

NOMADLAND

Written by

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Based on the book by Jessica Bruder

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Music. Title sequence:

Archival black and white photos of Empire -- One of America's longest running mine and company towns in the Black Rock desert of Northern Nevada.

The factory. Workers. Meetings in board rooms. White piles of gypsum against black mountains.

Families playing at the pool. People leaving church. Grand opening of a grocery store. Faces smiling. Children playing in the yard of a grammar school. A community flourishing.

Proud townsfolk posing outside the factory. Young lovers getting married. A man mowing his lawn. A young woman standing in front of her house, looking at the camera.

She is FERN.

Title sequence ends.

The sound of heavy wind...

EXT. EMPIRE - STORAGE - EVENING

The metal storage door rises, revealing Fern, now in her sixties, and the snowy landscape behind her.

She digs through dusty boxes and trunks, scanning for lucky items to bring with her. A stack of plates with autumn leaf patterns and a rusty camping lamp make the cut.

She loads them into "Vanguard", a white Ford cargo van, rusty and muddy, parked in the snow.

Fern keeps searching when she pulls out a man's blue work coat that's too big for her. She holds it to her face like an old friend and breathes it in. Holding back tears.

Later, she pays storage fee to GAY, seventies, the storage owner and an old-timer. They give each other a hug.

GAY

You take care of yourself out there.

EXT. ROAD - NORTHERN NEVADA - EVENING

Vanguard travels across an endless, frostbitten landscape.

EXT. ROAD SIDE - LATER

Fern, shivering, squats at the side of the icy road, urinating, while looking for incoming cars.

INT. ROAD - NORTHERN NEVADA - DUSK

Highway stretches out under a dark and cloudy sky.

Fern drives, gently singing a Christmas carol.

FERN

(Singing)

*What Child is this who, laid to
rest/ On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom Angels greet with anthems
sweet/ While shepherds watch are
keeping?*

EXT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - OFFICE - SAME NIGHT

Vanguard pulls up in front of a small building covered in snow and icicles. A large sign reads 'DESERT ROSE'.

INT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - OFFICE - NIGHT

PATTY, a chatty manager in her sixties, looks for Fern's reservation. A little nervous, Fern waits.

PATTY

No. I don't see your reservation.

FERN

Are you sure? I'm on the Amazon
CamperForce list.

PATTY

Oooh, Amazon. I see. Hold on.

FERN

Try McD...

PATTY

There you are!

Fern is relieved. It's been a long night.

EXT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - NIGHT

Vanguard pulls into a spot. The engine rattles to a standstill and the lights turn off.

INT. VANGUARD - MOMENTS LATER

Fern closes the curtain dividing the drivers seat and the back of the van. She turns on a small desk lamp and reveals the warm and cozy DIY interior -- her home on wheels.

A pot of mac and cheese bubbles on a portable stove. Fern adds a can of stewed tomato and seasons it.

She pours it onto the "autumn leaf" plate she brought from storage and eats, staring blankly out of the dark window.

She does dishes with a spray bottle and carefully wipes every one clean and stores them away.

She uses her five gallon bucket and cat litter for a pee.

She goes to bed. A red Santa light glows beside her.

EXT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - NEXT MORNING

The giant Amazon sign looms above.

Fern approaches briskly in the morning chill.

INT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - SECURITY LINE - MORNING

Fern lines up with SEASONAL WORKERS. Faces of all types, some tired and others excited.

Fern sees a someone she knows - AL, a man in his fifties. She nods and he nods back.

AL

Seems like more every year.

INT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - DAY

The sound in the massive factory is bone rattling.

Futuristic looking machineries and the shelves stretching all the way to the towering ceiling.

Fern marches down long corridors, pushing a "stower" cart.

She talks to herself as she matches items and packs boxes.

She works with LINDA MAY, sixty-five with long gray hair, wearing an orange blazer that reads "Ambassador, Ask Me."

Linda is warm and helpful. The kind of friend you want to have on the road.

EXT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - BACK - DAY

The towering warehouse stands alone in the open desert. Large delivery trucks are lined up against the building.

Fern lights a cigarette and hands Linda May one.

LINDA MAY

I quit.

FERN

What?!

LINDA MAY

I know. Forty-three years. Wasn't as hard as I thought.

FERN

I salute you, Linda May.

LINDA MAY

Well, I had to. Doctor said I have macular degeneration in my right eye.

FERN

Oh shit.

LINDA MAY

Could've been worse.

FERN

What can you do?

LINDA MAY

Eat healthier, exercise. Definitely no smoking.

Fern quickly puts her cigarette out.

LINDA MAY (CONT'D)

Oh, I was enjoying that.

FERN
 (fans the air)
 No, no.

LINDA MAY
 I think I found land, Fern.

FERN
 Really?! Where?

LINDA MAY
 Douglas, Arizona. Right on the
 Mexico border. It's four acres in
 the desert. And I just put down the
 deposit.

FERN
 Nice!

LINDA MAY
 Yeah. Real nice. Well, I haven't
 actually seen the land in person
 but the pictures on Craigslist
 looked *real* nice.

FERN
 (worried)
 Linda May!

LINDA MAY
 Fern! I'm taking a leap of faith!
 It's now or never!

FERN
 (thinking)
 Valid point. The other day I looked
 in the mirror and I saw my mother.

LINDA MAY
 (laughs)
 Exactly. I look into the mirror and
 I see my grandmother.

EXT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - LATER

Fern walks down a muddy path carrying oversized laundry.

INT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - LAUNDRY - SAME EVENING

Fern and Linda May share a box of detergent.

They get competitive doing a jigsaw puzzle while waiting.

I/E. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - VANGUARD - SAME EVENING

Fern shows off Vanguard to Linda May who is folding laundry.

FERN

I put these drawers under the bed.
They pull out from both sides. Now
I can get my stuff from inside and
outside.

LINDA MAY

Very smart. Where's your bucket?
And the carbon detector? Mr. Buddy
heater?

FERN

Here. Here. And my bucket and cat
litter is right here. I made a
curtain to cover it.

LINDA MAY

I should do that. I have to hurry
and hide my bucket whenever people
are visiting.

FERN

Oh, look. This is my husband's old
fishing box. I made a little
stopper and when it opens...
(opens it)
It becomes a surface to work on.

LINDA MAY

Counter space is everything.

FERN

(takes out the dishes)
And I got my nice dishes that my
Dad gave me. He collected these
from yard sales and when I
graduated from high school he gave
me the whole set.

LINDA MAY

Beautiful.

FERN

It's called "autumn leaf". I don't
have that many pieces left though.

LINDA MAY

Have you named your van yet?

FERN
Vanguard.

LINDA MAY
Ooooh. That's strong.

FERN
She is.

INT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - DAYS LATER

Fern works, taking her job so seriously it's almost comical.

EXT. FERNLEY - EVENING

Snow is falling. Time has passed. Fern drives.

INT. SPORTS STORE - LATER

Christmas music plays through the store speakers. Fern is passed out on a weightlifting bench. Her foot slips. She almost falls and wakes up.

VOICE
Fern! Hi!

Fern quickly gets up and sees BRANDY, mid-forties, walks over with a full shopping cart. Her young daughters AUDREY and MACKENZIE trail behind her.

FERN
Hi... Hi Brandy.

BRANDY
Hey girls. It's Mrs. M!

DAUGHTERS
Hi, Mrs. M.

Fern and Brandy hug.

BRANDY
How have you been?

FERN
Good. Real good.

BRANDY
You're working at Amazon again?

FERN

Yep.

BRANDY

How is it? You like it?

FERN

Yes. Great money.

BRANDY

You still doing the... van thing?

FERN

Yes. I'm parked at Desert Rose RV Park.

BRANDY

We just drove by there today.
Didn't we, girls -- ?

FERN

How's your mom?

BRANDY

Good. Real good. She misses you.
You know...

(leans in, quietly)

You can stay with us. I mean at least while you're working around here. We're worried about you.

FERN

Don't worry about me. I'm fine.
Thank you.

BRANDY

OK... You let us know if you change your mind, yeah?

FERN

I promise. Merry Christmas.

BRANDY

Merry Christmas, Fern. Take care!

They hug again. Brandy walks away with Audrey, while Mackenzie lingers.

MACKENZIE

Hey, Mrs. M... we went to Burning Man for field trip this year.

FERN

Finally!

MACKENZIE

Right?! Well, we went before it started. They gave us ice cream and we got to write our names and a message on a piece of wood, and they put the wood on top of that big temple thing they built and then they burn it on the last day.

FERN

Nice. What did you write on yours?

MACKENZIE

I wrote that I wish we still lived in Empire and all my friends that moved away are all moving back.

Fern smiles at Mackenzie's innocent hopefulness.

FERN

You like your new school?

MACKENZIE

It's OK.

FERN

I bet you're still the smartest kid.

MACKENZIE

Yeh, kinda.

FERN

You remember anything we worked on when I tutored you?

MACKENZIE

Uh, yes...
 (thinking hard)
 Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow/
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/
 The way to dusty death/ Out, out, brief candle!

Moved, Fern shakes Mackenzie's hand.

FERN

That's really good. Thank you.

MACKENZIE

My mom said you're homeless. Is that true?

Fern is caught off guard, but quickly recovers.

FERN

No... I'm not homeless. I'm just...
houseless. Not the same thing,
right?

MACKENZIE

No.

FERN

It's nice to see you, Mackenzie.

MACKENZIE

Yeah. Ok. Bye, Mrs. M.

Fern watches Mackenzie walking back to her family. She finally relaxes from the encounter.

EXT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - SQUEEZE INN - NIGHT

Linda May's home -- a small, pale-yellow, 10-foot-long fiberglass trailer she calls the 'Squeeze Inn'.

She has neatly decorated her "front yard" with Christmas lights and plastic pink flamingos that glows in the dark.

INT. SQUEEZE INN - SAME

The space is cramped but homey -- Colorful fabrics. Pink and blue donut shaped pillows. Red plastic flowers hanging from the ceiling. Pictures and postcards on the fridge door.

Fern knits, listening intently as Linda recounts the events that lead her to a life on the road.

LINDA MAY

Before I moved into Squeeze Inn, I lived in a 30 FT trailer. This was 2008. The money was running out and I was getting behind on paying for the trailer and the rent on the land and I still had no water or electricity... I couldn't find work. I was... I've never been suicidal. But, I had some liquor in my trailer. I just thought, oh I will just drink all this booze, turn on the gas and pass out, and if I come to, I will light a cigarette and blow us all up.

(MORE)

LINDA MAY (CONT'D)

Then I looked at my two little trusting dogs, my cocker spaniel and little toy poodle and I just couldn't do that to them and then I thought... well, I couldn't do that to me either!

Fern shakes her head, eyes wide.

LINDA MAY (CONT'D)

I was getting close to sixty-two at the time and I went online to look at my social security benefit. It said five hundred and fifty dollars. Fern, I worked my whole life. I worked since I was twelve years old. Raised two daughters. Now I've only got five hundred and fifty dollars a month to live with. I couldn't believe it. That's when I heard about Bob Wells and *Cheap RV Living*. On his website, he has two budgets laid out. One for 500 a month and one for 1000. I could live in an RV, travel and not have to work for the rest of my life.

Later, the small space is steamed up with Linda May's cooking. Fern sips on hot cider, watching a youtube video of Bob Wells. He wears glasses and has long white hair.

BOB WELLS ON SCREEN

The RTR is a bootcamp for beginner nomads. Once a year, we come together as a tribe --

FERN

(looks up)

Bob Wells looks just like Santa Claus.

LINDA MAY

Everyone says that.

FERN

What does RTR stand for?

LINDA MAY

Rubber Tramp Rendezvous. It's in Quartzsite, Arizona, in the desert on BLM land. I'll draw you a map. You won't have reception out there.

FERN

I don't think I will go.

LINDA MAY

You should! The "Big Tent" is happening in town at the same time. It's a RV show, biggest in the country. You can sign up for jobs.

FERN

What kind of jobs?

LINDA MAY

Seasonal. All kinds. Camp hosting for National Parks, Adventureland, working concessions at spring training games in Texas, beet harvest in Nebraska.

FERN

Beet harvest.

LINDA MAY

Not the small red ones. The big white sugar beets. I've done it twice now.

FERN

Um... No... I'm gonna stay around here. I know the area.

LINDA MAY

I'll draw you a map anyway.

INT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - WEEKS LATER

Everyone works double-speed during holiday shopping season. The warehouse begins to look bigger and the workers smaller.

EXT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - NIGHT A WEEK LATER

Fern smokes alone. DOUG, a coworker, walks by shivering.

DOUG

Happy holidays Fern. See you next year.

FERN

You too, Doug.

INT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - VANGUARD - NEW YEAR EVE

The blue flame of a Mr. Buddy heater glows in the corner. The sound of fireworks in the distance.

Fern makes a treat for herself -- bread with hot milk and sugar. She adjusts her Happy New Year headband.

2012, another year arrives.

EXT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - VANGUARD - MORNING A WEEK LATER

Fern cleans thick snow off of Vanguard when she sees a DOG sniffing near her things.

INT. OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

PATTY
Carl had a stroke!

FERN
Is he dead?

PATTY
No! No. But his daughter took him back east.

FERN
They didn't take the dog?!

PATTY
They didn't take the dog. Do you want to keep him? His name is Scout.

FERN
No. I can't. I don't have space.

PATTY
He's a good guard dog. You know... it's not safe for a woman to be out there all alone.

FERN
I've got nothing people want.

PATTY
Oooh... I'm sorry.
(beat)
You're checking out tomorrow right?

FERN

Yeah... I finished at Amazon last week. How much is it now?

PATTY

Let's see, Amazon paid for your parking spot until this Thursday. Afterwards, it's thirty-three a night and nine-fifty a month.

FERN

What about a discount if I don't use the electrical and dump? I just got my van.

PATTY

No sorry. We're set up for RVs. If you live in a van, why not just go somewhere warmer?

FERN

I'm trying to find a job around here.

PATTY

Oh. Ok. Good luck with that.

FERN

Aright, Patty. Bye.

PATTY

So long, Fern. See you next year.

Fern steps out into the cold roar of traffic outside. Scout still waits. Fern pets him awkwardly and goes on her way.

INT. FALLON - JOB CENTER - DAY

Fern sits at a desk opposite a JOB CENTER RECRUITER and puts on her best smile.

FERN

I went to college. I studied English and Theater. I have skills in the service industry. I was a waiter while I was in school. I also have secretarial skills. One summer I answered fan letters for ACDC. My husband worked at the USG Empire mine and I worked for their HR department for a few years, then I stopped working because of... an illness in the family.

RECRUITER
Didn't the Empire mine shut down?

FERN
Yeah. Last year. We all moved out.

Before the recruiter can say anything, Fern continues.

FERN (CONT'D)
I also did a lot of part time jobs. I tutored, I cashiered at the Empire store and I also worked at the Black Rock Information Center in Gerlach during Burning Man every year. Have you been to Burning Man?

RECRUITER
No, but my son goes every year --

FERN
Ah! So you know, people have all kinds of questions. I took care of it all. I just worked at Amazon during the holidays. I'm also very handy and I have my own tools.

RECRUITER
That's... all very good. But you're not specialized in anything?

A moment. Fern shakes her head.

RECRUITER (CONT'D)
Have you looked into early retirement?

FERN
I don't want to retire! I... don't think I can get by on the benefits anyway. I need work. I like work.

RECRUITER
I understand but the jobs we have require special trainings, and frankly they won't be available until the weather gets better.

EXT. FOX PEAK GAS STATION - NIGHT

Blizzard at night fall. Vanguard pulls into the gas station.

EXT. FOX PEAK GAS STATION - VANGUARD - LATER

Fern is wearing two hats and gloves as she shakes off a rug.

RACHEL, the gas station manager, approaches.

RACHEL

Hello, ma'am. I'm Rachel, I'm the manager here at Fox Peak --

FERN

-- I asked and someone told me I can park here overnight.

RACHEL

Yes, you're fine. But you know the temperature's gonna drop. It gets really cold at night. Real cold.

FERN

I have a really good sleeping bag.

RACHEL

I don't want to overstep my boundaries here, but there is a church down by Seven-Eleven. A Baptist church and they do have open bed --

FERN

I'm gonna be good! Thank you.

INT. FOX PEAK GAS STATION - VANGUARD - SAME NIGHT

Fern wraps herself in layers of blankets and sleeping bags. She shivers hard, unable to get warm.

EXT. FOX PEAK GAS STATION - NEXT MORNING

The ground is frozen. Fern smokes by vanguard.

Lights start to turn on in the suburban homes beyond the highway. A freight train rattles across.

It's time to move on.

INT. VANGUARD ON HIGHWAY - DAWN

Headlights illuminate the dark road ahead.

Fern drives. Ahead of her, the first light of dawn illuminates a new landscape.

EXT. ROAD IN DESERT - MORNING

Vanguard heads south on the warm low desert drenched in sun. It passes sleepy towns, corky billboards and hitchhikers.

EXT. QUARTZSITE, ARIZONA - EVENING

Fern drives through the bustling town of Quartzsite -- a strange and wild oasis in the desert.

ELDERLY RETIREES, DREADLOCKED TEENS, MOTORCYCLE GANGS, ROCK HUNTERS, TOURISTS. Cars and trucks towing all kinds of shelters. Mostly dusty. Traffic crawls. No one is in a hurry.

I/E. VANGUARD ON UNPAVED ROAD IN THE DESERT - EVENING

Vanguard travels on a bumpy road towards the middle of nowhere.

Fern looks at a hand-drawn map, unsure until she spots a yellow DIY sign in the distance that reads 'RTR'.

She goes further, finds another sign, and makes a sharp turn deeper into the desert.

EXT. RTR - EVENING

Fern spots a cluster of 50 vehicles in the distance. Mostly vans, old trailers, campers, some tents and a school bus.

She parks and climbs out of Vanguard, pulling on the oversized blue work jacket she took out of the storage.

She finds Linda May in A GROUP OF NOMADS. Linda is so happy to see Fern. She points at the MAN speaking in the front.

LINDA MAY

That's Bob Wells.

Bob has a deep voice and speaks with confidence.

BOB WELLS

We not only accept the tyranny of the dollar. We embrace it. We gladly live by it our whole lives. I think of the analogy as like a work horse.

(MORE)

BOB WELLS (CONT'D)

The work horse that is willing to work itself to death and then be put out to pasture. That's what happened to so many of us in 2008. If society is throwing us away and putting us out to pasture, we work horses have to gather together and take care of each other, and that is what this is all about.

Fern smiles. She's in the right place.

BOB WELLS (CONT'D)

The way I see it -- The Titanic is sinking and economic times are changing. My goal is to get the life boats out and get as many people into the lifeboats as I can.

EXT. RTR - DUSK

Steaming hot chili is served and shared with all from two large pots, similar to the old-fashioned hobo stew.

Fern and Linda May wait eagerly in line.

Fern is offered some vegan stew by DAVE, sixties, kind eyes.

FERN

What's that?

DAVE

This is vegan.

FERN

No thanks, I'm a carnivore.

SWANKIE, seventies, wades forward, hungry and eager for her serving. She is sharp and energetic, with one arm in a sling.

SWANKIE

I'm a carnivore too!

EXT. RTR - CAMPFIRE - LATER THAT NIGHT

Logs glow on the fire. A small group of nomads gather and share their stories of what lead to a life on the road.

BRYCE, sixties, a stern face, holds a small dog.

BRYCE

I'm a Vietnam vet and I got PTSD. I really can't handle loud noises, big crowds, fireworks. Bob helped me. I got a pickup truck and camper. I can live out here. And be at peace.

DENI, fifties, wearing a red beanie and feather earrings.

DENI

I had finally convinced my grandpa, my poppa and my momma that we should take off in an RV and see the country. But then both of them were told they had cancer and they died three weeks apart. I began watching Bob Wells videos on van dwelling. Then I bought my van *Paint*, because '*she takes me where I ain't*'. And started my healing journey two years ago.

MERLE, sixties, blue eyes glistening in the fire light.

MERLE

I worked for corporate America for twenty years. My friend Bill worked for the same company and he had liver failure. A week before he was about to retire, HR called him, in *hospice*, and said 'let's talk about your retirement!' He died ten days later... having never taken that sailboat he bought out of his driveway. He missed out on everything. He told me before he died 'just don't waste any time, Merle. Don't waste any time.' So I retired as soon as I could. I didn't want my sailboat to be in my driveway when I died.

(beat)

And it's not. My sailboat is out here in the desert.

EXT. RTR - CAMP - DAWN

Saguaro cactus silhouetted against the Arizona morning sky.

Bob Wells and Fern sit on the edge of the camp talking.

BOB WELLS

I can't imagine what you're going through. The loss of your husband. The loss of your whole town and friends. That kind of loss is never easy.

Fern forces a smile.

BOB WELLS (CONT'D)

I wish I had an easy answer for you, but I think you've come to the right place to find an answer. I think that connecting to nature and to a real true community and tribe will make a difference for you.

(beat)

I hope so.

EXT. RTR - CAMP - LATER

Fern takes a long walk through the camp. People going through their morning routines, cleaning, washing, cooking, a few gathered by the bonfire.

LINDA MAY

Hey Fern! Come join us.

FERN

No. I'm just gonna take a little walk. Be right back.

Fern watches as OLD-TIMERS help a NEWCOMER installing his solar panels. A MAN is giving free hair cuts. A SMALL GROUP is doing Tai-Chi together. A ROLL OF ATV speed by.

EXT. RTR - MAIN CAMP - MORNING

Bob Wells teaches in front of a crowd. Fern takes notes.

BOB WELLS

A lot of folks ask me: 'Bob, I want to live this lifestyle, but I work in the city. What do I do about the dreaded 'knock on the door'. So I created what I call the Ten Commandments of Stealth Parking.

FOREST, a younger man, teaches an "All About Tires" seminar. Fern is trying to plug a tire.

FOREST

That's it. You gotta make the hole bigger.

The WOMEN in the audience laugh delightedly at accidental innuendos. Fern blushes.

SUANNE, sixties, funny, enthusiastically teaches hygiene on the road.

SUANNE

I love this lifestyle. Freedom, beauty and connection with the earth. But there is a tradeoff -- you gotta learn to take care of your own shit!

Everyone laughs. Suanne takes out a stack of three buckets.

SUANNA

(displays a medium bucket)
Most of us use a five-gallon bucket. Most of us are in vans or something larger. I'm in a Prius...
(displays a small bucket)
So I use a two-gallon bucket. And if you have bad knees...
(displays a large bucket)
You can use a seven-gallon bucket! Look, it's like Goldilocks and the Three Bears!

EXT. RTR - CAMP - FREE PILE - NEXT MORNING

The 'Free Pile' -- a blue tarp cluttered with various items. People take what they need and leave what they don't.

Fern tries to decide between a blue or red can opener.

DAVE

(leans over)
You should take this one. That one's kinda funky.

FERN

These yours?

DAVE

Yep. There's a black hole in every van. One time I had seven of these can openers.

Fern considers Dave's observations.

FERN
Doesn't happen to me.

DAVE
Really.

FERN
I know exactly where everything is.

Fern hands Dave one of the pot holders she made.

FERN (CONT'D)
Trade you for a pot holder. I make them.

DAVE
Thanks. First year?

FERN
Yep. You?

DAVE
Been coming here every year. I'm what you would call a 'FOB' -- Friend of Bob's. You read his book?

FERN
It's my bible.
(picks up a tray)
Nice.

DAVE
(pretends to reach for it)
It *is* nice.

FERN
(laughs)
No, no. It's coming home with me.
(walks away)
See ya.

DAVE
(waves)
See you around.

EXT. QUARTZSITE - RV SHOW - NEXT DAY

The largest RV show in the country. Hundreds of vendors, RV displays, seasonal job recruiters, food stalls.

Fern, Linda May and Swankie munch on corn dogs and sign up for seasonal jobs. The ladies are having a great time.

EXT. RV SHOW - LATER

They walk by a lot full of luxurious RVs, towering over them.

SWANKIE

They are HUGE!

FERN

Like dinosaurs.

LINDA MAY

Do you know how much money is
sitting right here?

INT. GIANT RV - SAME

Wide eyed, they enter a brightly-lit fancy RV. They look in wonder at the leather sofas, marble kitchen counter, polished wood cabinets and flat-screen TVs. Fern opens a cupboards.

FERN

Washer and dryer!

LINDA MAY

Now that's real nice.

EXT. RTR - NIGHT

Fern signs her name on a small "van" made of cardboard boxes, covered with signatures and messages.

The van is burned in a bonfire while the tribe of nomads gather with food and drinks and sing their version of "On the Road Again" -- "Burn the Van again".

NOMADS

*In our vans again / Just can't wait
to get in our vans again / The life
we love is in the desert with our
friends / And we can't wait to get
in our vans again.*

*In our vans again / Goin places
most haven't been / Goin places we
may never go again/ And we can't
wait to get in our vans again.*

*Rubber tramps again / Like a band
of gypsies we go down to Quartzsite
We'll see Bob again / We'll share
our tales at campfires in the night
time / Warm fire time*

(MORE)

NOMADS (CONT'D)

*Burn that van again / Just can't
wait to burn up that van again / It
marks the end of our stay here in
Quartzsite town / But next year
we'll be coming back again / And we
can't wait to get in our vans again*

INT. QUARTZSITE YACHT CLUB - SAME NIGHT

Colorful disco lights flicker across smiling faces. The SINGER in a cowboy hat plays on a small stage in the corner.

Fern, Linda May, Swankie and more WOMEN line dance together. Fern is drunk and having a great time.

Later. Dave approaches Fern when she is sitting alone. He asks her to dance. She hesitates but accepts.

They dance to an old cowboy song.

EXT. RTR - NEXT MORNING

The RTR has come to an end. Fern walks passed a line of vans and RVs pulling out of the campsite, like an old fashioned wagon train, heading on to greener pastures.

She waves, sad to see them go.

EXT. DESERT - VANGUARD - MORNING A MONTH LATER

The desert is empty now. And it's getting hot.

Vanguard is parked by a cluster of cactus. Music rattles from a radio. Laundry drying on the line.

Fern finishes screwing a new panel to the back door, impressed by her handy work.

She looks to the distance -- Swankie, the only other camper in miles, is hoisting a pirate flag up by her van.

INT. LAUNDROMAT AND MALL - DAY

Fern reads while waiting for her laundry.

She inspects the bulletin board for local jobs. She tears off a contact number.

EXT. QUARTZSITE - TROCK - DAYS LATER

Fern is at her new job, dragging a small cart in a sea of gems and rocks, sorting, cleaning and stashing them.

NOODLE and ROXY, two travelers in their early twenties, are trying to sell the jewelry they made.

FERN

Hey Ron! Can you come here for a second? These guys have some really nice stuff.

RON, skin like an iguana, emerges from his office/RV.

FERN (CONT'D)

This is Noodle, Roxy. This is Ron.

NOODLE

Hey Ron. Just trying to make some gas money.

RON

Not sure we need new products --

FERN

Yeah, but these are much nicer than what we have going on here. Look at the details. Look, Ron, look!

Fern holds one up to her neck to demonstrate, clearly trying to help the youngsters out.

Later, Fern takes a smoke break. She sees a colorfully-painted school bus parked in the open desert. Noodle, Roxy and a group of YOUNG TRAVELLERS gather around a smoldering fire with their dogs. One of them is playing the banjo.

Fern tries not to stare and looks away.

VOICE

Hello, ma'am.

Fern looks back and sees DEREK, one of the travelers in his early twenties, approaches her. He is straight out of a Walt Whitman novel, wearing suspenders and a misshapen cowboy hat.

DEREK

Would you by chance have an extra cigarette?

FERN

Yeah sure. Need a light?

Fern lights Derek's cigarette and notices that his hands and forearms are covered in tattoos. The inked words on his knuckles read "RAIL FARE".

FERN (CONT'D)
 (offers him the lighter)
 Need it?

DEREK
 Why sure. Thank you. I'm Derek.

FERN
 Fern.

DEREK
 Fern. Well, it's nice to meet you.
 I'll be seeing you.

Derek walks away. Fern watches him go, concerned to see those so young out here on the road.

EXT. DESERT - NEXT MORNING

Thunder. Darkening sky. A storm is approaching.

Vanguard's front tire is flat. Frustrated, Fern kicks it.

EXT. SWANKIE'S VAN - LATER

The pirate flag is still up. Fern hesitates and knocks on the door. No one answers at first, she knocks again.

SWANKIE
 What? I'm busy!

FERN
 Sorry! Swankie, it's Fern! Can I
 talk to you?

Swankie opens the door, squinting. Eye mask on her forehead.

SWANKIE
 Didn't you see the flag? That means
 do not disturb -- !

FERN
 -- I know. I need a ride into town.

SWANKIE
 Why?

FERN
I blew my tire.

SWANKIE
You blew your tire.

FERN
Yeah.

SWANKIE
Go change it!

FERN
I don't have a spare.

SWANKIE
You don't have a spare.
(stares)
You're out here in the boondocks
and you don't have a spare?!

EXT. QUARTZSITE - GARAGE - DAY

Vanguard is being worked on by a YOUNG MECHANIC. Swankie is lecturing Fern who tries to listen patiently.

SWANKIE
You need to take this lifestyle seriously. This is not a holiday. You can die out here. You know that? You can die out here. I don't want you to die.

FERN
I really appreciate it, Swankie.

SWANKIE
You're welcome. You can pay me back.

Fern raises her eyebrows.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)
See, I'm going on an important trip and I got a lot of getting ready to do. I can't get things done fast enough, with my arm. I can't lift it, look, hey, look.
(tries to lift her arm dramatically)
Ouch! See? I can't --

FERN

Ok! Yes --

SWANKIE

Good. I really appreciate it.

EXT. SWANKIE'S VAN - DAY

Swankie shows Fern how to touch up the paint on her van.

SWANKIE

I'm going to leave you the rest of my paint. You need to touch up your van. It's looking kinda...ratty.

FERN

What? No. She just needs a wash.

SWANKIE

Oh, she needs more than a wash. Take my paint.

Fern looks over at Vanguard, offended.

Later, Fern is hard at work polishing the paint.

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

Ha! Fern, come look at this!

Fern wipes her hand and peaks into the van.

Swankie sits at her small desk next to piles of VHS tapes.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)

I'm digitizing home videos -- Watch! Watch!

The old laptop display a video of her skydiving with her SON from twenty years ago. The image is fuzzy but Fern can still make out Swankie, laughing as she jumps out of the airplane.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)

Off we go. To the blue yonder. That's me and my son Doug. I surprised him for his 30th birthday. Look! He's gonna grab me mid-air and kisses me!

On screen -- Two tiny figures falling through the sky together. One gives the other a kiss.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)

Ha! Did you see that!?

Swankie laughs like a child watching it. Another moment passes. She shrugs.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)
I used to like him. That was before
he turned so goddamn boring.

EXT. VANGUARD - NEXT MORNING

Fern brushes her teeth, gargles and spits into a dry bush.
She inspects Vanguard. It's more rusty than she thought.

FERN
(groans)
Ratty...

INT. VANGUARD - LATER

Fern practices playing a flute. She is out of tune.

Suddenly she's got a bad stomach and needs the toilet. She pulls out her five gallon bucket and does a number two.

The smell is overwhelming. Fern scrambles for toilet paper while trying to turn on the ceiling fan...

A KNOCK on the door.

SWANKIE (O.S.)
Hello. It's me!

FERN
What?! I'm indisposed!

EXT. SWANKIE'S VAN - MOMENTS LATER

Swankie's stuff, everything she owns, are laid out in front of her van and trailer.

SWANKIE
When did I buy all this crap?

FERN
(organizing)
Well, it adds up. I got mine in storage.

SWANKIE
I hate storage. I put an ad on Quartzsite Chatters.

(MORE)

SWANKIE (CONT'D)

I hope people come. I hate to throw things away...

Fern picks up a green lawn chair and admires it.

FERN

Why are you giving everything away?

SWANKIE

You like that chair?

FERN

I love it.

SWANKIE

Take it. It's yours. Check these out.

Swankie shows off her rock collections.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)

These are coming with me.

FERN

You found all these?

SWANKIE

Oh yeah. My eyes are always on the ground wherever I went. This one is fossilized pinewood. This one is jasper from around here. This one, the red, white and blue, is...

Swankie suddenly has a dizzy spell.

FERN

What's wrong? Swankie?

Swankie can barely stand. Fern holds her up.

FERN (CONT'D)

Come and sit down.

Swankie sits down and holds her head in pain.

SWANKIE

My head hurts really bad and I'm nauseated.

FERN

Here, drink.

Fern brings water and looks on with concern.

INT. SWANKIE'S VAN - LATER

Swankie is sleeping on her platform bed.

Fern is digitizing the home videos for her. She watches fuzzy footage of Swankie dressed as a carpenter's wife working at the Living History Museum.

Swankie wakes and pushes herself up.

FERN
Are you alright?

She coughs violently and takes a handful of pills.

SWANKIE
I guess...

FERN
(carefully)
Are you sure? Swankie?

Swankie hesitates.

FERN (CONT'D)
What's this trip about?

SWANKIE
...I have cancer.

Fern takes a deep breath.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)
I had it a while back. They removed it from my lung. But it came back. Small cell carcinoma. They told me its spread to my brain and they've only given me seven or eight months to live. Something like that. I didn't get the lucky gene. No, sir.

FERN
I'm so sorry, Swankie.

SWANKIE
I'm gonna take my trip. Gonna go back to Alaska. I've had some good memories there kayaking. I have this book called *Final Exit* by Dr. Kevorkian, some people call him 'Doctor Death'. It shows you various ways to end your life if you need to. It's kinda like a recipe.

(MORE)

SWANKIE (CONT'D)

I have it if I have to fall back on it for some ideas, but I'm not going to spend any more time indoors in a hospital. No thanks.

Swankie looks down. Lost in a thought for a moment.

Fern watches her, speechless.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)

I'm gonna be seventy-five this year and I think I've had a pretty good life. I've seen some really neat things kayaking all over the country... A moose family on a river in Idaho. Big white pelicans landing just six feet over my kayak on a lake in Colorado. Or... coming round a bend of a cliff and finding hundreds and hundreds of swallow nests on the wall of the cliff. And the swallows flying all around, reflecting in the water so it looks like I'm flying with the swallows. And little babies are hatching out. Egg shells are falling out of the nest and landing on the water right next to me, these little white shells. And... it was just so awesome, Fern! I felt I had done enough. My life was complete. I felt like if I were to die right then, it would be OK. How many people can say that?

Fern smiles. Not many.

EXT - DESERT - EVENING

Swankie shows Fern how to rock hunt under the orange sky.

SWANKIE (V.O.)

Maybe when I die, my friends will throw a rock in a fire in remembrance of me.

EXT. SWANKIE'S VAN - NEXT DAY

Fern helps PEOPLE loading up Swankie's things into their cars and ATVs.

Swankie shows a MAN how to use her tools that he picked up. She explain the origin of her doll collection to TWO WOMEN.

She sees A WOMAN walking away with an old music box.

SWANKIE

My grandmother gave me that. Take good care of it.

She watches that woman driving away.

By the evening, almost everything is gone.

I/E. VANGUARD - SAME NIGHT

Fern is sleepless. She looks out through the curtains.

Swankie is getting her kayak ready under a camping lamp.

Fern closes the curtain and takes out a metal box with a few random items and photos.

She looks through them -- Some are from her younger years: Fern dressed up with her parents. Fern and her sister DOLLY, smiling into camera. Fern acting in a play.

Then, a photo of Beau, her husband, in his younger years. She traces her finger over the black and white photo.

She smiles at it. Her eyes are wet.

EXT. SWANKIE'S VAN - NEXT MORNING

A cloudy and breezy morning. Fern is shaving Swankie's head. Swankie sits in a chair, a towel wrapped around her neck.

FERN

Can I tell you something, Swankie?

SWANKIE

What?

FERN

I keep thinking a lot about my husband Beau. Did I ever tell you about him?

SWANKIE

No. Bo, like b,o?

FERN

No, B,e,a,u. It's a nickname. It means boyfriend. My mom called him, "your beau", and it stuck. Anyway... When it got real bad at the end, they had him in the hospital with the morphine drips. I would sit there at night and I would want to put my thumb down on that morphine drip just a little longer... so I could let him go.

Swankie considers Fern's confession.

FERN (CONT'D)

Maybe I should've tried harder, you know, so he could've have gone sooner without all that pain...

SWANKIE

Maybe he didn't want that. Maybe he was trying to stay with you for as long as he could.

(beat)

I'm sure you took good care of him, Fern.

FERN

I did.

Fern smiles a little and keeps on cutting Swankie's hair.

When it's over, Swankie covers her now clean-shaven head with an overly colorful floral hat.

SWANKIE

Do you like my hat? I bought it for two dollars. You think people will stop calling me "sir" if I wear it?

FERN

(smiles)

Maybe.

SWANKIE

One last favor?

FERN

What?

Swankie goes back into her van and comes out with a box.

SWANKIE

These are all the home videos. All digitized. I'll give you my son's address and you can bring this to him. He lives in Yuma.

FERN

Why wouldn't you go yourself?

SWANKIE

I got no time for it.

FERN

But... What should I tell him?

SWANKIE

Nothing about any of this. I want to be left alone. So nothing. Just tell him it's from me and he can do whatever he wants with them.

Before Fern can protest, Swankie climbs into her van, the floral hat on her head and her arm still in the sling.

SWANKIE (CONT'D)

Take care, Fern! See you down the road!

Swankie waves and drives away.

Fern stands there for a long time, watching the white van rattle towards the horizon.

INT. OASIS BOOK STORE - NIGHT.

PAUL WINER, seventy five, the famed Quartzsite Naked Bookseller, wears a top hat and sings a Boogie woogie.

Fern sits with a small local audience, listening.

PAUL WINER

Hey, hey, now how about a drink?
How about a toast to our friends?
Not the friends you see every day,
no. Instead we're gonna drink to
the friends who had to go away. I
bet you know just who I mean -- the
friends who had to depart, the
friends in our hearts.

(Singing)

*You hear the blues, in my boogie,
can you see the blood in my beer?*

(MORE)

PAUL WINER (CONT'D)
*Just help me laugh at pain, help me
smile away the tears.*

Paul hits the last note on the piano and laughs.

EXT. DESERT SUBURB - SECURITY GATE - DAY

A sprawling desert suburb development.

Vanguard pulls up to the security gate. No one is around.

EXT. DESERT SUBURB - DAY

Fern walks along the identical houses holding Swankie's box.

She finds the right house and rings the doorbell.

EXT. DOUG'S HOUSE - SAME

DOUG, Swankie's son, mid-forties, wearing a baseball cap,
opens the door.

DOUG
Yes?

FERN
Hi. My name's Fern. I'm... I know
your mother, Swankie.

DOUG
Ok?

FERN
I'm just here to drop off some
things she wanted you to have.

DOUG
And, where is she?

FERN
She's gone... to Alaska! To kayak.

DOUG
(sighs)
And, what's in the box?

FERN
I'm not sure. Uh... Some home
videos. Digitized. One of them is
from your 30th birthday skydiving --

DOUG
Just leave it there.

Fern looks down at the spot Doug is pointing, next to the hose and muddy shoes.

FERN
There?

DOUG
Look. I don't know what my mother has told you. But she'll do anything to get out of coming to see her family.

Doug closes the door on Fern.

Fern hesitates for a moment, then puts the box down.

As she walks away, she looks back -- a life reduced to a box of memories discarded on a family porch.

EXT. ROADS IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS - TIME PASSING

The road goes on.

Beyond the desert is the red canyons and green mountains. The Black Hills and the Great Plains...

Fern, now in a light summer dress, walks around an abandoned western town in South Dakota.

She drives through the dramatic rock formation in Needles Highway and watches buffalos in Custer State Park.

She swims in the streams of Cascade Falls at dusk. Her naked body floats in the glistening water.

At sunset, the golden outlines of the badlands pass by in the window of Vanguard. Fern has arrived at her destination -- a campground in the Badlands National Park.

Vanguard is parked at a spot that reads "Camp Host". Fern sits in Swankie's green chair, smokes a cigarette, surrounded by families enjoying their summer vacation.

INT. CEDER PASS CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

Large moths hover around a fluorescent bulb. Fern cuts her hair at the sink.

EXT. VANGUARD - NEXT MORNING

Fern irons her camp host t-shirt outside her van.

She does her morning stretches, eats oatmeal, makes instant coffee and pours it into a green thermo.

EXT. CEDER PASS CAMPGROUND - MORNING

Fern walks around the campground, excited about her new job, offering coffee to campers.

She approaches a rusty Dodge van.

FERN
Hello! Coffee?

A man pops out from behind the van. It's Dave, dressed in the National Park volunteer uniform.

DAVE
Oh, Oh hi...

FERN
Hello. Coffee?

DAVE
I... know you.

FERN
Yes. I have your can opener.

DAVE
That's right.

FERN
Dave.

DAVE
Fern. So, you're working here?

FERN
Yup. First year. With Linda May.
You know her.

DAVE
I sure do...

FERN
...Coffee?

DAVE
Yes, yes, just...

Dave quickly gets a camping mug. Fern pours him some coffee. He drops the lid clumsily.

FERN
 (hurries away)
 It's just black, so, if you want
 anything else... OK, bye. I'm your
 camp host!

EXT. CEDER PASS CAMPGROUND - DAY

Linda May shows Fern the ropes of camp hosting. Fern follows Linda around while pushing a yellow mopping station.

INT. CAMPGROUND BATHROOM - DAY

The ladies clean dirty sinks and hairy shower stalls. The toilets are the worst, but Fern is dedicated.

EXT. CEDER PASS CAMPGROUND - EVENING

Fern and Linda May drive a golf cart around, welcoming the fun and fresh air.

They stop at a campsite to pick up trash. Fern finds a pair of men's underwear left behind. She picks it up and chases Linda May with it.

VOICE
 Excuse me. Are you the camp host?

Fern and Linda stop messing around and sees VICTOR, a tough looking man walking up to them.

FERN
 Yes. Yes. We are.
 (puts the underwear in a
 trash bag)
 I'd shake your hand but you
 wouldn't want to.

VICTOR
 Right. Sorry to bother you but the
 power is out. I think the whole
 grid is down. I'm trying to set up
 for my daughter's birthday.

Fern is at the grid station and flips all the switches.

FERN
 Is it on?!

VICTOR
Yup! Thank you!

Fern and Linda May join the birthday party. Linda May is chatting with Victor's family and making balloons for the kids. Fern is a little awkward and eats a slice of the rainbow colored birthday cake by herself as the sun sets.

EXT. BADLANDS NP - VISITOR CENTER - MORNING FEW DAYS LATER

Fern and Linda May walk towards the visitor center.

INT. VISITOR CENTER - DAY

Fern puts her face very close to a taxidermy rattlesnake in the display glass case. Linda fixes her hair.

LINDA MAY
We are here for the tour.

TOUR GUIDE
Welcome! The tour is in fifteen minutes. You can wait right here. Here is a map...

While the tour guide explains away, Fern notices Dave behind the counter, answering questions for TWO YOUNG FEMALE TRAVELERS, drawing on a large map for them.

EXT. BADLANDS NP - DOOR TRAIL - EVENING

Dave guides the tour, explaining the formation of the Badlands.

DAVE
About seventy-five million years ago a shallow sea covered the Great Plains region. Eventually the continental plates shifted, causing the land under the sea to rise and the water to retreat. During this time the Badlands looked nothing like it does today...

The 'Door Trail' is like another planet. Fern wanders away from the group.

She walks between colorful rocks, along dry washes, deeper into the rock formations. She picks up sandy rocks of different sizes and shapes and inspects them.

A while later. She finds herself on low ground. She looks around for a moment -- The trail has disappeared.

She turns around and walks back towards the direction she came from. But soon she finds herself in the same spot. Everything looks the same.

She starts to panic and tries to find a way to higher ground.

A LOUD whistle.

She looks up and sees Dave's tiny figure in the far distance. Relieved, she waves.

DAVE (CONT'D)
Found anything interesting?

FERN
Rocks!

Fern climbs back onto the trail. Before she rejoins the group she looks back at Dave, who is still on the cliff, having a moment on his own watching the dusky sky.

EXT. HORSESHOE BAR - WEEKS LATER

Time passed. Fern and Linda May have become friends with Dave and GREG, the bartender of a local cowboy bar.

They take shots of tequila together.

FERN
To the Earthship!

DAVE/LINDA/GREG
To the Earthship!

Linda shows off her land on her phone's cracked screen.

LINDA MAY
See that there? See the sand?
That's a good sign. It's buildable.

GREG
What's that thing?

LINDA MAY
That's a prickly pear. You can make
jam from it. Jelly, cactus candy.

DAVE
Wine. Got any neighbors?

LINDA MAY
Closest neighbor is two miles away.

DAVE
Exactly where you want them.

LINDA MAY
Exactly.

GREG
You're gonna build this thing
yourself?

LINDA MAY
Oh yeah. I'm been in construction
most of my life. I've never got to
build my own house. This Earthship
will be something I'm proud to
leave for grandchildren.

Linda and Fern exchange a smile.

LINDA MAY (CONT'D)
It'll be there for generations.
Outlive us all.

EXT. CEDER PASS CAMPGROUND - EVENING

Linda May's trailer is hooked up and ready to go. She and
Fern embrace for a long time.

LINDA MAY
I'm not gonna see you for a while.

FERN
I know...

LINDA MAY
You come and see me. You come and
stay as long as you like, whenever
you like.

FERN
Thank you, Linda May.

LINDA MAY
Thank you. You have given me so
much.

Linda drives away. A group of KIDS waving at her as she pulls
out of the campsite.

Fern watches, it's always bittersweet to see your friend move on to the next chapter of their life.

The tiny yellow trailer disappears into the pale badlands.

INT. VANGUARD - NIGHT

Fern can't sleep. She tosses and turns. She fishes for her tobacco but it's out.

EXT. DAVE'S VAN - MOMENTS LATER

Fern walks up to Dave's van with a camping lamp and finds Dave reading on his platform bed. His back doors are open.

FERN
Hi.

DAVE
Hey!

FERN
Can I bum a cigarette? I ran out.

DAVE
Oh. I don't have any.

FERN
Really?

DAVE
I don't really smoke. I was just being polite at the bar. People keep giving them to me because they think I look like a smoker --

FERN
So you don't have any.

DAVE
Do I look like a smoker?

FERN
(walks away)
I'm going up to Wall.

DAVE
It's too late to drive through the park!

FERN (O.S.)
Yep!

INT. FERN'S VAN IN BADLANDS - NIGHT

Fern drives through the park. The pale and sharp walls of the badlands look more menacing at night. She hums.

EXT. WALL - GAS STATION - NIGHT

Fern rolls a cigarette. She smokes and watches the lights of Rapid City in the distance.

EXT. VANGUARD - NEXT DAY

Fern is tidying up and she finds ants! Frustrated, she pulls everything out to be cleaned.

DAVE
(walks by)
What's going on?

FERN
Ants! I got ants!

DAVE
Oh, ants. They're alright --

FERN
They're not alright, Dave! They are
in my food!
(beat)
What?

DAVE
I... got you these.

Dave hands her some sticks in a plastic bag.

FERN
What are they?

DAVE
I think it's better if you don't
drive through the park at night,
just for cigarettes. So, I got you
these licorice sticks --

FERN
I can't smoke licorice sticks.

DAVE
I know... But you can chew them. It
helps with the urge --

FERN
I'm not gonna quit smoking, Dave.

DAVE
I know... But you should try these.
They are good for digestion too.

Fern keeps her cool and takes them from him.

FERN
...Fine. Thanks.

She fakes a smile and carries on. Dave tries to help her with the box she is carrying. She dodges.

FERN (CONT'D)
I got it.

He picks up another box.

DAVE
Where do you want these -- ?

The bottom falls out. A stack of plates SHATTER.

DAVE (CONT'D)
Oh.

Fern freezes when she realizes they are the "autumn-leaf" plates from her dad.

DAVE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I --

FERN
(explodes)
Go over there!

DAVE
Fern --

FERN
Go! Stay over there!

DAVE
You don't have to shout. I'm going.

Dave drops the box and walks away, frustration in his voice.

Fern regrets shouting right away, but her mind is on the broken plates. She carefully picks them up.

INT. VANGUARD - NIGHT

Fern glues the pieces back together. She manages to save one. She looks at it for a moment, relieved.

EXT. CAMPGROUND BATHROOM - DAYS LATER

Without her friends, the work is becoming more lonesome.

Fern mops the floor and cleans vomit from a toilet seat.

EXT. CEDAR PASS CAMPGROUND - LATER

Fern lights a cigarette whilst driving the golf cart. It's windy and her hair is a mess.

Fern sits with GRANDMA, a camper in her late seventies, thick rimmed glasses, two rings on each finger. She is giving words of wisdom while Fern listens politely.

GRANDMA

You are one of those lucky people
who is from the Unites States.

FERN

Yes ma'am. The U.S. Of A.

GRANDMA

And you can travel anywhere. And
they sometimes call you 'nomads' or
'people who don't have a home'. I
see that you have this ring. Are
you married?

FERN

I am. But my husband died.

GRANDMA

That ring is a circle and it never
ends. That means that your love
never ends. His love for you never
ends. And you may not be able to
take it off if you tried.

FERN

I don't think I could.

EXT. BADLANDS - CAMPGROUND - MORNING WEEKS LATER

Storm in the badlands. Summer is coming to an end.

EXT. VANGUARD - DAY

Fern boils canned soup on the camping stove.

INT. DAVE'S VAN - LATER

Fern pours the soup into a bowl.

Dave has a fever and is bed bound.

FERN

You need to eat something. I made soup.

DAVE

Thanks. I don't think I can.

The thermometer in his mouth beeps. Fern looks at it.

FERN

Still over a hundred!

DAVE

Fever's good. It burns the bad stuff off.

FERN

It's been burning for a couple of days, Dave!

DAVE

I'm fine. I'll eat some of that...

Fern hands Dave the soup. He stares at it for a while.

FERN

You can't eat it, can you?

DAVE

My stomach hurts. It's probably a bug.

FERN

A bug, or it could be something serious.

DAVE

Yeah. It could be.

FERN

Really?!

DAVE

Yeah...

EXT. RAPID CITY HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Fern smokes outside, watching people coming in and out.

INT. RAPID CITY HOSPITAL - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Fern sits by herself in the empty hallway.

INT. RAPID CITY HOSPITAL - FRONT DESK - NIGHT

NURSE MATT

He has a case of diverticulitis,
which is an inflammation of his
intestines. They did a laparoscopic
surgery --

FERN

He had surgery?!

NURSE MATT

It's standard. He can leave and be
back at work in a week. Would you
like to see him?

FERN

...No. It's ok. Bye.

EXT. ROAD ON PLAINS - SAME NIGHT

Fern drives. Eyes heavy, exhausted. She sees a gas station
and pulls over and goes to sleep.

I/E. VANGUARD OUTSIDE GAS STATION - NEXT MORNING

Fern eats a breakfast sandwich. She sees the pack of licorice
sticks Dave left her by the van door.

She tries one and hates it.

INT. GROCERY STORE ON PLAINS - SAME DAY

Fern carefully checks the prices and the expiration dates.

INT. RAPID CITY HOSPITAL - ROOM - SAME DAY

Fern puts a few food items on the table. Dave lies in bed, looking much healthier.

DAVE
Woo. Cup of noodles.

FERN
It's great when you're sick. And...
Juice box. Animal crackers. Jello.
And this.

She hands him a can of mackerel.

DAVE
That's my favorite.

FERN
I know.

DAVE
(moved)
Thanks, Fern.

FERN
See you back at work. Two more
weeks left.

DAVE
Where're you going afterwards?

FERN
Beet harvest in Nebraska.

DAVE
That doesn't start until October.

FERN
What about you?

DAVE
I'm starting at Wall Drug. It's
kind of fun, as far as retail goes.
I can see if they have an opening.

FERN
For me?

DAVE
Yes.

FERN
Why?

DAVE

Good pay. Great parking. People are nice... And, I don't think you should leave yet --

FERN

Get better. Bye.

Fern waves and leaves without an answer.

INT. WALL DRUG - TWO WEEKS LATER

Fern is dressed in the green Wall Drug uniform, complete with a green paper hat. She works in the busy dining hall boxing donuts. Dave walks by with a huge tray of donuts.

DAVE

Doing OK?

FERN

Good, good, good!

The large restaurant is covered wall to wall in western memorabilia and native American art work and gifts. International exchange programs brought workers from Philippines, Jamaica, Taiwan, and Slovakia. Fern works amongst them and makes small talk.

Fern is assembling the famous hot roast beef sandwich at the counter. Another WORKER rushes her to pick up the pace.

In the kitchen Dave is making large baskets of fries.

After hours, Fern and Dave play a duck shooting game in the arcade. Fern helps Dave to pick out a new hunting knife.

EXT. REPTILE GARDEN - DAYS LATER

Fern follows Dave around the famed reptile garden. Dave dressed up a bit, wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

At first Fern keeps her distance with a straight face. But that ends when she sees TANK, a giant, 100 year old tortoise.

FERN

Oh my god. Look at him!!

Fern pets Tank with two YOUNG KIDS. Dave talks about what he knows about Tank as if they are long time friends.

TERRY, the reptile specialist, wraps a large yellow python around Fern's neck. KIDS are gathered around them.

FERN (CONT'D)

No, I don't like it. Keep its head
away from me!

Later, Fern's level of bewilderment skyrockets when they watch Terry feeding Maniac, the 1,350 pound crocodile, the largest in North America.

Dave tries to keep his cool, but is very happy with himself that Fern is having a great time.

EXT. WALL - DISPERSED CAMPING - EVENING

Dave is making dinner. Sausages and corn on the cob.

Fern is making a salad.

They eat together on the cliff of a breathtaking overview. A silent comfort between them. It works.

EXT. WALL DRUG - DUSK

Fern and Dave walk towards the famed 80ft Wall Drug dinosaur, enclosed in metal fences and stands on a strip of barren land next to the highway.

Fern smiles at Dave. He takes a picture of her on his phone.

EXT. CEDAR PASS CAMPGROUND - SAME NIGHT

Fern and Dave join BRAD, fifties, a cowboy astronomer, for a planets demonstration under a starry night. CAMPERS coming together carrying lamps of different sizes and shapes.

BRAD

That's planet Vega in the mid-northern latitudes. Two thousand light years away. It takes twenty-four years for it's light to get here to earth. If Vega dies tonight and goes dark, we can still see its light for the next twenty-four years. How about that?

Fern, looks up at the sky, wondering what's beyond the world she knows.

BRAD (CONT'D)

The telescope is set up on Jupiter. The largest planet in our solar system.

Fern looks through the telescope at Jupiter with a childlike enthusiasm and wonder.

BRAD (CONT'D)

Stars blow up and they shoot plasma
and atoms out into space. They
sometimes land on earth, nourish
the soil and become part of you.
So hold out your right hand...

The group all hold out their hands.

BRAD (CONT'D)

...and look at a star. Because
there are atoms from stars that
blew up eons ago that landed on
this planet and now they're in your
hand.

INT. WALL DRUG RESTAURANT - EVENING A WEEK LATER

Fern is cleaning up.

JAMES, a man in his early thirties, glances around the restaurant.

FERN

Hi. Sorry, we're closed.

JAMES

I'm looking for Dave. I'm his son,
James.

FERN

He's in the kitchen....

JAMES

That way?

FERN

Just around the corner.

Fern watches James go. Dave never talked about his son.

INT. WALL DRUG - MOMENTS LATER

Fern tries to eavesdrop by the kitchen window, but their voices are muffled by the fans.

James is talking most of the time. Dave's body language is stiff as he makes a burger.

Later, while Fern mops the dining room floor, James walks in with a tray of burger and fries.

FERN

Sit there. I just cleaned it.

JAMES

(sits down)

I've been through here, what, twice?

(looks around the room)

This place is so weird. Who would wanna live here?

FERN

(keeps cleaning)

I can think of worse places.

JAMES

(shakes ketchup)

I guess so... You wanna know the best way to get to know a place?

FERN

What is it?

JAMES

AA meetings.

FERN

...Really?

JAMES

Back then when I was with the band, I had to travel a lot. Man, I tell you, you don't really get to know a place until you show up at their AA meetings.

FERN

You been to one around here?

JAMES

Yeah. In Rapid City. Man. So weird.

FERN

How come?

JAMES

Not in a bad way. You know? It's like... every AA meeting I've been to around this whole fucking country. People are all the same.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

We all got the same fucking problems. The same shit to deal with. Isn't that nice to know?

Fern gives James a closer look. He looks like his father.

FERN

How's the burger?

JAMES

It's OK.

FERN

Good cook, your Dad.

JAMES

It's not that hard to make a burger.

FERN

Oooh. Harsh.

They exchange a smile.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER THAT NIGHT

Dave shows Fern a photo on his flip-phone: James and a young WOMAN together. She is pregnant.

DAVE

That's his wife Emily. She's about to have a baby.

FERN

You're going to be a grandfather! When's she due?

DAVE

In two weeks. James's on his way back home now... He wants me to go back with him.

FERN

You should go.

Dave thinks for a moment. Then he goes over to the greasy grill and starts to scrub it.

Fern waits, quietly tearing the lettuce in her hands.

DAVE

I was... He doesn't like that I wasn't around much when he was young. Which is, obviously, my fault. And when he got older, I tried to be around, but I guess I just forgot how to be a dad. Anyway, I wasn't very good at it. We are ok now. I'm just not sure if he really wants me to be there.

FERN

Oh, I think he does.

DAVE

Yeah?

FERN

Don't think about it too much, Dave. Just go. Be a grandfather.

Fern finishes tearing the bag of lettuce and walks over to the over-sized fridge.

Dave looks back at Fern who is trying to stuff the large lettuce bag into the fridge that's clearly too full.

DAVE

Do you want to come with me?

FERN

Where?

Fern gives up trying to make the bag fit. She turns to Dave.

DAVE

Maybe not if you don't want to.

FERN

I can visit sometime.

DAVE

Yeah. Great.

Fern looks down at the bag of lettuce she's holding, not sure what to do with it or what else to say.

I/E. VANGUARD - NEXT MORNING

Fern is awake. She can hear Dave packing up his van and walking over. A knock on the door. She ignores it.

Through the gap of the curtain, Dave waits a moment, then puts something on the ground and leaves.

Moments later, Fern opens the door, just in time to see Dave's van pulling onto the highway in the distance. The trail of dust it left behind slowly settles.

Fern finds a rock by her footstool. It's smooth with holes -- the kind you find on the beach. And a note from Dave - *'If you visit, there's plenty more of these'*.

The wind is strong. Fern sits for a moment, then holds up the rock and looks through the hole at the boundless badlands...

INT. WALL DRUG - EVENING DAYS LATER

Fern cleans the greasy grill.

She climbs on top of a large Jackalope statue and pretends to be a rodeo cowboy.

She plays duck shooting game in the empty arcade.

She takes a selfie with a plastic model of Mount Rushmore.

EXT. VANGUARD - EVENING

Fern makes canned sardine on toast.

She watches a group of COWBOYS drinking beers by a pickup in the distance. One of them sings a song on the guitar.

EXT. WALL DRUG - NIGHTS LATER

Street lights pass overhead. Summer tourist season is over. Most of the stores are shut.

Fern walks down the empty street. Her shadow gets longer as she disappears into the night.

EXT. WESTERN SUGAR - NEBRASKA - WEEKS LATER

Cold wind blows across the dusty plains. It's late autumn in Scottsbluff, Nebraska.

The barren landscape of Western Sugar, filled with beet fields, beet piles and trucks. Large sugar beets tumble onto a conveyor belt. The sound is deafening.

Fern is wearing a hard hat, safety vest and goggles as she shovels beets and signals incoming trucks.

EXT. DOWNTOWN SCOTTSBLUFF - NEXT MORNING

Fern does laundry.

She eats at a Mexican restaurant, a FAMILY sitting at the other end is giving the father his birthday celebration.

EXT. WESTERN SUGAR - DAYS LATER

The work and weather is harsh and Fern looks exhausted. But she keeps going with pride in her hard work.

She sits in the door of her van, warming herself up sipping a bowl of cup noodles. She looks on, the open lot is dotted with vehicles -- occupied by migrant workers like herself.

EXT. SCOTTSBLUFF - NIGHT DAYS LATER

Fern walks by the historic Midwest theater. THREE CHATTY FRIENDS are standing outside waiting. Colorful posters of "The Avengers" in the window.

Fern checks out the window displays of a closed bridal shop.

She gives a cigarette to a HOMELESS MAN.

EXT. WESTERN SUGAR - NIGHT WEEKS LATER

Piles of beets falling from the piler into the convertible bell. Dust, steam, Fern working. Time passing.

After a night of hard work, MIGRANT WORKERS gather around a burn barrel to stay warm.

Fern watches them from afar. A GROUP OF MEN are talking about football. A COUPLE are arguing.

INT. VANGUARD - MORNING

The sound of a loud truck wakes Fern up. She tries to go back to sleep. Her phone beeps.

She gets a video message. It's from Swankie.

Fern watches it -- Swankie films from her kayak underneath a cliff populated with swallows. The migratory birds fly around her and she picks up a small egg shell from the water.

Fern can't help but to smile.

FERN
You made it, Swankie.

INT. SCOTTSBLUFF - SHOWER - MORNING

Fern scrubs dirt off of her hair and nails. She looks at herself in the mirror.

Time to move on again.

EXT. SCOTTSBLUFF - STRIP MALL - VANGUARD - NIGHT

Snow is falling. Vanguard is parked in the empty parking lot.

INT. VANGUARD - NIGHT

Fern is enjoying some friend chicken beside her Mr. Buddy heater. She hears a tiny noise, looks up and sees a MAN looking in from the gap of the curtain.

She freaks out and pulls the curtain shut, almost choking on her chicken.

LOUD knocks.

MAN (O.S.)
You can't sleep here! There's no
overnight parking!

FERN
Ok! Sorry! I'm leaving! I'm
leaving...

Fern scrambles to get ready to leave.

EXT. ROAD ON PLAINS - EVENING

Fern drives. The plains turn flatter and colder. It's harvest time. Tractors and field workers in the distance...

INT. FUR TRADE MUSEUM - DAY

Fern walks down rows and rows of pioneer artifacts.

She watches an igloo being built in "Nanook of the North".
She buys a beaver pelt.

EXT. VANGUARD OUTSIDE FUR TRADE MUSEUM - DAY

Fern hangs the beaver pelt above her bed. Happy with it.
She puts the key in the ignition and starts the van. Silence.

FERN
Oh no. No. No...

She tries again and again, nothing. It's dead.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT

Fern waits impatiently in the garage.

KEN THE CAR DOCTOR, fifties, a nervous but sympathetic man,
pulls parts out of the hood. The noises make Fern nervous.

Later, Ken hands her the estimate behind the counter, while
his son JERMEY surfs the internet next to him.

KEN
This is what you're looking at.
Parts and labor twenty three
hundred dollars with tax.

FERN
Yikes.

Fern looks mortified.

JEREMY
I just looked up the value on your
van. A 2004 E150. With that high
milage, you're at best looking at
five thousand dollars.

KEN
So I would recommend taking that
money and putting it towards
another vehicle instead --

FERN
(distressed)
No, well, I can't do that! I can't
do that! See... I spent a lot of
time and money building the inside
out.

(MORE)

FERN (CONT'D)

A lot of people don't understand the value of that, but it's not something you can just... I live in there. It's my home.

EXT. GARAGE - NIGHT

Fern paces frantically whilst on the phone.

FERN

I'm going back to Amazon in a couple of weeks and I can pay you back with my first pay check.

She takes a deep breath and tries to listen to the response.

FERN (CONT'D)

I can't! I don't have a car... no I don't want to take the bus.

(beat)

Why? You think I'm being difficult? I think you're being a bitch!

Fern hangs up and lights a cigarette.

Later, Ken finds Fern ironing a yellow shirt in her van.

KEN

I'm about to lock up...

FERN

Almost done.

KEN

(peaks in)

It is a very nice van, ma'am.

FERN

Thanks... Mind if I keep it here? I'm going to my sister's tomorrow to get the money. Can you make sure she's safe?

KEN

I got a few cars parked behind you in the same situation. It'll be safe.

After Ken leaves, Fern looks around -- she is surrounded by broken down vehicles, waiting for their owners' return.

EXT. WESTERN TERMINAL - MORNING

Fern shivers in line, chowing down a hot dog. She is careful so it doesn't get onto the nicely ironed yellow shirt.

INT. BUS ON ROAD - DAY

Rows of suburban houses flash by.

Fern looks out of the window. A GROUP OF CHINESE TOURISTS are chatting behind her.

EXT. DOLLY'S HOUSE - EVENING

A nice suburban home outside Denver.

Fern walks up to the front porch. She presses the door bell. No one answers. She presses it over and over again.

DOLLY, Fern's sister, swings the door open.

DOLLY

Hi Fern. That door bell works.

FERN

Well, I couldn't hear it.

They give each other a stiff hug.

DOLLY

Woah. You cut your hair.

FERN

Yep. What? What Dolly?

DOLLY

Nothing --

FERN

Oh my god! I haven't even stepped into the door yet --

DOLLY

Come on in!

INT. DOLLY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Dolly peels vegetables at the counter crowded by dishes.

Fern eats a cookie from the tray. Not great. She forces it down and takes out the beaver pelt.

FERN
I bought you a gift.

DOLLY
What is it?

FERN
It's a beaver pelt.

DOLLY
What am I supposed to do with a
beaver pelt?

FERN
It's decorative. Put it up
somewhere.

DOLLY
Can you make your four egg cake for
me? George has some friends over.

FERN
Are you going to tell them I made
it, or that you did?

Dolly ignores her.

FERN (CONT'D)
I'll make the cake. But then I have
to leave.

DOLLY
No. I want you to stay the night.

FERN
I can't. I gotta get back.

DOLLY
Get back where?

FERN
To the garage to pick up my van!

DOLLY
It's just a van! It'll be there.
You can't just stay for one night?

FERN
Dolly! You know what...?
(calms herself)
Why do you have to make me come all
the way here to lend me money? Why?

DOLLY
Because I want to make sure my
sister's still alive.

FERN
Why wouldn't I be?

DOLLY
You never visit. When I tried to
call you, you never answer.

FERN
I never have gas money or signal.

The banter reaches a dead end. They stay quiet for a moment.

FERN (CONT'D)
Do you even have enough eggs?

EXT. DOLLY'S HOUSE - GARDEN - EVENING

Burgers sizzle on the barbecue.

FERN
Got my famous four egg cake.

George, Dolly's husband is on barbecue duty.

FERN (CONT'D)
Dolly talked me into it. Where do
you want it?

GEORGE
Right there is fine.

Fern inspects the burgers.

FERN
I want that one.

GEORGE
It's got your name on it.

Fern pours another drink of tequila on the rocks, which is helping with her talkative mood. Dolly introduces Fern to George's coworker JIM and PAM.

DOLLY
This is my sister, Fern.

JIM
Hi Fern, I'm Jim. This is my wife
Pam.

DOLLY

Jim has been working with George
for a long time.

JIM

George actually sold us our first
house before I got into real
estate. I've learned everything
from him --

FERN

Did Dolly ever tell you how they
met?

JIM

No...

Dolly laughs nervously.

FERN

I introduced Dolly to George, but I
knew George from way before. Long
story. You see, my sister's a
flirt, Pam, she'd flirt with a
rock. So I took her out and I said
'Listen, George is a really good
friend of mine. I don't want you to
mess this up. If you're not serious
about him, don't mess with him' --

DOLLY

And I didn't 'mess it up' --

FERN

How many years have you been
together?

DOLLY

Thirty plus.

JIM

Worked out pretty good.

DOLLY

I was able to take care of things
myself after that 'introduction' --

FERN

You're welcome.

Later, everyone digs into Fern's cake and starts to talk
about real estate. George is optimistic.

GEORGE

It's been a good year. We've got more home sales and new constructions. The stakeholders are seriously talking about mortgage-debt forgiveness.

Fern snorts. She is tipsy.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

I think when we look back, we're gonna say, yes we hit the bottom back in 2008. It was bad. But 2012 is the year that things are finally looking up again.

FERN

I don't want to disagree with you, but I really do.

GEORGE

I'm just saying its finally getting better. Jim?

JIM

We've got the numbers.

FERN

Yeah. The numbers. The numbers. But how long do you think it lasts before it crashes again? And what if this time you can't get back up? What if you lose everything? I've met plenty of people like that. I think it's strange that you encourage people to use their life savings, to get in debt, just to buy houses they can't afford!

GEORGE

Come on Fern. That's a very limited view on what we do --

FERN

Is it limited, George?

GEORGE

We help people build *homes*. So they can start a family, have children, take care of their parents. I mean, we can't all just chuck everything and hit the road --

FERN

Is that what you think I did?! I
chucked everything and hit the
road?!

Fern's outburst brought on uncomfortable silence.

DOLLY

...That's not fair, George.

GEORGE

Right. I'm sorry.

More silence.

JIM

I... think... What George is trying
to say is that... We can't all do
what you do. I think the way you
live is exciting and brave. And
frankly I'm jealous. But we can't
all take the plunge, right? What
kind of society would that be?

Fern swallows her words with more tequila.

JIM (CONT'D)

Also I don't think we should ignore
the problem of homelessness. My
mother was homeless when she was a
teenager. It's a serious problem --

FERN

I'm not homeless.

Fern looks up at Jim, firmly.

FERN (CONT'D)

I am houseless. Not homeless. There
is a difference.

DOLLY

There is.

(tries to defuse the
situation)

I mean if you think about it, what
the nomads are doing is not that
different than what the pioneers
did, right? They went west in their
wagons, living on the road. Fern is
a part of the American tradition. I
think it's great!

Fern forces a smile and goes back to her cake.

EXT. DOLLY'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

Fern sits on the edge of the bed, knitting a pot holder.
Dolly walks in and sits down next to her.

DOLLY

Here you go.

She hands Fern an envelope. Fern looks into it and finds the cash needed for Vanguard's repair. She's relieved.

FERN

Thanks, Dol. You know I'll pay you back right? I will.

DOLLY

I know.

Fern puts the money away. Dolly hesitates.

DOLLY (CONT'D)

Wes is getting married.

FERN

Who?

DOLLY

Our cousin Wes?

FERN

Oh! Good for him.

DOLLY

Everyone is going back to Gibson for the wedding. You should come too. People ask about you.

FERN

(sarcastic)

Tell them the usual -- I live in a van and have no money for gas.

DOLLY

You know what? I tell people how great you're doing. I tell them you're traveling all over the country, having a great time.

FERN

It's not like that. It's not some great adventure. I just don't want to be comfortable anymore. I want to take a risk and try something different... What?

Dolly is smiling to herself.

DOLLY

Oh Fern, that's what you always want. It's always what's out there that's more interesting. You left home as soon as you could. You married Beau when you only knew him for a few months. And you dropped everything and moved to the middle of nowhere with him. Even after Beau passed away, you still stayed in Empire. I just don't get it. You could've left, did something with you life, or met someone --

FERN

This is why I don't want to come here.

Dolly knows she has hit a nerve. She softens.

DOLLY

I've never said this to you before. Maybe I should have... You've always been the eccentric one growing up. People thought you were weird, but really, you were just braver and more honest than any of us. You can see me, when I try to hide from everyone. Sometimes you see me before I see myself. I needed you in my life... And you're my sister. I would've loved to have you around all these years. You left a big hole by leaving.

Fern fights back tears and guilt.

EXT. DOLLY'S HOUSE - NEXT MORNING

Fern smokes on the curb.

Dolly comes out and hands her a packed lunch. They hug.

Fern walks away. She looks back for a moment, hesitates, but keeps on going.

EXT. GARAGE - EVENING

Fern climbs into the driver's seat of Vanguard and starts the engine. It runs good. Ken closes the hood and walks over.

KEN

She's ready to go. I threw in an oil change and rotated your tires.

FERN

Thank you so much.

KEN

Where're you headed?

FERN

(beat)

I don't know.

KEN

Well, good luck to you.

Ken walks away. Fern sits there for a moment longer. Slowly, she gives the steering wheel a hug.

EXT. ROADS - TIME PASSING

Fern travels south, taking her time, wandering, camping, sleeping at truck stops and parking lots.

She drives through the Sandhills, mountains, canyons, back in the desert.

INT. NEEDLES, CALIFORNIA - VANGUARD - MORNING

Fern is making PBJ sandwich. A knock on the door.

VOICE

Police. Open the door.

EXT. NEEDLES - RESIDENTIAL STREET - VANGUARD - MORNING

Vanguard is parked on a nice residential neighborhood.

Fern is all smiles while OFFICER STEVE runs her ID. She notices a WOMAN taking her trash out and glancing over at them. From the look on her face, it won't surprise Fern that it was this woman that called the police.

OFFICER STEVE

Are you living in your vehicle?

FERN

Only part-time.

OFFICER STEVE

You know there is no camping
allowed on residential streets in
the city limit.

FERN

Yes! I was just traveling through.
I took a nap and overslept.

OFFICER STEVE

(doesn't believe her)

If you need a place. Out in the
county you can do whatever you
want. Just keep driving until you
hit dirt.

Officer Steve gives Fern's ID another look.

OFFICER STEVE (CONT'D)

You look familiar.

FERN

People say that about me.

OFFICER STEVE

(hands her the ID)

Aright, Frances. You take care.

FERN

Thank you, officer, bye.

Fern watches Officer Steve leave and waves. As soon as he is
out of sight, she scrambles back into her van.

EXT. NEEDLES - RURAL AREA - EVENING

An abandoned open space next to the busy highway.

Fern sits outside the van, knitting while eating a sandwich.
She notices a young man sitting under a mesa oak by a fire.

She is concerned at the sight of the young traveller, packs
up the other half of the sandwich and walks towards him.

The young man is warming up a can of beans on the fire.

FERN

Hi, want a sandwich?

She recognizes him -- Derek, the tattooed young traveller she
met in Quartzsite.

DEREK

I think I've met you before.

FERN

Yes, I'm Fern. I was working at T-Rock in Quartzsite.

DEREK

You let Noodle sell his jewelry there, didn't ya?

FERN

Yep.

DEREK

Would you like a beer?

FERN

Ok. I'll trade you for a sandwich.

DEREK

Right on.

They make the exchange.

DEREK (CONT'D)

It's cold. You should sit down by the fire.

FERN

(considers)

Ok. Why not.

She sits down. It's nice and warm.

DEREK

You gave me a lighter back in quartzite.

FERN

You still have it?

DEREK

No, that's long gone but I do have this for ya.

Derek takes out a silver lighter cover, with a brown stone incased in it. He offers it to Fern.

DEREK (CONT'D)

I want you to have it.

FERN
(takes it)
...Thanks. It's really beautiful.
What's that stone?

DEREK
That right there is dinosaur bone.

FERN
Really?

DEREK
Really. But I only know what they
tell me.

FERN
Where's the bus? And your friends?

DEREK
The bus? Oh, the bus. They went
down to New Orleans.

FERN
I thought you all traveled
together.

DEREK
No... Noodle, Roxy and all of them
you saw with the bus, they come to
Quartzsite every winter to buy
gemstones and then they sell them
during their travels for the rest
of the year.

FERN
You don't do that?

DEREK
No, ma'am. You gotta be a people
person to sell anything. I like
helping out on ranches, working
with animals.

FERN
And travel.

DEREK
And travel.

FERN
You always been like this?

DEREK

I suppose... Ever since I was little. I never liked what other kids my age did, playing video games and stuff like that. I always just walked the railroad tracks. Once I pass all the trees and forests, I can see it going all the way to the horizon. And I couldn't help it. As soon as I was old enough, I started to jump trains. I like the west. I like being able to see the horizon.

Derek lights a cigarette. Fern watches him.

FERN

...How old are you?

DEREK

Twenty-one years.

FERN

That's... Impressive. Where are your mom and dad?

DEREK

Back home in Wisconsin.

FERN

Think they worry about you?

Derek avoids the question.

FERN (CONT'D)

You don't get lonely? Got a girlfriend anywhere?

DEREK

Well, to be truthful, there is one. She lives up near Lake Superior Small farm. She's happy with her life there. I'm happy with mine.
(beat)

I write letters to her.

FERN

Smart man. Letters are good.

DEREK

But I can't write about anything I reckon she'd care about.

FERN

You ever try poems?

DEREK

Can't say I have. I don't think I know one. Do you know any?

FERN

How about one I used for my wedding vows when I was not much older than you?

DEREK

Right on. Mind if I hear it?

FERN

Aright. Lets see if I can remember it...

(beat)

'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate/ Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May/ And summer's lease hath all too short a date/ Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines.

EXT. NEEDLES - RURAL AREA - NEXT MORNING

The early morning of city lights in the distance.

Fern watches Derek as he walks away towards the highway.

FERN (V.O.)

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd/ And every fair from fair sometime declines, By chance or nature's changing course undimm'd.

Inside Vanguard, Fern opens a binder of old slides. She looks at them through a viewer. A faint light illuminates past memories -- Images of Fern as a little girl. Her parents and her sister. Family life, summer trips, holidays meals...

FERN (V.O.)

But thy eternal summer shall not fade/ Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st/ Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade/ When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st/ So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

EXT. REDWOODS, CALIFORNIA - MORNING

The redwoods of northern California.

Fern looks up, mesmerized by these ancient giants -- the tallest living beings on the Earth.

EXT. CALIFORNIA COAST - LATER

Vanguard weaves along coastal roads. The Pacific Ocean suddenly appears.

The sun a golden orb bursting through sea mist.

EXT. DAVE'S HOUSE - MORNING DAYS LATER

Fern pulls into the well-kept homestead with a beautiful ranch house surrounded by trees.

FERN

Woah.

She gets out of the van, taking with her a nicely-ironed blue jean dress on a hanger and a box of chocolate.

Dave's van is parked by the bushes. One of the tires is flat. Fern peeks inside. It looks unused and empty.

She walks towards the front door.

VOICE

Fern!

Dave comes out in a hurry.

DAVE

You made it!

FERN

Yeah. Hi!

Dave shows her in through the gate and introduces her to his daughter-in-law EMILY, who is working in the garden.

DAVE

This is my daughter-in-law Emily.

FERN

Hi! Here --

EMILY

(takes the chocolate)

Oh, thanks. So nice to finally meet you. We've heard so much about you.

INT. DAVE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM/KITCHEN - DAY

Fern walks into the living room and is immediately surrounded with Dave's family and friends.

DAVE

Hey everyone, this is Fern.

VOICES

Hi Fern! Hello! Welcome!

Everyone makes small talk with her. There's a special effort to make her feel welcome, until the new BABY begins to cry.

INT. DAVE'S HOUSE - GUEST BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Fern recovers for a moment in solitude. She sits on the large bed, in a room that feels abnormally spacious.

INT. DAVE'S HOUSE - BABY ROOM - LATER

The sound of chatting and cooking in the kitchen.

Fern folds baby laundry, while Dave entertains the baby. He is good with him.

FERN

You've got a flat.

DAVE

Huh?

FERN

Your van. One of your tires is flat, Dave.

DAVE

Oh. Ok. I haven't noticed.

FERN

Because you're staying?

DAVE

Yeah...

FERN

Good.

DAVE

I never expected to. Never thought I'd spend another night under a roof, but... It was getting pretty lonely out there.

FERN

You had friends.

DAVE

Yeah...

FERN

What about Bob? You've known him for years. And your friends at RTR?

DAVE

Yeah... But every time I say "bye" to them, I don't know if I'm going to see them again. And most of the time, I never see them again. It's fine at first... but, a decade of that is something else.

Fern knows he is right. She has felt it too.

FERN

Well, it's really nice here.

DAVE

Yeah. It's not bad... you can stay.

FERN

Great. Thanks. I gotta do laundry.

DAVE

(smiles)
Yes. Laundry.

FERN

And a bath.

DAVE

I meant staying longer, Fern. They have a guest house.

Fern gives Dave a look.

DAVE (CONT'D)

I'm serious.

FERN
What do they think about that?

DAVE
I asked them already.

Unexpected, Fern stays quiet.

DAVE (CONT'D)
I like you. You're a really good person. You get along with people, for the most part and... I like being around you.

Fern didn't expect Dave's directness and honesty. She still doesn't know what to say.

DAVE (CONT'D)
We should drive to the beach tomorrow if the weather is good.
(to the baby)
What do you think? We should take her to the beach, yeah? Yeah...

INT. DAVE'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - EVENING

A knife carves through a perfectly cooked turkey.

The family and friends are gathered having dinner together. The mood is jovial. They pass around the food. Fern helps James with his plate. Dave taps his glass.

DAVE
I just want to say a little welcome to Fern. To the new one and the old ones too and everyone in between. So welcome Fern.

They clink glasses.

FERN
Thank you. Happy Thanksgiving!

Fern chows down the delicious food. She looks around and considers the option of a second chance at a family life.

EXT. DAVE'S HOUSE - PORCH - LATER

Fern stands on the porch to have a cigarette. Emily comes out to join her.

EMILY

Could I have one of those?

FERN

Yeah, sure. They're roll-ups.

EMILY

That's OK. I'm trying to quit, with the baby and all. But...

She lights it and takes a drag, satisfied.

FERN

I've given up trying. My friend Linda May quit over night after forty-three years. How about that?

They share a laugh.

EMILY

I'm really glad you're here. Dave talks about you a lot.

FERN

Yeah?

EMILY

He really likes you.

FERN

Yeah?

(changes subject)
You have a *nice* garden.

EMILY

It looks a lot better in the summer. Did you have a garden?

FERN

No. But we had a *really* great lawn.

EMILY

Was that hard to do? Empire's in the desert, right? I like that name, Empire.

FERN

When I first went there I couldn't believe how green the whole town was. Everyone's got green lawns. Stupid to waste that much water I guess. We even had a public pool and a golf course.

EMILY
Like an oasis.

FERN
It was.

Fern looks towards the dark tree lines in the distance.

FERN (CONT'D)
Our house was right on the edge of
the town. The backyard looked out
at this huge open space. It's just
desert, desert, all the way to the
mountains.
(beat)
There was nothing in our way.

INT. DAVE'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Fern takes a bath. Bliss. Like it's the first time in years.

INT. DAVE'S HOUSE - STAIRS - LATER

Fern carries her laundry down the stairs. She hears music and
looks into the study --

Dave and James are playing the piano together. A simple
melody in beautiful synchronicity -- something father and son
had played together many times in the past

Fern watches them. She is moved at first, smiling gently.
Then, something restless stirs inside of her. She suddenly
feels a little short of breath.

INT. DAVE'S HOUSE - GUEST ROOM - THAT NIGHT

Fern lies in bed, unable to sleep. She stares at the ceiling.
It feels too tall.

She gets up and walks out of the dark room.

EXT. DAVE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Fern walks out of the house and runs to Vanguard.

She climbs in, closes the door and lies under the covers.

She touches the ceiling. A moment. She closes her eyes.

EXT. DAVE'S HOUSE - NEXT MORNING

Dark clouds on the horizon. A storm is approaching.

Fern stands outside Vanguard and smokes a cigarette.

She looks up at Dave's house. It's beautiful and tranquil.

INT. DAVE'S HOUSE - LIVING/DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Everyone is still asleep. The house is quiet.

Fern looks at the family photos of different generations on the wall. She recognizes a younger Dave with an infant James.

She sits down at the empty dining room table and looks around. Silence.

A moment passes, Fern gets up, quietly straightens the wooden chair and walks away.

EXT. ROAD IN TOWN - SAME MORNING

Large rain drops on windshield.

Fern drives through the quiet town lashed with wind and rain.

EXT. OCEAN - SAME MORNING

Fern walks around the cliff in the heavy wind and rain. She takes off her hat and lets the rain wash down her face.

A bird soars on the gale. Alone, fragile, but free.

EXT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - MORNING A WEEK LATER

Fern lines up waiting with SEASONAL WORKERS. Same as the previous year, she looks around and notices AL again.

He nods at her and she nods back.

AL

Seems like more every year.

INT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - DAY

Fern works at the packaging station. She is now wearing the orange blazer that reads "Ambassador, Ask Me."

She curiously studies one of her new co-workers -- a high-tech DELIVERY ROBOT on the floor.

EXT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - EVENING DAYS LATER

Fern does laundry and solves a jigsaw puzzle alone.

EXT. AMAZON WAREHOUSE - EVENING A MONTH LATER

Fern smokes in the cold air as she facetimes with Linda May.

Doug walks by her, shivering.

DOUG

See you next year, Fern. Happy holidays.

FERN

You too, Doug.

EXT. DESERT ROSE RV PARK - VANGUARD - NEW YEAR EVE

Fern sits on the footstep of Vanguard and lights a sparkler.

She smiles watching and adjusts her Happy New Year headband.

2013, another year arrives.

INT. VANGUARD - EVENING A WEEK LATER

Familiar desert landscapes and sunsets flash by the window as Fern arrives back in Quartzsite, Arizona.

EXT. DESERT - EVENING

Fern, with her head down, hikes the desert, looking for a rock. She finally picks up one and feels its rough edges.

She looks back --

The Rubber Tramp Rendezvous camp is in the distance. It has grown in size since last year.

EXT. RTR - CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

A group of NOMADS gathered around a campfire to remember Swankie. One by one they toss a stone into the fire.

Bob Wells walks to the fire and looks down into the flames.

BOB WELLS

So long, Swankie. See you down the road.

He tosses a rock into the flames.

Fern stands next and tosses another rock. The embers rise up into the night sky, disappearing amongst the stars.

EXT. DESERT - NEXT DAWN

The first light of the morning sky.

Fern and Bob Wells sit together beside his van.

FERN

I've been thinking a lot in the past year about why I didn't just leave Empire when my husband Beau died. I could've left and started a new life sooner. But... I think I somehow made up my mind that if I just packed up and left, it would be as if Beau never existed. You see... Beau never knew his parents and we never had kids. But he loved Empire. He loved being there. He loved his work. Everybody loved him. So I stayed. Same town, same house. It's like my dad used to say 'what's remembered, lives'.

(beat)

I might've spent too much of my life just... remembering. Know what I mean, Bob?

BOB WELLS

I can relate... I rarely talk about my son, but he took his own life five years ago... Like you, I think I've made up my mind that I'm going to be his rememberer. I carry him everywhere I go. I realized I could honor him by helping people. It gives me a reason to go through the day. Some days that's all I've got.

They share an understanding smile.

BOB WELLS (CONT'D)

Out here there's a lot of people
our age carrying grief and loss
with them. Most of them don't get
over it, and that's OK. That's OK.

(beat)

One of the things I love most about
this life is that there's no final
goodbye. I've met hundreds of
people out here and we don't ever
say a final goodbye. We just say
'I'll see you down the road'. And I
do. Whether it's a month or a year
or sometimes years, I see them
again. I can look down the road and
I feel certain in my heart that
I'll see my son again. You'll see
Beau again and you can remember
your life together then.

Fern smiles through her tears. She cherishes Bob's words.
They're a gift.

EXT. ROAD - DESERT IN NORTHERN NEVADA - EVENING

Vanguard travels through a vast landscape. Gradually, the
familiar snowy high desert near Empire comes into view.

INT. VANGUARD - EVENING

Fern drives, approaching the blue gates of the storage unit.

EXT. EMPIRE - STORAGE UNIT - EVENING

Gay, the storage unit owner, and his grandson NICK, load
everything from Fern's unit into a pick-up.

NICK

Is that all, Mrs. M?

FERN

That's it, Nick. Thank you. You got
taller.

NICK

Yeah? Well, thanks. See ya, Mrs. M.

Fern gives Gay her final payment.

GAY

Sure you don't want to keep any of it?

Fern looks over at the possessions from her past. They look foreign to her now.

FERN

No. I won't miss any of it. Yard sale?

GAY

Sure. But it's hard these days. Those Burners, they have money now. They don't stop here to scavenge anymore. They've got their big rigs flew in from San Francisco and all over the place.

FERN

Really.

GAY

Yeah. Time has changed.

EXT. EMPIRE - FACTORY - EVENING

Fern walks towards the factory. She runs into ALBERT and BERNIE, the mine's last caretaker and his wife.

Albert opens the factory door for Fern.

ALBERT

I'm the last employee. Kind of. I just go around and make sure things aren't vandalized. And make sure the llamas are alright.

FERN

Llamas?

ALBERT

Well, the company got some goats to keep the lawn weeds down. But the coyotes came and started to get the goats. So, they got two llamas to keep the coyotes away. But the coyotes got the goats anyway. Now those llamas are out of work. They just live here now.

INT. EMPIRE MINE - FACTORY - EVENING

Albert wipes off the dust on a red button on a control panel.

He recounts the last day at the factory. His voice lingers as Fern walks around the empty factory.

ALBERT

It was around two o'clock. All the workers were in here. And when it was time, I pushed the button. Everything just came to a halt. It was quiet in here. Too quiet. The last thing you want to hear in a factory is silence.

(beat)

I thought of Beau on that day. I wish he was here. We would've asked him to stop the production line. It was an honor to be able to do that. The longest running mine in America and he was one of our best. And he was a good friend too.

EXT. EMPIRE - EVENING

Two llamas are wandering the empty street between rows of abandoned houses, munching on lawn weeds.

Fern walks past carefully not to disturb them.

She passes by the old baseball field, school, church, golf course. All frozen in time.

I/E. EMPIRE - FERN'S HOUSE - EVENING

Fern stands in front of her old house for a moment, the small red mailbox is covered in rust.

She walks through the empty house, stepping over broken floor tiles and tumbleweeds, onto the backyard where she shared happy memories with the man she loved. The rosebushes she planted are still there, withered.

Fern is unable to move, not forward nor back. She allows herself, for a moment longer, to be lost in time.

Then she walks on, leaving the yard behind, passing the fence door, towards the endless desert lies beyond, stretching all the way to the horizon.

FADE TO BLACK.