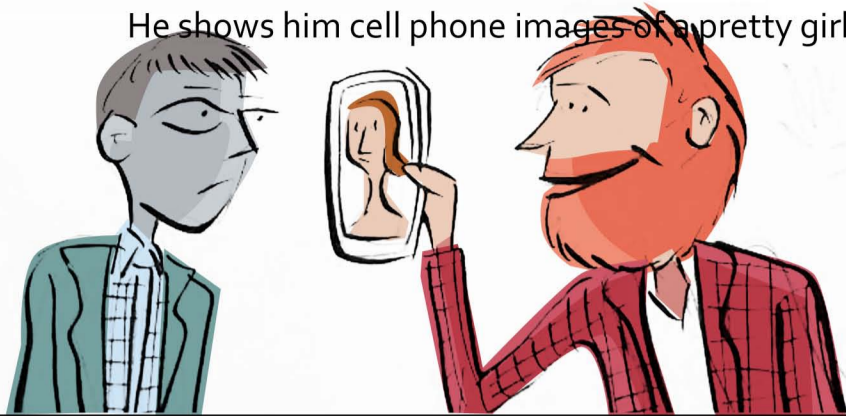
Jerk it! Rub it! Finger it! Stroke it! Onanism is A-okay!\*

\*Not her exact words.





Hank continues to help Manny with his memory.  
He shows him cell phone images of a pretty girl.



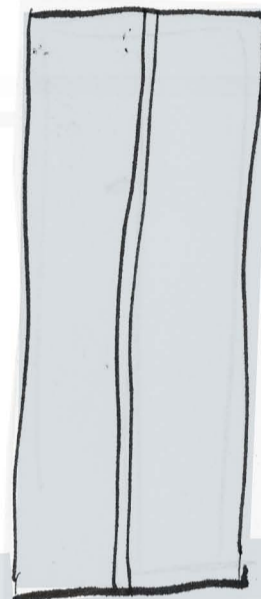
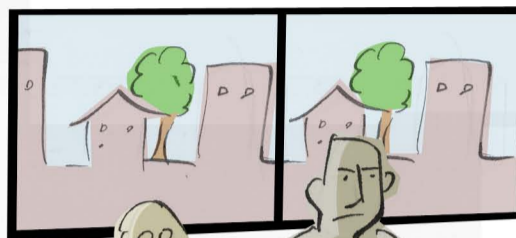
We see Hank on a bus, alone, surreptitiously watching a mysterious girl.



Hank imagines a life with her.

A normal life.

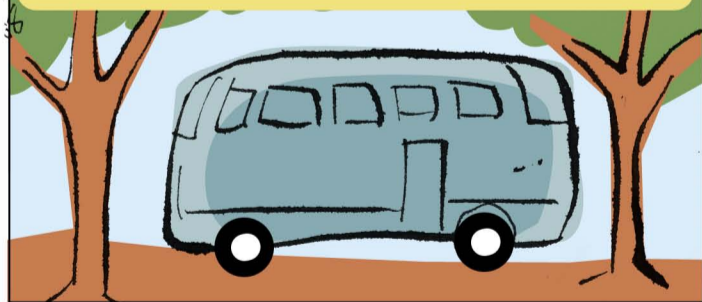
A heterosexual life.



This is the kind of life Hank's father would have approved of.

But Hank can't bring himself to talk to this mysterious girl. Is it because he's shy? Possibly. Maybe it's because it's not what he wants. It's only what he's SUPPOSED to want.

Together in the woods (closet), Hank and Manny recreate the bus. They want to bring this memory to life.



Hank shaves.

He dresses up like a girl.



He and Manny almost share a kiss.

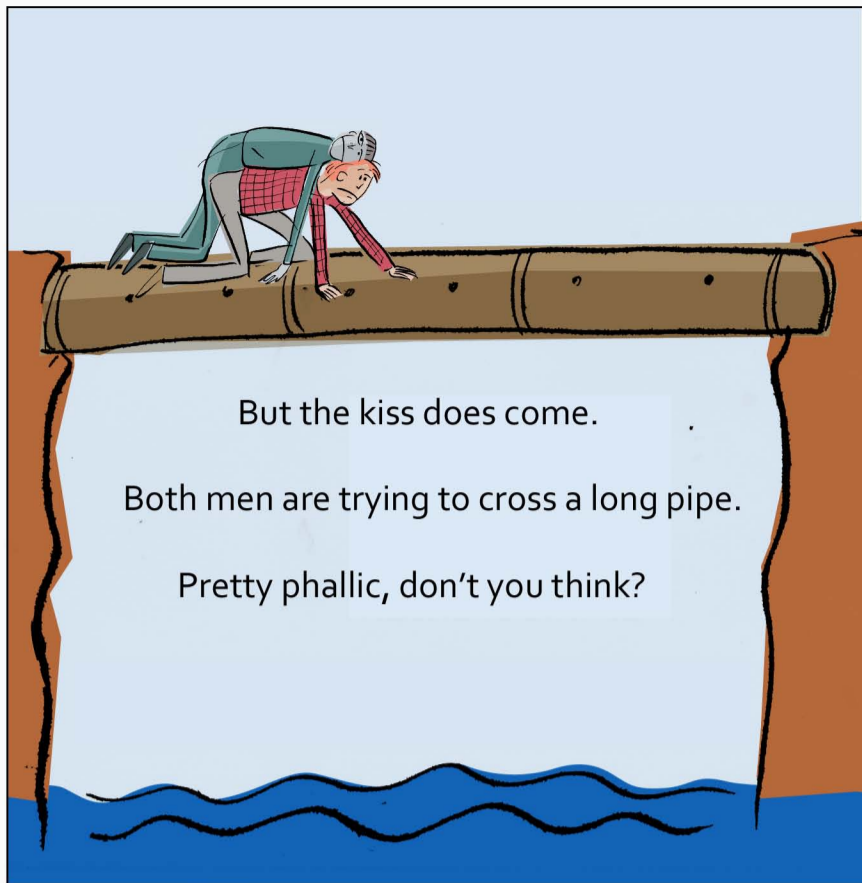
But they can't kiss. Hank can't connect with his soul in this way. He isn't ready to embrace his sexuality.

Also, if farting and masturbation isn't permitted, surely man-on-man kissing is forbidden.



The stuff with the girl is what troubled me during the third screening. Manny seems genuinely obsessed with her and I couldn't make sense of it.





But the kiss does come.

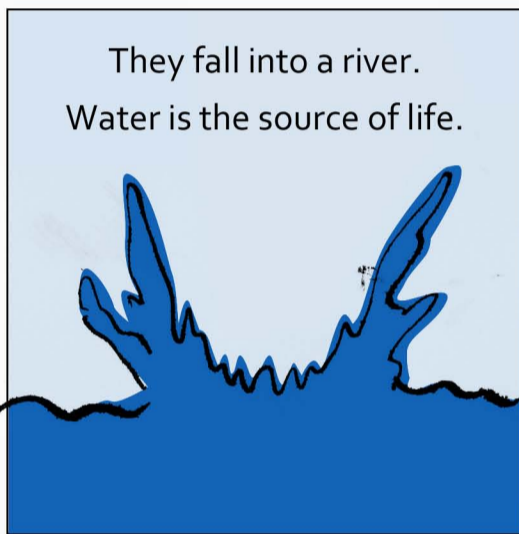
Both men are trying to cross a long pipe.

Pretty phallic, don't you think?

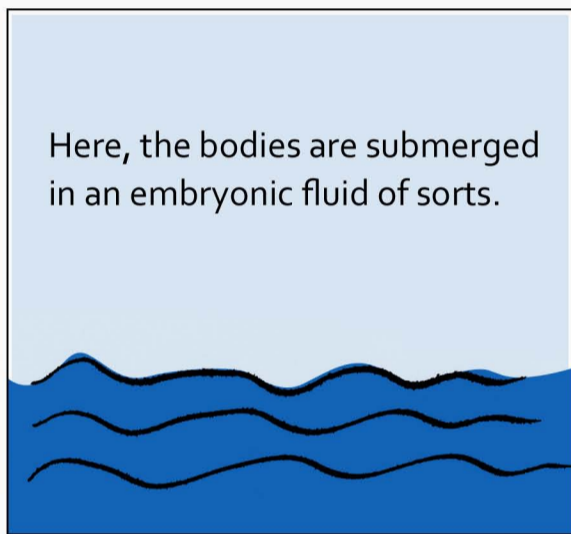
The pipe snaps!

Men shouldn't squat on such things.

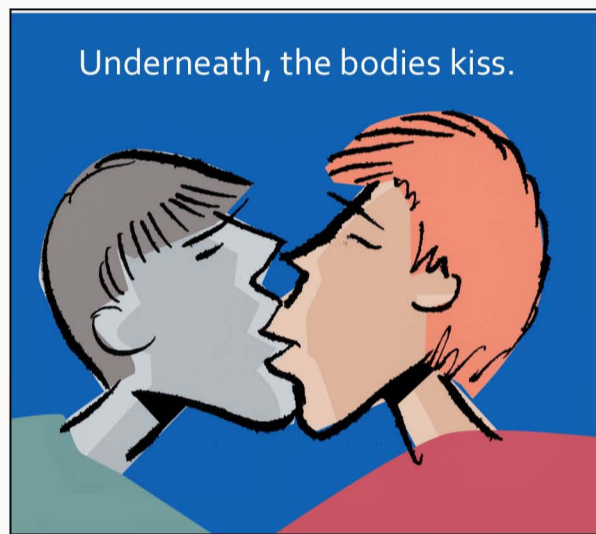
The pipe didn't snap like this. But this is how I remembered it from the first two screenings.



They fall into a river.  
Water is the source of life.



Here, the bodies are submerged  
in an embryonic fluid of sorts.

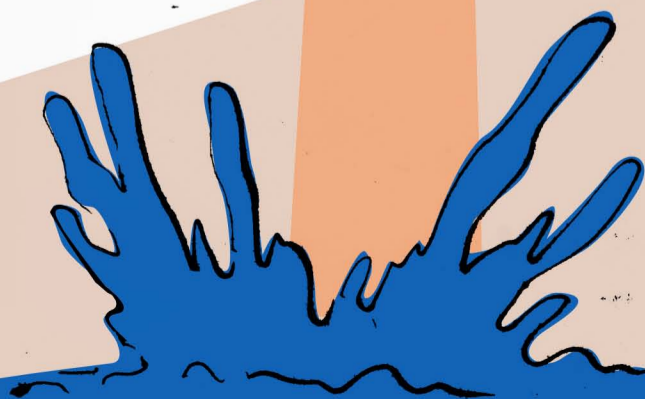


Underneath, the bodies kiss.

The kiss propels them into the air.  
The images are in glorious slow motion.  
They are amplified by a magical melody.  
Hank has embraced his authentic inner libido.  
He has given in to what the body wants.  
He has admitted, "Yes, I'm gay."  
He is born again.

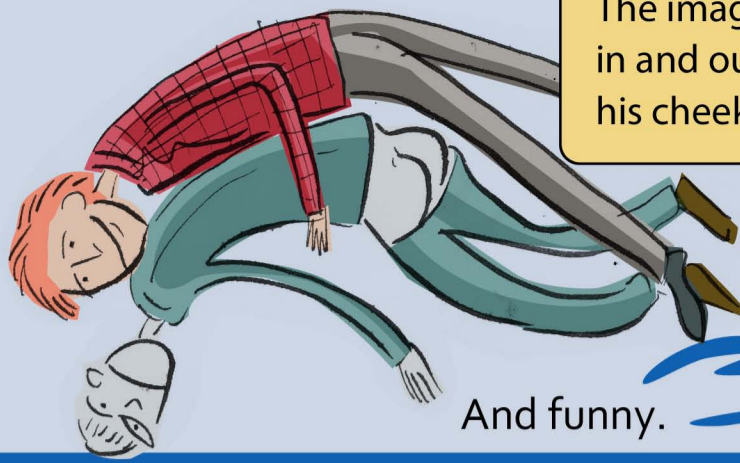


I still can't remember who initiates the kiss. I seem to recall that Hank is sinking and Manny pulls him up and kisses him. If this is the case, it supports some of my ideas.





The images of Hank riding Manny through the air, in and out of the water, Manny's buttocks exposed, his cheeks quivering as he flatulates - it's pretty beautiful.



And funny.

And inspiring.

To be set free is to be alive.

If you can embrace who you are, without shame, it's not just empowering, it's transcendent.

You will have magical powers.



I hate queers!

Love is beautiful. The body is beautiful. So is the ass. There's nothing to fear.

Homophobic white men love to call homosexuality "unnatural." I wonder how many of them have anal sex with their wives? I bet it's a lot.



Shut up and butt-fuck me!

Hank has admitted to himself that he's gay. He has confronted his soul. His body has said "yes!"

But it's one thing to admit it to yourself. What about the rest of the world?

Hank must come out.

He must fart in public.

But Hank's not ready.

He's content on staying in the forest (closet) and never returning to normal society.

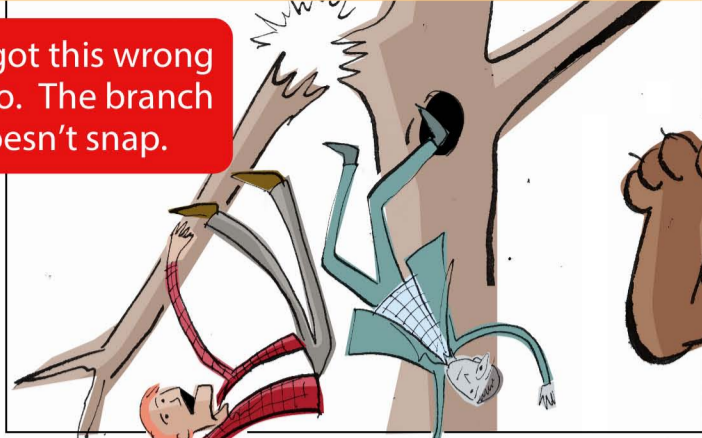
Can't we just stay here forever? No one has to know.





But men shouldn't sit on stiff wooden branches. Plus, staying in the forest has its dangers.

I got this wrong too. The branch doesn't snap.



There are bears.

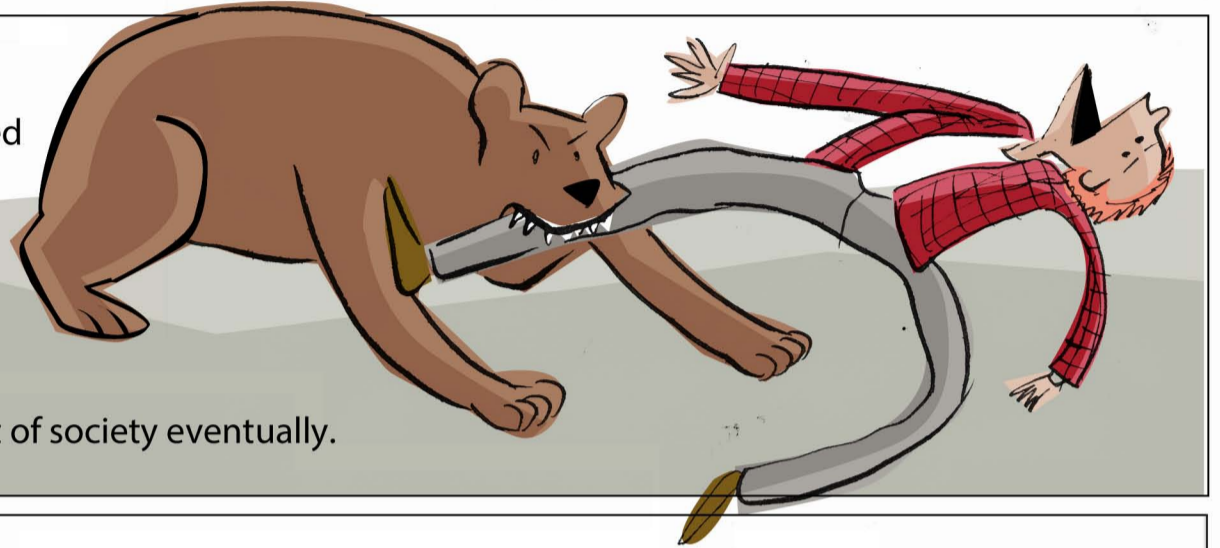
And they will devour you.



One shouldn't be too cloistered from the rest of the world.

Is it dangerous to be too primal, too feral, too animalistic?

You have to join the rest of society eventually.



In gay culture, there's also the idea of a "bear" being a hairy, chubby man.

Perhaps the bear represents (sexual) predators? Homophobes like to link gay folks to sexual predation.



I've had gay friends describe me as bearish, which always makes me blush. Bears are known to quite handsome.

But I'm just fishing for meaning here. I have no idea what this bears represents.

Maybe nothing.

And maybe *Swiss Army Man* has nothing to do with homosexuality.

As Freud said...

"Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."



I agree with that.

But sometimes, a cigar is a dick!

I'm reminded of a very funny George Carlin monologue here!



Anyway, Hank has to complete his journey. In the last act, he and Manny rejoin society.

They land in suburbia, outside a nice house with a nice yard in a quaint heteronormative community.

Stay away from my child!





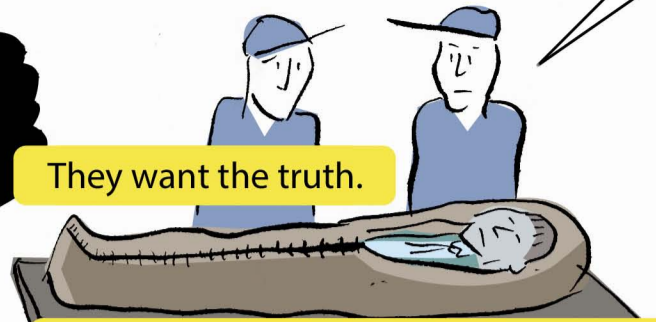
Hank, surrounded by press and suburbanites, is crippled by public scrutiny.

Where did he come from?



Who is the dead guy?

They want the truth.

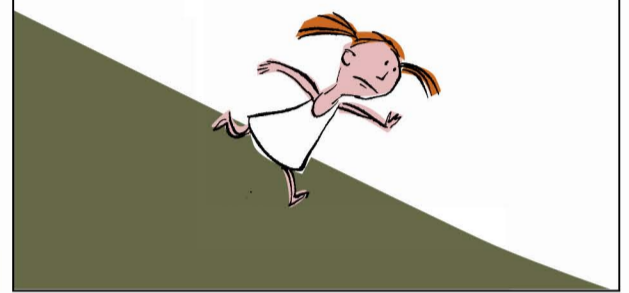
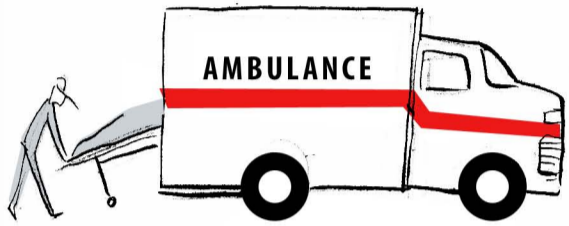


But Manny lies in a body bag, lifeless. And Hank's not talking.

The heteronormative community is about to cart the anonymous corpse away in an ambulance, like a heap of trash.

Hank has to rescue Manny. He has to save himself.

A child follows close behind, causing panic in the community. Don't let children be near gay people. They might get infected!



The film ends where it began, on the beach. Hank now has to reveal himself.

He finally lets go, a sense of calm appearing on Hank's face. Some people find it disgusting. Some recoil from the smell. But Hank is relieved. He no longer has to hold it in. If assholes could talk, his would say, "This is who I am."



This is who I am.

Hank seems to chuckle after farting. It doesn't feel like he's "coming out."

As for Manny, the corpse, he's waking up again. Hank's public admission has resurrected him. The soul is alive like never before!



Manny sails off into the ocean. The cadaver is now catamaran, on its back, face up, staring back at Hank with a brilliant smile stretched ear to ear.

The body has saved the soul.



This is how we are all supposed to live. Authentically. Truthfully. In public. With no shame.



This is what I saw in *Swiss Army Man*.



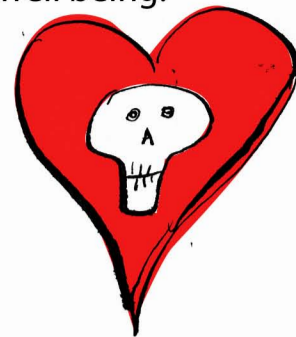
I'm probably way off base. Almost everything goes over my head.



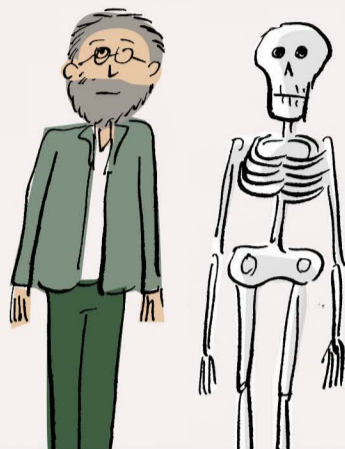
Plus, this may be things I'm wrestling with myself.



I'm often concerned with my internal well being.



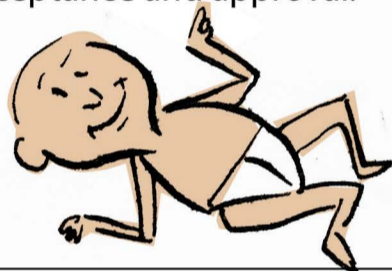
Do I know who I am?  
Do I believe in what I'm doing?  
Do I feel inspired in life?  
Do I still love watching films?  
Do I love making them?  
At some point, will I give up, throw up my hands and say, "What's the point?"



As much as I appreciated it, *Swiss Army Man* wasn't the movie I expected nor wanted. I was hoping for something more existential, I suppose. I'm consumed with fears of the future, fears of death, my body shutting down, my mind leaving me.

I can't believe I'm making this about me. Pathetic.

This felt like a young man's film, concerned more with things like acceptance and approval.



Still, two weeks after seeing it, I'm left with lots of interesting thoughts and images.



That's saying a lot, since I have the memory of a Commodore 64.



I have to say that I admire it for its originality. And I appreciate its warmth and earnesty. The movie was clearly a labor of love. Everything about the production is top notch.

I don't know anything about the directors, Daniels, but they're so imaginative and visual, that I feel a bit guilty about not loving their debut. But they're clearly artists and I'm looking forward to seeing what they do next.



You guys are great but I just can't suck your dicks on this one.

We like to make art!



It's also really refreshing to see two talented mainstream actors doing something so unique.

Can you imagine someone like Robert Downey, Jr. doing a movie like this?

What the fuck is art?



I do wonder if there's still a soul inside that iron body.

Fuck you and indie film.

