

LET HIM GO

Screenplay by
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Based on the novel by
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GEORGE
Leg seems better. Looking good.

He helps himself to Margaret's coffee as he takes a seat and she nudges her plate of toast towards him with a smile.

JAMES
Thinking I'd take him out to check
fence line after breakfast.

LORNA
It's almost ready.

James spins the radio dial from cattle reports to George Jones singing and dances across the room, clowning, to nuzzle Lorna. He snatches the baby, launches it into the air...

MARGARET
(laughing)
Careful.

JAMES
Oh, he likes it. Don't you, Jimmy?

He catches the happily gurgling baby, tosses him up again.

4

INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

4

Lorna playfully rubs the baby's tummy with her nose as she undresses him on the drain board while water pours steaming from the faucet to fill the giant white sink for a bath.

MARGARET
Lorna. This is too *hot*.

Lorna glances over to find Margaret pulling her fingers from the stream of water, face creased with impatient concern.

LORNA
Oh. I know. I didn't--. Haven't
checked it yet--

Margaret spins the cold water tap, comes to tend the child.

MARGARET
Here. Let--. You rest.

Lorna holds a beat, weighing a response, but then steps away.

5 **INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER**

5

The baby stares up in mesmerized wonder at the shifting patterns of shadow and light cast by the leaves of the yard's shade tree as Margaret soaps him in the giant white sink.

MARGARET

What is it? What do you see?

The infant's eyes roll and search until they finally come to rest on Margaret. His mouth twitches into a smile.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Yes, I'm right here. Hello.

The baby's smile flickers and fades as he continues to stare, eyes locked on hers in a spell of deep, penetrating inquiry.

Margaret slows, arrested by the steadiness of his gaze and her own humming sense of profound communion.

The baby's expression screws down into a tight furious knot. He squeaks as he passes gas, then relaxes again with a smile.

Margaret laughs. She cups water in her palm and sluices it over his head, a bit of suds running into the baby's eyes.

As he begins to fuss and cry, movement beyond the window snags Margaret's attention and she glances out, just as the black horse James had trained earlier enters the yard, alone.

She watches the dark animal bring itself to a stop under the shade tree, where it stomps the ground and flags its tail.

Margaret sees nothing but the empty saddle on its back.

6 **INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY**

6

Lorna looks up from reading *Life* magazine on the sofa when Margaret hustles through with the wet, crying baby.

Margaret pushes out the screen door with a hip and dashes off the porch. The door springs back behind her with a slap.

MARGARET (O.S.)

George! George!

7 **EXT. BLACKLEDGE RANCH - DAY**

7

George shields his eyes against the sun as he steps from the barn to look in the direction Margaret points, running towards him with the bawling baby. He spots the black horse.

He turns back to Margaret, the urgency on her face, then drops the tools in his hands and breaks into a run.

He crosses the yard in a bound, seizes the horse's trailing reins, and launches himself up into the empty saddle.

GEORGE

Yah!

He spurs the animal which takes off in the direction it had come; across the stretch of rolling fields beyond the fence.

The screen door claps again and Lorna comes to join Margaret, who stands with the baby, eyes pinned on George as he goes.

LORNA

Where's George going?

Margaret shakes her head vacantly as Lorna tentatively reaches to reclaim her baby, to jiggle and soothe.

LORNA (CONT'D)

Shhh... It's okay. It's okay.

(to Margaret)

Where's James?

Margaret opens her mouth, but nothing comes out as the horse carries George away from her, over the edge of the world.

8

INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

8

The shadows of bare branches ripple the blank wall reflected in a bureau's mirror; a patch of hard winter sunlight.

Margaret steps into the mirror's frame.

She checks herself; a simple dark dress, hair scraped back. She meets her own eyes at last, and all the sadness there. She steels herself and applies a line of red lipstick.

The floor creaks, breaking the mournful quiet, and she turns to George, who holds out two neckties, one in each hand.

Margaret chooses one, loops it around George's neck, and begins to form a knot. She pauses, wipes a dab of missed shaving cream from his earlobe, and returns to tying his tie.

George watches his wife closely as she concentrates, but she avoids his gaze, focusing on her task.

LORNA

I, Lorna Blackledge...

She stumbles slightly over the last name, throwing a quick, nearly apologetic glance at George and Margaret standing witness. Margaret holds hands with JIMMY (now 3 years old).

LORNA (CONT'D)

Take you, Donnie--

She breaks off with a nervous laugh, a cluster of white flowers and holly trembling in her hands, takes a breath.

LORNA (CONT'D)

Take you, *Donald* Weboy, to be my lawfully wedded husband.

DONNIE WEBOY (20s, darkly handsome) gives her an encouraging wink, the two of them standing in their best clothes before a JUDGE. A portrait of President Kennedy hangs on the wall.

JUDGE

To have and to hold. From this day forward. For better, for worse.

LORNA

To have and to hold. From this day forward. For better, for worse.

Jimmy watches all the adults, George and Margaret stoically enduring this ceremony with ramrod-straight backs.

JUDGE

For richer, for poorer. In sickness, and in health.

LORNA

For richer, for poorer. In sickness, and in health.

JUDGE

Until death do us part.

LORNA

(a breath)

Until death do us part.

JUDGE

By the power vested in me by the State of Montana, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.

Donnie turns to Lorna with a sexy, teasing grin.

DONNIE

Thank you, sir. I think I will.

Margaret drops her eyes as Donnie kisses Lorna, catches Jimmy watching her. She smiles thinly, gives his hand a squeeze.

George steps forward as the couple parts and offers his hand to Donnie, who makes a big show of respect; looking George in the eye, nodding solemnly as he shakes his hand.

Margaret meets Lorna stiffly; patting at her without embracing, without meeting the girl's searching expression.

Lorna gives up, and drops down to Jimmy's level...

10 **EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY**

10

Lorna throws her arms open to Jimmy, who lets go of Margaret's hand to run to his mother in the snowy side yard.

Lorna catches him up, laughing, and Margaret watches her pepper the boy with kisses as feathery flakes swirl the air.

George retrieves a box of Jimmy's toys and a small cardboard suitcase from the back of a parked station wagon.

He turns for the ramshackle building and follows Margaret up a peeling wooden exterior staircase behind Lorna and Jimmy, toward Donnie standing in an open second story doorway.

11 **INT. LORNA AND DONNIE'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY**

11

George sets the box of toys down in the all-but-empty living room; a couch, a lamp, chipped enamel-topped kitchen table.

LORNA

We've got some more stuff coming.
I put some chairs on lay-away...

She gives an anxious tour of the few rooms wanting to impress and George observes his wife take it all in without comment.

12 **INT. LORNA AND DONNIE'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - DAY**

12

Lorna ratchets up her enthusiasm for Jimmy's benefit as she opens the door to a narrow room, the only one freshly painted. A cowboy-theme blanket on a twin bed makes it nice.

LORNA

And this is your room!

Jimmy throws himself on the bed with delight and Lorna turns to Margaret with a smile that goes unreturned.

Margaret nods at the bare window overlooking the parking lot.

MARGARET

We can sew you some curtains.

13 **EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY**

13

George looks on as Margaret clutches Jimmy to her in the yard with Lorna and Donnie. Margaret kisses the boy tenderly.

MARGARET

(choked)

You'll come visit soon.

14 **INT. BLACKLEDGE'S CAR - DAY - (MOVING)**

14

Margaret watches Jimmy waving her good-bye in her passenger side mirror as George turns them out of the building's lot.

A last glimpse of the boy, hand in the air, beside his mother, Donnie already climbing the stairs... Then they all slide from the mirror and Margaret's field of vision.

She closes her eyes because there's nothing left to see.

15 **INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY**

15

George enters to find Margaret standing motionless at the sink, staring out the window into the snowy yard.

He leans a hip against the counter, studying his wife transfixed by the bare arms of the shade tree outside.

He sees her chin begin to quiver.

GEORGE

(quietly)

He isn't far. Just in town.

Margaret angles her face away. She won't get caught crying.

MARGARET

Fix you some lunch.

Jimmy bursts into hot tears.

Lorna swoops down to comfort him, but Donnie jerks her back to her feet. She tries squirming from his grip, but Donnie squeezes her upper arm and she twists in pain.

Jimmy stops crying instantly, seeing his mother struggle, and Donnie releases Lorna. The three stand a breathless beat.

Lorna scowls at Donnie, then extends her ice cream to Jimmy, but Donnie swats her hand and the cone falls into the street.

Margaret can't hear from this distance, but Lorna spits a few choice words at Donnie, who may be nodding his head tightly, but he's not agreeing with anything she says. He's coiling.

And then he springs. He mashes his own ice cream in Jimmy's face, surprising the boy, who falls back on his butt.

Lorna lunges at Donnie, but he's anticipated this and meets her with a sharp slap across the face.

Lorna's hand goes to her cheek as Margaret's hand flies to the car's horn... just as another car sounds its horn.

Margaret glances in the rearview mirror and sees a line of three cars waiting directly behind her.

She pulls out of the parking lot and quickly over to the side, but by the time she's stopped and cranes around, Jimmy, Lorna, and Donnie are nowhere to be seen.

18

INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

18

Two steaks sputter and pop in an iron pan.

The back door opens and George enters in his work clothes, making a beeline for the sink where he washes his hands, dries them with a dish towel hanging there.

He observes Margaret adding frosting to the top of a coffee cake, and smiles. He dabs up a taste with a clean pinky.

GEORGE

Mm!

Margaret blocks him from taking more with her elbow.

MARGARET

That's not for you.

19 **INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT**

19

George eyes Margaret as they eat their steaks at the table. Something's going on, but she's keeping it to herself.

 GEORGE

Barlow Ott says he might have something for Donnie next month. Needs a couple of fellas to help put a new roof on the Lawson place.

Margaret lifts her eyebrows and lets them drop. That's it.

George considers his reticent wife as she chews her food, and he glances at the coffee cake on the counter for a clue.

20 **INT. BLACKLEDGE'S CAR - DAY**

20

Margaret checks herself in the rearview mirror then picks up the coffee cake from the seat beside her, opens the door.

21 **EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY**

21

Margaret knocks on the door at the top of the rickety stairs and waits, listening, the coffee cake offering in her hands.

She glances at the building's small lot where trash blows free, then brings her attention back to this closed door.

She knocks again with a frown.

 MARGARET

Hello? Lorna?

A dark window reflects morning sky on the other side of the railing, and Margaret leans out, straining for a peek inside.

 WOMAN (O.S.)

Who you looking for?

Margaret startles, wheels about in surprise.

 WOMAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

You the girl's mother?

It takes Margaret a moment to locate the voice; a WOMAN (40s, sallow) clutching a bathrobe closed tight at her neck in an open doorway at the bottom of the stairs.

 MARGARET

No. I'm her--

George can't find a dish towel, dries his hands on his jeans.

GEORGE

Well, you're sure packed for a trip
into town.

Margaret indicates his chair again, the soup. She's serious.

MARGARET

Sit down, George.

29

INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

29

George sets his spoon down in the now-empty bowl, thinking.

GEORGE

You didn't see fit to share this
with me?

Margaret sweeps cracker crumbs from the table top into the bowl and carries it to the sink.

MARGARET

Sharing it now.

George studies his wife's back as she rinses the bowl.

GEORGE

Anyone else see it happen?

MARGARET

You mean other than me?

GEORGE

I'm asking if you're sure what you
saw.

Margaret turns off the water, faces her husband.

MARGARET

I saw exactly what I've felt all
along about Donnie Weboy. What
you've felt, too, whether anyone'll
ever get you to admit it or not.
And I saw that girl can't protect
her child.

GEORGE

On that account you expect she's
just going to hand him over to you?
That what you see happening?

Margaret scoffs, but George clocks a dip in her confidence.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
 And when Lorna says no? Margaret,
 Jimmy's her boy.

The color rises hot in his wife's face.

MARGARET
 He is *your* grandson, George
 Blackledge.

George nods, explores the table's grain with his fingers.

GEORGE
 And your plan for finding them?

MARGARET
 Donnie's from somewhere in North
 Dakota. I'll find them. You ought
 to know me well enough by now.

GEORGE
 (laughs)
 Oh, I do.

MARGARET
 I won't come back here without him.

GEORGE
 Nope. And you're going with me or
 without me?

Margaret waits for George to look at her.

MARGARET
 That's your choice. I packed you a
 bag. Depending on what you decide.

30

INT. BLACKLEDGE HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

30

George stands alone, considering the empty spot where one of
 the two pillows should be at the head of the double bed.

He looks over the contents of the suitcase left laying open
 there for him, examines a fresh razor from the dopp kit,
 picks up a heavy wool sweater, in August.

GEORGE
 (calling)
 How long you planning on being
 gone?

Margaret comes to lean in the doorway, watch George intently.

NEVELSON (CONT'D)

I remember that. That was you?
 (marvels at George)
 You sure got 'em.

GEORGE

I had some help.

NEVELSON

Well, how can I help?

GEORGE

We're trying to locate a Donnie
 Weboy. He's got family over in
 North Dakota.

NEVELSON

I know the name. Not Donnie. But,
 Weboy, sure.

GEORGE

He's married our son's widow. Got
 our grandson with them. Boy's only
 three.

(a look to Margaret)

We just want to know where they
 are. Make sure they're safe.

Margaret nods when Nevelson checks with her.

NEVELSON

Let me call around some.

41 **INT. RESTAURANT - BENTROCK - DAY**

41

George scans a local paper's front page as he eats across
 from Margaret in a booth, a sparse handful of other DINERS
 scattered about; BUSINESS MEN, TWO OLD GALS, A YOUNG FAMILY.

Margaret idly watches the family's MOTHER cut the meat on her
 DAUGHTER'S plate into bite-sized pieces. The Mother glances
 Margaret's way and smiles as she saws. Margaret turns away.

MARGARET

How's that pot roast?

GEORGE

Yours is better.

He rotates one end of his oval plate in Margaret's direction.
 She reaches to fork a sample, tastes.

MARGARET

You're just used to mine.

42

EXT. BENTROCK - MAIN STREET - SUNSET

42

Margaret slips her arm through George's as they stroll the sidewalk back towards the town hall and courthouse.

George looks at Margaret in surprise, but doesn't comment, and they continue on, taking in the town's evening activity, PEOPLE heading home for supper or to the one movie house.

They pass a liquor store and George spontaneously unhooks Margaret's arm from his and goes inside without a word.

From out here, her lips compressed into a straight line, Margaret watches George buy a pint bottle of whiskey.

He comes back to meet her, bottle in a paper sack, and they resume walking as he unscrews the cap. He offers it to her.

MARGARET

Thank you. No.

George takes a nice pull, and recaps the bottle.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Happy?

GEORGE

Happy not to hear a lecture.

Together, they wander back to the town hall and Sheriff's office, but Margaret doesn't take George's arm again.

George stops at their parked car, opens the driver's door.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Gonna hide the evidence.

He bends to slip the bottle of whiskey beneath the driver's seat and meets something already hidden there.

He pulls the heavy object wrapped in a dish towel from beneath the seat and drops it on the upholstery with a thump.

Margaret opens her mouth to speak, but--

GEORGE (CONT'D)

What the *hell*, Margaret?

He turns from the Colt service revolver on the car seat to glare at his wife.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

What the hell?

MARGARET

That was before I knew you were coming--

GEORGE

And you thought you'd need it?

MARGARET

I didn't want to find out I did and not have it.

GEORGE

Christ, Margaret.

He wraps the gun back up in the dish towel and grabs Margaret roughly by the elbow, angrily shaking her. He pulls her with him to the rear of the car.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Was this going to be part of your argument?

MARGARET

George, I would never--

GEORGE

It's got bullets in it.

He lets her elbow go, still furious, and opens the back gate to pull out his suitcase. He glances around to make sure no one's watching, and packs the swaddled gun away inside.

He slams the rear door closed and heads for the Sheriff's office carrying the suitcase, shaking his head.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Margaret.

43

INT. BENTROCK SHERIFF'S OFFICE - NIGHT

43

Nevelson consults notes, Margaret in the chair beside his desk, George standing over them both, listening.

NEVELSON

There's a branch of the Weboy clan over in Forsyth. Townsfolk. A little down on their luck but hardworking. Frontier Saddlery there is a Weboy operation, or it was started by the family. Ain't North Dakota, but I'd start there.

GEORGE

That's what we'll do, then.
Appreciate your help.

George picks up the suitcase and shakes Nevelson's hand.

MARGARET

We're also hoping you might
recommend a hotel in town for the
night. Anyplace clean.

NEVELSON

If clean's the priority, my Nora's
in charge of the jail here. Cells
are empty. Got fresh sheets. Not
sure what feelings you got on it.

Margaret lifts her chin in George's direction.

MARGARET

They called him Sheriff nearly as
long I've been going by Blackledge.
I'm not spooked by a jail house.
Or a cell. We'd be right at home.
Thank you, Sheriff Nevelson.

44

INT. BENTROCK SHERIFF'S OFFICE - CELLS - NIGHT

44

Margaret snaps open a sheet to make up one of the bunks.

Nevelson glances back at her from the end of hall as he gives
George a tour. He lowers his voice so Margaret can't hear.

NEVELSON

You think they're running?

George looks back at Margaret as well. He shakes his head.

GEORGE

No. Not that I know. But, they
did take off in a hurry. Forgot to
say good-bye.

He nods toward his wife smoothing a blanket on the bunk.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

I'm just looking to give her that.
Let her say a good-bye.

GEORGE

Shh... Shh... S'okay, boy.

He lays James's body across the saddle on the animal's back.

George's worn fingers form knots with a soft rope, tying the body down. He takes his time, there's no need to rush now.

He cups the back of his son's head with his hand when he's done, and stands a silent beat, eyes open.

Then he secures James's hat on the saddle's horn and starts to lead the black horse on the long walk for home.

50 **INT. BENTROCK SHERIFF'S OFFICE - CELL - NIGHT**

50

George stands over Margaret in the dim light of her cell, watching the even rise and fall of her breath in sleep.

He leans closer to her, whispering.

GEORGE

Home. Go home. Go home.

FADE TO BLACK.

51 **INT. FRONTIER SADDLERY - DAY**

51

A bell clangs over the door as George and Margaret enter and a YOUNG MAN (20s, scrawny) looks up from behind the counter.

MARGARET

Good morning!

The Young Man nods tightly and Margaret pours on the sunshine, making a show of astonishment at the array of saddles, while George scans the shop's layout.

Margaret slips a wrist through the stirrup of one elaborately hand-tooled saddle, the new leather creaking loudly.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Sounds like my knee in the morning.
But, *beautiful* saddles. Wouldn't you say, George?

George doesn't say as he takes up a tactical position just inside the door where he can keep his eye on everything.

YOUNG MAN

Fella in Miles City makes 'em. The fancy ones.

MARGARET

Very impressive...
 (smiling bigger)
 But, we're not shopping for saddles
 today. Or bridles and bits.

She advances on the Young Man who backs up a step behind the display counter, his eyes darting to George, who allows Margaret the stage.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Now, would you be a Weboy, too?

YOUNG MAN

No, ma'am. A cousin to. I'm a
 Tucker.

Closer now, Margaret sees the freshly sewn welt, puckered as a mattress seam, that runs throbbing-red down the Young Man's neck from one ear. She blinks, forces her eyes from it.

MARGARET

Well, we're relations, too, then.
 Of a sort. Donnie Weboy married
 our daughter-in-law. *Former*
 daughter-in-law. Which makes him
 stepdaddy to our grandson...

The Young Man cocks his head, raw stitches straining.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

My husband and I found ourselves
 over in this part of the state, and
 I said to him, let's look in on
 Lorna and Donnie while we're here.
 So here we are. To see Donnie.
 Well, really, our grandson, of
 course, but.

YOUNG MAN

I don't know no Donnie. Or a Laura.

MARGARET

Well, I understood it's why they
 relocated here. Donnie was going
 to hire on at his uncle's saddlery.

YOUNG MAN

His uncle's saddlery--? Who?

MARGARET

George, didn't Lorna say?

YOUNG MAN
You sure you don't want Gladstone?

GEORGE
Gladstone?

The Young Man looks to George at the door, nods.

YOUNG MAN
North Dakota. Just the other side
of the line. Not that there's work
there either. No good work anyway.
But they got a Weboy or two.

MARGARET
Well, maybe we should give there a
try. Though I don't know why Lorna
and Donnie would have been talking
up Forsyth like they did.

Her eyes light on items under the counter's display glass;
blade-sharp spurs and knives, skins, snake rattles...

YOUNG MAN
What was your names again?

GEORGE
Any idea who we might ask to find
Donnie if we went to Gladstone?

The Young Man reaches up a hand, rakes his stitches; itchy.

YOUNG MAN
You let it be known you're looking
for a Weboy, they'll find you.

52 **EXT. BADLANDS - DAY**

52

An armada of mountain-high clouds sails the sky over the
endless bleak landscape in ringing silence.

Light and shadow paint the land in undulating waves as a
faint droning growl pierces the vacuum, growing, until...

George and Margaret's car appears, tiny in the distance.

53 **INT. BLACKLEDGE'S CAR - DAY - (MOVING)/EXT. BADLANDS**

53

Patsy Cline crackles and fades on the radio. Margaret tries
to chase her on the dial, but Patsy evaporates into static.

Margaret fishes around as a sign flies past - WELCOME TO NORTH DAKOTA, and a VOICE suddenly leaps from the radio.

VOICE (O.S.)

What you have done to your Christ!
How you made him suffer! *Crucified*
him! Spilled *his* blood! For your
sins--!

George snaps the radio off.

MARGARET

Goodness.

GEORGE

Turn it back on if you want.

MARGARET

I don't want it, either.

She rearranges herself on the seat, leans against the window.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Sounds like your Daddy. Thumping
his bible.

GEORGE

Wasn't just bibles he thumped.

He scrolls his window down to let in a jet of air, blowing a fine grit of the pulverized land.

54

EXT. BADLANDS - DAY

54

A buffeting breeze reaches George and Margaret, perched on a mesa overlooking the distant small city of Gladstone; a grid-like concentration of buildings spread out as randomly as buckshot across the desolate valley below.

MARGARET

You're with me on this, right?

GEORGE

I'm right behind you.

His tone, flat as the land before them, turns Margaret from the view to study her husband's profile.

MARGARET

I don't want you behind me, George.
I want to know you're beside me.

GEORGE
Who's been doing the driving?

MARGARET
You could say you want him back. I
haven't heard that yet.

George turns now, selects his words with great care; coaxing
an animal in a direction it doesn't wish to go.

GEORGE
We're not young, Margaret.

MARGARET
(laughs)
Well, we're not old.

GEORGE
We're not young.

Margaret looks across the valley, away from George, who
clocks a slithering movement in the pebbled dust behind her.

A black and tan snake oils a path for Margaret's turned back.

MARGARET
You saying you don't miss him?

George snatches the snake up and flings it away.

GEORGE
I'm saying he's not even in school
yet. Years before he'll read. He
hasn't had measles. Or rode a
bike. He's young. And we're not.

Margaret stands, oblivious of having been saved from a snake,
dusts the back of her pants.

MARGARET
Well, you can drive me into town
then. Drop me off and turn around,
take yourself back home. I'll do
what I need to do and take a bus
back to Dalton with Jimmy.

GEORGE
Once Lorna's handed him to you. A
smile on her face, happy as a clam.
And if they're not down there?
What? You gonna chase them around
the country on a bus?

Margaret pulls a face.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
 What if they go where Greyhound
 doesn't?

MARGARET
 I'll walk.

GEORGE
 (a resigned laugh)
 You would too. And when you
 finally learn that what you want to
 make happen isn't going to happen?
 What then, Margaret Meloy?

MARGARET
 I suppose I'll learn what I've
 never been able to. Isn't that
 what you've told me? Over and
 over? That I don't know when it's
 time to call it quits.

George stands now, shies a rock at the far distant town.

GEORGE
 Yep. And I'll be the one gets the
 job of picking up those pieces.

55 **EXT. BADLANDS - DAY**

55

George and Margaret trudge back from their lookout as the sun
 falls, walking together but separate, lots of space between.

George spots the shape of a horse, and then a MAN leading it,
 by his and Margaret's car.

He blinks. Is it James? His son? A phantom? Then he sees
 that the Man is nosing around the parked car, peering inside.

GEORGE
 Hey!

Margaret looks up and sees the Man and horse too.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
 The gun.

They both break into a run and the Man jumps on his horse.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
 Halt! *Right* there!

The Man throws up his hands, astride the horse, and Margaret
 grabs the horse's worn bridle while George goes for the car.

MAN
 Okay! Okay! I didn't take
 nothing. I was just--

MARGARET
 You were just what?

Face to face, Margaret now sees the Man for what he is;
 barely twenty, Native American, more skittish than his horse.

MAN
 Fishing.

GEORGE
 Fishing around this car.

MAN
 No, sir. I'm coming from fishing.

He indicates the rod tied to his horse, pulls a bundle of
 fish from a tackle box as George joins them.

MAN (CONT'D)
 I just seen your car, and was
 wondering who's setting up camp out
 here. That's all.

GEORGE
 And who are you?

MAN
 Peter Dragswolf, sir. I live over
 there. Have my own place.

He lifts his chin to the other side of a rise.

PETER
 I've got my own money, too. I
 don't need none of your goods.

Margaret strokes his horse's long nose; the animal's quiet
 ease rendering a verdict for her on Peter himself. She
 flicks a glance at George, then extends a hand to Peter.

MARGARET
 I'm Margaret Blackledge, Mr.
 Dragswolf. This is my husband,
 George. Sorry if we're trespassing.

PETER
 Where you're standing's as much
 yours as mine.

MARGARET

And what's this girl's name?

PETER

Can't say. She don't belong to me.
But, I call her Silverflower.

Margaret regards the horse warmly, like an old friend.

GEORGE

How'd you come by her?

PETER

She come by me. Showed up outside
my shack one morning. Out of the
snow last February. Thought she
was wild at first, but...

(shrugs)

She came from somewhere I don't
know. But, she found me.

MARGARET

Same as us.

56

EXT. BADLANDS - SUNSET

56

The horse's pounding hoofs churn up dust as she gallops,
hanging a gossamer contrail bright as flame behind her in the
evening air, lit by the lowering sun as it settles.

The horse rockets forward, arrow-straight, neck lunging,
surrendered to Margaret on her back, and the joy of motion.

Margaret suddenly pulls the reins hard to the right, and the
horse follows easy, wheeling around, and Margaret whoops.

George sits with Peter on the hood of the car, watching
Margaret turn the horse again and spur the animal.

PETER

Maybe the horse belongs to her.

GEORGE

Near about every horse does.

Margaret sails past, all-but-standing in the saddle, as the
horse reaches speed, legs a blur.

CUT TO:

Margaret dances the horse through various walks, turns, and
tricks, the two in natural rhythm, and George tracks his wife
becoming easier, more fluid, as she remembers an old self.

57

EXT. BADLANDS - DUSK

57

MARGARET

I used to ride.

Peter watches his fish roast over a fire as Margaret prepares a meal and George finishes pitching his and Margaret's tent, the lights of Gladstone peppering the distant valley floor.

GEORGE

She's being modest with you.

MARGARET

I used to break horses. Along with our son, James. Then he died. And I guess I lost my appetite for it.

George stops working, watches his wife stare into the fire a thoughtful beat, then she looks to the horse tied to the car.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Haven't kept animals for a while. It's nice to spend time with a sweet one like your girl there.

PETER

I'm sorry. About your son.

George comes to join Peter and Margaret at the fire.

GEORGE

What about you? How long you been out here?

PETER

Three years?

MARGARET

All on your own? No family?

Peter shrugs, circumspect.

GEORGE

Where were you before?

PETER

(vaguely)
Indian school, sir.

GEORGE

You don't have to call me sir. George'll do the job.

MARGARET

You finished that school? How old are you?

Peter stands abruptly, stepping toward the horse, escape.

PETER

I don't bother anybody. If somebody comes for the horse they can have her back. The skins I sell, those are animals I catch. The fish are free. I don't steal. I mind my own business.

George and Margaret don't even look at one another, neither moving, as Peter remains standing uncertainly, ready to flee.

GEORGE

That's a good business. Sit.

Margaret portions food onto three tin plates.

MARGARET

Peter. Come eat what you caught.

Slowly, he returns to accept the plate she offers.

PETER

Thank you.

MARGARET

Thank you.

She passes a plate to George as Peter sits, and they eat.

GEORGE

You're familiar with the area, though. Gladstone.

PETER

I can tell you where the folks are buried that ain't buried in the cemeteries.

GEORGE

Weboys?

Peter stops chewing, swallows.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

You had any dealings with them?

PETER

I go careful through life so I
don't have dealings with Weboys.

George and Margaret exchange a glance.

MARGARET

We're looking for our grandson.
Our boy's boy.

GEORGE

He's with a man named Donnie Weboy.
You ever heard of him?

PETER

No. But, if you're looking in
Gladstone look for Bill Weboy.

GEORGE

You think he'd help us?

PETER

Help? Maybe. But... Go careful.

58 **EXT. BADLANDS - NIGHT**

58

Margaret wraps the last of her coffee cake in a dish towel
and gives it to Peter as he climbs up and sits in his saddle.

He shakes hands with the Blackledges and turns the horse for
the near hills.

Together, George and Margaret watch after the horse and rider
as they cross the rocky land beneath a dense river of stars,
and vanish over a ridge.

59 **EXT. GLADSTONE - STREET - DAY**

59

The Blackledge's car rolls slowly down a raw-looking street
in the shadow of Gladstone's water tower.

A tall MAN rakes leaves from the gutter into the road up
ahead in front of an unadorned house painted mint green.

60 **INT. BLACKLEDGE'S CAR - DAY - (MOVING)**

60

George and Margaret scrutinize houses as they drive.

MARGARET

That's got to be it. Only green
house on the street.

George pulls to the curb and the Man (40s, strangely handsome despite a shattered nose) lines himself up with the center of their car's hood and leans on his rake, staring with a grin.

George's brow furrows, but Margaret's quick out of the car.

61

EXT. BILL'S HOUSE - DAY

61

MARGARET

Mr. Weboy?

MAN

Who's asking?

George steps from the car, taking measure of this Man as Margaret goes to offer her hand and shake.

MARGARET

Margaret Blackledge. And my husband, George. If you're a Weboy, we're family. After a fashion.

MAN

How you figure that?

The Man shakes George's hand as he joins them, but his focus is wholly on Margaret as he unfolds a smile.

BILL

Bill Weboy. A cousin, are you?

MARGARET

Could be! But, probably not exactly. Our former daughter-in-law married a Donnie Weboy. He's step-dad to our grandson now. That's pretty tangled up, isn't it?

BILL

Like family usually is.

GEORGE

We heard they might have come to settle here in Gladstone.

MARGARET

We wanted to pay a visit. See our grandson, Jimmy. Since we were in the neighborhood.

BILL

Since you're in the neighborhood.
And since you didn't find them up
in Forsyth.

George eyes Bill narrowly while Margaret turns up the dial on her smile.

MARGARET

You heard we were coming, did you?

BILL

Oh, I did. I did. A little birdie
flew over here ahead of you.

He pinches the air to make a bird's beak.

BILL (CONT'D)

Cheep. Cheep. Cheep.

GEORGE

(enough with this guy)
Are they here or not?

Margaret shoots George a sharp look and Bill hooks a thumb.

BILL

Is he always like this? Big hurry.

MARGARET

My husband likes to get down to
business.

BILL

A hell of a lot of men are like
that. Can't wait to get to where
they're going. Women, in my
experience, would as soon take
their time.

(winks at Margaret)

Enjoy the ride, so to speak--

GEORGE

Mr. Weboy, I'm going to tell you--

BILL

Oh, they're here. I'm just funnin'
you, George. Donnie's my nephew!
They're safe and sound out at his
mom's place. Why don't we all go
inside and give the old homestead a
call? See if anybody's at home.

(MORE)

BILL (CONT'D)

Hell, maybe you can drive out there this morning and see that precious grandson of yours.

MARGARET

He is that to us, Mr. Weboy.

BILL

Doesn't even need to be said.

He starts for the house, flinging the rake onto the scorched patch of earth that passes for a yard. Margaret looks to George, who lifts his chin: let's get this done.

62

INT. BILL'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

62

BILL

Had your coffee yet? I could put a pot on.

Bill pauses in the center of the room as they follow him in.

MARGARET

We're fine. Thank you.

BILL

Well, make yourself at home. I'll make that call. See what their schedule is like.

He exits for the kitchen and Margaret surveys the home; spare as a furniture store, not one sign of hobby or habit.

George hears the heavy rattle and clunk of a wall phone's handset as it's lifted from its cradle in the kitchen.

BILL (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Hey, Mabel. Can you connect me with the ranch?

Margaret takes a seat on the davenport and George sits beside her, alert, his ear cocked toward the kitchen.

MARGARET

What? What is it?

George gives his head a tight shake.

BILL (O.S.)

Blanche! It's Bill.

MARGARET

What?

GEORGE
(quietly)
You don't want this man's help.

MARGARET
We can't do this on our own.

George turns slowly to his wife, but then there's the clatter of the telephone again and Bill suddenly enters the room.

BILL
You two have plans for supper?

MARGARET
(impulsively)
We surely don't.

George fixes Margaret with a look.

BILL
How would you like to be the guests of the Weboy clan out at the ranch?

Margaret hesitates, deferring now to George.

GEORGE
We don't want to be any trouble.

BILL
No trouble at all. My sister-in-law wants to meet you. Says you all can swap grandma-and-grandpa stories. And just between me and you, she's a hell of a cook.

Margaret turns to look at George as she addresses Bill.

MARGARET
You'd have to give us directions.

BILL
Nope. Not a chance. I could be the best damn direction-giver in the world and you still wouldn't find it. You'd be out there wanderin' all over Four Bridges Road and never see a one. No. You make your way back here at four o'clock and you can follow me.

The sun ducks behind a cloud and the room irises dim.

Not one of the three people moves. Then the sun reemerges, the room flares bright, and Margaret gets to her feet.

MARGARET

Thank you. We'll come back then.

63 **EXT. BILL'S HOUSE - DAY**

63

George takes Margaret's elbow as they walk towards their car.

She glances at him, but George isn't looking at her. He's scrutinizing the line of wires that run overhead, pole to pole down the street, bypassing the house they just left.

George gets Margaret in the car and takes a furtive look back at Bill's house as he goes around, but the dark windows make it impossible to tell if anyone's watching from inside.

64 **EXT. SCHOOL - GLADSTONE - DAY**

64

The empty seats of children's swings sway on rusty chains.

George idly eyes a CLUSTER OF YOUNG BOYS lighting matches in boredom and mischief in the distance as he eats a sandwich, seated beside Margaret on a cracked wooden bench overlooking the school's bone-dry playground. He checks his watch.

MARGARET

Time is it?

GEORGE

I'm thinking I should find a phone booth, give Jack Nevelson a call. See what he might know about your friend Bill Weboy.

MARGARET

What's there to know?

GEORGE

How he managed to make that call when there's no phone wire to his house. For starters.

He fishes the bottle of whiskey from his pocket and Margaret looks elsewhere as he takes a sip.

MARGARET

I thought you were done with that.

GEORGE

There's a lot I thought I was done with.

Margaret's head swivels to look at George askance, but he stands, tucks the bottle, and jerks his chin towards town.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Come on. Let's scout a hotel for tonight.

MARGARET

Hotel? We're heading home tonight. I don't need to stay a second longer than I have to in this place, thank you very much.

(decisively)

We get Jimmy, we start driving.

George laughs, an astonished exhale, and shakes his head.

GEORGE

Now, there's something you do. Count a thing done because you want it so.

Margaret surveys the withered houses that ring the school.

MARGARET

You've walked through Gladstone now. Seen this town, same as me. Tell me what there is here for a boy.

GEORGE

I'd think you'd be able to answer that for yourself easy enough.

MARGARET

Help me--

GEORGE

His *mother*, Margaret.

Margaret stops, looks up at George flatly a long beat.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Open your eyes, honey. See what's in front of you.

Margaret looks away.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

You're not going to get him back.

Margaret shakes her head and folds the rest of her sandwich away in its paper for something to do, then she stands.

She avoids George's eye as she angles around him and heads for their car.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
Can't leave me here. I've got the keys.

65 **EXT. BILL'S HOUSE - DAY**

65

The rake still lays in Bill's yard, right where he'd thrown it, when George and Margaret pull up out front.

Bill emerges from a truck parked alongside his house and ambles to the passenger window as Margaret rolls it down.

66 **INT. BLACKLEDGE'S CAR - DAY**

66

BILL
About time.

He flashes a smile and leans low to the window.

BILL (CONT'D)
One of you should ride with me and the other follow. I can tell you where we're going and why and that way maybe you can find your way back on your own.

He turns without waiting and starts away back to the truck, spinning his keys on a finger.

Margaret looks to George who shakes his head watching Bill go. She reaches for her door handle.

GEORGE
Where do you think you're going?

MARGARET
You think he wants you in the passenger seat?

GEORGE
(a sour laugh)
No, I know he doesn't.

They watch Bill climb into his truck, see him reach across and swing the passenger door open.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
I don't care what he wants. I'm going, you drive.

Bill's eyes move from the toy horse Margaret holds in her lap to explore the curve of her hip, her breast. He flicks his eyes to George following in the rearview mirror.

BILL

Pretty bird, that old jalopy won't have trouble keeping up, will it?

MARGARET

You're looking in the mirror often enough. You know where he is.

BILL

I guess he don't want you to get too far out of his sight. Which I understand.

He pulls a White Owl cigar from his shirt pocket.

BILL (CONT'D)

You mind?

MARGARET

Your car. You don't need my permission.

BILL

You strike me as the kind of woman a man is always asking permission of. Or excusing himself to.

MARGARET

An expert, are you? On kinds of women?

BILL

I've been around more than a few women who want men to ask before drawing a breath.

MARGARET

Well. Air is free, Mr. Weboy. And so are men.

BILL

You and I got a lot in common.

Margaret turns sharply to look at him, and Bill meets her with a sly wink and grin as he lights his cigar.

BILL (CONT'D)

Seems you're an expert, too.

Margaret cranks her window down an inch to let the smoke out.

MARGARET

And Mrs. Weboy? I'll bet she's an expert.

BILL

Blanche? Donnie's mom?

MARGARET

I meant your wife.

Bill draws deeply on his cigar, fills the car as he exhales.

BILL

You saw my place, how tidy it is? Used to be a regular pigsty. Or so my wife called it. Sniped away at me for years. "I'm sick of cleaning up after you." "Just leave it!" I'd say. "Who gives a damn?" Oh, we'd go round and round. Then her mother took sick, and Clara-- that was my wife--. Off to Idaho. To take care of her. "I'm leaving this house clean and I don't want to find it any different when I come back." Ha. I tore the place apart. Every room, right down to the lath. Opened it up real good. Me, a claw hammer, and Mr. Jack Daniels. Well, Clara comes back, the sight of the place scares the hell out of her. She saw to it I was locked up. For destroying something that belonged to me, if you can imagine. She cleared out while I was behind bars. Left me nothing but a bowl, a spoon, and a house without walls.

He checks Margaret, can tell she's listening, but she keeps looking straight ahead.

BILL (CONT'D)

I put that house back together. You saw it; walls just where they're supposed to be. Plastered and painted. The hell of it was, once I finished the place, I was finished with her. Now, that house ain't ever anything but neat as a pin, just the way Clara would like it. Except she's never setting foot inside again.

Margaret denies Bill a reaction when he looks to her again. He grinds out his cigar and they ride on in prickly silence.

BILL (CONT'D)

We turn here.

MARGARET

Why don't you signal instead of telling me so George knows what's coming?

Bill turns a smirking smile on Margaret.

BILL

Aye, aye, cap'n.

72 **INT. BLACKLEDGE'S CAR - DAY - (MOVING)**

72

George explicates where an unmarked road ahead will meet the highway so he's ready when Bill signals at the last possible second before swinging the truck from the blacktop onto dirt.

George spins the car's wheel, makes the sharp turn, and rocks and gravel explode beneath the vehicle as it leaves the pavement to follow in the truck's billowing wake.

73 **INT. BILL'S TRUCK - DAY - (MOVING)**

73

Margaret grips the armrest on the door out of Bill's sight as he speeds them along the rutted trail. She tries to keep an eye on George, obscured by dust in her side mirror.

MARGARET

How much further is it?

BILL

You mean how much more of me do you have to put up with?

MARGARET

(trying for lightness)

I--. We just want to see Jimmy.

BILL

(not buying it)

Yeah. Fine-looking boy there. And his mother is a good-looking woman. You know, Donnie never asked me for a word of advice in his life--

George ignores Bill, who laughing, shakes his head as he leads the way past a tree from which an engine block swings on a creaking rope over the open hood of ruined car.

George tracks the hammering and clanging coming from a nearby shed as he and Margaret climb the worn steps of the house's sagging enclosed porch, Bill holding open the screen door.

BILL (CONT'D)

After you.

77

INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - BACK PORCH - DUSK

77

George and Margaret navigate a path ahead of Bill through a clutter of shotguns, boxes of shells, snow shovels, boots, cans of kerosene, tumbling piles of firewood, farm catalogues, and broken jars of nails to reach the house door.

BILL

Blanche!

78

INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - KITCHEN - DUSK

78

The Blackledges step into the semi-dark room, similar in shape to their own kitchen, yet different in every other way.

A thin haze smudges the air, from cook smoke or the cigarette burning in an ashtray on the table over which a lamp hangs low, casting the only light in the apparently empty room.

BILL

We're here!

Bill enters behind George and Margaret, who have stopped.

BILL (CONT'D)

(calling into the house)

Blanche?

A slender white hand floats down to take up the burning cigarette on the table and lift it from the pool of light.

Only now is it clear that a WOMAN stands directly in front of them, though on the far side of the table, her dress blending into the background, her head obscured by the hanging lamp.

They hear her inhale on the cigarette, see the exhaled smoke.

Then she leans down, bringing her face into the lamp's light.

BLANCHE WEBOY's smile stretches over fifty years from one ear to the other, but there's nothing friendly in all that span. A fuss of makeup undermines her striking natural beauty.

BLANCHE

I hope you like pork chops.

George squints, getting a bead on this woman as Margaret rounds half the table, stretching out her hand to her.

MARGARET

My mouth's watering already.

BLANCHE

You're the grandma.

MARGARET

I am. Margaret Blackledge.

Blanche looks at Margaret's hand before she shakes it, clocks the stuffed horse in Margaret's other hand.

BLANCHE

Blanche Weboy.

MARGARET

Thank you for having us.

Blanche rotates her head in George's direction.

BLANCHE

And you're the lawman.

GEORGE

Retired, ma'am. George Blackledge.

He goes and shakes the hand she trails in the air before him.

BLANCHE

Well, why don't we all retire to a seat at the table? Shall we?

Bill double-times it to pull out a chair for Blanche, taking the seat beside her as she sits. George and Margaret seat themselves opposite, empty chairs separating the two couples.

Margaret rests the toy horse on the table set for dinner and Blanche picks up an open bottle of wine already there.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Now, who can I interest in a glass?

MARGARET

No, thank you.

Blanche looks to George, who shakes his head. She shrugs and refills the jelly glass in front of her.

BLANCHE

Well, I don't mind drinking alone.

She takes a long sip, stubs out her cigarette.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

(a prepared speech)

I was born Blanche Gannon. My people originally came from Illinois. Filed a homestead claim north of Gladstone before there was a Gladstone. I'm one of eight. Lost an older sister to pneumonia. My brother Carl drowned in a neighbor's cistern. Another fell off a truck; lived in a wheelchair the rest of his days. My aunt Ruth got caught in a white out. Froze and died, right where she stood, not thirty feet from that back door. Hard life. And not for everyone. My other brothers and sister lit out as soon as they could, never looked back. I stayed.

Thunder crashes overhead, startling everyone at the table with its nearness. Blanche lifts her eyebrows, laughs.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

When I first met Henry Weboy, he couldn't stop talking about heading for Florida. I figure I had more than a little to do with his decision to stay. Now he's buried in the same cemetery as my folks and his. And my boys are fourth generation Weboys and Gannons born and living on North Dakota soil.

Thunder rolls low as George watches Bill drape an arm across the back of Blanche's chair, intimate.

Blanche slides her gaze to George, then Margaret.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

But, you didn't come to hear me yak. You came to eat. Bill, why don't you call the boys for supper?

Bill jumps up and goes out the way they came in and Blanche moves to the oven to pull out a pan of charred chops.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

I suppose you could tell a story
not a hell of a lot different from
mine. Am I right? About family.
Hardships.

Neither George nor Margaret answer and Blanche turns to catch them glancing about for any sign of their grandchild.

Bill returns, trailed by TWO MEN (30s, nearly identical, both enormously tall and hulking, in grease-stained coveralls).

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Meet the boys. Tall one's Elton
and the other's Marvin.
(to her sons)
Say hello to our guests.

The brothers grab cans of beer from the refrigerator with oil-black hands, pop them open using a church-key on a string.

ELTON

That your wagon out there?

MARVIN

We tried to get inside. Take a
look.

ELTON

Tighten a couple bolts we could
probably get you a few more horses.

George ignores both sons as he slowly stands up to his full height.

GEORGE

Where's Jimmy? Where's the boy?

Blanche leans against the counter, lights another cigarette.

BLANCHE

Why he's not here. He's with his
daddy.

MARGARET

His father--!

George quiets Margaret with a staying gesture of his hand.

GEORGE

We came here to see our grandson.

BLANCHE

You mean you didn't come here to eat my pork chops?

The Weboy men join Blanche in a laugh.

GEORGE

If you brought us all the way out here for the sake of a joke...

BLANCHE

Lorna said you were rough bark.

She points her cigarette at Margaret.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

And I can see already you're no day at the races. No, ma'am.

She brings the pan to the table where Elton and Marvin grab seats and she forks chops onto each person's plate. She gestures for George to sit again.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Your grandson's with my Donnie. He took Jimmy along to pick up the boy's mother from work.

MARGARET

Lorna?

BILL

She's working at Monkey Ward.

MARGARET

In Gladstone? We could've seen Lorna and Jimmy in Gladstone?

BLANCHE

Now, I am feeling insulted by you. You really don't give a damn about sharing a meal.

MARGARET

(dialing herself back)
I just meant--

BLANCHE

Maybe you're a Jew. Maybe you can't eat pork chops.

Margaret looks to George, who regards Blanche unflinchingly from the far side of the table. Thunder rumbles outside.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Oh, breathe easy. Anyone who knows me knows I can't be insulted. Eat my chops or don't.

Her sons eat her chops. They gobble them up, seemingly oblivious to the tension at the table.

MARGARET

We'd certainly hoped to meet Donnie's family someday.

BLANCHE

Had you? Well, I'm glad to learn it. I thought we should meet too. Have ourselves a chat. It would have been nice if it was at the wedding. But, maybe that was too much to ask. For his mother to be invited. Or his brothers.

BILL

His poor Uncle Bill.

Margaret looks to George again, then back at Blanche.

MARGARET

You weren't invited? He didn't--?

BLANCHE

You recollect seeing us there?

Margaret blinks at the heat and absurdity of Blanche's blame.

MARGARET

And that's *our* fault?

BLANCHE

You didn't stop and think to yourselves, he must have come from somewhere? Must have family.

MARGARET

Frankly, we thought only that Donnie was a grown man.

Blanche studies Margaret a long, measuring beat.

BLANCHE

Your son's dead.

She blows smoke into the center of the table.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

It's understandable you forget.
We're never really done raising
them. Teaching them the right way.
Why I had to bring my boy home,
where I can keep an eye on him.

George watches his wife as Blanche stubs out her cigarette.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Your boy's perfect now. Not really
fair to compare him and Donnie.

MARGARET

I wouldn't ever compare Donnie to
our son.

Blanche's smile stretches unnaturally, Cheshire cat-wide.

BLANCHE

He says you two don't approve.

GEORGE

I'm surprised to hear he gives a
damn what we think. He couldn't be
bothered to let us know they were
leaving.

Blanche looks at George in surprise; he's been so quiet.

BLANCHE

My boy doesn't have to answer to
you.

GEORGE

(almost a laugh)
No. He does not.

MARGARET

And we don't have to answer to you.

Blanche's eyes go wide turning to Margaret and she brings
both hands slapping down on the table with a high hoot.

BLANCHE

Hoo! We better get some food in our
bellies before this get-together
turns into a real blood feud!

BILL

And we've got numbers on you.

A car's headlight's sweep the room.

BLANCHE

Why, here come the newlyweds now.

Everyone falls silent, waiting, listening for the slam of car doors that finally comes. Footfalls sound on the porch and Lorna and Donnie's voices pitched in hushed squabbling.

Donnie enters the room first, scanning all the faces turned in his direction. He reaches reflexively for his hat's brim on seeing George; a tell of deference as he removes it.

Blanche's eyes twitch in tracking this signal of respect from Donnie to this retired sheriff, who merely nods at her son.

Donnie steps aside to reveal Lorna, frazzled after a work day, in a blouse and skirt a size too big, Jimmy on her hip.

GEORGE

Lorna.

Lorna glances around; the Blackledge's car outside and her former-in-laws in here are all apparently fresh news to her.

Margaret has eyes only for her grandson, softening completely at the sight of him, a naked longing opening her face.

MARGARET

Hello, Jimmy.

George sees the boy's head snap in his grandmother's direction, recognition flaring bright in Jimmy's eyes.

Then the child glances furtively at Donnie, Blanche, the other men in the room, and he pops a thumb in his mouth.

BLANCHE

Uhn-uhn.

She hastily snatches his thumb out.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Am I right? Sure way to end up
with buck teeth.

Margaret rises from the table and walks to the boy, her arms floating out in front of her, extending, reaching.

MARGARET

May I?

George watches Jimmy fall into Margaret's arms, wrap his arms around her neck and bury his face; an animal hiding.

He sees his wife's eyes fill as she presses her nose to the boy's skull, his hair, breathing him in deeply.

She kisses the top of the boy's head and he squeezes her.

Lorna looks to Blanche who observes this reunion with a mask-blank face, then turns back to Margaret, laughs nervously.

LORNA

He's turning into quite a load.

DONNIE

I told you, you pick him up too much. How's he supposed to learn?

LORNA

Learn what? How to walk? He knows how to walk.

DONNIE

Hell, I'd probably unlearn how myself if someone carried me everywhere I wanted to go. That's flat-out spoiling him.

Margaret hefts the child in her arms, thinner than he was.

MARGARET

He weighs nothing.

BLANCHE

Has he eaten?

DONNIE

I got him a burger at Ressler's while we were waiting.

BLANCHE

And did he eat it?

DONNIE

Half.

BLANCHE

Does he want a pork chop? Some potatoes?

She tugs at Jimmy's trailing foot.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Do you? Can I cut up a little meat for you?

Jimmy won't lift his head from Margaret's shoulder.

JIMMY

No.

Blanche yanks harder on the toe of his shoe.

BLANCHE

What's that? What are you supposed to say?

He rolls his face away from Blanche and into Margaret's neck.

JIMMY

No, thank you.

Blanche lets go of his foot and looks to Lorna.

BLANCHE

Take him up to bed then.

George clenches his jaw, bracing.

MARGARET

What?

Lorna doesn't move but looks between the two women.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

We just--. He just got here.

BLANCHE

We believe in early-to-bed in this house.

She pats Jimmy's bottom in Margaret's arms.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

And we believe in walking up stairs on our own two feet.

Margaret backs away from Blanche, tightening her hold on Jimmy as her eyes dart from one Weboy to the next.

Bill strolls to stand in front of the back door.

BILL

Easy now, Grandma. You know who makes the rules around here.

George's chair scrapes the floor as he stands abruptly.

Marvin pushes away from the table at the same time, but remains in his chair, hands on his knees; ready.

A crack of thunder pins everyone in place; Margaret clutching the blinking child, the men cocked and tensed, Blanche turned casually toward the counter, and Lorna stuck in the middle.

Thunder booms again, with a crackling tail, then a hush. Finally, the hiss and patter of falling rain fills the room.

Elton spears another pork chop. Marvin takes a sip of beer. Donnie rolls his shoulder. And Bill slowly unwraps a cigar. Each Weboy man makes himself known, one way or another.

Margaret looks to George. He meets her desolate gaze, nods.

She holds, then slowly bends down and sets Jimmy on his feet. The boy looks up at her in bewilderment. Abandoned.

JIMMY

There was mustard.

MARGARET

On your hamburger?

Jimmy bobs his head and Margaret follows his gaze to the toy horse as he spies it on the table. Margaret picks up the horse, extends the old toy towards her grandson.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

You don't like mustard, do you?

He wags his head forlornly as he reaches for the horse, but Blanche claps her hands and the boy flinches at the sound.

BLANCHE

Off you go. Up the stairs.

MARGARET

Please...

BLANCHE

Now that you know where to find us,
you'll have to visit more often.

Donnie gives Lorna a shove and she lurches forward, reaches down to take her son's hand.

LORNA

Come on, Jimmy.

The boy slips his hand into hers and lets himself be led towards the dark mouth of a back staircase.

Margaret reflexively follows, pulled as by a magnet, still holding the stuffed horse in her hand.

MARGARET

Please...

GEORGE

That's enough.

He moves quickly to Margaret's side, encircling her shoulders with his arm, either to support or restrain her.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Enough.

Jimmy looks back at his grandparents from the stairwell, then matches his steps to Lorna's as they climb out of sight.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

(whispers to Margaret)

Don't beg.

The stuffed horse slips from Margaret's hand as George steers her now towards the door.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

We thank you, but we'll be on our way.

Blanche scoops the horse up from the floor and holds it out, but George has already maneuvered Margaret out the door.

BLANCHE

Well, I guess we know who matters to you. You're rushing off before the pie. But if you have to go, you have to go.

79 **INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - BACK PORCH - NIGHT**

79

George hustles Margaret through the labyrinth of junk, kindling, and spare parts, the tin roof ticking with rain.

BIL (O.S.)

Hey, Blackledges!

80 **EXT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - NIGHT**

80

BILL

Hold up there!

Bill appears on the porch behind them as George and Margaret reach the car, George unlocking Margaret's door in the rain.

BILL (CONT'D)

You need me to show you the way?

George mutters angrily but doesn't answer as he gets the door open and Margaret into her seat. Suddenly Bill is with them.

BILL (CONT'D)

If you left a trail of bread
crumbs, the coyotes have got 'em by
now. Or they washed away.

He passes the stuffed horse to Margaret, who vacantly turns the toy in her hands as though she's never seen it before.

BILL (CONT'D)

She won't say so, but I can tell.
Running off like this, you hurt
Blanche's feelings--

MARGARET

(instantly ignites)
Her feelings! We've come all this
way to see Jimmy--! Our grandson.
Not hers! And she gives us less
than two minute's time--!

George slams the door, cutting Margaret off, and heads around for the driver's side to unlock his own door.

GEORGE

Go back inside, Mr. Weboy.

BILL

Why was your car locked?

George stops Bill with a look across the car's roof, rain splattering the metal plane between them.

GEORGE

What're you doing out here?

Bill smirks, seems to realize the rain now.

BILL

Damned if I know.

He spits as he turns and heads back to the house, where a figure in a lit upstairs window snags George's eye; Lorna holding Jimmy, watching after him and Margaret.

George pauses a moment with the rain pelting down, then Lorna steps away from the window, leaving the empty frame behind.

Her cheeks flush red as they land at her counter and Margaret pretends interest in the trays of handkerchiefs on display.

Lorna turns to ring up the woman's purchase at the register, and becomes flustered; hits every wrong key, again and again.

LORNA
(to the Woman)
I'm sorry--

A rigid FLOOR MANAGER goes behind the counter to take over and Lorna steps back from the register in embarrassed defeat.

86

INT. MONTGOMERY WARD - MEN'S DEPARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER 86

LORNA
I didn't think you'd just go home.

Lorna comes to the opposite side of the counter from George and Margaret, who idly picks through a tray of handkerchiefs.

MARGARET
I'm like a bad penny.

Lorna doesn't respond, flicks her eyes to George with a small smile of greeting as she shifts from one foot to the other.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
Who watches Jimmy while you're here?

LORNA
Who do you think? Donnie. His mom. Or maybe you think I just tie him to a tree until I get home.

Margaret looks fully at Lorna now, stung.

MARGARET
You're a good mother, Lorna. I know that.

LORNA
(tell me another one)
Right.

MARGARET
I was merely wondering how you're working things out with this job.

George tracks Lorna glance at the Floor Manager who watches them all from a distance.

LORNA
Well, I just started, so...

GEORGE
We don't want to get you in
trouble. Can we buy you lunch?

LORNA
My break's not until noon.

MARGARET
Noon straight up?

Lorna sighs. How'd she get roped in already?

GEORGE
We'll meet you outside.

LORNA
No. I'll meet you at Ressler's.
It's across the street.

Margaret indicates the handkerchiefs.

MARGARET
Can we buy some of these from you?

Lorna shrugs, shakes her head.

LORNA
They're cheaper if you order by
catalogue.

The Floor Manager glares disapprovingly at the Blackledges as Lorna steps away to attend to another CUSTOMER.

87 **INT. RESSLER'S RESTAURANT - DAY**

87

George and Margaret watch Gladstone's PROFESSIONAL SET come for lunch from a booth at the rear, eyes on the front door.

Lorna enters with a quick backward glance, nervously making sure she wasn't being followed on the sidewalk, and walks briskly towards George and Margaret in the back.

88 **INT. RESSLER'S RESTAURANT - MOMENTS LATER**

88

WAITRESS
And to drink?

LORNA
Tea, please. With lemon.

The Waitress's face flickers at "lemon;" a request with airs.

She collects menus from the Blackledges and leaves them to sit with their former daughter-in-law in an awkward silence. The clap and ring of lunch hour dishes fills the void.

Lorna peeks at them both but it's George she finally addresses.

LORNA (CONT'D)

I was going to write. Once we got settled. It was kind of a last-minute decision. Coming here.

GEORGE

That Donnie's decision?

LORNA

(a mirthless laugh)
You met Blanche.

MARGARET

Well, we found you. That's the important thing.

Lorna's tea arrives and George watches her try to squeeze juice from a dried wedge of lemon with jittery fingers.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Jimmy *looks* bigger. Growing so fast.

LORNA

He's counting now. To ten. At first he'd just say the words, you know. One, four, five, two. But, now he understands they go in order. And I'm working on his alphabet. He can spell his name.

MARGARET

Smart. Right from the start.

Lorna attempts a sip of scalding tea, sets the burning cup down with a clatter; too hot. She stares at the cup a beat.

LORNA

He misses you. Both of you.

Margaret looks to George at this opening.

MARGARET

We miss him too. Both of you.
That's what we wanted to talk to
you about, Lorna. And I won't beat
around the bush.

(pauses, winding up)

I remember when James first
introduced us. This wonderful girl
he'd told us so much about. So
beautiful and funny. No family of
her own, but--

LORNA

Thought you weren't going to beat
around the bush. I have to be back
at the store by one. Just get to
it.

George smiles to himself at Lorna's show of grit, and she
catches him. She smiles herself, rolls her eyes.

MARGARET

All right. Here it is. Let Jimmy
come back with us.

Lorna's smile goes fast.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Not just a visit. I mean for good.

Lorna looks from Margaret to George; betrayed.

LORNA

(incredulous)

You--? You want me to give Jimmy
to you? Want me to give up my son?

MARGARET

You know he'd have a good home.
One he knows. One he remembers--

LORNA

Stop.

MARGARET

You know the school he'd go to.
The teachers he'd have--

LORNA

No! *God*. Stop! I can't hear this!

Her outburst hushes the nearest tables and the three sit in
silence until conversation and the scrape of cutlery resume.

MARGARET

(discreetly)

I saw Donnie hit Jimmy. On the street. I saw him hit you. And it didn't look like a first time.

Lorna drops her eyes again, reaches for her tea, but then remembers its heat and leaves it.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

A little or a lot, no amount's good. That's why we're here.

LORNA

You came to take him.

GEORGE

Lorna.

Lorna looks up at George's voice, its inherent authority.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

We came to help. Whatever the situation is.

(simply)

Jimmy can't stay there.

Margaret blinks in surprise at her husband's verdict. When did he come to this? She watches Lorna's eyes fill as George holds her with his sure gaze.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

He can't stay here.

LORNA

(almost a question)

He needs his mother.

MARGARET

You come with us then. You and Jimmy. Live with us. Like before. We'll take care of you too.

Now George looks to Margaret in surprise; he hadn't anticipated this invitation. Lorna checks George and he nods his ascent just as their meals arrive. None of them eat.

LORNA

We were supposed to have a place in town. That's what Donnie said. Or what they told him. What they promised. Now we're stuck out there.

She fidgets the frilled toothpick holding the sandwich together on her plate with zero appetite.

LORNA (CONT'D)

He'd kill me. Him and his mother. She couldn't care less if I fell off the face of the earth, really, but... She'd never let me go. Or Jimmy. Donnie got away from her once. She's not gonna let that happen again.

Tears stand in her eyes when she looks up, miserable.

LORNA (CONT'D)

I don't want him to grow up like them... To be like them.

Margaret gets up to slide into the other side of the booth beside Lorna, the young woman swiping her eyes dry.

MARGARET

Then you know what's right.

George sees Lorna's almost imperceptible nod.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

You want us to drive you out there? We can do that. Right now. Right, George? The three of us. We can get Jimmy. Pack you up. Take you home.

Lorna shakes her head, easing away from Margaret.

LORNA

No. No.

Margaret looks to George for help.

LORNA (CONT'D)

I'll meet you.

Margaret perks, tempers her relief.

LORNA (CONT'D)

They... Everyone's usually asleep by midnight. One at the latest. I'll have to wait. To make sure.

George's brow knits.

GEORGE

Lorna, you sure that's the way you want to do this? We should come get you--

LORNA

No. This is the way. The safest way. Trust me.

George reads a dark weight in the urgency of Lorna's insistence, her look specifically to him.

MARGARET

Well, that's... That's what we all want most, isn't it? For you and Jimmy to be safe. And happy.

Lorna almost laughs. Happy?

MARGARET (CONT'D)

We're staying at the Moon Wink.

LORNA

Okay.

MARGARET

Cabin 7. At the Moon Wink Motor--

LORNA

I heard you. I know where it is.

She calculates the timing of her plan, looks to George.

LORNA (CONT'D)

I should be there by two. But, we'll have to leave then. Right when I get there. No waiting.

George nods tightly.

89

INT. RESSLER'S RESTAURANT - DAY

89

Margaret watches Lorna exit through the glass front door while she waits in line with George at the CASHIER.

On impulse, she takes off after Lorna, pushes outside.

MARGARET

Lorna! Wait!

George looks out to the street where Lorna spins back at the curb and furtively scans the CROWD as Margaret walks to her.

90 **EXT. GLADSTONE - STREET - DAY**

90

MARGARET

Lorna, I know we haven't always
seen eye to eye--

LORNA

I don't know if we've ever seen eye
to eye.

Margaret laughs; fair enough.

MARGARET

We will, Lorna. I promise.

LORNA

You're just saying that to make
sure I go with you.

Margaret shakes her head. No. That's not why.

MARGARET

Jimmy needs his mother.

Lorna nods, bright tears springing to her eyes.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

You could have used one too. I
could have been that to you. I
should have been. But, I wasn't.

LORNA

It's okay...

MARGARET

(emotional)

I'm sorry, Lorna. I should have
been... much more to you.

91 **INT. RESSLER'S RESTAURANT - DAY**

91

CASHIER

Your change, sir.

George receives his change without looking; all his attention
on Lorna hugging Margaret on the busy sidewalk outside.

If he weren't seeing this for himself, he'd never believe it.

He stops just inside the door, not wanting to interrupt
Margaret and Lorna's embrace. The two women finally part.

Margaret goes to her husband and snakes her arms around his naked chest from behind, rests her chin on his shoulder.

He smiles at her in the mirror and leans his head into hers.

She kisses the back of his neck.

GEORGE

Don't start what you can't finish.

Margaret smiles, wraps her arms more tightly around George and he turns to face her. They look at each other, studying.

George kisses Margaret. She meets him in the embrace.

George unbuttons Margaret's shirt, his mouth on hers, and pulls her against him. She breaks off with a laugh, and a teasing indication of his arousal, smiling.

MARGARET

Who's not young now?

George grins.

GEORGE

Come here.

They meet again in a deep kiss, to pursue what they started.

96 **INT. FANCY RESTAURANT - NIGHT**

96

George and Margaret follow a HOSTESS to a table in Gladstone's best restaurant; white tablecloths, candles.

They each wear the finest clothes they've brought on the trip; Margaret in a dress, George sporting a jacket.

He pulls out Margaret's chair for her, holds it as she sits, his courtliness painting an amused smile on his wife's face.

97 **INT. FANCY RESTAURANT - MONTAGE - NIGHT**

97

A SERIES OF SHOTS: The Blackledges order from oversized menus, sip cocktails, take in other PATRONS. A sweet air of playful intimacy ghosts them; two kids out on a date.

98 **INT. FANCY RESTAURANT - NIGHT**

98

A WAITRESS delivers their meals, and George considers the steak she sets in front of him as he drains his glass.

GEORGE

I've had more restaurant food in three days than I have in the last five years.

MARGARET

We'll be home soon.

The Waitress picks up George's empty cocktail glass.

WAITER

Would you care for another?

MARGARET

Not for me, but he'll have one.

The Waitress turns to leave...

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Actually, Miss...

Margaret swallows the last of her drink in one go, salutes George with her empty glass, and hands it to the Waitress.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Me too.

George smiles at Margaret who grins back.

GEORGE

Can you answer something for me?

MARGARET

Oh. Okay.

She folds her hands primly; teasing, flirting with him.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I'll do my level best.

GEORGE

That horse of yours. Strawberry.

MARGARET

Strawberry?

Margaret could not have guessed at George's direction.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I loved that horse. Rode her to school every day. Doug Vance and I were the only kids that came on horseback. Real "country." We got teased merciless.

(MORE)

MARGARET (CONT'D)

(pauses)
What brought that up?

GEORGE

(ponders)
Seeing you ride again.

Margaret studies her husband.

MARGARET

You had a question?

GEORGE

Something I've always wondered about. When we had to put her down. You whispered to her. Do you remember? Like you were telling secrets.

Margaret nods softly.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

What was it you told her?

MARGARET

I reminded her of things. How she liked to gallop through the first snow every year. About the time we raced Ernie Dahlberg and his big chocolate mare and left them choking in our dust. I reminded her of this one time, I was in high school, some October, we were heading home and the full moon was just coming up over Dollar Butte and she stopped. Stopped and stared. Like she cared about the moonrise as much as me. And when we put James on her back the first time, and she stood so still like she knew she had to take care of him...

She trails off, falls silent, lost in her own thoughts... Then she comes back with a teary smile.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I wanted to send her on her way with happy memories.

GEORGE

I'm sorry.

Margaret dabs at her eyes with her napkin, laughs at herself.

He opens its empty cylinder with a snap of his wrist, loads bullets in, and spins the cylinder back into the gun's frame.

He turns with the gun to the rust-colored mare standing in the shaft of sunlight flooding through the tall open doors, gray hairs edging all her features, like a lacy frost.

Margaret (30s) whispers closely in the horse's ear, words only she and the animal can hear, as she strokes its head and George comes to stand five feet in front of the old horse.

George takes a mental bead, gun still at his side, as Margaret raises the animal's head to face him. He nods.

Margaret drapes sheeting across the horse's cataract-clouded eyes, wraps its head. She kisses the fabric and steps away.

She goes to James (9) in the open doorway and folds him in, turning him with her to face out, to face the open land. Her eyes swim as she waits, tensed for the gun's report.

George lifts the revolver and aims it at the shrouded head of the animal standing still and tall as a mountain before him.

His finger tightens on the trigger.

Margaret covers her son's ears...

102

INT. MOON WINK MOTOR COURT - CABIN - NIGHT

102

BANG!

George's eyes open in the dark, Margaret stirring beside him.

BANG! Another knock sounds at the door, a voice outside.

MAN (O.C.)

Mr. Blackledge? Mrs.? We have an emergency here!

George gets himself up and to the door while Margaret fumbles for the light switch.

MARGARET

Is it Lorna?

George opens the door and then struggles to shut it again just as fast, fighting against a force from the other side.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

George--?

The door flies open and George staggers back as Marvin and Elton shoulder their way in, followed by Bill Weboy.

GEORGE

What the hell? Get out!

Margaret pulls herself up as the men step aside to make room for Donnie to enter, Blanche Weboy bringing up the rear.

MARGARET

You can't come in here!

BLANCHE

Too late for that, Grandma. We're in.

She closes the door and slips its locking chain in place.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

He let us in.

GEORGE

No. You get the hell out now.

He moves for the door, but Marvin cuts him off and Elton barricades the door with his body, his back against it.

George looks to Donnie, but Donnie won't meet his eye.

Bill circles the bed, stopping near Margaret, while Blanche drops a canvas satchel heavy with shifting tools on the mattress with a clank and takes a seat on the other side.

BLANCHE

See, you think you can gang up on Lorna. But then when it's done to you, it's a different story.

MARGARET

What are you talking about?

BLANCHE

Is that what you're going to do? Pretend like you don't know what I'm talking about? Pretend like you two didn't jump Lorna at work? Shame on you.

ELTON

Two against one.

George abruptly stops taking measure of each Weboy and their position in the room when Blanche turns her attention on him.

BLANCHE

Shame on both of you. Badgering and bullying her. To give up her boy.

She turns back to Margaret and George resumes casing the room, estimating his distance to the open suitcase laying on the dresser behind Bill. He begins inching his way there.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

You're lucky Lorna doesn't have a little mama grizzly in her. Come between that kind of mama and her baby... You're fixing to get your hand bit. Or worse than.

MARGARET

That's not exactly what happened.

BLANCHE

Somebody would have tried to come between me and one of *my* boys? Tried to talk me out of *my child*--?

MARGARET

That's not what--

BLANCHE

It's no wonder Lorna don't want to go with you. It's a wonder she lasted long as she did in your house. Big bull-hen, always sure you know what's best for everybody.

She lifts an eyebrow to George, half his way to the suitcase.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Pecking *you* to death, no doubt.

MARGARET

I never said she shouldn't marry Donnie.

Blanche reels back, pointing a finger at Margaret, laughs.

BLANCHE

Oh-ho! I never said you had!

MARGARET

He hit the boy.

Blanche cocks her head at Margaret, who turns to Donnie.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I saw you. Across the street from the IGA. Jimmy dropped his ice cream... And you hit him.

BLANCHE

Is that what all this fuss is about? He hit--? Grandma, you gonna tell me you didn't paddle your own? Not ever?

MARGARET

He knocked him to the ground. He hit Lorna too.

Blanche turns, focuses on Donnie now as well.

BLANCHE

Come here.

George takes a step towards the suitcase when Donnie goes to Blanche, but gets blocked by Elton as bodies shuffle in the too-tight room. Blanche waves Donnie down to her level.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

You hit your wife?

MARGARET

I saw him.

BLANCHE

How'd he do it?

MARGARET

With his hand.

Blanche rolls her eyes and hooks a thumb at Margaret.

BLANCHE

Alberta Einstein. I know his *hand*. I'm asking *how*. Like--?

She lashes out, whip-quick, slaps Donnie in the face.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Was it like that?

Margaret blinks, too shocked to respond.

George watches Blanche's other sons as she slaps Donnie again; dull-eyed at the sharp crack of flesh on flesh.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)
 Donnie, how'd you do it?
 (turns to Margaret)
 How was it?

MARGARET
 It was harder.

BLANCHE
 Harder? Like this?

Blanche slaps Margaret. A lightning strike; fleet, stinging.

The room goes still and George sees Blanche's handprint rise red on his wife's cheek, but Margaret never flinches.

MARGARET
 Like that. But, harder.

Blanche smiles.

BLANCHE
 Donnie, I think you're going to
 have to show us how you done it--

George lunges for Donnie but Marvin knocks him sideways, and George falls, striking his head on the bed's iron frame.

MARGARET
 George!

Margaret scrambles the length of the bed as a gash opens above George's left eye. He blinks, dazed, wipes blood from his brow as he hauls himself up unsteadily by the suitcase.

GEORGE
 (reassuring Margaret)
 I'm okay.

BLANCHE
 Yeah? Maybe you want to try
 talking this over again now like
 reasonable folks. Or maybe you'd
 prefer gettin' some sleep so you
 can get an early start back home
 tomorrow?

Bill drifts closer to Margaret now at this end of the bed, glancing briefly at George, who appears woozy, unfocused.

BILL
 Or maybe you'd like to send him
 home while you stay on for a spell.
 (MORE)

BILL (CONT'D)

I could take you back when you're ready. Of course, by then you might decide you'd rather stay.

He snakes a finger inside the neck of Margaret's shirt as George reaches his hand behind his back to the open suitcase.

BILL (CONT'D)

We could go for another ride.

Margaret slaps his hand away.

MARGARET

I want to take Jimmy back with me.

BLANCHE

I know what you want, woman!

Margaret doesn't back down; meets Blanche, glaring fiercely.

MARGARET

I will not let you ruin him.

Blanche holds a beat, then gets up without a word, nodding to Bill; a shrugged signal of permission. She's all yours.

BILL

Yeah?

He winks at Margaret as he starts towards her on the bed.

GEORGE

Stop! Right there!

Everyone spins to George, holding the gun pointed directly at Bill's head, not as dazed as he's been pretending.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

You move away from her.

Bill raises his hands in surrender and starts slowly easing back from Margaret, but Elton makes a run at George.

Margaret screams as George turns the gun on Elton.

Bill grabs the satchel of tools and swings it, knocking the gun from George's hands at the same time Elton hits George.

BANG!

The gun fires hitting the floor at the same time as George; a stunningly loud concussion in the small space. George crawls for the gun...

BLANCHE

Get it! Get the gun!

Marvin, Bill, and Elton scramble to get the revolver before George, sending it skittering across the scuffed linoleum, where it stops at the toe of Donnie's boot. He picks it up.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

Get him up.

The brothers haul George to his feet and pin him against the wall, bleeding again from the cut above his eye.

Blanche takes the gun from Donnie to examine, shaking her head in a show of regret, looks between George and Margaret.

MARGARET

Please...

Blanche retrieves the canvas satchel from the floor and opens it on the dresser. She reaches in among the clanking items.

She locates what she wants and slowly draws it out; a long-handled, iron combination tool with a double-sided head. Hammer and hatchet both. A Farmer's Ever-Ready Toolkit.

George surges against Marvin and Elton, already knowing what's coming as Blanche holds the heavy tool out to Donnie.

DONNIE

What--? What do you want me to do?

Blanche impatiently forces the tool on him, repositioning it in his reluctant hand, hatchet blade leading.

BLANCHE

Make sure he can't pull a gun on us again.

MARGARET

No!

George bucks and fights, breaks one arm free to punch Marvin.

Elton hangs on, grinding an elbow into George's throat as Margaret screams. The men wrestle George, pin his right hand down on the dresser top. Bill forces George's fingers apart, splays them over the lip of the dresser as George kicks.

Donnie looks miserably between George's hand and the tool.

BLANCHE

I'm teaching you to teach *him*.
See?

George storms against the brothers holding him down and Bill cracks him on the back of the head.

MARGARET

Stop! Please! Stop! Please...

Donnie glances around the room as if for an exit, an escape.

BLANCHE

Quicker's better.

Donnie swallows and hefts the Ever-Ready.

MARGARET

Donnie! Don't!

George locks his eyes on Donnie's; the fierce, sternly challenging glare of a steady parent. Don't. Don't. Don't.

GEORGE

Donnie. You don't have to.

Donnie wields the tool up over his head.

MARGARET

Donnie, please!

Donnie looks at George as he steels himself. George shakes his head, a single, tight shake. No.

BILL

Do it, boy!

GEORGE

Donnie--

Donnie swings his arm down and the hatchet's blade plants itself in the dresser's wooden top, separating George's index, middle, and ring fingers from the rest of his hand.

His pinky hangs by a horrible, mangled thread of skin.

Margaret screams, yet George barely grunts at the blow. His knees fold beneath him and he slides silently to the floor.

Margaret scrambles down to throw herself over George as Bill pries the Farmer's Every-Ready blade out of the dresser.

MARGARET

George! My God! George...

Blanche watches Donnie turn away from what he's done as she opens the satchel for Bill to drop the tool inside.

BILL
 Won't be doing much shooting now.

Marvin picks up one of George's fingers, goofing.

MARVIN
 Trigger finger.

He drops it as Donnie unchains the door to bang out of the cabin, leaving the door open behind him.

Marvin and Elton follow him out as Blanche strips a pillow of its case and slips the gun inside.

BLANCHE
 I'll hang on to the evidence if you don't mind.

She takes a last look around the cabin, at Margaret crying on the floor with George, shakes her head.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)
 Lorna told me you don't even go to church. Yet you think you're the ones ought to be raising that boy.

She sniffs as if disappointed in the room itself, and leaves.

BILL
 Safe drive, you two.

He closes the door behind himself, leaving them alone.

MARGARET
 George. What have I done to you?

GEORGE
 You haven't done a goddamn thing to me. Not yet, anyway. But you're going to have to drive me to the hospital.

103 **EXT. MOON WINK MOTOR COURT - NIGHT**

103

MARGARET
 We should call the police.

George spies someone watching them from the motel office window as he gets in the car with Margaret, twisting a towel tightly around his hand.

The office light snaps off.

GEORGE

We're on our own, Margaret.

She urgently glances about, sees a GUEST lower the paper blind in the window of another cabin. No one wants trouble.

104 **INT. BLACKLEDGE'S CAR - NIGHT - (MOVING)**

104

Margaret drives the night streets of Gladstone, turning down one street and then another, navigating by instinct and hunch, on the lookout, all the while keeping one hand tethered to George, slumped against the passenger door.

She looks over at his gray pallor, inert form.

MARGARET

George?

GEORGE

You haven't lost me yet.

105 **EXT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT**

105

The Blackledge's car pulls up to the entrance and Margaret jumps out, runs around to the other side.

106 **INT. HOSPITAL - EXAMINING ROOM - NIGHT**

106

The blood-soaked towel is unwrapped, revealing George's mutilated hand; crimson gristle, bone, the dangling pinky.

A DOCTOR (30s) looks up in shock from the hand to George, Margaret beside him, and an attending NURSE (40s).

DOCTOR

This was an axe, you said?

George's thin lips barely move, white in this light.

GEORGE

I didn't. A hatchet.

NURSE

Police are on the way.

The Doctor examines the hand more closely under a lamp.

DOCTOR

Look. I can put you under, or I can numb it up and you stay--

GEORGE
Awake. I'll stay awake.

DOCTOR
Ma'am, you're welcome to wait out--

MARGARET
You'd have to carry me out. I'm
not leaving him.

George smiles faintly at Margaret's fire.

GEORGE
She's a little excited.
(a joke)
Mittens are easier to knit than
gloves.

107 **INT. HOSPITAL - EXAMINING ROOM - LATER** 107

The doctor cleans George's wounds, the stumps of his fingers, trimming back the ragged skin to stitch with black thread.

Margaret grips her husband's good hand, leaning her head on his broad back, facing away from the Doctor and Nurse's work.

George sits upright, rigid, and pale as dawn as he's sewn together, eyes fixed unwavering on a far distant point.

108 **EXT. VALLEY - DAY** 108

VIEW: From a horizon line across a great amber valley, a range of mountains soar skyward, mantels of violet snow draping their shoulders, crowning their craggy peaks.

109 **INT. HOSPITAL - GUEST ROOM - DAY** 109

A panoramic photograph of mountains hangs above the bed in which George recovers, hand bandaged, Margaret sitting vigil in a chair beside him, lost in fretful contemplation.

A window on the opposite wall offers counterpoint; Gladstone's grim downtown and its omnipresent water tower.

A knock at the open door draws Margaret's attention to the MAN (40s, potbellied) standing there in sheriff's uniform.

110

INT. HOSPITAL - GUEST ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

110

SHERRIF

Well, now, I've already been out to the Weboys's and had a chance to hear their side of--

MARGARET

Their side--? Side of what?

George restrains Margaret at her perch on the edge of his bed while the Sheriff prowls the room, a bad actor on stage.

SHERRIF

The way they tell it, it's Mr. Blackledge who pulled a gun--

MARGARET

In self-defense!

SHERRIF

(to George)

That your service revolver Blanche showed me?

George eyes this Sherrif striking a pose at the window and finds not one thing he likes.

GEORGE

I'm sure it is.

SHERRIF

You wore the badge once.

MARGARET

He wore it over thirty years.

SHERRIF

Then you know how the law works.

GEORGE

I've got a fair idea I know how it works around here.

The Sherrif shows his teeth, but he's not smiling.

SHERRIF

Blanche explained things got a tad rough persuading you to set your weapon down.

MARGARET

They chopped off his hand--!

George gives Margaret a squeeze with his good hand; cool it.

SHERRIF

Their account is that the two of you came here looking to take a child away from his mother. First with talk. Threats. Then a gun.

MARGARET

Lorna. The boy's mother. Did you see her--?

SHERRIF

Oh, sure. She was there--

MARGARET

And you spoke with her? She's terrified of them, you know. She's--

SHERRIF

She was married to your son?

GEORGE

She was.

SHERRIF

He died. Right? He's dead.

George regards the oily man, doesn't bother answering.

SHERRIF (CONT'D)

How exactly did that happen?

GEORGE

Why don't you tell us?

SHERRIF

An accident, she said. Thrown from his horse. Broke his neck. Snapped in two. An accident.

He sighs sadly, points to George's hand.

SHERRIF (CONT'D)

An accident.

Margaret opens her mouth to object, but then closes it.

SHERRIF (CONT'D)

Blanche Weboy expressed real concern. How accidents follow your family. She fears for that little one she's looking after now.

(MORE)

SHERRIF (CONT'D)

And how the longer you two stick around the chances of something happening to him... Well, those chances keep creeping up. I don't even want to contemplate what a tragedy that would be.

He gazes out to the water tower, wags his head with a sigh.

SHERRIF (CONT'D)

Nothing smaller in this world than a kid's casket.

He gives this all the air it wants then turns back to the Blackledges, Margaret now faded as gray as George.

SHERRIF (CONT'D)

Consensus over there is you won't be making any more trouble here. And because you are family, by a way, the Weboys aren't going to press charges. You are free to go.

George glares at the Sherrif who pushes away from the window, begins a slow showy amble towards the door.

SHERRIF (CONT'D)

If I were giving out advice--

GEORGE

You can save that.

SHERRIF

Well. See. I'm thinking on your grandson here... He's a Weboy now.

Margaret turns her anguished face to George.

SHERRIF (CONT'D)

Best you put Gladstone behind you.

111 **EXT. MOON WINK MOTOR COURT - DAY**

111

Margaret throws their suitcases into the back of the car.

SHERRIF (V.O.)

Just as quick as you can.

She climbs behind the wheel beside George, his arm in a sling, and pulls the car out of the lot and onto the road.

112 **INT. BLACKLEDGE'S CAR - DAY - (MOVING)**

112

Margaret drives, her face a map of worry, passing a sign by the side of the highway: GOODBYE, GLADSTONE - COME BACK SOON!

GEORGE

Pull over.

Margaret glances at George, his eyes closed, head lolling.

MARGARET

What's wrong?

GEORGE

Just pull over.

MARGARET

Are you going to be sick?

GEORGE

Pull over, goddamnit!

113 **EXT. HIGHWAY - GLADSTONE - DAY**

113

Margaret wrests the car to the shoulder of the highway and George clumsily shoves his door open, nearly tumbles out.

He catches himself and sits bent over, breathing hard, while Margaret scrambles out of the car and around to his side.

MARGARET

George? Are you all right? Talk to me.

GEORGE

(covering)

I'm fine.

She lowers herself to his level, touches him.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

I needed to stop s'all. Give me a second.

He leans back on the seat, sweat beading his pallid brow, and Margaret stands to scan the empty landscape helplessly.

A wind catches her hair, whipping it around, and she turns in that direction to pull it from her face.

She surveys the scrubby horizon thoughtfully, focusing, turns again and scrutinizes the ragged foothills and bluffs.

The bright chirp of a bridle's bit and the thump of a hoof draw Margaret's attention to the shack's open back door and Peter removing the horse's tack just outside.

She observes the young man tending to the animal that rubs his shoulder with its chin; one creature caring for another, the other wordlessly expressing its gratitude.

119

EXT. PETER'S SHACK - SUNSET

119

PETER

What will you do?

MARGARET

I don't know.

Peter feeds the horse oats from a dented pan while Margaret replenishes the water in its trough with fresh.

PETER

I heard what the Weboys done to you. Except I didn't know it was you.

MARGARET

What'd you hear?

PETER

They chopped off someone's arm.

MARGARET

Who told you that?

PETER

My uncle in Gladstone.

MARGARET

You have family in town then?

PETER

An uncle and aunt. They sell skins for me. Other stuff.

Margaret studies the young man as he works.

MARGARET

Why do you live out here then? All alone? It's not where you're from.

Peter continues in his chores long enough that Margaret stops waiting for an answer, turns her attention back to the horse.

PETER

I ran away. From the school in
Bismarck.

Margaret sneaks a glance at Peter.

PETER (CONT'D)

The government agents came into the
house when I was eight. Took me.
Put me in their truck. I thought
I'd done something wrong, that my
mother didn't want me anymore.
But, then I could see she was
crying. All the mothers were.

*
*
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*

MARGARET

You were eight?

PETER

They cut my hair off. Washed me in
kerosene. Beat me. To kill the
Indian inside. I guess they did.
When I came home I couldn't
understand my grandmother's words
anymore. "My name is Peter now," I
tried to tell her. But, she
couldn't understand me either.

*
*
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*

He surveys the landscape as the sun drops from sight, shrugs.

PETER (CONT'D)

If I don't belong any place, here
is fine.

Margaret takes in the view beside him, sees the wide, flat
disc of a nearly full moon on the rise, opalescent at dusk.

MARGARET

You picked a good spot.

She lays a maternal hand gently on his arm.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

But it's not good to be alone.

PETER

I'm not alone.

He smiles and strokes the horse. Margaret nods, conceding.

PETER (CONT'D)

I'm talking to you.

120 **INT. PETER'S SHACK - EVENING**

120

Margaret pulls the iron skillet from the box she'd packed at home and sets it to heat on the stove, scraping in potatoes to brown. She tastes soup she's making in a big enamel pot.

She takes a can of beans from the box of groceries... when her attention snags on a man's humming, just shy of a tune.

She listens, then goes to the room's makeshift partition and peers around to discover Peter humming as he rebinds George's hand, weaving a meticulous web with a ribbon of white gauze.

She holds, watching Peter as he works, singing his hushed song in an ancestor's tongue to her husband as he sleeps.

Peter glances up at Margaret.

PETER

Can you die from getting your
fingers cut off?

GEORGE

(not asleep after all)
Jesus Christ, I'm not deaf.

121 **INT. PETER'S SHACK - NIGHT**

121

Margaret ladles soup into a bowl at the stove.

122 **INT. PETER'S SHACK - NIGHT**

122

George sits himself up in bed to receive a bowl of soup from Margaret, and they both realize at the same moment that he won't be able to hold it himself with his damaged hand.

George takes a spoon from Margaret and she sits facing him, cradling the bowl near enough so he can feed himself.

George exhales a mirthless laugh at their pitiful setup.

Margaret leans close, lowers her voice so Peter won't be able to hear on the other side of partition.

MARGARET

I have an idea.

GEORGE

That's not a first.

He scoops a spoonful of the soup, eats.

MARGARET

Now, let me finish before you make fun of me. And if you don't know what to say, don't say anything.

GEORGE

Let's hear it.

MARGARET

What if we stayed? Here.

George pauses the spoon and Margaret rushes ahead.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I'm sure Peter'd be glad of the company. We could build on to this place, put another room on the backside of the kitchen--

GEORGE

You hold the boards while I hammer in the nails, s'that it?

MARGARET

You said you'd let me finish.

GEORGE

You're finished now you just don't know it.

He drops the spoon in the bowl. Done.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

You want us to live in the shadow of a rock with an Indian boy and a lost horse? Just so you can drive into town every now and again to try and catch a peek at Jimmy?

(shakes his head)

You gonna follow him to school? Hope time untwists a sour mind and Blanche Weboy lets you hold him again. Someday. For more than thirty seconds's time?

MARGARET

George--

GEORGE

And when they hack off another couple pieces of me? Or when they start taking pieces of you, if there's anything left once you're done tearing yourself apart?

(MORE)

GEORGE (CONT'D)

What then? And when they hurt
Jimmy? And they will. Just for
spite. How're you gonna feel then?

Margaret stirs the cold soup, unable to meet George's eye.

MARGARET

First time I held him... He
arranged himself; easy. Just right
in my arms. *Snug* to me. And light
as can be. Like feathers--

GEORGE

Jesus Christ, Margaret. When will
you *stop* torturing yourself?

She stops, stung, but still can't bring herself to look at
her husband as she struggles to keep her tears at bay.

MARGARET

I'm sorry. I know I've tortured
you too.

GEORGE

No.

MARGARET

I know I have.

She sets the bowl down to take his good hand in hers.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

We'll go. But, not home. There's
nothing for us there now. We'll...
keep driving. Car's packed. We
can go to California. Maybe see an
ocean. Or north. But... I can't
go back...

Her voice breaks apart as she looks at George now.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I tried. I tried, George...

George slips his hand from Margaret's to wipe away her tears.

GEORGE

I know. Shhh... I know.

MARGARET

I couldn't save him. God help me.

George pulls his wife to him and holds her tight, rocking her like a child as she finally surrenders to all her overwhelming grief. Margaret weeps in George's embrace.

FADE TO BLACK.

123 **EXT. PETER'S SHACK - NIGHT** 123

An almost-full moon keeps unblinking watch over the land.

The horse stirs in her shelter, ears swiveling at a sound. They pan the still night air and she shudders.

124 **INT. PETER'S SHACK - NIGHT** 124

Peter lays sleeping, curled into himself for warmth, on a pile of blankets on the floor at the foot of the bed.

THUNK. A car door closes outside.

Margaret's eyes open in the semi-dark. She listens in bed, suddenly alert; unsure what's woken her.

Then the churn of a car's ignition cuts the night.

She sits straight up as the car's engine catches and she turns to George beside her.

MARGARET

George--?

But, he's gone.

She scrambles up and dashes past Peter on the floor to fling open the door just as the car outside shifts into drive.

125 **EXT. PETER'S SHACK - NIGHT** 125

MARGARET

George!

Margaret runs after the car in her bare feet as it pulls away, but the cutting rocks bring her to a stop.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

George! No!

She watches helplessly as the car's taillights bob and jump.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Come back!

The car disappears over the ridge and into the night.

PETER
Where's George going?

Margaret turns urgently as Peter joins her.

126 **EXT. PETER'S SHACK - NIGHT**

126

Margaret sets the saddle on the horse's back and Peter jumps in to fit the bit and reins; working together with speed.

PETER
Fast as you are, I don't think
you're going to catch him.

MARGARET
If he's going where I think he'll
have to take the road. You're
going to show me a quicker way.

PETER
I'm going to show--? I'm not
going.

MARGARET
You are.

127 **EXT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - NIGHT**

127

The same moon hovers over the still two story wooden house, every window dark with sleep. Not a sound on the land.

Bill Weboy's truck stands parked at the back.

128 **INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - BACK PORCH - NIGHT**

128

George examines the shotguns piled atop the firewood just outside the kitchen door, noiselessly makes a selection.

He breaks a double barrel shotgun open one-handed, cradles it in the nook of his arm to load in shells with his good hand.

129 **INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - KITCHEN - NIGHT**

129

George picks his way through patches of moonlight that tile the floor, testing for creaks, ear cocked to the still house.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Wake her.

Lorna's already stirring when Donnie shakes her hip.

LORNA

Wha--?

She barely keeps herself from screaming when she rolls over to find George holding the shotgun on Donnie in the dark. Her eyes dart to Jimmy, still asleep on the cot, and back.

GEORGE

Do you want to go back to Dalton?
You and Jimmy? You have to decide.
Go or stay.

DONNIE

Lorna--

George presses the gun's barrels, cutting Donnie's temple.

GEORGE

Not you. You don't get to say a
goddamn word. This is up to her.

Lorna stares at George, paralyzed. He keeps his voice low.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

You know what life will be. Here
or there, you know. This isn't
something you need to think on.

LORNA

Go. I'll go.

She turns on the bedside lamp, revealing a ripe black eye to the light. She throws off the covers and goes to lift Jimmy, carries the child as he stirs in sleep back to George.

GEORGE

You know the car. It's parked at
the bottom of the drive. Keys are
in it. Get in and drive straight
to the Sherrif's office in
Bentrock. Ask for Nevelson.

LORNA

Bentrock?

GEORGE

Sherrif Nevelson. He'll sort it
out.

LORNA

But, what--? What about you--?

GEORGE

Go.

Lorna blinks as she figures it out; George intends to stay to ensure her and Jimmy's escape. She glances at Jimmy's bare feet, plucks at his pajamas.

LORNA

Jimmy's things... I have to--

GEORGE

No. Out now. Quiet as you can.
Take the front door. Then run like
hell.

Lorna steps into her shoes and puts her hand on the door knob. She takes a last look at Donnie glaring from the bed.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Lorna.

She looks to George, Jimmy's head on her shoulder.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

The *front* door.

Lorna nods, slowly eases the bedroom door open... its hinge chirps. She stops, holds, then dares to inch it wider.

Her nostrils flare when she detects the thin layer of smoke accumulating in the dark hallway, and turns back to George in alarm. He prods her forward with a look, mouths the words.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Front door.

Lorna steps shaking into the hall and Jimmy lifts his head, squinting sleepily at George in the room behind them, smiles.

JIMMY

Grandpa.

The child's clear voice carries bell-like on the night.

Lorna freezes mid-stride. Donnie's eyes dart to George, who makes a shushing shape with his mouth for Jimmy.

BLANCHE

What's--?

BLAM!

The hall flashes blinding bright when George fires the shotgun, narrowly missing Bill, who pivots in his direction.

Blanche slams her bedroom door and Lorna scoops Jimmy up, but Bill grabs him back, clasps the boy to his chest as a shield as George advances. Lorna claws at Bill for her crying son.

LORNA

Stop! Stop it! Let him go!

Bill shoves Lorna away and she staggers backwards, blindly stepping right off the landing. She cries out as she falls, banging, banging, banging down the stairs to a stop midway.

George lunges and seizes Jimmy from Bill, hooking the arm of his damaged hand around the boy's torso, shotgun in his one good hand, but Bill keeps a grip on the boy's leg, and pulls.

The bedroom door springs open again and Blanche reappears, aiming George's service revolver at the men, and the boy.

George raises the shotgun, but Bill bats it from his grip. It clatters over the railing, lands in the hall far below.

BLANCHE

Bill! Outta the way! I got him!

BILL

Christ, Blanche! Don't shoot!

She squints an eye closed, finger tightening on the trigger, and Bill tries to dodge clear, but George seizes him back.

BANG!

The gun fires; cracking lightning-bright in the dark hall, the gathering smoke holding its flare like storm clouds.

LORNA

No!

Bill looks at George with bemused surprise, a small hole in his cheek. He opens his mouth as though to ask a question, and falls dead. Blanche gapes, blinking at George.

GEORGE

(calling down)

Lorna?

Blanche points the gun again at George holding Jimmy, and George swings the clinging child out over the railing, dangling him high above the steep stairs, Lorna craning up.

LORNA

Jimmy!

BLANCHE

Give the boy to me, old man. No one gets hurt.

George lets Jimmy go. The child drops through the smoky air.

Blanche shoots George.

He falls, carried by the bullet that strikes him high in the chest... as Lorna catches Jimmy on the stairs below.

Blanche cranes over the railing, locks eyes with Lorna, and Lorna breaks for the front door standing open to the night across the deep foyer at the bottom of the stairs.

Blanche dashes for the top of the stairs at the same time Marvin and Elton explode up the back stairs into the hall.

ELTON

Who's shooting?

MARVIN

We're on fire!

Blanche comes around the end of the railing...

BLANCHE

Get her!

...And George's hand suddenly closes over hers from behind. He snaps the gun up, still in Blanche's grip, and fires.

Marvin drops dead while running, his momentum sending him down the front stairs as Blanche screams.

George pivots with Blanche, taking aim at Elton as he comes.

137

EXT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - NIGHT

137

BANG!

The horse shies and rears up as the echoing gunshot reaches Margaret and Peter riding into view of the distant house; front door yawning open, a spiral of smoke threading skyward.

MARGARET

Oh my God.

And then she spots Lorna; a lone figure stumbling at a run away from the house, pitched forward with her son's weight.

138 **EXT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - FRONT DRIVE - NIGHT**

138

Lorna desperately searches the inky night ahead for the car.

LORNA

It's okay, baby. It's okay...

MARGARET

Lorna!

Lorna ducks at the call, reflexively veers away from the galloping horse headed in her direction.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Lorna! Wait! Stop!

Lorna recognizes Margaret's voice now and slows as Margaret and Peter arrive. She begins to cry as Margaret climbs down.

Margaret embraces Jimmy and Lorna with urgent relief.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Are you all right?

Lorna nods rhythmically, but can't speak.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Where's George?

Lorna shakes her head pitifully, her breath ragged and wet.

LORNA

He said to run... To take the car.

Margaret turns to Peter.

MARGARET

Stay with them.

He nods and Margaret takes off on foot.

139 **INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - FRONT HALL/STAIRS - NIGHT**

139

The shotgun lays on the floor where it fell from upstairs, deep in the foyer, far from the front door framing the moon.

Beyond the door, Margaret steps from the pitch night into a spill of light. She cautiously approaches, mounts the porch.

She peers from the threshold, taking measure of what she can; shotgun, smoke, the fire snarling behind the kitchen door.

She sees Marvin's prone body, facedown on the staircase.

140 **INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - FRONT HALL/STAIRS - MOMENTS LATER** 140

Margaret breaches the double shotgun to check its load, plucks the spent cartridge from one barrel, closes the gun; the crack and click of metal ring loud in the stillness despite the fire's growing voice at the rear of the house.

She scans the ground floor rooms for any sign of George, backing away from the snapping heat of the kitchen aflame.

She carries the shotgun to the stairs, inches her way up, straining for a view of the upper hall, one eye on Marvin.

She stops at his body, nudges him with her toe. Dead.

She stretches her neck to bring the upstairs floor into view.

A spray of blood clouds the far wall, Elton sitting blank-faced under its spatter, staring dumbly at Margaret in death.

She sees Bill lying dead in the murky hall, and George sprawled on his back on the floor.

MARGARET

George!

She clammers over Marvin's body, scrambles up the stairs.

141 **INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - UPSTAIRS HALL - NIGHT** 141

Margaret drops to her knees beside George, his chest rapidly rising and falling beneath his bloodstained shirt.

MARGARET

George... George.

His eyes swim and search for Margaret in the smoky dim.

GEORGE

Jimmy? Where's Jimmy?

MARGARET

He's safe, George. With Lorna.
And Peter. They're waiting for us.

She helps him sit up and he takes count of Elton and Bill.

GEORGE
Where's Blanche?

MARGARET
I don't--. I don't know.

GEORGE
Go. Get out of here.

MARGARET
Not without you.

She loops George's arm around her neck and he leverages himself up with the railing. He takes the shotgun to use for support, shuffling with Margaret through the gathering smoke as the back stairwell glows bright with licking flames.

DONNIE (O.S.)
Momma?!

George looks behind them as Donnie pulls himself from the bedroom, crawling blind, blood running down his face.

142

INT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - FRONT HALL/STAIRS - NIGHT

142

George grits his teeth navigating his way down with Margaret, Donnie calling above them as the fire enters the upstairs.

DONNIE (O.S.)
Help!

PETER (O.S.)
Margaret! George!

They both look to where Peter arrives on the porch outside.

GEORGE
Stay there! Where you are!

But Peter dodges inside despite the fire. He crosses the foyer, climbs the stairs to help, takes George's other arm.

A crash sounds at the back of the house as the fire runs riot, roaring up the back stairs from the kitchen.

George, Margaret, and Peter reach the ground floor together, but only George senses Blanche as she enters the hall behind them, George's revolver raised and pointed in her hand.

George pushes Margaret from as him as he turns...

BANG!

The banister's newel post splinters beside George.

BANG!

George lurches backwards, stumbling out of Peter's grip, and falls to the ground.

MARGARET

George!

She drops to the floor beside him as Peter spins around to see Blanche, framed by the kitchen in flames behind her.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

George... George.

His eyes won't focus as fresh blood soaks his shirt.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

George. Look at me. Please...

He gropes for his wife's hand as a widening pool of blood spreads from beneath him. She grasps his hand in hers.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I'm here. I'm right here.

George places Margaret's hand on the shotgun on the floor beside them.

BANG!

Peter ducks when Blanche fires again, advancing on them through the smoke, eyes dancing furious and bright.

BLANCHE

Why?! WHYYYYYYYYYY?!

Margaret lets go of George's hand to take up the shotgun. She lifts it from the floor, fits its stock to her shoulder.

Blanche stops in place when she sees Margaret turn, sighting down the long length of the shotgun's double barrels at her.

Blanche laughs, aims George's revolver squarely at Margaret.

BLANCHE (CONT'D)

You. You go to hell.

BOOM!

Margaret fires. The shotgun flashes. And Blanche falls backwards into a wall of flame. Dead.

Margaret drops the shotgun and comes back to George; his face smooth now in complete stillness, eyes closed.

MARGARET
George? George?

Peter tugs at Margaret's arm and she looks up at him.

Peter shakes his head softly, grimly.

Margaret looks back to George. Her husband. No longer.

DONNIE (O.S.)
Help me!

Peter glances to the top of the burning stairs where Donnie's managed to drag himself among the flames.

Margaret traces George's features with shaking fingers.

Peter pulls urgently at Margaret again. She tries to shake him off, jerk her arm free. But, he keeps his grip.

Margaret blinks at Peter in torn anguish.

She turns to George, searches his familiar face, now empty.

She lowers her lips to his and kisses him a last time... Then Margaret puts her mouth to George's ear.

She whispers; words meant only for him.

Peter seizes Margaret forcefully and hauls her to her feet, and leads her away, through the smoke and blistering heat.

DONNIE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Momma!

143

EXT. WEBOY HOMESTEAD - NIGHT

143

The blazing structure reflects in the dark, gleaming eyes of the horse, standing with Margaret, Lorna, Jimmy, and Peter.

Margaret stares into the pyre; shattered, confounded by shock and fathomless loss. Lorna rocks Jimmy, shielding his view.

The house collapses into itself, the second floor caving under the burning roof. Swirling sparks and embers swarm the sky as the flames climb high to light the night.

PETER
People will come. We can't be here.

The thrum of paved road beneath the tires creates a faint rhythm, a phantom heartbeat that invades the car.

Margaret searches the dark road ahead, her forehead knotting over with the twist and pull of thoughts.

Lorna lays a hand on Margaret's arm and Margaret turns to meet her eyes shining at Margaret in the gray light before day; a steady gaze of witness, understanding, connection.

Lorna lowers her eyes to Jimmy, now asleep, his head in her lap, and takes her hand from Margaret's arm to smooth the boy's hair, raked by the breeze from her open window.

Margaret scrolls her own window down, letting fresh air in.

A flare of light sparks her eye in the rearview mirror.

She squints into the sheering ray of reflected light.

It takes her a moment to recognize the light for what it is; the sun breaking the distant horizon behind them in the east.

The strong light grows, illuminating Margaret's face by the mirror, and floods the car with its warmth as she drives.

147

EXT. ROAD - DAWN

147

The car follows the road flowing west, chasing the endless string of pavement across the valley floor, and out of sight.

Gone.

The sun keeps coming, long fingers of light scrabbling for purchase on the land.