

SWEET TOOTH

EPISODE 101

"Out of the Deep Woods"

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Based on the comic book by

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TEASER

INT. HOSPITAL LOBBY - DAY

CLOSE ON a CHOCOLATE BAR in a hospital vending machine.

ADITYA SINGH, an East Indian nurse (mid 30s), leans against the machine. Loosens a button. Stares through the glass at the SHINY YELLOW WRAPPER. Feeling the weight of the world.

A BIG MAN (30s) with a chiseled face and a KNEE BRACE limps by on a pair of crutches. The men share a look. Just the two of them in this empty lobby.

A WEATHERED VOICE narrates.

OLD MAN (V.O.)
*The Great Crumble happened slowly.
And then all at once.*

QUICK CUTS FOLLOW:

EXT. SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD - MORNING (DAYS BEFORE)

Singh, briefcase, kisses his bathrobed wife RANI goodbye at their front door.

RANI
Don't--

DR. SINGH
Forget the turkey. I know.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - MORNING

Singh makes his way to the hospital entrance. Waves to a colleague. Jots down on a stickie: "Turkey".

INT. SINGH'S OFFICE - DAY

A COLLAGE of PATIENTS faces JUMP CUT together: Mostly KIDS with a fever. Runny noses. Red eyes. Chicken Pox. A SINGLE MOM (30s) taking the brunt of a chest cold.

Singh makes notes. Smiles warmly as the DOCTOR examines.

INT. SINGH'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Singh and Rani absentmindedly watch a HOCKEY GAME on their couch. An injured player for the local team is being carted off the ice. TOMMY JEPPERD (the Big Man from the hospital).

Singh remembers something.

SINGH
(to himself)
Dammit.

RANI
You forgot didn't you.

SINGH
I'll get it tomorrow.

EXT. SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD - MORNING

Front door kiss...

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - MORNING

Parking lot wave...

INT. SINGH'S WAITING ROOM - MORNING

Singh pats a YOUNG BOY with the sniffles on his way out the office when he spots Single Mom. Back again.

Her LEFT EYELID TWITCHES uncontrollably.

INT. SINGH'S OFFICE - MORNING

He takes Single Mom's temperature as The Doctor draws her blood. Her eye continues to twitch.

Singh sees that the PINKY FINGER on her left hand has also started to twitch. Doctor shares a concerned look with Singh.

INT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

Singh carries a hand basket with a plump turkey in it. Stressed out families stream by. SNEEZING. COUGHING.

He clocks the EMPTY SHELVES in the Pharmacy aisle.

CONTINUED:

THE SOUND OF PANICKED VOICES behind him as a SICK MAN stumbles through a crowd of shoppers. Hands twitching.

OLD MAN (V.O.)
*When nature makes up her mind, she
can be a stubborn mistress.*

The man COLLAPSES to the tiled floor, taking out a display. Singh tries unsuccessfully to revive the convulsing man...

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - MORNING

Singh jogs across the lot. AMBULANCES crisscross through a STREAM OF PEOPLE funneling at the entrance. Singh lowers his head and tunnels through the crowd. Covering his mouth.

INT. SINGH'S OFFICE - DAY

Single Mom is now inside a STERILE GLASS BOOTH. Eyes and pinkies twitching. LITTLE TOES twitching now too. Tethered to machines that pulse and blink as she loses consciousness.

Singh watches a half dozen SCIENTISTS huddle around The Doctor. Lost in heated debates and rattled nerves.

FAST CUTS: Syringes. Test tubes. Pills of all shapes. All sizes. Microscopes. Spinning centrifuges...

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - DAY

Singh steps out to find personnel in HAZMAT SUITS. A PUZZLED DOCTOR draws out FLU STRAIN DIAGRAMS on the hospital wall.

Concerned nurses huddle around a TV where the NEWS TICKER reads: "H5G9 FLU PANDEMIC". The head of the CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL announces:

CDC SPOKESMAN (TV)
*... it is here, it is now and if
you don't pray, now might be a good
time to start.*

INT. SINGH'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Singh and Rani shower together. Clinical. Scrubbing each other with antibacterial soap. Never enough soap.

SINGH
From now on you stay home.

CONTINUED:

RANI
From work?

SINGH
From everywhere.

RANI
Promise me you will too?

Singh doesn't answer. Just scrubs.

OLD MAN (V.O.)
*For Aditya Singh there would never
be a more important time in his
career. Little did he know, it
wouldn't matter.*

INT. SINGH'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Singh AWAKENS with a jolt. Passed out over a pile of textbooks. Medical journals. SUNLIGHT burns a beam of dust motes through DUCT TAPED windows.

He orients himself. TV on MUTE in the corner. *People in PANIC under an eerie silence.*

"BREAKING NEWS: Outbreaks in Ohio."

SINGH
Rani...?

He checks their bed. It's empty.

INT. SINGH'S BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Singh opens the bathroom door. Stops when he sees:

Rani is seated on the edge of the tub. Her LEFT EYELID TWITCHING. Fear in her eyes.

SINGH
(snapping into action)
Come with me.

EXT. SINGH'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Their GARAGE DOOR rolls open to REVEAL:

A stampede of AMBULANCES blare through the neighborhood. FRIGHTENED NEIGHBORS pack belongings into cars.

CONTINUED:

POLICE in hazmat hoods try to get a SHRIEKING WOMAN into a MILITARY BUS against her will. 21st century chaos.

EXT. ROAD TO HOSPITAL - MOMENTS LATER

Singh races to the hospital, narrowly avoiding several accidents in a stream of EMERGENCY and MILITARY VEHICLES.

HELICOPTERS fill the sky so thick two CRASH into each other in the distance and spiral down to earth like drunk bugs.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Singh slams his Volvo on to the curb and carries Rani through a throng of FRENZIED PEOPLE, clamoring to get in.

SINGH

She's sick! Get Back!! She's contagious!

He uses her to fend people off.

INT. HOSPITAL ELEVATOR - MOMENTS LATER

Elevator doors close on Singh. Bedhead. Shirt torn. Wife in his arms. He soothes her with loving words, then sees her pinky finger is now starting to convulse. His heavy eyes.

Floors scroll by. Ding. Ding. Ding. *DING!*

INT. HOSPITAL LOBBY - LATER

WE'RE BACK in the opening scene. All doors sealed in plastic and taped shut. Singh leans on the vending machine.

Staring at Tommy Jepperd and his pair of crutches.

Then a FRAIL VOICE from a crack in the stairwell door.

YOUNG NURSE

Are you a doctor?

Singh realizes she means him. He's not. But he nods anyway.

YOUNG NURSE (CONT'D)

I need you to see something...

INT. MATERNITY WARD - MOMENTS LATER

She slices through the plastic and leads Singh downstairs to the NURSERY. People gathered in the halls but no panic. Parents. Nurses. A Priest? The mood is lighter here. *Calmer.*

She clears a path for him to the nursery observation window and Singh stops in his tracks when he sees what's there.

Inside, cribs are filled with NEWBORNS. *But something is odd.*

A tiny baby hand with WEBBED FINGERS pokes out of one crib...

A large RABBIT EAR dangles out of another...

Baby ANIMAL NOISES echo inside like a sleeping barnyard...

OLD MAN (V.O.)
Some stories start at the
beginning. Ours begins here.

Singh peers in to see the HEAD NURSE rocking a newborn to sleep. She turns to show him in full and WE SEE:

A *BABY DOG BOY* in her arms. Eighty percent human newborn with a black button nose and teeny tiny CLAWS on his toes. A FLOPPY TAIL wags between his legs as he snores peacefully.

Singh. Speechless. Then blurts out what everyone is thinking.

SINGH
What the fu--

SMASH CUT TO:

TITLES: "SWEET TOOTH"

CONTINUED:

ACT ONE

EXT. DEEP WOODS - MORNING

Soaring AERIAL shots of an endless pristine forest.

Far below, a needle in a haystack: a man digs a hole in the forest floor. FATHER (late 30s). Gangly. Glasses.

A small TUBE TELEVISION sits on a tree stump in the forest. Rigged to a car battery. NEWS REPORTS play silently. *Hospitals. Nurseries. A zoo. Crowds. Doctors. Fences. A wall. A politician at a podium.*

Father throws the TV in the hole. BURIES it.

OLD MAN (V.O.)

Far away from the commotion and chaos of the crumbling cities, one man disappeared into the wilderness with the thing that mattered to him most.

WE NOW SEE the Man has a TINY BABY strapped in a harness.

OLD MAN (V.O.)

And he called that thing "Gus".

But like the newborns in the nursery, Gus is different.

Human in every way except for TWO SMALL BUMPS that poke from his forehead and a pair of ELONGATED EARS that dangle like fuzzy petals.

Branches sway above, bathing Gus's happy little face in Autumn leaves.

EXT. DEEP WOODS - DAY

Father hikes with a comically large pile of BAGS and belongings on his back. Baby son strapped to his chest.

They arrive at an OLD ABANDONED CABIN swallowed up by the forest. Vacant and overgrown. This will do.

A VISUAL MEDLEY of Father and Gus:

REHABBING the cabin. Father struggles to DIG a garden. TRANSPORTS water from a stream, splashing everywhere. CHOPS firewood awkwardly. Getting the hang of the survivalist life.

EXT. FENCE - DUSK

Father uses a coat hanger to mend a hole in a government grade FENCE. Ten feet high, stretching to infinity. A large SIGN tells us we're in the "NEBRASKA WILDERNESS SANCTUARY".

Forest on Father's side. A ROAD and PLAINS on the other.

An oblivious Baby Gus crawls towards a RATTLESNAKE. Father catches a glimpse and as the serpent coils to POUNCE, he THROWS HIMSELF in front of Gus and backs the child away.

Father is horrified. Baby Gus laughs through the whole thing.

EXT. CABIN PORCH - NIGHT

By candle light, Father hand writes a book from memory: "The Velveteen Rabbit - *by Father*".

He rocks Baby Gus to sleep in a spare tire. He's enclosed the makeshift cradle with chickenwire. Snake proof.

Gus's tiny human hand clutches Father's large, calloused finger. Then Gus's first words:

GUS

...Pubba.

Father's conflicted eyes on the child. Then tears of joy.

FATHER

"Pubba." You, Gus. Me, Pubba.

In the great distance A LARGE EXPLOSION flares up silently from some far off event. Father clocks it. Gus doesn't even notice.

Father blows out the candle as:

INT. CABIN - MORNING (A FEW YEARS LATER)

FOUR YEAR OLD GUS blows out FOUR BIRTHDAY candles. His ears, bigger. The bumps on his forehead now hardened nubs.

Gus opens a gift wrapped in birch bark: KID'S BOOKS. Including Pubba's version of several classics.

Gus pushes a button on a book shaped like a cow and it MOOS at him electronically.

CONTINUED:

He throws the book and hides behind a chair. The book moos again and Gus trembles as Father tries to console him.

EXT. MAPLE TREE - DAY

Father notches Gus's height in the MAPLE TREE TRUNK as Gus catches trickling MAPLE SAP from a spout. Sweet and delicious.

LATER

Father BOILS the sap over a roaring fire. Condensing it down into MAPLE SYRUP. Gus tastes the final product. Magic.

A DISTANT RUMBLE sounds and a petrified Gus clutches his Father's legs in terror. Father covers Gus's oversized ears to block out the DEAFENING ROAR.

FATHER

It's just a bird.

Gus looks up to see a CESSNA AIRPLANE soar above the trees.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Look at me...

Gus does and we SEE what HE SEES. Father, muted by his heavy hands. Speaking so Gus can read his lips under the engine's rumble.

FATHER (CONT'D)

It's a bird. A big, big bird. Okay?

Gus nods, still scared as:

LEAFLETS of paper float down through the branches as Gus hides under massive tree roots. Father catches one. It's a notice for something called The Preserve.

"A safe place for Hybrids".

Decorated with clipart of happy human-animal children.

Father digests it. Looks at the boy cowering under the roots. With a heavy heart, he throws the flier in the fire.

Then notices the BLACK SMOKE billowing high above the trees. A SIGN for any and all to see. Father puts out the fire.

FATHER (CONT'D)

From now on, no more fires during the day.

EXT. FOREST POND - DAY

Father fishes from the banks next to a homemade duck hut.

FATHER

You're gonna scare the fish.

GUS

No I'm not.

Gus tries to hop from one half submerged pond rock to another. Crossing the large pond in one straight shortcut.

FATHER

"If I hear a growl..."

GUS

I will duck.

Gus makes it to the first rock. Teeters.

FATHER

"If I hear a voice?"

GUS

I will run.

Gus hops to the next rock.

FATHER

If I see a human?

Gus gauges the distance to the next rock. Can he make it?

GUS

I will hide!

With that, he leaps... and comes up well short. SPLASH!!!

Wary DUCKS take off in a bluster of honks as Gus flails about in the pond. Father lets him flounder a bit. Then:

FATHER

Stand up.

Gus does. Realizes he's in waist deep water.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Now try again.

PRELAP: Gus shrieks with delight.

EXT. HILL - DAY (WINTER)

He BURSTS through falling glitter.

SLEDDING down a MASSIVE HILL with Father. Wrapped in blankets. Big EARS flapping.

With a THUNK, Father and son splat in a mound of snow and the sled shoots off on its own, coming to rest next to:

A man-sized HOLE in the perimeter fence.

Father's laughter cuts out. Gus starts towards the fence to retrieve the sled but Father GRABS him and pulls him back.

FATHER

NO! Don't go near the fence.

GUS

I just--

FATHER

What did I tell you about it?

GUS

... Don't cross it?

FATHER

NEVER cross it. Don't even go near it. Now get inside.

GUS

(re: sled)

I wanna go again.

FATHER

Maybe tomorrow. Now run.

He watches Gus scamper back home.

EXT. FENCE - DUSK

Father uses heavy gauge wire to REPAIR the hole in the fence. Breath heavy. Battered fingers exposed to the elements. Alert eyes on the lookout.

FATHER

(muttering to himself)

I did the right thing... I did the right thing... Tell me I did the right thing...

CONTINUED:

A DIM LAMP hangs as a WORK LIGHT. The wind blows it OUT as:

INT. CABIN - MORNING (A FEW YEARS LATER)

SEVEN YEAR OLD GUS blows out SEVEN BIRTHDAY candles.

It's now clear that his forehead nubs are miniature ANTLERS.
His big ears, now covered in a SOFT FUR.

If we didn't know before, we do now. Gus is part deer.

A GIFT wrapped in birch bark: A STUFFED ANIMAL Father made out of an old pair of jeans.

GUS

A... horse?

Father, now sporting a full beard, shakes his head no.

GUS (CONT'D)

Pig...?

No.

GUS (CONT'D)

A cat?

Father pushes a button on the Animal Sound book and it WOOFs.

GUS (CONT'D)

A dog!!

Bingo! Father puts on his best throaty woof. Gus can't contain his excitement.

FATHER

What are you gonna name it?

Gus thinks long and hard. Then it comes to him in a wave of ingenuity.

GUS

I'll name him "Dog."

Father bites his tongue as:

GUS (PRE-LAP) (CONT'D)

"Swimming's no good. I don't seem to care for it..."

EXT. ORCHARD - DAY

A Crayola landscape. Spring BLOSSOMS blanket a CHERRY TREE with WHITES and PINKS.

Gus lounges on a branch, stumble-reading *"The Adventures of Tom Sawyer"*. By Pubba. Dog "listens" at his feet.

GUS

"--Oh, shucks! Baby! You want to see your mother, I reckon. --Yes, I DO want to see my mother -- and you would, too, if you had one. I ain't any more baby than you are..."

Gus SNIFFS the air and stops reading.

CLOSE on his nose. Twitching and searching for something on the wind. A scent...

A distant twig snaps. His big ears swivel. He's not alone.

Far off, a small HERD OF DEER graze in the field. A doe and three fawn. Gus clocks them as the doe, as if sensing some primordial connection, *lifts her head and stares right back.*

Gus touches his little antlers. CLOSE on the deer. Her hooves. Gus looks at his own hands. His fingers.

Then a woman's voice whispers, barely audible on the breeze: *"Guuuuuuuuuuuuussss."*

The leaves around him sway. Then GUST. The wind picks up.

A familiar GROWL in the sky. A *growl*. Gus remembers the rule:

GUS (CONT'D)

(to himself)

Duck...

He grabs Dog and DROPS from the tree. The sky darkens and leaves tumble past. He peeks through trembling fingers TO SEE

The horizon is a writhing gray mass. CLOUDS race towards him. The air thick with RAIN. A *cone shaped form* spins together in the distant sky.

A TORNADO...

Gus grabs Dog and blurts out a FERAL YELL. SPRINTING in the other direction. Leaping bushes and fallen branches.

CONTINUED:

He knows these trees like the back of his hand. It's exhilarating to see. *A mix of animal and human grace.*

EXT. FOREST POND - CONTINUOUS

Gus bounds across the pond rocks. One, two, SPLASH!

He doesn't make the third rock, so he flails to shore.

EXT. CABIN PORCH - MOMENTS LATER

Gus sprints to the cabin to find Father bracing against the wind. Boarding up windows with tree branches.

GUS
Bathtub! Bathtub!

Father catches Gus before he makes the front door. Gus squirms but Father holds him tight.

FATHER
Stop.

The RAIN breaks through the trees and pelts the garden, the yard, the cabin. Wind in their hair.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Quit rootching.

GUS
I'm scared.

FATHER
I know you are, but I'm here. I gotcha.

Father holds Gus tight and steps off the porch *into* the storm. Gus trembles as the sky rumbles.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You feel that?
(beat)
It's Mother Nature. Washing everything clean.

Gus settles just a little. Still in panic mode.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Respect her but don't fear her,
Gus.

CONTINUED:

He stands in the yard, rain soaking them both. Gus shivers but Father turns him to face the weather. Holding his son up like an offering. Slowly, Gus smiles.

MOMENTS LATER

SLOW MOTION. Gus runs in happy kid circles around his Father. Hopping, prancing, bounding through rain.

Ears like airplane wings. Bare feet striking puddles like atom bombs.

Gus catches his breath in ankle deep mud. Then:

GUS

Can we live on a raft? In a river?
Like Huck?

FATHER

Who?

GUS

You, me and Dog?

FATHER

There are no rivers here Gus. You know that.

GUS

What about out there?

He points beyond the fence.

FATHER

I told you we can't go out there.

GUS

Why not?

FATHER

Because I said so.

GUS

You said when I'm old enough you'll tell me.

FATHER

I know what I said.

GUS

So...?

CONTINUED: (2)

FATHER

So what?

GUS

I'm seven. So...?

Father is torn. Then:

FATHER

So we better get you cleaned up.

(toying)

We need those ears to hear every word of it.

Gus's face lights up.

INT. CABIN - DUSK

Rain pelts the cabin.

Father pours a bucket of hot water into a tin bathtub. The steam gives the cabin a thick, swirling atmosphere.

Gus, up to his armpits in bathwater. Face, attentive. Father puts WINE CORKS on Gus's antler tips to avoid a bath accident, then holds up a jar.

There's an APPLE inside. Soft and bruised. CRAWLING with ants. Hundreds, if not thousands.

FATHER

Once upon a time, Bad People ruled the Earth.

PUSH IN on the apple. Like a tiny planet overrun by tinier hordes. Millions of insect legs stomping on red apple skin. Gus's big googly eyes through the jar glass.

FATHER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Doing what they wanted. Takin' as they pleased. Just like those ants.

Gus looks up and sees he's surrounded by BATH STEAM. Pulsing and flickering with the fireplace glow.

SHADOWS move through the steam. Almost resembling... *ants.*
We're sliding in to Gus's IMAGINATION...

FATHER (V.O.)

They were brutal things. Dangerous to everything around em.

CONTINUED:

Gus tries to blink it away, but the shadows in the steam seem to grow... Forming... Upright shapes.

FATHER (V.O.)
*Self destructive. Where they
walked, hate and death followed.*

They seem to march in a circle around Gus. Getting bigger. Closing in. Gus scrunches down in the water to hide.

FATHER (V.O.)
*And God was the only thing brave
enough to wipe them out... She
drowned and burned and shook them
off, as many as she could. Until a
miracle happened.*

The shapes are STOMPED OUT in the steam. One by one with a warm, AMBER GLOW. Caressing Gus's cheeks.

Around the bathtub, SMALL FIGURES EMERGE in the steam. Part children. Part Animal...

FATHER (V.O.)
*Your kind. They called them
"Hybrids".*

Gus's face relaxes. Calmed by the faint presence of others like him. He reaches out. Almost touches them in the mist.

FATHER (V.O.)
*No one knows where they came from.
Or how. Some worshipped you. Some
studied you. But the Bad People
feared you...*

The steam darkens, turning gray as large shapes POUNCE on the Hybrids in the steam.

Gus splashes about as shadows writhe in the air around him. Biting. Tearing. A terrifying visual on all sides.

FATHER (V.O.)
*There were less of them now. But
they were meaner. Angrier. Fear
brought out the worst in them...*

Suddenly all figures BURST like black fireworks in the steam.

FATHER (V.O.)
*So God called your kind back home.
And set fire to the rest of the
earth. Now it burns forever...*

CONTINUED: (2)

Gus looking all around for Father in the flickering clouds. Glimpses of the angry shapes, hidden in the steam. Twisted shapes and evil eyes.

FATHER (V.O.)

But the Bad People are still out there Gus. In the flames. Waiting. And it's my job to make sure they never get in.

Father's hand in the steam. Touches Gus's shoulder softly.

Gus looks up and the steam has thinned out. The steam figures are gone. His imagination yields to reality. Father scrubs.

FATHER

It's your job to live a full life. To be happy. To be kind. To love your Father. And yourself. And The Forest. And the birds and the squirrels and the rabbits and Dog--

Gus cuts him off.

GUS

Are there others? Like me...?

FATHER

No. I'm afraid there aren't.

Gus looks at his rippled reflection in the water.

FATHER (CONT'D)

You're the last one buddy. That's why I brought you here. Because you're too special to be out there in the flames. And it's a lot more fun just the two of us.

Gus's big soulful eyes. Trying to make sense of all this.

GUS

How come it's just the two of us?

Gus, trying to make sense of something.

GUS (CONT'D)

Huck don't have a mother. Tom got Aunt Polly--

FATHER

And you've got me.

CONTINUED: (3)

Gus, not satisfied.

GUS
I saw her today.

FATHER
(fearing the response)
...Who?

GUS
Mama.

Father's hands stop scrubbing.

GUS (CONT'D)
She was pretty. But she didn't have
nubbins like me--

FATHER
That wasn't your mother, Gus.

GUS
I could feel her--

FATHER
That's not how it works.

GUS
But you didn't see her.

FATHER
Gus.

GUS
She was in the field and--

FATHER
Gus, that wasn't her.

GUS
How do you know?

FATHER
Because your mother's gone, Gus.
That's how I know.

Gus. Lower lip trembling.

Father gets up and leaves the bathroom.

Gus's heavy eyes on the jar, writhing with hungry ants.

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT

The Moon floats above trees, recovering from the storm.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

COME IN on the dark cabin. A BUNK BED against the wall.

Gus on top. Awake. Father's story alive in his mind.

A CREAK from below and Father rolls out of bed and pulls something from under his bed. A SMALL METAL BOX. He gazes wistfully at what's inside.

He pulls out a LANYARD with what looks like an ID badge. Strange DIAGRAMS on napkins. Trinkets. A few PHOTOS. Father's eyes tremble.

He pulls out a single MATCH and builds up the resolve to strike it. Staring at the FLAME as it glows on the contents of the box. About to erase the memories of what's inside...

But he can't.

He lets the match burn itself out. Down to the nub. Then tucks the belongings back inside and shuts the lid tight.

He grabs a SHOVEL and quietly heads outside.

EXT. TREE LINE - NIGHT

Father DIGS a hole near the tree line. BURYING that box by the light of the moon. He covers it and pats the fresh soil.

Wiping away the tracks of his former life.

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO**INT. CABIN - MORNING (A FEW YEARS LATER)**

TEN YEAR OLD GUS blows out TEN BIRTHDAY CANDLES.

His antlers are larger and beginning to branch.

This year's gift: A HOMEMADE SLINGSHOT. Gus lights up.

EXT. MAPLE TREE - LATER

MAPLE SAP drips.

Dog sits on the sled. Faded and tattered. Showing his age.

BZZZZZ! An ACORN whirs through the air. Missing Dog. Then another. Gus was clearly born with zero marksman skills.

EXT. GARDEN - LATER

Father rips out overwintered weeds as pesky BLACKBIRDS dive bomb the pea trellis. He shoos them away.

Gus hides in the bushes Rambo style. FIRING corn kernels at the birds. Fire. *Miss*. Fire. *Miss*. Fire. *Father yelps*.

FATHER

Ahhh! Motherfuck--!

(catches himself)

Was that gift a mistake?

He calls out to the woods. Gus sheepishly slinks back into the trees, scampering off while Father rubs his arm.

EXT. FOREST POND - LATER

Ducklings crawl over Gus's feet as he takes big monster steps in Father's massive BOOTPRINTS. Fe-fi-fo-fum through the mud.

He's now managed to get the elastic off the slingshot and onto: *his antlers*.

He contorts himself into a pretzel firing pond rocks from his antler catapult high up into the air...

...and waits for the inevitable little splash in the pond. A perfectly good way to spend an afternoon.

CONTINUED:

Searching for a new rock, he SPOTS:

A HOOF PRINT in the fresh mud.

Leading up the bank. And into the bushes.

GUS

Mama...

Gus's eyes follow the tracks.

And then Gus follows them.

EXT. THICK FOREST - MOMENTS LATER

Ducklings scatter as Gus pushes through the thick overgrowth. Ahead of him, DEER TRACKS snake through the forest.

He SNIFFS the air. EARS perk up to soak in the FOREST SOUNDS. And then he sees:

The FENCE. An OLD TREE has fallen over and BROKEN OPEN a section of fence big enough for an animal to squeeze through.

The deer tracks go *right through the opening*.

Gus. Deep breath. Puts his slingshot back together...

And PUSHES ON till he's right at the opening to:

EXT. THE GREAT OUTSIDE - CONTINUOUS

His toes on the invisible line between safety and danger.

He scans the open land before him. No deer.

His ears ROTATE like little satellites. Just the SOUND OF WIND in the grass.

He blinks. And then *takes a STEP FORWARD*.

Nothing changes. It's like there's no difference between either side of the fence.

He musters up the courage to take ANOTHER STEP. The little ducklings follow dutifully.

And then he hears it.

A GROWL. From deep in the canyons and mountains beyond. His EARS picking up all the little things humans can't hear.

CONTINUED:

(It's actually the sound of A CAR ENGINE but to Gus it's a:)

GUS

...growl...

(beat)

Duck...

But he's too scared to move. Too panicked.

Fearful eyes. Little heart pounding in his chest. Ducklings chirping at his feet.

As the growl swells, Gus turns to flee and runs right into a LARGE FIGURE!

HIS FATHER. Standing like a totem. Mortified.

EXT. THICK FOREST - DAY

Father carries Gus under his arm. Tearing through the brush. Repeating over and over:

FATHER

What did I tell you what did I tell
you what did I tell you--

GUS

I could hear *them*.

FATHER

What did I tell you?

GUS

I thought it was her!

FATHER

I told you she's gone!!

EXT. PASTURE - DAY

They march through a field of wildflowers. Father stumbling. Gus sobbing.

GUS

I heard a growl. Far away. Gettin'
closer.

FATHER

It's my fault. I told you not to be
afraid. I taught you not to-- I
thought I could trust you.

CONTINUED:

GUS

You can!

FATHER

We need to trust each other!!

Gus wriggles free and backs away.

GUS

I DON'T trust you. You don't tell me everything. You think I'm too little.

FATHER

You are too little. You just proved it.

Gus's face falls. He stomps away to the cabin leaving Father alone in the field.

EXT. CABIN - CONTINUOUS

Father shuffles through the overgrown garden. Reaches the cabin steps. He can hear Gus inside. Crying.

As he's about to go inside, he hears the sound of A FAINT VOICE coming from far away...

A man's voice.

The crying inside stops. Gus heard it too.

Father scans the porch for something. Thinking on his feet.

EXT. YARD - CONTINUOUS

Father jogs into the clearing, head on a swivel. Scanning the trees, the pasture, the horizon for a sign of...

A YOUNG BLACK MAN.

Standing beyond the fence. A good fifty yards away. Hands up, palms open. Beard, scarf. Wrapped in blankets. Hard to read as a person from afar.

Father raises a broom. Points it at the man. From this distance, it LOOKS like a gun. Or so Father hopes.

He hears Gus coming down the path to his right. Father hisses, throwing his words to the dirt.

CONTINUED:

FATHER
(clenched teeth)
Gus... stay back.

Gus freezes. From where the man stands, he can't see Gus. The men call out into the large space between them.

YOUNG MAN
Afternoon.

FATHER
Don't come any closer.

YOUNG MAN
You mind lowering the gun?

It worked. Father gulps down air. Tries to look strong.

FATHER
Feel better if I didn't.

YOUNG MAN
I'm just looking for someone.

FATHER
Well they're not here. Better look
someplace else.

The man takes in the remote surroundings.

YOUNG MAN
How long you been here?

Father debates answering that. Allows a quick glance to Gus. He doesn't know how to respond.

YOUNG MAN (CONT'D)
I realize how this looks, but I
give you my word, I had no idea
your camp was here.

FATHER
Who said I had a camp?

YOUNG MAN
Lucky guess. My sister went off in
these woods. Week and a half ago. I
want to know she made it through--

FATHER
She didn't come through here.

CONTINUED: (2)

YOUNG MAN

Sure?

FATHER

Very. You should get back on the road 'fore it gets dark.

YOUNG MAN

Roads ain't exactly safe these days. You haven't gotten out much lately, huh?

(beat)

She's with a couple. Two adults. Two kids.

Gus's ears perk up at that. Father's too. Gus tries to get a look at the man. Father hisses again.

FATHER

Don't move...

Did the man see Gus? Father tries to get his attention.

FATHER (CONT'D)

What's it like? Out there?

YOUNG MAN

It sucks. I haven't seen anyone besides you in... two days.

FATHER

I haven't seen anyone since it started. What about the Sick?

YOUNG MAN

No cure yet. People think the Hybrids caused it.

FATHER

Maybe *it* caused them.

YOUNG MAN

Maybe. Any case. Ain't many of us left.

Gus takes another step forward to try to sneak a peek at him.

YOUNG MAN (CONT'D)

Though if you're out here alone, isolated and such, you probably aren't in to company.

(beat)

Are you?

CONTINUED: (3)

FATHER

In to company?

YOUNG MAN

Alone.

Father catches Gus, moving discreetly but a whole lot more than he's comfortable with. He raises his voice to mask his nerves.

FATHER

I've lived here. Alone. *By myself.*
For nine years. Seventeen weeks
and...

(doing the math)

Three days.

Gus shoots Father a look. Father ignores it.

Gus takes another tiny baby step around the foliage and Father clenches his jaw.

FATHER (CONT'D)

You say she had kids with her?

YOUNG MAN

Boy and a girl.

Gus moves ever so slowly.

FATHER

Were they... ?

He leaves the last bit hanging.

YOUNG MAN

Were they *what*?

FATHER

Y'know.

Gus's antlers catch on a low branch. Father whispers:

FATHER (CONT'D)

Stop it.

YOUNG MAN

Wouldn't *you* like to know?

Gus tilts his head a few degrees to un-snag his antlers and the branch BOUNCES back, *shaking the leaves.*

Not super obvious to an observer. But more than a wind gust.

CONTINUED: (4)

Father tries to appear unfazed but he's rattled. He shifts his eyes back to the field.

But The Young Man is gone.

The spot where he stood is empty. Like he was never there.

Father calls out. Marches towards the fence. Frightened eyes scan the place beyond the fence but there's no sign of the man. Then he spots, around the bend: A RED RIBBON.

Tied to the fence. From the outside. Like a marker.

Father rips it down then sees the WHOLE FENCE has red ribbons tied every thirty yards or so.

Gus's tiny voice breaks the silence.

GUS

He said there were kids.

But Father doesn't respond. He falls to his knees. Paranoia sets in.

FATHER (PRE-LAP)

Gus. Son. Get in.

INT. CABIN - DAY

A FRAMED MAP on the wall. Pinpointing every important place in the forest. Father tilts it up on a hinge to REVEAL:

A HIDDEN CUBBY built into the wall behind it. Sized and built for Gus.

GUS

I don't want to.

Father's frazzled and it shows.

FATHER

I said get in the cubby.

GUS

It's a hole.

FATHER

It's not a hole, it's a... You know how foxes hide out during the day in their own fox house in the ground?

CONTINUED:

Father pulls up a floorboard and snaps open a PELICAN CASE. Gus, (and we) confused by it.

GUS
Who was he?

FATHER
A Bad Person.

Gus's ears droop.

GUS
Maybe the kids were like me?

FATHER
Maybe. Maybe there were no kids and he just said what he thought I wanted to hear.

GUS
Why did you say you lived alone?

Father sighs. Not the time for this conversation.

FATHER
To protect you.

Father pulls a LOADED SYRINGE from the case. Sticks it on the end of a broom handle. Uses a red ribbon to secure it tight.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Sometimes it's okay to bend the truth if it helps someone you love. Understand?

Gus tries to make sense of it, but he starts to tear up.

GUS
I'm scared.

FATHER
I know. But I promise you. If you hide in the cubby and be very quiet, I'll be back before the sun goes to bed. And everything'll be just like it was before.

Father puts the case back in the floor. Gus eyes the hole.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You can take your syrup.

CONTINUED: (2)

That gets Gus's attention.

CUT TO:

INT. CUBBY - DAY

Gus is finally in the cubby, nursing his maple syrup. An old HOURGLASS at his feet. The Map goes back in place.

Father's eyes peer in the slats.

FATHER
Remember what I said?

GUS
(totally genuine)
It's okay to lie?

FATHER
That's what you took from that
conversation? I said be quiet. And
don't come out til you hear from
me.

Father takes the tip off the long arm syringe like a weapon.

FATHER (CONT'D)
I love you Gus.

He slips his pinky through the wall and Gus squeezes it.

FATHER (CONT'D)
And you're not too little. Stay big
for me.

Before Gus can respond, the finger is gone. Front door OPENS.
SLAMS shut.

LOCK turns.

Silence.

Little Gus. All alone.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE**EXT. CABIN - DUSK**

The Nebraska SUN begins its descent. The CABIN cowers beneath trees on all sides. The front two windows like beady eyes, staring out at:

Empty woods. Fence. Empty landscape beyond.

No sign of Father.

INT. CUBBY - LATER

The hourglass finishes a round and Gus flips it over. Jar of maple syrup almost empty. Gus, about to drift off into a sugar crash sleep.

The SOUND of a door. *Opening*. Somewhere in the cabin. Gus catches his breath.

Footsteps. Hard and CLIPPED.

Gus peeks through the slats to see something step into the living room.

The footsteps get closer. Right up to the wall. Then:

FWOOM! Gus FLINGS the map-door open and COCKS back his slingshot. Pointed straight into the face of:

A WHITE TAILED DEER.

No antlers. A doe. She just wandered into the cabin like she got lost in the forest. Her tail flickers.

Gus opens his eyes to see the deer looking back at him. Unafraid. Curious. Steam from its warm, wet NOSTRILS. Slowly, Gus lowers the slingshot.

And builds up the courage to reach out his tiny hands to TOUCH the large cervid animal. Like a kid petting a dog for the first time. Timid, but enchanted.

The deer's ears perk up. Soaking in the sounds of the cabin. Gus's breath. His heartbeat.

Gus's human fingers stroke the doe's soft pelt. She shows no fear and almost seems to relish the connection.

CONTINUED:

AAAA AAAAA GGGGGG HHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

A hideous SCREAM rings out from the deep woods. Human. Male.

Blackbirds take FLIGHT. The deer FLINCHES.

Gus throws himself back into the safety of the cubby while the deer SCATTERS in fear.

HOOVES scramble on hardwood. She HURLS herself through the front window in an EXPLOSION of glass and fur.

The distant scream still rings out. Then it cuts short.

Gus shakes. Waits for the next shoe to drop.

EXT. PORCH - MOMENTS LATER

Gus undoes the lock.

Antlers slowly peek out the doorway, followed by wide eyes.

He tiptoes onto the porch.

Sprinkles of glass and fur create a path leading off the porch into the woods.

But no sign of the deer. Or Father.

GUS

Pubba...?

A gust of wind and the TREES seem to come to life. As if answering him. Swaying and blowing all around.

Gus stands his ground. Frightened. A little boy, dwarfed by the epic forest.

His EARS perk up. *Hypersensitive*. Tracking every sound in the forest. Every branch shake. Every leaf bend.

Something is coming closer.

He raises his slingshot at whatever it is. The wind brings the soft sound of FOOTSTEPS. Staggered. Hard to decipher a pattern. Gus aims the slingshot. Right at the footsteps.

PUSH IN on the brave little deer boy. Standing his ground. And then his ears drop submissively. His eyes well up.

Father steps through the foliage looking like he just saw hell. Broom in his hands. No syringe.

CONTINUED:

Gus wraps his arms around Father's legs.

FATHER

Gus--

GUS

I thought She took you.

Father crouches and holds Gus close. Practically swallowing the boy in his arms.

GUS (CONT'D)

I heard a scream.

FATHER

I know.

GUS

I didn't like it.

FATHER

I didn't either.

(beat)

But you're safe now. You're safe,
Gus. You're safe.

He nuzzles Gus even closer.

GUS

Pubba?

He pulls back to see what Gus is looking at:

Father's PINKY FINGER. It's TREMBLING uncontrollably. Along with his eyelids.

A realization on Father's weakened face.

Then he collapses at Gus's feet.

Unconscious.

EXT. GARDEN - DUSK

Gus drags Father's motionless body through the garden path.

EXT. CABIN PORCH - DUSK

He pulls Father up the porch steps. Inch by inch.

INT. CABIN - DUSK

Gus rolls Father into bed, then catches his breath. Father mutters unintelligible words to himself. Still out cold.

His little fingers quivering. His eyelids twitching like a hummingbird's wings.

Gus pulls a sheet over him.

LATER

Gus pushes a bowl of steaming soup and a jar of water towards Father. Father doesn't budge or wake. It just sits there.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

That night Gus sits by the foot of the bed dutifully.

SKETCHING in one of his books. Watching Father toss and turn in a fitful sleep. *Whispering*. His food untouched.

Gus hears snippets of Father's words. *Safe... Good boy... Doesn't need to know...*

Gus sketches. The WHISPERS building louder in his ears until:

INT. CABIN - MORNING

Gus snaps awake in the top bunk. Morning sun streaming in.

FATHER

(weak)

You did this?

Gus sees Father sitting up below him. The back of his head. Wheezing. Trembling something awful.

Gus's sketch in his hands. A crude but admirable DRAWING of the WHITE TAILED DEER from yesterday.

FATHER (CONT'D)

She was like me, Gus.

He stares out the window. Focusing on nothing.

FATHER (CONT'D)

She was better than me. Selfless in a way I could only... She smelled like peaches.

CONTINUED:

Gus leans in from the top bunk.

FATHER (CONT'D)

I have regrets Gus. But the biggest is that you'll never know her. You'll sense her. You may feel her when you're alone. But the short time I spent with her was...

He gets lost in a memory.

FATHER (CONT'D)

She would be proud of you. You were her joy. You were her life. You always will be.

He tries to stop his trembling hand. But can't.

GUS

What happened?

FATHER

Life. We were separated. In a crowd. I had you and she-- We had a meeting point. We had agreed to wait three days for each other... I waited two weeks. But it wasn't safe for you and so... I brought you. Here.

Gus climbs down to see him eye to eye.

GUS

What was her name?

WE SEE Father's face for the first time. Gaunt. Pale. Hollow.

FATHER

Peaches. I called her Peaches.

Gus sorts through all the questions he has in his mind.

GUS

When you get better, we can look for her.

FATHER

(weak but stern)
But what don't we do?

GUS

...cross the fence.

CONTINUED: (2)

FATHER

Ever?

GUS

Never ever...

FATHER

Swear.

He reaches out a trembling pinky. Gus locks his pinky to his Father's. They shake.

GUS

Pinky swear.

FATHER

It's a big... world. Remember...
That fence doesn't just keep the
world out. It keeps you... in.

Gus's hope dissipates.

FATHER (CONT'D)

I'm tired Gus. You know... what
could wake me up?

The boy shakes his head. Ears gently swaying.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Breakfast. Will you make us some?

GUS

But you make the breakfast.

FATHER

And you watch me... So you know
how. What do I start with?

GUS

A plate?

FATHER

What food?

GUS

... Eggs?

FATHER

See that? Smarter than you look.

He forces a grin. Gus weighing the odds.

CONTINUED: (3)

GUS
Then you'll tell me more?

FATHER
Then I'll tell you... everything.

Gus's concern turning to hope.

EXT. FOREST POND - MORNING

Gus stands at the banks. Eyes the pond rocks it will take to make it across to the pond. An audience of ducklings gather.

He LEAPS onto the first rock. Easy.

Jumps to the second. No problem.

Gathers himself. Then FLINGS himself to the third...

And STICKS the landing! Ducks prattle on approvingly.

GUS (PRE-LAP)
Pubba!

INT. CABIN - MOMENTS LATER

Gus sprints towards the house. Hands full of duck eggs.

GUS
PUBBA!!!

He bounds up the porch steps. Two at a time.

GUS (CONT'D)
Pubba! I did it!!!

He bursts in the door.

GUS (CONT'D)
I crossed the...

But Father is not in the bunkbed. The blankets are splayed. Gus drops the eggs on the floor.

Father is in his rocking chair. Back to Gus. Asleep.

GUS (CONT'D)
... Pubba?

But there's no answer. Father is still. *No trembling.*

CONTINUED:

Gus approaches the rocking chair and sees a metal trinket thing in Father's hands.

A TINY KEY. Small in Father's palm. A little HEART etched into it. Gus has no idea what to make of this foreign object.

His big, innocent eyes. So many questions. No one to ask.

He takes a seat in his little chair next to Father.

He swings his legs and dips his thumb in a jar of syrup then sucks on his thumb in a long, still silence.

FADE OUT.

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR**EXT. DEEP WOODS - DAY (WINTER)**

WINTER brings snow. Gus chops FIREWOOD, wearing Father's RED FLANNEL SHIRT. He's a little taller. A little more grown up.

His ANTLERS are almost fully formed. His ears mostly FUR.

OLD MAN (V.O.)

By his twelfth Winter, the boy was now the man of the house. Though the weight of growing up took its toll.

Gus waves to his Father through the frosted window.

EXT. HILL - LATER

Gus sleds by himself. Dog, now tattered and missing some fluffs, rides along.

OLD MAN (V.O.)

With hard work came harder play...

Gus tears down the hill. Ears flapping in the cold wind. He HITS A BUMP and the sled spins out, tossing Gus in the snow as it sails away and slams into

THE FENCE

The sled comes to rest just a hair's breadth from the Great Outside. Gus gulps.

GUS

Dog. Stay here.

Dog "watches" from the snow bank as Gus approaches the fence cautiously.

He RETRIEVES the sled, then scampers back to safe ground like a drunk crab fleeing a tsunami.

GUS (PRE-LAP) (CONT'D)

Fire!

EXT. DEEP WOODS - DAY

Gus plays commando by himself in a FIELD OF BEASTS – big monsters Gus has made out of snow like an art installation. His assault is a goofy ballet of slingshots and pinecones.

OLD MAN (V.O.)

*It was lonely in the deep woods and
his heart yearned for more. As his
antlers grew, so did his
imagination.*

Gus fires his slingshot at the beasts, declaring victory as he leaps onto the last one in an explosion of glittery white.

SLO MOTION: Gus celebrates his victory with Dog and a crowd of animal-human kids he's built out of snow.

Running in circles through his make believe friends like a kid on a pre-crash sugar overload.

GUS (PRE-LAP)

You shoulda saw it.

INT. CABIN KITCHEN - DUSK

Gus serves up a smorgasbord of winter veggies while Father listens to his son's wild tales from the rocking chair.

GUS

Bad People were everywhere. I
thought they was gonna take Dog but
he scared em away for good. Didn't
you Dog?

He looks to the mangy toy by the fire and when he LOOKS BACK WE SEE the table is almost completely empty.

The feast was in his head. It's just a big plate with a few small scraps of food and a dozen beans. An empty plate in front of *Father*.

Who isn't there at all.

It's just the SCARECROW Gus has dressed in Father's clothes and set in the rocking chair.

OLD MAN (V.O.)

*But sometimes all a boy has is his
imagination.*

EXT. GARDEN - MORNING (SPRING)

OPEN on a LARGE MOUND OF DIRT AND ROCKS by the tree line. Marked by a CROSS made of branches. Father's GLASSES mounted ceremoniously to the cross.

GUS

Rabbit. You're on garden duty.

Gus strolls like a drill sergeant, spouting a list of chores. The garden is overgrown with thick weeds.

GUS (CONT'D)

And don't mess it up like last time. We need it clear and ready to plant or there won't be any carrots this summer.

His audience is a CADRE OF ANIMAL KIDS Gus has crafted from branches and twigs. Handmade ears. Whiskers. Tails. Snouts.

GUS (CONT'D)

Pig you can help Rabbit. Dig and till. Use your snout if you hafta.

He turns to a figure with two horns made out of leaves.

GUS (CONT'D)

Goat. You need to keep the birds off the peas. We can't lose any more. I'll do the syrup and the water. Dog will keep watch. Right Dog?

He looks at the blank faces staring back at him. Dog's seen better days.

GUS (CONT'D)

And remember. Do not. Cross. The Fence.

EXT. FENCE - DAY

From the omniscient fence, WE SEE Gus pulling with all his might to get his sled loaded with supplies up the muddy hill.

Gus gabs to Dog who rides stoically on the sled.

GUS

You eat too much, dog. You're gettin' fat like the bullfrogs. Good thing I'm big.

CONTINUED:

Gus pulls again and the sled inches up the hill.

GUS (CONT'D)

Being big's harder than it looks.
Every day the woods feel smaller.
Sometimes I think they're laughing
at us. Probably just at you.

He gazes out beyond the formidable chain link perimeter.
Slows his pace.

GUS (CONT'D)

Don't even think about it. I
promised. That means you promised.

He yanks at the sled and they continue the uphill climb. Dog,
silently judging. Then Gus SLIPS in the mud and SLIDES back
down the hill. Supplies going everywhere.

EXT. MAPLE TREE - LATER

Scabbed over height markers in the bark.

Dog watches Gus drill into the trunk with a rusted bit but it
BREAKS OFF in the wood.

Frustrated, Gus tries unsuccessfully to dislodge it.

EXT. WATER PIPES - LATER

Gus battles an onslaught of SPRAYING LEAKS in the plumbing
system. A frustrating game of water wack-a-mole.

As he spackles a crack, the entire plumbing system FALLS
APART in an eruption of busted pipe, spraying Gus in the face
like a firehose. He cries out into the spray.

EXT. GARDEN - LATER

The Animal Kid stick friends stand motionless as Gus pulls at
a thick weed, but it doesn't budge.

He tries snipping it with Father's OLD BLADE but the rusty
tool falls apart in his hand.

Gus DIVES on the weed. Wrestling with it. But it's taller and
stronger than him. The weeds are winning.

Gus snorts and gnashes his teeth, falling into a ball of
brambles that wrap him up tight and won't let go.

CONTINUED:

He unleashes a pre-pubescent ROAR and fights his way out of their clutches and stumbles out of the overwhelming garden.

He locks eyes with Dog, watching from a safe distance.

Gus STOMPS up the steps into the house.

WE HEAR him inside, tearing the place apart.

A moment later he stomps back outside. Father's old LANTERN in his hands.

He heaves the lantern into the patch of weeds and watches the brambles SHRINK and CRINKLE in the small patch of FLAMES.

He watches the flames glow. And groooow....

FWOOOOM!

In the blink of an eye the flames EXPAND until the WHOLE GARDEN is a sea of golds and reds and warped heat. A sudden BONFIRE. Casting a warm kaleidoscope in Gus's glassy eyes.

Gus's breaking point. He didn't mean for any of this.

He watches the weeds shrivel and scream in the heat and before he knows what he's doing, he's grabbing Rabbit and launching his stick friends into the flames.

Then Goat. Then Pig.

Then even Dog.

Gus stands before what's left of his garden. Lip quivering.

BLACK SMOKE rises high above the tree tops...

Then Gus is gripped by regret and he leaps into the flames to rescue Dog. Stamping out the flames.

GUS
I'mSorryI'mSorryI'mSorry...

INT. CABIN - LATER

Gus storms back in the house with Dog, smoking in his hands. He plunges the smoldering toy into a bucket of water and watches the steam rise.

Dog is now tattered and singed and MISSING AN EAR.

CONTINUED:

Gus plops down in the cabin mess. The tantrum is over. He's all cried out.

His red eyes go to the scarecrow on the porch. Then the faded map on the wall.

To something he never saw before.

*A little **HEART** his Father drew on the map by the tree line.*

EXT. TREE LINE - DAY

The garden smolders as Gus surveys the tree line. Using the map as his guide.

He lines it up and focuses on ONE TREE. Hidden by overgrowth.

Gus peels back the foliage and spots:

A HEART. Carved into the trunk years ago.

And a carved ARROW. Pointing down.

Gus's eyes go to the dirt.

CUT TO:

EXT. TREE LINE - DUSK

Rain falls as Gus digs at the foot of the tree. He digs and digs until his shovel hits metal. Something rectangular.

The BOX Father buried. Gus pulls it from the earth. Tries to pry it open.

His fingers find a heavy latch on the lid. With a hole.
A *keyhole*. No idea what that means until--

His fingers find the key around his neck. The engraved heart.

Gus rams the key in the hole and with a CLICK the lid OPENS.

A pile of things greet Gus. To him, nonsense.

- Ty Cobb baseball card. Crumpled dollar bills. Credit cards.

Gus casts them aside like styrofoam peanuts.

- Phone charging cable. COCKTAIL NAPKIN. With funny symbols drawn on it. The ID lanyard we saw glimpses of earlier.

CONTINUED:

- A framed photo of: A WOMAN.

Father's age. Warm and soulful.

Gus forgets everything else. Hypnotized by the photo. The most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

A SLIP OF PAPER falls out from behind it. The FLIER for "The Preserve" father had thrown away. He kept it.

Gus looks at the flyer. At the happy animal kids on it.

The word "SAFE". "HYBRID".

And another word at the bottom:

GUS
"Col-o-ra-do".

CLOSE ON Gus. Wheels turning.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Gus clears the table and lays out Father's MAP. He flips it over to show a map of the MIDWEST.

Locating Nebraska. Then Colorado.

He tracks a thick line (I 76). Means very little to him. He doesn't even know what a road is.

Then his finger falls on a blue line. *Water.*

THE PLATTE RIVER. It snakes from Nebraska... to Colorado.

Gus flips open his homemade copy of "Huck Finn" and sees a snaky blue diagram of the Mississippi River. Looks just like the blue line on his map.

His heart goes double time.

INT. CABIN - MORNING

Dog bobs up and down.

On a block of wood. FLOATING in the bathtub.

Gus observes. Taking notes as he draws out a feverish PLAN on the back of his book.

A SMALL RAFT. Made out of:

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Wood. Piles of branches Gus has collected and laid out in a 4x6 rectangle. An arts and crafts project on steroids.

-- He lashes down the wood with pieces of CHAIN LINK FENCE.

-- Gus ties down a milk crate of the essentials: Maple Syrup. Four sweet potatoes. One bottle of water. One slingshot. Huck Finn book. Preserve flier. More maple syrup. And a bent fork.

He ties Dog to the crate (he's repaired the missing ear).

Lastly, the PHOTO OF HIS MOTHER in an old ziploc bag.

He touches his fingers to her face.

GUS
I'm coming for you, Peaches.

EXT. WILDFLOWER FIELD - MOMENTS LATER

Gus pulls the raft on his sled through the field with ease. He marches forward. Little chest out.

EXT. FENCE - MOMENTS LATER

Gus arrives at his first obstacle. How to get the raft through the fence.

He stops. Looks for a break in the chain link. But it's secure. He gauges the height. Too high...

He inspects the surrounding area when he SEES:

A shimmer in the grass. In a clearing in the woods.

A shiny metallic rectangle.

A CANDY BAR - Just like the one from the TEASER. Laying in the field like it just grew there on his side of the fence.

Gus approaches it. Nudges it with a foot. It doesn't attack.

He picks it up. Peels it open. Sniffs the dark brown brick inside. Takes a bite.

Holy mother of CHOCOLATE.

His first ever taste of the stuff. It's amazing. He licks his lips and takes another bite and sees:

CONTINUED:

Another bar. A dozen yards away.

He scurries to it and sees another, deeper in the woods.

Gus reaches to pick it up when the candy bar slides across the grass. Towards the fence. Pulled by a string.

Gus realizes this is a terrible new twist just in time to see something long and skinny dart out of the trees *straight towards him*.

- *FWIIIP!*

A screaming ARROW whizzes by at the speed of light and slams into his antlers. Chipping off a small chunk then sticking straight into the earth. What the--

STOCKY FELLA

TOLDJA!!

A deep, hoarse voice whoops and hollers from the woods.

Gus leaps behind a fallen tree. Panting. Tries to stay quiet. From this vantage point, he can see a HOLE cut through the fence in the brush.

He ducks to hide his antlers just as:

A STOCKY FELLA in soiled camo steps out of the woods and retrieves the arrow. He's missing THREE FINGERS. He scans the trees.

Eyes peeled for Gus. All is QUIET for a long. Tense. Moment.

STOCKY FELLA (CONT'D)

AHHH! Dammit.

He flinches as something tiny smacks off his head. He picks it up. An ACORN.

GUS

Lines up his slingshot with another acorn. Carefully taking aim. Pulls back the elastic...

A BIG HAIRY HAND clamps onto Gus's arm from the brush!

Gus turns to see a second BEARDED FELLA. Crazy in his eyes.

BEARDED FELLA

Over HERE!!!

CONTINUED: (2)

Gus is torn from his hiding spot. Dragged by his antlers. Their cackles drown out his screams. Gus fights with every inch of his little life.

STOCKY FELLA

What'd I tell you huh?!?! What!
Did! I! Tell you???!!

BEARDED FELLA

Ain't never seen a deer one 'afore.

STOCKY FELLA

Look at his clothes! It's got a
little shirt and everything.

Fidgety hands pull and tug on Gus's red flannel shirt. Ripping at buttons.

BEARDED FELLA

MY shirt now!

STOCKY FELLA

I found him, I get the shirt.

BEARDED FELLA

It ain't gon' fit you! You're a XL,
that's a medium, tops.

STOCKY FELLA

Fine I'll take the antlers--

BEARDED FELLA

They're MY goddam antlers. You
missed it. I caught it. They're
mine!!

He yanks Gus away in a tight grip. Gus can barely breathe.

Stocky notches an arrow in his bow. Points at Gus's belly.

STOCKY FELLA

I'll skewer you both right here.
Take BOTH your damn shirts.

Bearded pulls a SAMURAI SWORD from a sheath on his back.

BEARDED FELLA

You better not miss or I'll slice
the rest of your fingers---
BLAGGHHHHH!

CONTINUED: (3)

Gus jabs an antler into Bearded's soft belly the man doubles over, dropping Gus. Gus tries to scamper when the sword SLICES through the air, just missing him.

BEARDED FELLA (CONT'D)

See what you did!!

Gus sees daylight and bolts for it when Stocky aims the arrow right for Gus and cocks back the bow.

STOCKY FELLA

I got eem-

BOOOOOO OOOOO OOOOO MMMMMM!

A loud ERUPTION from the woods. Birds scatter.

CHNK. Stocky's head twitches and he pirouettes like a tired marionette as his arrow shoots straight up into the sky.

TIME GOES SLOW

GUS turns to see Stocky crumple to the ground in a heap.

BEARDED. Wide-eyed. Scared. Where'd that BOOM come from?

BEARDED LUNGES FOR GUS

Then SHHHHNK.

The arrow returns to Earth and sticks in Bearded's bicep like a porcupine needle.

BEARDED FELLA

Gahd. DAMMit!

He tries to pull it out as:

A LARGE MOUNTAIN OF A MAN steps out of the woods. Stopping Gus in his tracks. Bigger and scarier than the other two.

A cross between Clint Eastwood and an Easter Island rock. We recognize him as:

TOMMY JEPPERD. The injured hockey player from the opening. 12 years older.

He marches forward with a slight limp. RIFLE in his mitts.

Gus crawls backwards from Jepperd towards Bearded who fumbles to notch a fresh arrow.

Caught between two trains coming straight at each other.

CONTINUED: (4)

BEARDED FELLA (CONT'D)

Okay! We can share him!

He loads the arrow and brings it up to face JEPERD.

BOOOOM-- Jepperd fires the rifle and Gus's hypersensitive ears go

B L A N K . Sound disappears.

Gus flees like he's shot out of a silent cannon.

EXT. DEEP WOODS - CONTINUOUS

Gus hauls ass down his sled path. Fast and fleet and nimble with that amazing knowledge of the forest.

LEAPING bushes and ducking branches in a gorgeous display of WILDERNESS PARKOUR.

He crosses the pond. Rock to rock. WHIR of wind in his ears.

Out of the tree line...

Through his garden...

And into his little cabin.

INT. CABIN - CONTINUOUS

Gus tosses a jar of a BALL and RUSTY JACKS onto the porch.

He pulls a rope and the human sized SCARECROW of his Father drops from the rafters. Standing guard at the window.

He locks the door. Slides a rig of barbed wire netting over the entry way.

He crawls into the wall cubby, pulls a strand of fishing line and the empty map frame slides back into place.

Then he hears FOOTSTEPS. On the front porch.

Gus closes his eyes. And holds his breath.

END ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE**INT. CABIN - DAY**

GUS'S POV. Through the slats. Little frightened eyes. Alert ears.

FOOTSTEPS on the porch. Limping. Kicking aside the jacks.

BIG HANDS on the doorknob. Turning but not opening. Then

The door is KICKED in. The lock goes flying.

A huge hand squeezes in with a cable cutter. SNIPPING the barbed wire open. Gus shudders, out of sight.

Jepperd steps through the threshold.

He taps a small yarn TRIPWIRE at his feet which summons a TOY wooden duck to motor its way out of the shadows. Webbed feet slapping the floorboards like a little alarm system.

Jepperd kicks it aside and enters. In no hurry.

Just paces. Surveys.

JEPPERD

You know how much your antlers are worth to a poacher?

He asks to the empty room. Gus covers his mouth. Silence.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

I counted three points. Not bad.

He pushes a button on a book and it MOOS at him. Cute.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

Saw a man turn in his own daughter one time so he could collect on her horns. She was a goat or something.

Gus holds his breath. Jepperd's hand appears. Holding up Gus's slingshot.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

You forgot this.

In a flash Jepperd GRABS Gus by the antlers and yanks him out of the wall, dragging him across the floorboards. A lion carting off a mouse.

CONTINUED:

GUS

Leave me alone!

Jepperd drops Gus in his tracks and eyeballs the thing that just spoke at him.

JEPPERD

The hell?

Jepperd sizes up the frightened Hybrid. Did he hear what he thought he heard?

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

Speak.

GUS

Stay back!

JEPPERD

You. *Talk?*

Gus responds by firing a slingshot rock at the incredulous tough guy. It bounces off Jepperd's barrel chest.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

Shit!

He bites down. That actually hurt.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

Who taught you--?

GUS

My Pubba did and he's gonna be back any minute now so you best git.

(huffs and puffs)

He's bigger than you.

JEPPERD

I thought your kind just barked and shit on the floor.

GUS

Stop swearing!

Jepperd pulls the photo of Gus's mother from a back pocket. Gus lunges for it but he pulls it back.

JEPPERD

Take it nice.

He looks at the photo. Weary eyes soften at the sight of her.

CONTINUED: (2)

JEPPERD (CONT'D)
That your old lady?

GUS
Put that down. I don't talk to Bad
People.

Jepperd holds on her. Haunted by her beauty, same as Gus.

JEPPERD
Them two in the field were bad.
Most of em are.

He hands Gus the picture.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)
Shouldn't set fires in the daytime,
little man. Your daddy never teach
you that? Saw the smoke twenty
miles off.

Gus remembers the fire from yesterday. Curses himself.

GUS
I said go away!!!

Jepperd reaches for his rifle and when Gus sees it he cowers
in fear behind a chair. Covering his ears.

Jepperd notices. Puts the rifle down. He looks at the sad
SCARECROW of Father. The empty FOOD cabinet. Jars of Syrup.

His eyes soften just the smallest bit.

JEPPERD
How long you been here?

Beat. Then a little voice from behind the chair.

GUS
Go back to the fire where you
belong.

Jepperd shuffles back out through the busted door.

Gus watches Jepperd pause at the porch. Take in something.
Then pick up the broom and disappear out of sight.

Gus scrambles to see where he went. Can't get a glimpse.

EXT. WATER PIPES - MOMENTS LATER

Jepperd is repairing Gus's plumbing system. Using the hollowed out broom handle as a NEW PIPE.

An acorn hits him and he turns to see Gus has now climbed up on the cabin roof. Watching from a safe distance.

GUS
What was that boom?

JEPPERD
Your daddy didn't leave you any
guns?

Jepperd pulls DUCT TAPE from his sack and seals both ends of the pipe. The leaks stop. Good as new.

Gus, impressed.

GUS
What do you want?

JEPPERD
I come here to take you in.

Gus fires another acorn at him. Jepperd deflects it and looks at the sad layout of the place.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)
But I'm not gonna. You think. Talk.
Got folks. I'm an asshole but even
I got limits.
(beat)
You know what size shoe your daddy
wore?

Gus doesn't answer so the man limps in the house. Gus can hear rummaging around downstairs. Gus stomps on the roof.

GUS
You get out of our house right now
and don't touch nothing!!!

Jepperd comes back out and tries on Father's boots.

JEPPERD
Don't worry, kid. You're daddy
don't need 'em in the ground.

Gus realizes the man read through his Father's fib.

CONTINUED:

Jepperd tests the boots out. Throws a SMALL ANIMAL TRAP from his sack up on to the roof as an offering.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

Trade. You know how to use that?

Gus eyes it like a mystery.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

Course you don't.

Gus sees a flock of CROWS clustering on the peas again and he BELLOWS to scare them off.

They ignore it. Jepperd clocks it as he laces up.

EXT. GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

Jepperd takes Father's glasses off of the grave. Shines them with a shirt.

GUS

You put them back!! They don't belong to you!

Jepperd shoos the crows from Gus's pea trellis and ties the glasses to the netting.

JEPPERD

You like that syrup so much you oughta plant beets. Mix up your sugar intake.

He SPINS the glasses in the wind, the sun reflecting off the lenses like a flashing, strobe light. Scaring the birds.

Gus is mesmerized.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

Should keep 'em off the peas. If you use that scarecrow, you want to reposition 'im every few days. Otherwise they're on to you. You want to rotate these crops too. Peas eat up all the nitrogen, your soil be shot in a few years. Your dad keep a tarp or anything? You cover this garden in the winter it'll keep the weeds from starting up in the Spring. Warm the soil too.

(MORE)

CONTINUED:

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

Buy you another few weeks to plant early in the Spring. Winters here, you could use that.

On Gus. How the hell did he know all that?

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

What killed your folks? They get The Sick?

GUS

I told you my Papa's coming back and he's gonna run you away.

Jepperd smiles sadly.

JEPPERD

He give you a name?

Gus responds by lining up another acorn in the slingshot. Pointing it down at Jepperd.

GUS

I said go.

JEPPERD

You keep that edge, "Sweet Tooth". Just remember. Good poachers don't miss.

He heads off to the woods in his new boots. Gus, filled with scattered emotions. Watching the man getting further away.

Finally:

GUS

(calls out)

Where's Co-lo-ra-do?

Jepperd keeps walking.

JEPPERD

It ain't close.

GUS

Which way?

JEPPERD

Don't try it, kid. Hybrids last half a day out there. Tops.

CONTINUED: (2)

GUS

There ain't no other Hybrids. I'm
the only one left.

The man slows to a stop. Looks back.

JEPPERD

That what he told you?

Gus sees the rifle again and he cowers.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

There's others. Not many, but
they're out there. Out *there*...

Gus follows where the man is pointing. Past the fence.

JEPPERD (CONT'D)

What's in Colorado?

GUS

Nothing.

JEPPERD

The Preserve?

GUS

Peaches.

He looks at the little kid on the dilapidated roof on the
dilapidated cabin. The burned down garden.

Weariness in his eyes. Loneliness in Gus's.

JEPPERD

You go out there alone, they'll
have your head mounted to a wall by
morning.

GUS

*I AIN'T GOING NOWHERE WITH YOU SO
DON'T MAKE ME!!!*

The words erupt out of him. Defiant.

JEPPERD

So long, Sweet Tooth.

And with that Jepperd heads into the woods, leaving Gus and
his big ears and his little antlers on the cabin roof.

Alone.

EXT. ROOF - DAY

TIME PASSES up there on the roof. The dappled shadows get longer. The sun makes its way over the forest.

Gus sits. Swatting flies off his ears.

GUS (PRE-LAP)
Pubba always said the world was
big...

EXT. GARDEN - LATER

Gus inspects the magic tape stopping the plumbing leaks. Touches it gingerly.

He looks at the burn pile in the garden. Rubble and ash. Remnants of his stick friends. He spins Father's glasses.

GUS (PRE-LAP)
Maybe it ain't on fire anymore.
Maybe all people ain't bad...

EXT. GRAVE - DAY

Gus stands over the burial mound. Talking to Dog. Holding back a question he wants more than anything to ask.

GUS
Maybe Pubba was wrong?

There's no answer of course. Just a slight breeze in the porch chimes. The branches SWAY above him, just as they've done his whole life.

Gus closes his eyes.

The SOUND of the forest is overwhelming. Hypnotizing. And soothing. But it provides no answers.

Gus will have to make this decision himself.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. CABIN - MOMENTS LATER

Gus grabs his mother's photo. Throws syrup jars in a bag.

INT. YARD - CONTINUOUS

The glasses are gone from the garden as Gus sprints to the trees. Past the smoldering ashes.

Past Father's grave.

Past the duck house and the grown up ducks.

The Maple Tree and the years of height notches in the bark.

EXT. PASTURE - CONTINUOUS

All the while Gus picks up his pace until he's in a full on SPRINT. Without stopping, he picks up Dog. Holds him tight.

Ears pinned back. Nerves jangling. Feet churning til he sees:

THE FENCE. The great symbol of his enclosure.

It's tall. Taller than Gus. Should he cross it? Can he?

He doesn't stop to think, just LEAPS onto a low branch, scampers out and OVER THE FENCE taking a blind leap through the branches!

BURSTING through the other side and tumbling to the Great Outside in a heap. He's done it. Gus has crossed the fence.

OLD MAN (V.O.)

*The boy broke his Father's rules
slowly...*

He takes a big sniff of the air then spots:

Footprints leading away. *Father's boot prints. He follows.*

OLD MAN (V.O.)

And then all at once.

EXT. THE GREAT BEYOND - DUSK

Gus cuts a skinny corridor through the tall grass. Following the boot prints.

Running out of breath. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of what he's done. The excitement and wonder and curiosity.

Gus looks down at his feet streaking across PAVEMENT for the first time. FLINCHES when he sees his first SPEED LIMIT SIGN.

CONTINUED:

He screams at the sight of a RUSTED OUT CAR and darts in a different direction. As fast as a 12-year-old deer boy can.

He picks up the tracks again. Streaks by a demolished WIND MILL, overgrown and bursting with a rainbow of wild growth. Its crisp white blades like a T-rex skeleton from the future.

EXT. CREST OF HILL - CONTINUOUS

Gus reaches the top of a heavy slope. Jams on his feet just in time before he goes over the steep edge.

He drinks in the view. Nothing but an OPENNESS he's never seen in his twelve years on earth. *Breathtaking.*

Mountains and canyons and a massive waterfall.

The REMAINS of the Nebraska Wilderness center. Overgrown with a kaleidoscope of foliage and vines.

The bootprints have ended.

OLD MAN (V.O.)
Some stories start at the
beginning.

Gus searches. And then he sees FAR BELOW on a road cutting through the wilderness, the large figure of

JEPPERD. Limping towards the horizon.

OLD MAN (V.O.)
Gus's story begins here.

Gus bounds up to the highest point of his embankment and he screams out at the top of his little lungs.

GUS
Biiiiig Maaaaaaan!!!!

It echoes around the landscape like crackling thunder. Louder than the booms from Jepperd's gun.

Jepperd looks back at the little deer boy on the ledge. Waving his gawky little arms.

GUS (CONT'D)
Take me.

END EPISODE ONE