

Wildlife

by

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Adapted from the novel by Richard Ford

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EXT. STREET. NIGHT. FIRST SNOW. 1960.

JOE BRINSON, barely 14, is sprinting as hard as he can, past house after house, tree after tree, like he is running for his life. He runs until he can't breathe, his body reaching a breaking point.

He looks around, lost. His deep breaths glow in the cold.

Empty street, dark woods. He has no idea where he is or what to do.

EXT. POLICE STATION. NIGHT.

The lights are on in the police station, the only illuminated building on the block. Joe jogs up, gasping for air.

INT. POLICE STATION.

Joe enters. There is an OLDER POLICEMAN at the front desk.

OLDER POLICEMAN  
Yes, can I help you?

Joe leans on the desk. He tries to gather his breath to talk.

OLDER POLICEMAN (CONT'D)  
What is it, son?

JOE  
I... I'm lost. And I think--I  
think my father might be in here.

Joe chokes up with sudden emotion, surprising himself.

In BOLD LETTERS over his face:

**WILDLIFE**

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

EXT. GREAT FALLS. MONTANA. LATE SUMMER. 1960.

A suburban town, prairie on one side, mountains on the other.

EXT. MAIN STREET. DAY.

RADIO CONSOLES and TV SETS crowd the window of an APPLIANCE STORE. Campaign posters line a fence: "The NATION Needs NIXON" and "KENNEDY: A New Leader for the Sixties." The cover of the local newspaper reads: "*Gypsy Basin Oil Boom.*"

FORESTER (O.S.)  
Fire can be a positive thing.

EXT. OIL REFINERY. DAY.

Brand new, the REFINERY sits like a spaceship on the prairie.

FORESTER (O.S.)  
It clears the undergrowth, which  
helps the forest regenerate.

EXT. GRANARY. DAY.

The red brick GRANARY against the blue September sky. The shift whistle blows and men pour out into the sunshine.

FORESTER (O.S.)  
You'll make a home out of that  
timber someday.

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS. DAY.

A freight train picks up speed as it leaves town. In the distance, we can see faint smoke rising from the mountains: *something is on fire out there.*

FORESTER (O.S.)  
But these fires are burning out of  
control.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL. FIELD. DAY.

Joe and his FELLOW STUDENTS are seated on a field outside the school. A visiting FORESTER points to a MAP OF THE REGION: prairie and town cupped by mountains and a river. Joe takes diligent notes.

FORESTER

The fires started about 60 miles west of us, but the wind is carrying the smoke over the plains, and dumping it here in our valley. That's the real danger. It can scar your lungs without you even knowing it.

A GIRL (14, part Native American) taps Joe on the shoulder.

GIRL

You don't need to take notes.

JOE

Sorry?

GIRL

It's the same as the bomb drills. If the fire ever gets to us, it'll be too late.

Joe blushes, feeling caught, and puts his notebook away.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD. AFTERNOON.

Football practice. Kids run plays in a scrimmage. Joe sits on the bench. The ball flies out of bounds.

COACH

Ball!

Joe hustles to get it. He throws it back, but it doesn't reach. A player on the field runs to retrieve it.

Joe sits back on the bench, alone.

EXT. WHEATLAND CLUB. LATE AFTERNOON.

An affluent country club on the edge of town. Joe bikes in, passing a row of sparkling Cadillacs. He docks his bike next to a 1956 Chevrolet Wagon.

EXT. WHEATLAND CLUB. GOLF COURSE. LATE AFTERNOON.

JERRY BRINSON (38), wearing a name tag, helps remove a man's golf shoe. A *metal leg brace* can be seen at the man's ankle. On Jerry, as he listens intently to the wealthy men.

CARTWRIGHT (O.C.)  
My old partners can't believe the  
luck we've been having here.

MAN WITH LEG BRACE(O.C.)  
Luck's not luck when you plan for  
it. Signs all pointed North.  
Those boys were scared to take the  
risk and didn't move fast enough.

The man stops Jerry from removing the other shoe.

MAN WITH LEG BRACE (O.C.) (CONT'D)  
In a moment. Leg's acting up.

CLARENCE SNOW (50s), President of the Wheatland Golf Club, comes over to glad-hand the men on the clubhouse patio.

CLARENCE SNOW  
Gentlemen. I hope Jerry is  
treating you well.

CARTWRIGHT  
He's a good one. I booked a lesson  
for tomorrow after he damn near  
fleeced the pants off us!

JERRY  
No, no. You gentlemen were just  
buttering me up for next time.

Cartwright laughs, charmed. But Clarence Snow frowns.

CLARENCE SNOW  
You're not supposed to wager with  
our guests, Jerry.

CARTWRIGHT  
Don't worry. It was all in fun.

Clarence shoots a look to Jerry, then smiles at the men.

CLARENCE SNOW  
Gentleman, you can follow me if  
you'd like a beer on the house.

The men stand and walk towards the clubhouse. The man with the leg brace limps. Jerry waves as they walk away.

JERRY

See you tomorrow, Mr. Cartwright.

Jerry sees a small figure beyond them: Joe, waiting for him.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. LATER.

A single story house in a working-class neighborhood. The 1956 CHEVROLET WAGON sits in the driveway.

Joe and Jerry throw the football around their small front yard. Jerry is a natural athlete and Joe isn't, but they are having a good time.

JERRY

30 seconds left in the game.  
Brinson takes the snap. He looks  
for Young Brinson. He fakes left.  
He throws deep... Touchdown! Young  
Joe Brinson makes the big catch to  
win the game!

Jerry tackles Joe with a hug. They fall to the ground.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JEANETTE AND JERRY'S ROOM. DAY.

JEANETTE BRINSON (35) crouches in her closet, arranging something on the floor. She stands to look at her work: her books (Wordsworth, Dickens) are tidily stacked under her hanging dresses. Her own private world.

Jeanette removes items from a cardboard box. She pulls out a framed photo: Jeanette, Jerry and Joe, standing by their car in front of a different house. She notices: the glass in the frame is cracked. She touches her finger to it.

Just then, Joe taps on the window from outside, sweaty.

JOE

Mom! When's dinner?

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. KITCHEN. LATER.

The house is modestly outfitted, but Jeanette has made an effort with what they have. Jerry sits at the table while Joe helps Jeanette bring food over.

JEANETTE

Did you have fun at practice?

JOE

It was okay.

JEANETTE

You know, there's no law that says you have to play football.

JERRY

He'll be fine. Joe has to show them what he's worth, that's all.

Jerry starts to serve himself as Joe sits.

JOE

Dad, guess what? We're using the same math book I had in Lewiston last year. I've already done every test.

JEANETTE

They should put you in a more advanced class, then. Do you want me to call them?

JERRY

There's no harm letting the boy get ahead. This way he'll be at the front of his class.

JEANETTE

He could be in the front of his class anyway.

JOE

I'll let my teacher know if it gets too easy.

JERRY

There you go.

Jeanette sits and begins to eat. Jerry puts down his fork.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Well, I have some news.

Jeanette and Joe both look at him.

JERRY (CONT'D)

One of the gentlemen I was assisting today, Mr. Cartwright, he's a big oil man around here. And tomorrow he and I are going to have a talk.

JEANETTE  
You got a meeting?

JERRY  
Things are done more casually out here, Jean.

JEANETTE  
But you're going to have his ear?

JERRY  
That's right.

Jeanette takes his hand, happy.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
I told you it was a good time to be in Montana.

JEANETTE  
We should do something to celebrate. Go out dancing. We might finally meet some of our neighbors.

JERRY  
All right then. I'll ask around about a place to take my bride.

Jeanette leans over and kisses his cheek. Jerry grins.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
We won't get rich working for rich men, but we might get lucky hanging around them. Right, Joe?

Jerry winks at Joe. Joe smiles back at his father.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

Jerry is in his easy chair and Joe is sprawled on the ground doing homework. They listen to a baseball game on the radio. In the corner, an OLDER MODEL TV SET sits, one antenna clearly damaged.

Jeanette is in the kitchen cleaning up.

JEANETTE  
Jerry, can you help me?

Jerry goes to the kitchen to help Jean put a heavy roasting pan on top of the cabinets.



Joe watches his parents from the living room. They have a short conversation, which he can't hear. To him, they look young, beautiful and happy.

EXT. GOLF COURSE. THE WHEATLAND CLUB. DAY.

Jerry watches as Mr. Cartwright takes a swing. It is a decent shot, at best.

JERRY

That's the ticket. You're a fast learner, Mr. Cartwright.

Cartwright starts off across the fairway, Jerry in step, carrying his bag.

CARTWRIGHT

I envy a man like you, out all day in the sunshine. How long have you been teaching golf?

JERRY

About 15 years, give or take. Played in college. But I had to give that up when my wife and I had our boy.

Cartwright nods. Jerry takes this opportunity:

JERRY (CONT'D)

Of course, there comes a time when a man wants something more to hang his hat on. You're in the oil business, is that right?

CARTWRIGHT

Among other ventures, yes.

JERRY

You know, I've been looking towards a future in oil myself.

CARTWRIGHT

I'd be happy that you have a job. Too many people looking for a short cut. A lot of lives wasted waiting around.

JERRY

Not me, sir. You see I've been reading up--

CARTWRIGHT

That's good. Would you grab my putter, Jerry?

Cartwright crouches, examining his shot. Jerry watches, wondering whether to press the issue. Instead, he takes out the putter and brings it to Cartwright.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL. OFFICE. DAY.

Jeanette stands by desk of the FEMALE RECEPTIONIST (50s), rummaging through her purse for her checkbook.

JEANETTE

I'm sorry, I thought my husband had already paid for everything. How much will it be?

RECEPTIONIST

Fifteen.

JEANETTE

Fifteen *dollars*? Just for books?

RECEPTIONIST

That'll cover the whole year. Would you rather pay by the semester?

JEANETTE

...No, that's fine.

Jeanette writes out the check. Some kids run by in the hall, laughing. Jeanette looks up as they pass.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Must be nice, being around young people all day. All that spirit.

RECEPTIONIST

I guess. It can tire a person out.

JEANETTE

Oh, I know. I work as a substitute sometimes. The last place we lived, a teacher had a baby and I ended up staying all year.

RECEPTIONIST

I believe we've already made all our hires for the fall.

JEANETTE

No, I wasn't... My husband and I decided I should be at home with our boy now.

Jeanette smiles and hands her the check. The Receptionist files it, all business. Jeanette lingers.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

I saw the signs for the Homecoming Dance. That's exciting. Do you have any need for chaperones?

The phone rings. The Receptionist lifts the receiver.

RECEPTIONIST

Great Falls High, Reception.

The Receptionist becomes absorbed in the business at hand. After a beat, Jeanette exits down the hallway.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL. CAFETERIA. DAY.

Joe eats his bagged lunch, alone. The Girl who Joe spoke with before sits with friends a few tables away. Joe steals a look at her. She looks back. Eye contact. The LOUDSPEAKER squawks on, interrupting the moment.

LOUDSPEAKER

Attention students. Due to the concentration of smoke in the air today, all outdoor extracurricular activities will be cancelled.

Scattered whoops and groans. Joe is relieved. He looks back at the girl, but she is talking with her girlfriends.

EXT. WHEATLAND CLUB. LATER.

Joe walks up to the clubhouse. Empty. He peers out over the range. In the distance, a tiny figure stands in the middle of the manicured expanse: Jerry.

EXT. WHEATLAND CLUB. DRIVING RANGE. JUST AFTER.

Jerry and Joe pick up balls by the river at the edge of the driving range.

JERRY

Just one lesson today. You'd think in good times people would want to learn a game like golf.

JOE

At school they told us to stay inside because of the smoke.

JERRY

Do you see any smoke? They're making people afraid for no reason.

Jerry throws a bad ball into the water.

JERRY (CONT'D)

How's football going? You going to be the next Bob Waterfield?

JOE

I don't know.

JERRY

That's alright. I won't be the next Walter Hagen either.

JOE

I bet you could be.

JERRY

Hagen could hit a bad shot and still win the hole. The game came naturally to him.

JOE

It came to you too, didn't it?

JERRY

...I thought it was easy. There's probably something wrong in that.

They continue picking up balls.

JOE

Dad? I don't know if I really like football.

JERRY

You will. Keep at it. When you have the ball and you're running up the field and no one can touch you... No feeling like it.

Jerry throws a golf ball like a quarterback, lost in his own vision. Joe watches the ball fade into the distance.

INT. WHEATLAND CLUB. GOLF PRO SHOP. LATER.

Joe walks around the shop while Jerry removes his golf shoes.

JOE  
Did your meeting go well?

JERRY  
What meeting?

JOE  
With that oil man?

JERRY  
Oh. It was fine. You know, these things take time.

Clarence Snow enters from the back office, smoking a cigar.

CLARENCE SNOW  
Jerry. You get everything up?

JERRY  
Almost. We lost our light. This is my son, Joe Brinson. Joe, this is Clarence Snow. He's the president of this club. And the best golfer out there.

Snow smiles his greeting, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

CLARENCE SNOW  
Come see me when you're done. I need to have a talk with you.

Something deliberate in Snow's tone makes Jerry sit up.

JERRY  
Can it hold till tomorrow?  
Promised my wife I'd get our boy home for dinner.

CLARENCE SNOW  
This won't take long.

Clarence disappears down the hall. Jerry stares after him. He then looks down at his yellow socks, and wiggles his toes.

JOE  
Should I wait for you in the car?

JERRY

He'll fire me. That's what this will be.

JOE

...What?

Jerry puts on his street shoes.

JOE (CONT'D)

Why would he do that?

JERRY

I don't know. Maybe he thinks I fucked his wife. He doesn't have to have a reason.

Joe is shocked. He's never heard his father talk like that. Jerry stands and girds his shoulders.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Stay here. Think about some pretty girls while I'm gone.

Jerry walks down the hall to Clarence's office.

Joe stands alone in the store. He listens, but can only hear a low murmur of talking. He looks around at the nice clothing, the golf clubs, the pictures on the wall.

Jerry's golf shoes lie discarded on the floor. Joe puts his foot next to his father's shoe. Still not big enough to fit.

The office door opens. Jerry comes down the hall. His cheeks are red.

JOE

Is everything alright?

Jerry heads straight to the cash register, opens it, and begins to stuff DOLLAR BILLS into his jacket pocket.

JERRY

Look around here Joe, see if there's anything you want.

Joe looks around, unsure what his father means.

JERRY (CONT'D)

You don't want anything? All this expensive stuff?

JOE

No, Dad.

JERRY

You've got good character. That's your problem.

Jerry closes the register and exits, hitting the lights as he leaves. Joe is left in the dark.

EXT. VALU-MART/INT. CAR. NIGHT.

Joe waits in the parked car, anxious. Jerry emerges from the store with a SIX PACK OF BEER. He gets in the car and emits a strange high whoop. He hands Joe a stack of cash.

JERRY

Count that, would 'ya, son?

Jerry snaps the radio on: AN UPBEAT SONG is playing, but the static is as loud as the music. Jerry cracks open a beer as Joe gingerly picks up the money and rifles through the bills.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Well? Are we rich yet?

JOE

There's twenty-three dollars.

Jerry laughs.

JERRY

Not even two weeks' pay. What do you think a man is entitled to?

Joe doesn't have any clue what to say.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Maybe we should go on a crime spree. Bring everything down on top of us. Jesus, what am I going to tell your mother.

JOE

...Did he say why he fired you?

JERRY

He said I overstepped my boundaries with the customers.

Jerry turns to Joe, serious.

JERRY (CONT'D)

I'm personable. Everyone's always liked that about me. It's an important part of the job.

JOE  
I know, Dad.

JERRY  
But the moment you try for  
something more... They don't want  
small people like us to get ahead.  
That's all.

Jerry feels some emotion he can't fully suppress. He snaps  
off the radio. Silence.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
Do you love your Dad?

JOE  
Yes.

JERRY  
Do you think I'll take good care of  
you?

JOE  
Yes.

JERRY  
I will.

Jerry starts the engine.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. LATER.

CLOSE on Jeanette. She looks confused, or like she might  
cry. Then: she *laughs*.

JEANETTE  
That man is a damn fool!

Jerry, standing in front of her, and Joe, watching from the  
doorway, are surprised by her reaction.

JERRY  
You think so?

JEANETTE  
Of course. How is he ever going to  
find a better man for that job?

JERRY  
You're not angry?

JEANETTE  
No. Not at you, anyhow.



She laughs again but wipes her eyes.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Did he say why he fired you? Did he even give a good reason?

Joe looks at Jerry. Jerry shakes his head "no."

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Montanans just don't know gold when they see it.

JERRY

Don't worry. I'll find something better. We didn't come here for nothing.

She stands and embraces him.

JEANETTE

Of course not. This is an opportunity in disguise. The phone will be ringing once people hear you're available. You'll see.

Jerry holds her tight.

JERRY

You're my angel, Jean. Really.

JEANETTE

Enough of that. We're fine. Why don't you see if there's a ball game on? Joe can help me with dinner.

Jeanette goes into the kitchen to start dinner. Joe goes to follow her, but Jerry stops him.

JERRY

Don't be worried about things. I feel calm now.

JOE

I'm not worried.

Jerry nods. Joe goes to help Jeanette. Jerry turns on the radio and lies down on the sofa. We hold on the family for a long beat, as they carry on like normal.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. KITCHEN. MORNING. A FEW WEEKS LATER.

On the kitchen table: clipped out coupons, an open checkbook, a newspaper with the headline: FIRE SPREADS AT ALLEN CREEK. It's now October. Joe's hand scoops up a brown paper bag.

Jeanette plunges a dirty pan into the sink. She's in a house-coat, up to her elbows in dishes. Joe rushes with his lunch.

JOE

I missed the bus. Can you drive me?

JEANETTE

Your father took the car to his interview. You'll have to ride your bike.

JOE

Dad got an interview? Doing what?

JEANETTE

I don't know, sweetheart. Go on, you'll be late.

Joe heads for the door. The phone rings, loud.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Joe!

She holds up her wet, soapy hands. Joe turns back and picks up the phone.

JOE

Hello?

MAN (O.S.)

Hello. Is Jerry there?

EXT. GREAT FALLS. MORNING.

Joe bikes through town fast, scanning the streets. He sees Jerry's car parked outside the PUBLIC LIBRARY and swerves sharply.

INT. LIBRARY. JUST AFTER.

Joe crosses the library toward Jerry, who is sitting with a newspaper propped in front of him.

JOE

Dad!

Jerry doesn't respond. As Joe comes closer, he realizes: Jerry is asleep. Joe nudges his shoulder.

JOE (CONT'D)

Dad?

Jerry opens his eyes and rubs his face. He has a few days growth on his cheeks.

JERRY

Hey, kiddo. Shouldn't you be in school?

JOE

Mom sent me to find you. A man from the Wheatland Club called. He said they made a mistake. You have to call them right away.

Jerry stares at Joe, taking in the news. Then:

JERRY

Tell your mother that I have nothing to say to those people.

Joe, confused, assumes his father hasn't understood.

JOE

Dad. They want you back. They said there's a lesson available tomorrow.

JERRY

I'm not going back. I won't work for people like that.

JOE

But Dad--

JERRY

I won't work for them again. If they call, say I'm not interested.

Jerry opens his paper again and begins to read it. Joe stands there, at a loss.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. NEXT MORNING.

The Brinsons eat breakfast together. It's quiet. Jeanette breaks the silence.

JEANETTE

Did you mail the rent?

JERRY  
I will. Tomorrow.

Silence. Jeanette holds up the paper she's reading.

JEANETTE  
It says here they're hiring at the  
Valu-Mart.

JERRY  
I didn't come all the way to  
Montana to bag groceries.

JEANETTE  
It would just be to tide us over.

JERRY  
I'm not doing a teenager's job.

Pause.

JEANETTE  
Maybe I should go back to work  
then.

Jerry looks up.

JERRY  
I'm making contacts, Jean.

JEANETTE  
Until you get established, then. A  
part-time job.  
(Trying to make light of  
the situation)  
Besides, it'd be a good way to meet  
people. It's about time I made  
some friends around here!

There is a pause, as she waits for his reaction.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
...Jerry?

JERRY  
Sure. If that's what you want.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. YARD. LATER.

Jerry hits a plastic golf ball from one side of the yard to  
the other. Over and over, seemingly without purpose.

Joe watches from the back door, concerned.

INT. JEANETTE AND JERRY'S BEDROOM. JUST AFTER.

Jeanette, wearing a slip, looks through her clothes. Her hair and makeup are done. Joe comes to the open door.

JOE

Mom?

She turns and holds a SKIRT SUIT up to herself.

JEANETTE

What do you think?

JOE

It looks nice. Are you going somewhere?

JEANETTE

I thought I might look for work.

JOE

Right now?

JEANETTE

Don't worry, I'll be back in time to make dinner.

Jeanette smiles at him and steps behind her closet door to finish dressing. Joe sits on the bed.

JOE

Mom? Is Dad okay?

JEANETTE (O.C.)

Of course he is.

JOE

Why didn't he take his job back?  
If they wanted him, why wouldn't he just go back?

Through a crack in the door, Joe catches a glimpse of his mother's face. In that moment, thinking no one is watching, Jeanette looks small and sad.

JEANETTE

I don't know. His pride got hurt.  
That happens sometimes.

JOE

But he's still looking for a job,  
right? He's interviewing?

JEANETTE

He says he is.

JOE

Are we going to have to move again?

Silence. Jeanette sees Joe looking at her. She smiles, to cover whatever she was thinking or feeling.

JEANETTE

He's been out of work before and he always finds his way. We have to trust him, that's all. Come on, zip me up.

INT. SCHOOL BUS. MORNING.

A grey Monday morning. Joe sits on the bus by himself, lost in his thoughts.

GIRL (O.C.)

How come you don't always take the bus?

Joe looks up. The Girl he spoke with before is sitting in front of him. She's turned around, looking right at him.

JOE

I like to ride my bike.

GIRL

You won't be able to do that much longer. Weather's gonna turn.

JOE

Yeah. Not looking forward to that.

GIRL

I am. First sight of snow, my daddy will come home from the fire.

She blushes for some reason. Joe, afraid she might turn back around, keeps talking.

JOE

Your father's at the fire? I mean, he's fighting the fire?

GIRL

He's gone almost every time it's happened. And he's still got eyebrows and hair on his head too. Have you been watching on the news?

JOE  
 No, our TV's on the fritz.  
 (Beat)  
 I'm Joe Brinson.

GIRL  
 Ruth-Ann Freeman. But people call  
 me Ruth. You're new here?

JOE  
 We moved from Idaho this summer.

The bus stops momentarily, and something catches Joe's eye out the window: Jeanette, dressed nicely, parking his bike. She walks into a store with a Help Wanted sign on the door.

The bus starts. Joe turns back to Ruth, but she is facing front again, absorbed in her book. The moment has passed.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD. DAY.

Joe gets tackled: he has finally made it onto the field. His teammate gives him a hand up.

Joe stands, and sees Jerry sitting alone in the bleachers. Joe waves to him, but Jerry doesn't seem to notice. Jerry just sits, staring ahead.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD. LATER.

Joe drives cautiously. Jerry sits in the passenger seat, smoking a cigarette, one hand out to grab the wheel in case of emergency.

JOE  
 I was thinking, in the Spring,  
 depending on what you're doing, we  
 could start a golf team at school.

JERRY  
 Keep those hands at ten and two.

Joe adjusts his grip.

JOE  
 They'd probably pay you to coach.

JERRY  
 I've played enough golf for one  
 lifetime. I want to give you and  
 your mother more than that.

JOE  
I don't need more.

JERRY  
Maybe now you don't, but you will.  
Someday you'll understand. Pull  
over.

Joe stops and kills the engine. He looks at his father.  
Jerry just sits for a moment, smoking, looking out the  
window. Outside, a breeze tosses the long prairie grasses.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
I read that when the wind stiffens,  
the fire jumps. Explodes in some  
untouched place.

Joe peers at his father, worried, trying to read him.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
A little breeze down here can mean  
something awful out there.

JOE  
...But we're safe here in Great  
Falls.

JERRY  
'Course we are.

Jerry gets out of the car. Joe slides over to the passenger  
side. He watches as Jerry walks around the car and gets into  
the driver's seat.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
Don't tell your mother I let you  
drive. She's got enough to worry  
about.

He starts the engine.

INT. YMCA. LATE AFTERNOON.

Jeanette stands before ESTHER (40s), the receptionist.

JEANETTE  
Could I speak to your manager then?

ESTHER  
His answer's the same as mine.  
We're not hiring.



JEANETTE

I can answer phones, I can type--

ESTHER

You could try the pharmacy. I hear they're looking for a girl.

JEANETTE

I already asked over there. Your ad in the paper said--

ESTHER

There is no secretarial position. The paper ran an old notice, god knows why. Giving me a real headache today, sorting that out.

Jeanette breathes out, defeated.

JEANETTE

...I'm sorry. That must be frustrating for you.

ESTHER

It certainly is.

Jeanette goes to the door. She stops and turns back.

JEANETTE

Do you have anything for a man? My husband's looking for work as well.

Esther sighs, taking in her vulnerable state.

ESTHER

Well, shucks. You don't happen to know how to swim, do you?

Jeanette's face lights up.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. EVENING.

Jerry lies on the couch, eyes closed. There's a game on the radio. In the kitchen, Jeanette is bubbling over with excitement as she cooks, regaling Joe with her day.

JEANETTE

There's two mixed age groups and one junior class. They'll let me teach privately too. Can you believe the luck? Imagine: People in Montana want to learn to swim. Why do you think that is?

JOE  
I don't know.

Jeanette pokes him with the cooking spoon.

JEANETTE  
Maybe we're all about to get washed  
away in a big flood!

Joe laughs, despite himself.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
No. *Some* of us will be washed away,  
but some of us will float to the  
top. That's better, isn't it?

JOE  
Much better.

JEANETTE  
A happy ending. For the right  
people. People who signed up for  
swimming at the Y.

Joe laughs again. Jeanette walks over to Jerry, lying on the  
sofa. She puts a hand on his forehead and he opens his eyes.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
Do you have a headache? Should I  
bring you some ice?

JERRY  
Just resting my eyes.

JEANETTE  
Let's have some music then.

JERRY  
You can have all the music you want  
after the game, hon.

JEANETTE  
Come on! We need more dancing  
around here.

Jeanette hums and sways by herself. Jerry watches, but does  
not join her. This makes Joe sad and he doesn't know why.

JOE  
Maybe I should get a job too.

JEANETTE  
That's a fine idea! We can all  
pitch in.

Jerry sits up.

JERRY

No. You've got school and football. That's enough.

JEANETTE

He'll learn more at a job than by playing football.

JERRY

He won't learn anything bagging groceries.

JEANETTE

Why don't we let Joe decide for himself?

Jeanette goes to the kitchen. Jerry closes his eyes. Joe looks between them, trying to decipher what just happened.

INT. JOE'S BEDROOM. NIGHT.

Joe sits in bed, reading through the WANT ADS with a pencil. He hears the low sound of his parents arguing in their room. After a moment, Joe gets up and closes the door to his bedroom, muffling the sound.

EXT. GREAT FALLS STREET. DAY.

Joe, wearing his father's golf jacket, walks down the street, holding a piece of paper. He stops, checks the address.

INT. PHOTO STUDIO. LATER.

A small, neat space. The STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHER (40s) stands with Joe, arms crossed. An informal interview.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Have you ever handled this kind of equipment before?

JOE

No, sir. But my mother always says I'm a quick study.

The Photographer smiles a little. He points to a big LAMP.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Alright. Well, the first thing you do is check to see if the bulb is hot. Go on.

Joe touches the bulb cautiously.

EXT. JERRY'S CAR. DAY.

Parked in his car, Jerry smokes and watches a group of ROUGH-LOOKING MEN board a bus across the street. They carry duffle bags. A MAN with a clip board calls off names as the men line up.

PHOTOGRAPHER (V.O.)

Then you put in the new bulb. Careful, now, it's fragile.

INT. PHOTO SHOP. CONTINUOUS.

The Photographer indicates an empty stool, set up in front of a backdrop.

PHOTOGRAPHER

You ask the customer to take a seat. Or if it's a large group, you might have them stand.

INT. YMCA POOL. DAY.

Jeanette stands in the pool in her MODEST SUIT, watching a MAN swim. His stroke is clumsy. On the side of the pool: a METAL LEG BRACE. We don't see the man's face, but Jeanette smiles encouragingly as he comes up for air.

PHOTOGRAPHER (V.O.)

Then you warn the customer you are going to turn on a bright light.

INT. PHOTO SHOP. CONTINUOUS.

The Photographer switches the light on and Joe squints.

PHOTOGRAPHER

And always remember to smile.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. EVENING.

Jeanette is in the kitchen, running water over frozen food. Joe is in the living room doing homework. Jerry stands outside smoking, staring at the red glow on the horizon.

PHOTOGRAPHER (V.O.)  
 You see, people come in here so  
 they can remember something good  
 that's happening in their lives.

INT. PHOTO SHOP. A MONTH LATER.

Joe moves lights, assisting as the Photographer takes portraits:

A YOUNG COUPLE holds hands.

PHOTOGRAPHER (V.O.)  
 They want to make that happy moment  
 permanent.

A GROUP OF AIRMEN pose without smiling.

PHOTOGRAPHER (V.O.)  
 That way, they can keep it forever.

A FAMILY, mother and children gathered around the father.

PHOTOGRAPHER (V.O.)  
 We're here to help them do that.

INT. PHOTO SHOP. CONTINUOUS.

The Photographer and Joe, back in the interview.

PHOTOGRAPHER  
 Do you understand?

JOE  
 Yes, sir.

The Photographer switches off the bright light.

PHOTOGRAPHER  
 Good. Let me show you how to work  
 the register.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. LATER.

Joe runs in the front door, clutching his first pay envelope, excited. He calls out:

JOE  
Mom! Dad! Guess what?!

He walks from room to room. No one is home. He stands in the middle of the empty living room, alone.

FADE TO:

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. EVENING. A FEW WEEKS LATER.

Dusk. Lights are on inside the house.

A PINK OLDSMOBILE pulls up outside. Jeanette gets out and walks up the driveway. Her hair is wet. The car pulls away.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

Jerry and Joe eat TV dinners while listening to the radio. Jeanette comes in the front door.

JEANETTE  
Good evening.

She starts down the hall, holding her wet swim suit.

JERRY  
You didn't call.

JEANETTE  
Sorry. I got a ride.

JERRY  
Your dinner is in the oven.

Jeanette looks at the TV dinners, then goes down the hallway to the bathroom. After a beat, she comes back out.

JEANETTE  
Jerry, you promised you'd fix it.

JERRY  
What?

JEANETTE  
Could you turn that down?

Jerry wipes his mouth, then turns down the radio.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

The toilet. It's been running for a week.

JERRY

Shit. I forgot to get a part. I'll do it tomorrow.

JEANETTE

What were you even doing all day?

Jerry just looks at her. She stares back at him, insistent. Joe tries to cut the tension:

JOE

I can stop by the hardware store after work.

JEANETTE

Thank you, sweetheart.

JERRY

I said, I'll do it.

Joe is taken aback by the edge in his father's voice.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Joe has other things on his mind. He's thinking about girls, not toilets. Right, son?

Jerry smiles at Joe. Joe looks down at his dinner.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JOE'S BEDROOM. LATER.

Joe lies in bed, listening to his parents' muffled argument.

JERRY (O.S.)

I can't be threatened. Don't threaten me, Jean.

JEANETTE (O.S.)

Oh, grow up. You've had your feelings hurt is all. You have to face facts, Jerry.

Jerry says something too low to hear.

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

I don't care! I'm tired of being disappointed too.

The door opens and shuts. Someone walks down the hall. Joe watches the shadow of feet passing his door. Silence.

Then: a loud sound of static from elsewhere in the house.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe creeps towards the noise. Jerry is crouched in front of the TV, adjusting the antenna. Static fills the screen.

JOE

Dad? Is everything okay?

JERRY

I'm tired of this damn radio.

The picture clicks into fuzzy focus. It's a local news report: footage of a airplane with a RED EMBLEM on the wings. The NEWS ANCHOR explains:

NEWS ANCHOR

Smoke jumpers have been parachuting down by the dozen. These brave men go straight into the heart of the fire...

JERRY

Must be something, risking everything like that, huh?

In the flickering light, Joe notices a blanket and pillow on the couch. Joe pales with the realization: his father is going to sleep out here.

INT. CLASSROOM. AFTERNOON.

Joe sits in class. Ruth sits a few seats away. The teacher is writing a math problem on the board, but Joe isn't listening. His mind is elsewhere.

TEACHER

Joe?

Joe looks up sharply. The whole class is looking at him.

TEACHER (CONT'D)

Can you tell us the mean and median?

Joe looks through his notes, trying to catch up.



JOE  
Yes. Sorry. One second.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL. HALLWAY. DAY.

Joe changes his books at his locker. Ruth comes up.

RUTH  
You know, I can help you with the  
math stuff. If you like.

JOE  
Oh, no. I'm fine. I just wasn't  
paying attention today.

She nods, but she doesn't leave.

RUTH  
Do you have football practice now?

JOE  
Actually, I quit a few weeks ago.  
Had to get a job.

RUTH  
Do you have to get to work then?

JOE  
Not today. Why?

EXT. GRANARY. AFTERNOON.

Joe and Ruth ride up in the GRAIN ELEVATOR. Slats of light pass down their bodies as the small freight elevator moves up. They are alone in this small space. It feels charged.

Ruth pulls a lever to stop the elevator and climbs out onto the elevated walkway. Joe follows. From up here, they can see past town, across the prairie, to the mountains, which are now crowned with an even more distinct haze of smoke.

RUTH  
Those are the Marshall Mountains.  
They say that peak got hit by  
lightning a hundred times in one  
hour.

JOE  
Is that true?

RUTH

Probably not. But the fires had to start somehow.

Ruth shields her eyes to look at the mountain.

JOE

Your dad must be brave.

RUTH

He is. He says some men hide. They take the pay, then hide. The fire is too much for them.

JOE

I can understand that.

RUTH

You wouldn't run.

JOE

I don't know.

RUTH

No. You're not the type.

Joe looks away, embarrassed at the attention.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Why don't you ever sit with us at lunch?

JOE

What?

RUTH

You always find an empty table. Do you like being by yourself?

JOE

No, not really.

(Beat)

We've moved around a lot. I've gotten used to it, I guess.

RUTH

I've lived here my whole life. I know everyone and everyone knows me.

JOE

That must be nice.

RUTH  
 ...Sometimes.

In the distance, a MAN exits a barn. Ruth spots him and her face changes.

RUTH (CONT'D)  
 Uh oh.

She hurries into the freight elevator. Joe follows.

JOE  
 Are we not allowed to be up here?

RUTH  
 You want to ask him?

Joe is nervous, but smiling. The freight elevator makes a loud noise as it goes down.

MAN  
 Hey! What are you doing up there?

The man starts walking rapidly in their direction. He has a distinct LIMP.

MAN (CONT'D)  
 This is private property!

The man gets closer. The elevator reaches the bottom. Joe and Ruth run off, giddy.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. EARLY EVENING.

Joe walks into the house, still happy from his afternoon.

JOE  
 Sorry I'm late!

Jeanette rounds the corner, her eyes red and wild. She wears an apron. Something burns on the stove, forgotten.

JEANETTE  
 Talk to your father, tell him not  
 to act like a fool.

JOE  
 What?

Joe runs to turn the burner off just as Jerry comes out of the bedroom, holding a duffel bag.

JERRY

I'm not being foolish. I put my name on a list. I waited for my chance. And now finally there's a place for me.

JOE

What's happening?

Jeanette and Jerry ignore him, absorbed in their argument.

JEANETTE

You don't know anything about fires. You'll get burned up.

JERRY

I've been reading about them, I know enough.

JEANETTE

You've been reading about them? You've been studying up?

JERRY

Don't turn my words on me, Jean.

JOE

What's happening?!

JEANETTE

Your father's leaving us to go fight those wildfires.

Joe looks at Jerry, shocked.

JOE

What? Why?

Jerry looks at his son, unsure what to say.

JEANETTE

Jerry, answer him. You wouldn't take a job at the grocery store, but you'll go out with a bunch of dead-beats and risk getting killed?

JERRY

I have to pack. The bus will leave without me.

JEANETTE

What does it pay?

JERRY

What?

JEANETTE

What does it pay?

JERRY

A dollar an hour.

Jeanette is speechless. Jerry goes out the back door.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. BACKYARD. CONTINUOUS.

Jeanette follows, wiping her hands on her apron. Jerry pulls shirts off the clothesline and stuffs them in his bag.

JEANETTE

A dollar an hour is nothing. It's not even minimum wage. This is foolish. And dangerous. Listen. You don't have to do this. I'm working now.

JERRY

It won't be for long.

JEANETTE

No, not if you get yourself killed!

JERRY

Soon it will snow and the fire will go out, and they'll send everyone home.

JEANETTE

What if it doesn't? What if it never snows at all?!

Jerry stops and looks at Joe, who spies from the doorway.

JERRY

What do you think, Joe? Is this a bad idea?

Joe looks from his mother to his father, unsure what to say.

JEANETTE

Don't ask him! He'll approve of anything you do!

JERRY

He's almost grown, he should have a say what happens in this family.

JEANETTE

Alright then!

(To Joe)

How will you like it if your father gets burned up and you never see him again? Then you and I can go straight to hell together.

JERRY

Don't say that, Jean!

JEANETTE

You can't keep running every time something doesn't go your way.

JERRY

You don't know what I'm doing.

JEANETTE

Don't I? I'm a grown woman, Jerry. Why don't you act like a grown man?

Jeanette goes inside, slamming the door behind her. Jerry and Joe are left standing in the yard.

EXT. BUS DEPOT. LATER.

A group of men wait in the cold. Jerry is jittery with excitement and nerves. Joe stands by, to see him off.

JERRY

I wish I had some money to give you. I feel I should.

JOE

What will you do out there?

JERRY

Dig trenches the fire won't cross. Whatever they need men for.

JOE

How long will you be gone?

The bus pulls up. Jerry grabs Joe, suddenly emotional.

JERRY

I've got this hum inside my head. I need to do something about it. Understand? Tell your mother I didn't mean to make her mad.

The other men start to load onto the bus.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Are you too old now to give your  
dad a kiss? Men love each other,  
too. You know that, don't you?

Jerry kisses Joe roughly on the cheek. He holds him close.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Don't let what your parents do  
disappoint you.

JOE

I won't. You couldn't.

Jerry lets go of him and gets on the bus. The doors close.  
The bus pulls out. Joe watches till it can't be seen.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. NIGHT.

All the lights are off in the house. The dinner Jeanette  
started is cold on the stove. Abandoned.

Joe flips on the hallway light and knocks on his mother's  
door. There is no response.

He cracks the door open. The room is dark, but the light  
from the hall spills in. Jeanette is lying fully clothed on  
top of the bed.

JOE

He got on the bus.

JEANETTE

Just like a school boy.

JOE

He told me to tell you he was  
sorry. He said he didn't intend to  
cause any trouble.

JEANETTE

He has very beautiful intentions.

She turns to look at Joe. Her face is a mess, puffy and red,  
smeared makeup and dried tears.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Maybe he's going to leave me.

JOE

I don't think he'd do that.

JEANETTE

We haven't been intimate lately.  
You're old enough now to hear that.

The phone rings.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Don't answer that.

The phone continues to ring. It is loud in the quiet house.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

I told him we shouldn't come here.  
What kind of man leaves his wife  
and child in such a lonely place?

Joe stands there, unsure what to do or say. The phone rings.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

You probably think I'm making too  
big a deal out of this, don't you?

JOE

I don't know what you're thinking.

The phone stops ringing. Silence.

JEANETTE

Tomorrow something will happen to  
make things feel different.

JOE

Do you think so?

Jeanette turns onto her side, away from Joe. He waits for her to say something more. She doesn't.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. WOODS. EARLY MORNING.

Empty woods, hazy air. Smoke starts to surround the trees, seeping in from the edges of frame.

High at the top of a tree, a BROWN BEAR perches, clinging to the trunk. Flames erupt, shooting up the tree.

The bear catches fire and falls to the ground. It writhes on the earth, a ball of fire, then runs away into the distance.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JOE'S BEDROOM. EARLY MORNING.

Joe wakes, his face red from the bad dream.



INT. BRINSON HOUSE. BATHROOM. LATER.

Joe splashes water on his face. The toilet is still running. Joe jiggles the handle. Nothing. He takes off the lid and looks inside.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. KITCHEN/HALL. JUST AFTER.

Joe comes in, dressed for school. Jeanette is dressed as well, dolled-up. She seems filled with a new, hard energy.

JEANETTE

You'll have to take the bus today.  
I'm going to look for a better job.

JOE

I thought you liked the Y.

Jeanette doesn't respond, just pins up her hair. Her hands shake slightly, the only sign of nerves.

JEANETTE

How do you feel? Strange? I  
wouldn't be surprised, with your  
father taking off like that.

JOE

I feel fine.

JEANETTE

Good. No use feeling sorry for  
ourselves.

She turns to face Joe.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

We might have to move into a  
smaller place. Would you mind that?

JOE

Did Dad say that?

Jeanette turns back to the mirror and applies more lipstick.

JEANETTE

This fire could go on for a long  
time. I have to be smart about  
things.

JOE

Dad said he'll be home soon. As  
soon as it snows.

Jeanette does not respond. She examines herself in the mirror while Joe stands there, holding his backpack, waiting for her to behave normally again. She looks back at him.

JEANETTE

You're wasting your life standing here watching me, sweetheart. Go to school.

JOE

Will you be here when I get home?

JEANETTE

I'm not going off to fight any fires, if that's what you're asking.

She turns back to the mirror to powder her nose.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL. CLASSROOM. DAY.

The TEACHER is distributing a quiz to the students. Ruth sits a few seats away from Joe.

TEACHER

You have fifteen minutes to complete the quiz on last night's homework.

Joe stares at the paper. He stands, and walks to the teacher's desk. As quietly as he can:

JOE

I didn't get to do the homework.

TEACHER

Why not?

Joe doesn't know what to say. He shrugs.

TEACHER (CONT'D)

You have to take the quiz, Joe. Do better next time.

INT. SCHOOL. HALLWAY. LATER.

Joe loads his backpack with heavy books. Ruth comes up to him. She looks pretty in a bright colored sweater.

RUTH

Hey.

JOE

Hi.

He takes a quick peek at her, but his attention is elsewhere.

RUTH

You wanna come over after school?  
My sister's making cookies for the  
church bake sale.

JOE

I have to work.

RUTH

I thought you had Tuesdays off.

JOE

I mean, I have stuff to do.

RUTH

Oh. Maybe next week?

JOE

Yeah, maybe.

Ruth laughs.

RUTH

You don't have to spend time with  
me if you don't want to.

JOE

No, I just have something to do  
today. For my mom. I'll see you  
soon, okay?

RUTH

Sure.

He walks away. She watches him go.

EXT. HARDWARE STORE. AFTERNOON.

Through the window of the hardware store, we see Joe talking  
with an EMPLOYEE, who shows him various parts. Joe nods.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. LATER.

Joe rides up, the small brown paper bag tucked under his arm.  
He stops at the sight of: A PINK OLDSMOBILE, parked in the  
Brinson driveway. The curtains in the living room are drawn.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

Joe comes in the front door. Jeanette is drinking beer with a tall, imposing-looking MAN. At Joe's entrance, Jeanette jumps up. She is barefoot in her stockings.

JEANETTE

Joe! Didn't you have work?

JOE

Not on Tuesdays.

JEANETTE

Oh. Right.

She stands there for a moment. Then:

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Where are my manners? Mr. Miller,  
this is my son, Joe Brinson.

WARREN

Good to meet you, Joe.

WARREN MILLER (tall, 50's) steps forward to shake hands. He has a pronounced *limp*. Joe recognizes him: this was one of the men Jerry taught at the Wheatland Club. This is the man from the granary. Joe looks down to hide his reaction.

JEANETTE

I recently taught Mr. Miller how to swim. He's going to give me a job in his car dealership. Isn't that right?

WARREN

Sure is.

Jeanette seems different, girlish in Warren's presence. Joe tries to cut the feeling in the room:

JOE

Has Dad called?

JEANETTE

No, he hasn't, sweetheart.

WARREN

I hear your father's fighting this fire. Are you worried about him?

JOE

No, sir.

WARREN

Brave boy you've got here, Jenny.

Warren smiles at Jeanette, who smiles back. Something is being communicated between the adults to which Joe is witness, but not privy. Jeanette stands.

JEANETTE

Warren's borrowing a book from me.  
He wants to learn about poetry.

WARREN

That's correct.

JEANETTE

I'll just go fetch it.

Jeanette disappears down the hall, leaving Joe and Warren Miller alone. Warren points at Joe's brown bag.

WARREN

What do you have there?

JOE

Toilet part.

WARREN

Real man of the house, huh? Let me  
give you a present.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small knife,  
"Burma 1943" carved on the side.

WARREN (CONT'D)

Sometimes you have to do the wrong  
thing just to know you're alive.  
But some trouble isn't worth  
getting into. This will remind you  
which to choose.

Warren extends the knife to Joe.

INT/EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

Warren Miller limps down to his pink car, book of poetry  
under his arm. Inside, Joe and Jeanette watch him leave.

JEANETTE

Doesn't he seem like a nice man?

Joe doesn't answer. He holds the knife.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
 He fought in two wars but never  
 learned to swim. Isn't that odd?  
 That's not supposed to happen.

Jeanette leaves the window, but Joe keeps watching as Warren Miller drives away.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. BATHROOM. LATER.

Joe finishes fixing the toilet, using the new part he bought. He flushes. It works.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JEANETTE AND JERRY'S ROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe knocks at his parent's bedroom door. No answer. The muffled sound of Jeanette's voice on the phone. Joe tries the knob. The door is locked.

JOE  
 Mom?

JEANETTE (O.C.)  
 ...What is it?

JOE  
 I fixed the toilet.

JEANETTE (O.C.)  
 What?

JOE  
 I fixed the toilet.

JEANETTE (O.C.)  
 I'm on the phone, sweetheart.

JOE  
 What time is dinner?

She says something to the person on the phone. Then:

JEANETTE (O.C.)  
 I'll be out in a few minutes.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. KITCHEN. JUST AFTER.

Joe checks the fridge. Not much in there. Jeanette's laughter echoes from her room. Joe looks at the clock.

INT. VALU-MART. EVENING.

Joe walks down the aisle of the grocery store. He checks prices on food items, choosing carefully.

EXT. VALU-MART. LATER.

Joe leaves the store with a bag. He tries to figure out how to ride the bike and carry the groceries.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. LATER.

Joe comes in with the groceries. Jeanette is fixing herself a drink in the kitchen. She's wearing jeans and a western-style shirt. Music is on.

JEANETTE

There you are. Where did you go?

JOE

We didn't have anything to eat.

Joe starts unpacking the groceries. Jeanette pulls a few dollars from her purse.

JEANETTE

Here.

JOE

That's okay.

JEANETTE

Take it, I'm not broke yet.

JOE

I don't want it.

JEANETTE

Joe. Take it.

A tense moment. He takes the money from her and goes back to unpacking groceries. She smiles at him again.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Well? How do you like this particular get-up?

JOE

...It's nice.

JEANETTE

I used to dress like this all the time when I was younger. They called us Chute Beauties. I'd stand behind the bull chutes at the rodeos and hope some cowboy would approve of me. It made my father very mad.

She smiles and strikes a pose.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Isn't that an impressive thing to know about your mother? That she was a Chute Beauty?

JOE

Dad told me that.

JEANETTE

It's probably nice to know your parents were once not your parents.

JOE

Who were you on the phone with?

JEANETTE

...Don't worry. If it had been your father, I would've put you on.

She takes a can of beans and opens it into a pan, humming along with the music, subtly moving her hips. Joe watches, feeling like his mother is a stranger to him.

JOE

Do you like Miller?

JEANETTE

What? You mean, Mr. Miller?

JOE

Yes. Do you like him?

JEANETTE

Not very much. Things do happen around him, though. He has that feel about him.

JOE

What's his wife like?

JEANETTE

He doesn't have one anymore. She left him, apparently.



Jeanette tips her glass back for the last sip of her drink. In the hard kitchen light, she looks deeply sad. She puts down her glass and throws a brilliant smile at her son.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Hey. How would you like to skip school tomorrow?

INT/EXT. CAR. NEXT DAY.

Jeanette drives across the plains towards the mountains, Joe beside her. In the distance, smoke rises.

They drive along a river and see ducks in the eddies. They pass a farmer cutting silage rows through his corn stand. They drive past homesteads and prairies.

Finally they reach a large CAMPSITE, very close to the fire. Smoke is thick in the air, blocking out sunlight. Tents and shacks have been thrown up on the side of the road. SOOTY MEN sit in groups, drinking and talking.

JEANETTE

That must be the stage-up. That's where the firefighters stay.

JOE

Let's drive in and find Dad.

JEANETTE

No. I'm not going looking for him in this mess.

They drive past the stage-up. Joe keeps his eyes on it.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Do you know what they call trees in a forest fire? Fuel. You know what they call the trees left up when the fire goes by? Joe?

JOE

No.

JEANETTE

They call them the standing dead. My father taught me that. He liked to think he knew a lot.

A bus filled with men passes them, racing to the fire. Joe strains to look. The bus pulls too far ahead for him to see.

JOE

What happens to the animals that live out here?

JEANETTE

They adjust, I suppose. Sometimes the little ones get confused and burn up. I used to cry about it when I was a kid, but my father said that didn't help anything. And you know what? He was right.

Without warning, Jeanette pulls the car over and parks.

Not fifty feet from where they are, the forest burns. Great cattails of flame leap against the charred remains of trees. Sheets of smoke rise from the earth.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Go on. Get out there. See what it feels like.

Joe looks at his mother, incredulous.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Don't be scared. It's just a bunch of small fires that once in a while blow together.

The fire feels so close he could touch it, this massive thing raging out of control. Joe opens his door.

EXT. WOODS. SIMULTANEOUS.

Joe walks toward the woods and the raging fire. The SOUND is HUGE, an unexpected and overwhelming roar. The heat is visible, rising in waves. Joe's face turns instantly pink.

Joe stops thirty feet from the fire. Jeanette gets out of the car and comes up next to him. She shouts over the noise.

JEANETTE

Do you like it?

JOE

No.

JEANETTE

Do you understand it?

JOE

No.

They watch the flames leap and whip around the trees, unpredictable.

JEANETTE

You had to see what your father finds so important. I'm sorry we both can't sympathize with him.

Jeanette goes back to the car, leaving Joe by the fire.

INT. ROADSIDE DINER. LATER.

FIREFIGHTERS, dirty and exhausted, fill the cafe. Eating. Dozing in booths. Waiting in line for the pay phone.

JEANETTE (O.C.)

How do you feel about your name?

Joe and Jeanette sit in a booth. Jeanette sips her beer. She seems relaxed, different, younger.

JOE

I never thought about it.

JEANETTE

We chose it because it was plain. Joe. You could be anyone with that name.

JOE

I suppose.

JEANETTE

Jeanette. I never liked that. It seemed like a waitress's name.

JOE

What would you rather be called?

JEANETTE

Well... There used to be a singer named Lottie. Lottie-da. How would that be?

JOE

I like Jeanette.

JEANETTE

You have to like me the way I am. Anyway, I guess at my age I don't have much choice.

JOE  
How old are you?

Jeanette takes a sip of her beer before answering.

JEANETTE  
I'm thirty-five. Does that seem like the wrong age? Would you like it better if I said fifty? Would that make you feel more protected?

JOE  
Thirty-five is alright.

JEANETTE  
Well, I won't be this age forever, so don't get used to it.

A WAITRESS brings over their food. Joe eats. Jeanette looks at her dinner, quickly congealing on the plate.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
It's not mysterious at all.

JOE  
What is?

Jeanette looks up.

JEANETTE  
This fire. It just goes on and on, like a city or factory. I feel sorry for him.

She pushes her plate away, as if to also clear her thoughts.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
I think he has a woman out here. Probably an Indian woman. A squaw.

JOE  
He wouldn't do that.

JEANETTE  
No? Why do you think men do things? They either go crazy or it's a woman. Or it's both.

JOE  
I don't think that's true.

JEANETTE  
You don't know anything. How could you? You haven't done anything.

Joe looks stung. Jeanette covers her face with her hands. Joe reaches out and touches her lightly. She looks at him through her fingers, her face full of emotion.

JOE  
He's going to be all right, Mom.

JEANETTE  
Yeah?

JOE  
Yes.

JEANETTE  
What about me?

JOE  
You're going to be all right too.

Jeanette attempts a smile.

JEANETTE  
People are drawn to things they shouldn't be. It's nature's way. Consider this the start of your higher education.

Jeanette sips her beer. Joe looks at her, trying to guess what she meant by that. He goes back to his dinner.

INT/EXT. CAR/GREAT FALLS STREET. LATER.

Jeanette pulls the car to a stop on an unfamiliar residential block. Joe, asleep beside her, wakes with a start.

JOE  
...Where are we?

Jeanette points at AN OLD GREY VICTORIAN HOUSE. Inside, a few lights are on.

JEANETTE  
That's Warren's house. Mr. Miller's. I looked it up in the phone book.

JOE  
Are we going inside?

JEANETTE  
No. I had something to ask him, but it can wait.

Joe watches his mother. Her face is barely visible.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

He doesn't live like a rich man,  
does he? But he owns an Oldsmobile  
agency. And three grain elevators.  
And who knows what else. It's hard  
to think about.

JOE

What is?

Jeanette shivers.

JEANETTE

I feel like I need to wake up, but  
I don't know what from. Or to.  
That's a big change.

JOE

...Mom?

Joe leans forward, concerned. Jeanette smiles at him and  
puts the car into gear.

JEANETTE

Come on. Let's get you home.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JOE'S BEDROOM. NIGHT.

Joe turns over, wide-awake. He can't sleep.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. LIVING ROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe crouches in front of the TV. The news is on, blurry. He  
watches the weather report ("Enjoy that Indian Summer!"), and  
waits for news of the fire.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. LIVING ROOM. MORNING.

Asleep on the couch, Joe wakes to the phone ringing. He sits  
up, bleary-eyed. Someone must have put a blanket over him in  
the night.

JOE

Mom?

The phone rings again. No one else seems to be home.  
Disoriented, Joe stumbles to the kitchen to answer the phone.

JOE (CONT'D)

Hello?

JERRY (O.S.)

Joe! What's going on over there?  
Why aren't you at school?

Joe clutches the phone receiver close.

JOE

Dad! Are you okay?

INT. ROADSIDE DINER. DAY.

Jerry is on a PAY PHONE in the same diner where Joe and Jeanette ate. He has to talk above the noise.

JERRY

I'm fine. Where's your mother?

BRINSON HOUSE: Joe looks around, not knowing what to say. The clock says 10 am. He lies to cover:

JOE

She went to town. How is it up there, Dad?

JERRY

It's fine. It's a mess, really. We don't have control over anything. We just watch it burn.

JOE

Are you coming home?

DINER: Jerry looks out the window at some commotion.

JERRY

I saw a bear catch on fire, Joe. You wouldn't have believed it. It blew up around him in one instant. A live bear in a hemlock tree. It was like balled lightning.

Joe doesn't know what to say.

JERRY (CONT'D)

I feel like I've been here a year, but it's only been a couple days.

JOE

It feels a lot longer here, too.

JERRY

Is your mother stepping out on me?

BRINSON HOUSE: Joe's breath catches. Jerry laughs.

JERRY (CONT'D)

I tried to call last night, but no one answered.

JOE

We ate at a cafe. We had chicken.

JERRY

That's good. Good for you two. I guess you don't need me anymore.

JOE

That's not true.

DINER: Jerry smiles to himself, holds the phone closer.

JERRY

Tell your mother I haven't lost my mind out here yet, okay?

BRINSON HOUSE: Joe holds the phone tighter, too.

JOE

All right. I will.

There is a click on the line.

JERRY

Hello? Hello? Joe, where are you?

JOE

Dad. Dad. I'm still here.

JERRY

Are you there Joe? Goodbye.

JOE

Goodbye. Yes. Goodbye, Jerry.

The phone clicks again. Jerry is gone. Joe gently puts down the phone. He glances at the clock.

EXT. OLDSMOBILE DEALERSHIP. DAY.

Joe rides into the dealership lot on his bicycle.



INT. OLDSMOBILE DEALERSHIP. JUST AFTER.

Joe walks in and scans the room for his mother. There are several women working here, but he doesn't see Jeanette. A PRETTY FEMALE EMPLOYEE approaches him.

FEMALE EMPLOYEEEE  
Can I help you, honey?

JOE  
I'm looking for my mother.  
Jeanette Brinson.

FEMALE EMPLOYEE  
I don't think we've had a customer  
by that name today--

JOE  
No, she works for Mr. Miller.

The woman looks confused.

JOE (CONT'D)  
Or she might be seeing him about a  
job.

FEMALE EMPLOYEE  
I don't think... Let me check.

She moves toward an inner OFFICE.

JOE  
That's all right. I was just  
passing by--

FEMALE EMPLOYEE  
It'll only take a second.

JOE  
No, thank you, sorry--

He abruptly leaves the store.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL. CLASSROOM. DAY.

Joe sits in class. He can't concentrate, and keeps looking at the clock. Finally he raises his hand.

TEACHER  
Yes, Joe?

JOE  
May I have the bathroom pass,  
please?

INT. HIGH SCHOOL. OFFICE. LATER.

Joe stands next to the Receptionist, holding the phone.

RECEPTIONIST  
We don't usually do this.

JOE  
I need to ask her a question. It's  
an emergency.

The Receptionist sighs, dials for him, and hands him the phone. He waits. It rings.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. SIMULTANEOUS.

The phone rings in the empty kitchen. No one picks up.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL. OFFICE. SIMULTANEOUS.

Joe hands the phone back to the Receptionist.

RECEPTIONIST  
Do you want me to try your father  
at work?

JOE  
No, he's not... No thank you.

He walks back down the hall. The Receptionist watches him.

INT. PHOTO SHOP. DAY.

Joe helps the photographer adjust lights, sweating under the bright bulbs. He keeps an eye on the clock while they take portraits:

YOUNG PARENTS with their NEWBORN.

An ELDERLY COUPLE.

A group shot of a HUGE WEDDING PARTY.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. AFTERNOON.

Joe enters the house with his pay envelope, urgent:

JOE

Mom?!

The living room is empty, but an iron sits out on the ironing board next to a GREEN DRESS. Joe touches the iron: it's hot.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. BACK YARD. JUST AFTER.

Joe comes out the back door.

Jeanette is standing in the yard, holding a drink and smoking a cigarette. She doesn't wear a coat. A few clothes still hang from the clothesline, flapping in the fall wind.

JOE

Where have you been?

JEANETTE

Enjoying the day.

Jeanette stands there, staring out. Joe can't read her face.

JOE

Dad called.

JEANETTE

When?

JOE

This morning. While you were gone.

JEANETTE

Did you have a nice chat about me?  
All my character flaws on parade?

JOE

No. I think he misses us.

JEANETTE

Where did you say I was?

JOE

I said you went to town.

She takes a drag. He waits for her to say something.

JOE (CONT'D)

...Did you?

She puts out her cigarette.

JEANETTE

Yes. I went to Warren Miller's dealership and did a few things, just to get started.

JOE

You were there this morning?

JEANETTE

It'll only be part-time. I still have a son to raise, I think.

She walks over to the clothesline and pulls down a shirt.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Here. Put this on.

JOE

Why?

JEANETTE

Mr. Miller invited us over for dinner.

INT. CAR. LATER.

Jeanette drives, Joe beside her. Jeanette wears a low-cut green dress and sings along with the radio.

JEANETTE

(singing)

Is your heart filled with pain?  
Should I come back again? Tell me  
dear... Are you lonesome tonight?

Elvis continues to croon. Jeanette sneaks a look at Joe.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

This is my desperation dress. What do you think?

JOE

Dad would like it.

JEANETTE

I'm sure he would. Inasmuch as he paid for it.

They pass a SLIGHTLY RUN-DOWN APARTMENT BUILDING. Jeanette points to it.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
 That's the Helen Apartments. A couple of the girls from the Y live there. What would you think of that? Living by the river?

JOE  
 I like our house.

JEANETTE  
 It's not our house, Joe. It's a rental.

The song ends and the announcer comes on, speaking in French.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
 Canada. We live near Canada now. My god.

She snaps the radio off.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
 I can't stand Canada tonight.

EXT. WARREN MILLER'S HOUSE. DRIVEWAY. EVENING.

Jeanette stands by the car, bent over to use the side mirror as she reapplies her lipstick. Joe stands near her, shifting from side to side. She glances at the house.

JEANETTE  
 It's all lit up in there, isn't it? Like a Christmas tree.

She blots her lips and straightens up.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
 Are you coming inside with me? You don't have to. You can go home.

Joe is taken aback by this.

JOE  
 No. I'm hungry.

Warren Miller opens the front door, white dish towel stuck in his belt like an apron. Jeanette waves to him girlishly.

WARREN  
 Well, hello there!

INT. WARREN MILLER'S HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

The house is neat and clean, but old fashioned. Flowered wallpaper. White lace doilies under the lamps.

Jeanette stands by the furnace. Joe hovers near her. Warren Miller limps over with a glass of Coca Cola for Joe.

WARREN

You look like a beauty pageant queen, Jeanette.

JEANETTE

I was. On one occasion.

Warren hands Joe the drink, conspiratorial.

WARREN

You should always say nice things to women. Especially your mother.

Jeanette laughs.

WARREN (CONT'D)

What'll you have to drink, Jeanette?

JEANETTE

Oh, just a little something. Gotta keep my wits about me with you two.

Warren goes to the bar cart to mix her drink.

WARREN

So, Joe, how's your old man? He coming home soon?

JOE

I hope so.

Jeanette holds up a framed picture, interrupting.

JEANETTE

Who's this?

WARREN

That's my wife. Formerly.

JEANETTE

I'm sure she regrets leaving.

WARREN

She hasn't called up and said so.

JEANETTE

Poor old thing. Nobody's nice enough to you.

Jeanette takes Warren's face in her hands and kisses him on the cheek. Joe looks away, embarrassed. Jeanette laughs.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Well, is something waiting to begin or has it already happened?

WARREN

Everything's in front of us. Come on now, I'll show you the house.

Warren touches her wrist as he hands her a drink.

INT. WARREN MILLER'S HOUSE. LATER.

Jeanette, Joe, and Warren finish eating. Warren has a napkin tucked into his collar. He pours Jeanette more wine.

JEANETTE

It's already so cold here. Lewiston never got cold. It had a special climate.

WARREN

Never been to Lewiston myself.

JEANETTE

Well, if you ever find yourself there, I bet you'll have the sense not to leave.

WARREN

Your husband had to go where the work was.

JEANETTE

He had work in Idaho. Steady work. But he insisted on leaving.

WARREN

Well, you won't get anywhere if you don't try. I started with a small farm, and simply never stopped trying for more.

Jeanette shakes her head.

JEANETTE

That's different. You worked for your success. Jerry's always looking for a shortcut. He gets an idea about what's going to make him happy, and he can't let go.

WARREN

A dream's a dream. A man's got to believe in something. That's as important as bread and water.

(To Joe)

I respect what your father's doing. When he gets back, I'm going to discuss a job with him.

Joe brightens at this.

JOE

That's great. Isn't it Mom?

JEANETTE

Well, I'm glad someone's here to take care of us.

Warren smiles and lights his cigar.

WARREN

Tell me, Joe. Do you know what you want to do with your life yet?

Joe is thrown, unprepared for the question.

JOE

...Maybe I'd like to work on a railroad someplace.

JEANETTE

No. That's not very good. You need to come up with a better answer.

WARREN

The kid's only fifteen, Jenny.

JOE

I'm fourteen.

WARREN

See? Plenty of time. Your mother says you want to go to school back East. Is that true?



JOE

No, I want to go where my parents went, in Washington State.

JEANETTE

No, you don't. Believe me. I dropped out of college to follow your father. Look where it got me.

JOE

You did?

JEANETTE

You want to grow up to be like Warren. He went to Dartmouth.

WARREN

Yes, but I learned everything that meant anything in the army.

JEANETTE

The army didn't make you rich.

WARREN

No. Other people's incompetency is what makes you rich. Money begets money based on no other principle.

JEANETTE

And that's how the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor.

WARREN

That's not what I'm saying at all, Jenny.

Jeanette stands abruptly. Warren and Joe look at her. She seems to be teetering on some precipice. Then:

JEANETTE

Would you mind very much telling me where the little girls' room is?

WARREN

Just through the bedroom.

Jeanette goes into his bedroom and closes the door. Joe and Warren are left alone. Silence.

WARREN (CONT'D)

Put that record on, won't you?

Joe gets up. Warren puffs on his cigar. Joe gets the record on: old fashioned RAGTIME MUSIC, the cheery tune contrasting with the strange solemn mood in the room.

WARREN (CONT'D)

Have you ever been up in an airplane, Joe?

JOE

No, sir.

WARREN

I own one. I could take you up sometime, if you like.

JOE

...Okay, sure.

WARREN

We could take your mother.

Joe shrugs, unsure, and eyes the door where his mother left. Warren takes a big gulp of his wine and licks his lips.

WARREN (CONT'D)

Once...it was Fall, like now, only colder. I was flying up to look at some poor man's failed crop. Suddenly there were all these geese, in formations, you know. Big V's. And do you know what I did? I turned off the engine. Four thousand feet up. So I could listen. They were all around me, honking and honking, up in the sky, where no one ever heard them, except God himself. And I thought: this is like seeing an angel. It was the most wonderful thing I ever did in my life. Ever will do.

JOE

...Were you afraid?

Warren leans forward like Joe has just said the most meaningful thing in the world.

WARREN

Yes. I was afraid. Because in that moment, I'd lost all humanity. I had all these people on the ground trusting me: my wife and my mother and my four businesses.

(MORE)

WARREN (CONT'D)

But they didn't matter to me in the slightest. Not that I didn't care about them. I just didn't even think about them at all.

(Pause)

Do you understand what I'm talking about Joe?

Warren looks at Joe intently. Joe has no idea what to say.

JOE

...Yes, sir.

Warren smiles, as if Joe has passed some secret test.

WARREN

Do you want a glass of wine?

JOE

Okay.

Warren pours Joe a glass, and another for himself.

WARREN

Here's to the angels. And to your old man not getting burned up like a piece of bacon.

JOE

Thank you.

Joe takes a sip. He doesn't like the taste. Jeanette comes out of the bedroom with a big smile restored to her face.

WARREN

Look now, the pretty lady's back.

JEANETTE

Why is it so gloomy in here?  
Someone put on some dancing music!

WARREN

Oh, we'll dance.

Warren gets up and changes the record.

JOE

Mom, I have homework.

Jeanette ignores him. CHA-CHA MUSIC comes on. Jeanette begins to move, snapping her fingers. Warren watches.

JEANETTE

Cha-cha-cha. Cha-cha-cha.

She goes over to Joe and grabs his hands.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
Come on. Dance with your mother.  
Cha-cha-cha.

Joe moves uncomfortably, almost limply. After a moment, Jeanette drops his hands.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
You're a terrible dancer, Joe. I'm  
ashamed of you. You'll have to  
dance with me, Warren. There's  
nobody else.

She holds her arms out, moving her hips. Warren watches her.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
Joe wants you to dance with me.  
You're the host; you have to do  
what the guest wants.

Warren begins to dance. Despite his limp and size, he is somehow light on his feet, the way a big animal can move.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
Look, Joe. Warren's a man who can  
dance. He's one in a million.

JOE  
I have to pee.

Joe abruptly turns and goes into Warren's room, leaving Jeanette and Warren dancing alone.

INT. WARREN MILLER'S BEDROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe stands in the dark room, panting slightly, trying to calm himself.

JEANETTE (O.C.)  
I can feel the music everywhere...

Joe quietly opens the closet. Inside: a row of suits. A pair of women's heels. A metal leg brace hangs from a nail.

Joe sits on the bed. He examines the photo on the nightstand: An OLDER LADY stands beside a UNIFORMED YOUNG MAN. Joe opens the bed-side drawer. There, resting on a white handkerchief, is a CONDOM WRAPPED IN GOLD TINFOIL.

From the living room, the sound of Jeanette's laughter, low and suggestive. Joe freezes. Her laughter fades.

Joe picks up the rubber. He feels it, examines it, even smells it. The music goes off. Joe panics and shoves the condom back in the drawer.

INT. WARREN MILLER'S LIVING ROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe comes out. Jeanette is standing in the middle of the room, drinking her wine and fanning herself. Warren is seated at the table again, smoking and looking at her.

WARREN

Your mother's a very passionate dancer, you know that, Joe?

JEANETTE

He means I go 'til I drop.

She closes her eyes. Her hips move to an unheard beat, independent of the rest of her body. Warren watches her.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

When Joe's father and I were first married, I rented a sailor costume and did a little cute tap dance when he got home.

She does a sloppy tap-step and throws her arms out. Warren laughs softly.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

It was an anniversary present. He loved it.

WARREN

I bet he did.

Jeanette opens her eyes and looks at Warren coldly. She drains her glass and sets it down a little too hard.

JEANETTE

We have to go now. I'm irritable all of a sudden and Joe's bored.

WARREN

You're drunk.

JEANETTE

That's not a crime yet, is it?

WARREN

You can't drive in this condition. Stay the night.

JEANETTE

No.

WARREN

Come on. There's another bedroom.

JOE

I can drive us.

Both adults look at him.

JOE (CONT'D)

Dad taught me.

JEANETTE

See? Joe will drive us.

WARREN

Put something on at least. You said yourself, it's gotten cold. Wait here.

Warren limps into the bedroom. Jeanette grabs Joe's hand.

JEANETTE

You don't mind, do you?

JOE

No, I like driving.

JEANETTE

Combat experience. That's what my mother used to call it when my father would get drunk and roar in.

JOE

Don't worry. I can get us home safe.

JEANETTE

You're a good boy. Someday you'll get a big promotion. Which is to say, you'll be grown up and can leave.

Warren comes back into the room with one of his own coats.

WARREN

This will do the job.

JEANETTE

Don't you have one of your wife's coats?

WARREN

They're in a bag somewhere to throw  
away. Here.

Warren puts the jacket on Jeanette and buttons it for her. She lets him. Suddenly, Warren grabs her and kisses her hard. Joe stares, frozen. After a moment, Jeanette wrenches away and strides toward the door.

JEANETTE

Come on, Joe. The fun's over.

INT. CAR. JUST AFTER.

Joe sits in the driver's seat, while Jeanette tries to locate the car keys. Their breath is visible in the cold.

JEANETTE

My heart's just pounding away.  
Switch on the light.

Joe turns on the light. Jeanette's hands are shaking. She finds the keys on the floor and hands them to Joe.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

I drank too much. That makes your  
heart race.

He starts the car, but she immediately opens her door again.

JOE

Mom?

JEANETTE

I don't want to wear this home.

She unbuttons the coat as she talks.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Can you imagine what the neighbors  
would say, if they saw me in some  
strange man's coat? Stay here, I  
won't be a minute.

She gets out and walks up to the house, carrying the coat. Joe watches as she knocks on the door. Warren Miller opens it. Jeanette steps inside. The door closes behind her.

Joe waits. And waits. The car begins to steam up. He turns off the engine.

EXT/INT. WARREN MILLER'S HOUSE. SIMULTANEOUS.

The street is dark, cold, and empty. Joe gets out of the car and walks up the lawn. He knocks softly on the front door. No answer. In the silence, he hears faint music.

Joe peers in the living room window and sees:

At the center of the room, Jeanette and Warren Miller stand as close as humanly possible, mouths and bodies pressed together. Jeanette is on her toes, arms around his neck. Warren Miller holds her by her backside, her dress pulled up, exposing where her white stockings are held by white elastic straps. In his other hand, he holds his cigar.

Joe turns away, feeling like he can't breathe.

INT. CAR. LATER.

Joe sits in the car, engine off. After a moment, Jeanette opens the door and jumps in. Her cheeks are flushed.

JEANETTE

Well! I surprised myself and had a good time. Did you?

Joe stares out the windshield, trying to control his feelings.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

My face is hot.

She presses her hands to the cold window and then against her pink cheeks. Joe just sits there, not looking at her.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

So? Did you like him?

He looks at her, but doesn't say anything. Jeanette's smile finally fades.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Well, why don't we drive away now.

Without a word, Joe starts the engine.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. NIGHT.

Jeanette and Joe enter the house, Joe just in front of her.



JEANETTE

You want to play cards or something?

Joe continues to walk, down the hall to his room. He closes the door hard. Jeanette stands in the living room, alone.

INT. SCHOOL GYM. PEP RALLY.

LOUD MUSIC and CHEERING. The high school homecoming pep rally in the gym. The band plays. The football team runs in, wearing their game day jerseys, while the small cheer leading squad does a routine.

Joe sits with the rest of the student body, who are cheering loudly. Joe does all he can to blend in, or get through it.

Ruth sits down next to him.

RUTH

Hey. Are you feeling any better?

Joe is alarmed she might know something.

JOE

Better than what?

RUTH

You weren't in class the other day. I thought you might be sick.

JOE

Oh. Yeah. I was.

Joe tries to focus on the pep rally. After what he saw last night, he is having trouble being in his own skin.

RUTH

Are you going to the homecoming game tonight?

JOE

I don't think so.

RUTH

What about the dance tomorrow?

JOE

I don't know.

There is a long pause. Ruth waits for him to ask her out. Joe is just trying to breathe. Ruth gathers her courage:

RUTH  
A bunch of kids are going together.  
Just as friends.

Joe stands abruptly.

JOE  
I'm sorry.

Joe hurries out of the gym, through the pep rally. Ruth sits there, embarrassed.

INT. SCHOOL BATHROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe vomits into the toilet. He breathes heavy, eyes closed.

He sits on the toilet in the tiny metal stall, trying to catch his breath.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. NIGHT.

Joe sits at the kitchen table, alone, eating a sandwich. The clock reads 8 pm.

A car slows in front of the house. Joe looks up, hopeful. The car keeps going by. Joe goes back to his sandwich.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JOE'S BEDROOM. NIGHT.

Joe, asleep in bed, wakes with a start. He sits up. From the hall: the sound of the toilet running. Joe gets out of bed, goes to his door and cracks it open.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. HALLWAY. SIMULTANEOUS.

A strip of light shines from under the bathroom door. A man's cough. Joe holds his breath. *Is his father home?*

The door opens. Warren Miller walks out. He is completely naked. Joe can see his penis and the thick scars that cover his left leg.

Warren Miller turns off the light and limps down the hall. In the dark, his white body is almost luminescent. He slips into Jeanette's room and closes the door.

For a moment, Joe cannot move.

Then he tiptoes down the hall toward his mother's room. He is almost at her door, when:

JEANETTE (O.C.)

Shh. Be quiet now.

The sounds of bodies moving inside the room. Joe runs back to his room and pulls the door closed behind him.

INT./EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. JOE'S BEDROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe stands inside his room, heart beating hard. He sees the shadow of feet passing in the hall. Low voices. Quiet. Then: the sound of the front door closing.

Joe drops to the ground and crawls to the window. He peeks over the sash.

Outside, Jeanette and Warren hurry across the lawn. Warren is dressed, Jeanette wears a bathrobe. They get into Warren's pink car. The interior car lights come on. Jeanette says something, Warren nods. The car lights go off.

Joe squints, but he can't see anything.

After a moment, a car drives by, its headlights illuminating Warren Miller's car. The windows are fogged. The silhouette of two bodies. Then darkness again.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. KITCHEN. JUST AFTER.

Joe gets a flashlight from under the sink. His mother's whiskey bottle is on the counter. Joe takes a swig from it. It tastes disgusting. He chokes, then drinks more.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. HALLWAY. JUST AFTER.

Joe sweeps the flashlight across the dark hall. Everything looks alien, transformed, like this is someone else's house.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JEANETTE AND JERRY'S BEDROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe stands in the doorway of his parents' room, shining the flashlight across the tousled bed, the twisted sheets, his mother's clothes in a heap on the floor.

The flashlight beam lands on a framed picture on the wall: Jerry, alone on the golf course, smiling like he hasn't a care in the world.

A sound outside. Joe turns off the flashlight. Suddenly Jeanette runs in a pale streak past the bedroom window.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. HALLWAY. JUST AFTER.

Joe tiptoes towards his room. The sound of water running in the kitchen. Joe freezes. Footsteps.

Joe makes a dash towards his room--and almost runs into Jeanette, coming around the corner with a drink. She is startled and drops her glass.

JEANETTE

God damn it!

Jeanette SLAPS him full across the face, hard. Joe, frightened, frozen, does not move. She *slaps* him again.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

You scared me.

JOE

I didn't mean it. I'm sorry.

Her bathrobe has fallen open. She is naked underneath. Joe looks away. Jeanette clutches her robe together.

JEANETTE

You can't sneak up on someone like that. You hear me? Christ.

She leans over, as if to catch her breath. Joe stares.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

What?

JOE

What was he doing here?

She puts her hand over her face in irritation or shame.

JEANETTE

...Christ, I couldn't stand to be young again. I'd run from the fountain of youth, I swear to God.

JOE

Are you going to see him again?

JEANETTE

What does it matter?

JOE

Do you love him?

She looks straight at him, full of contradictory feelings.

JEANETTE

Yes. And if you wonder how it happens so fast, it simply does.

JOE

Do you still love Dad?

His voice cracks. She looks down, as if lost. When she speaks again, she has dropped her bravura. Her voice is soft, searching.

JEANETTE

Your father wants to make things better. Maybe I'm not up to that. I don't know. I wish I was dead.

The starkness of her language scares Joe. He doesn't know what to say. Jeanette goes to her bedroom door, stops and turns back to him.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

If you've got a better plan for me, tell me. Really. I'll try it. Maybe it'll be better than this.

Joe meets her eyes.

JOE

I don't have one. I don't care.

He turns, walks to his room, and closes his door.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JOE'S BEDROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe sits on his bed. He touches his face. It's quiet in the house. He tries not to cry.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JOE'S BEDROOM. MORNING.

Joe lies in bed, awake. He hasn't slept. He listens to Jeanette walking around the house. The front door closes. Joe looks out the window. He watches Jeanette get into her car and drive away. He jumps out of bed.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JOE'S BEDROOM. JUST AFTER.

Joe pulls clothes from his closet and shoves them into a bag. Focussed, urgent. He pulls a wad of cash from his underwear drawer, empties pennies and dimes from a coffee tin.

EXT. GREAT FALLS. RIVER. LATER.

Joe stands on an old RAILROAD TRESTLE, high over the river. For a moment, it looks like he might jump. Then Joe pulls Warren Miller's knife out of his pocket, and throws it as hard as he can into the river.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL. ADMINISTRATION OFFICE. DAY.

Joe stands in front of the Receptionist, who looks confused. He holds a note out to her.

RECEPTIONIST

I'm sure she's in class right now.

JOE

I know, that's why I need you to give it to her.

RECEPTIONIST

Wait, shouldn't you should be in class too?

JOE

Please just give it to her? Ruth-Ann Freeman, she's--

RECEPTIONIST

You wait right there.

The Receptionist gets up, goes toward the administrative office. Joe drops the note and runs out of her office.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)

Pardon me, young man!

She tries to wave him down, but Joe keeps running.

EXT. BUS DEPOT. LATE AFTERNOON.

Joe talks to a man in the ticket window, purchasing a ticket.

EXT. BUS DEPOT. LATER.

It is now almost evening. Joe waits on a bench, grim, holding his ticket. Down the street, a bus approaches. Joe stands and shoulders his bag.

At that moment, something drifts down onto his face. Joe looks up. A LIGHT MIST OF SNOW is starting to fall. The bus pulls up, obscuring Joe from sight.

The bus idles. People get off, people get on. Snow continues to fall. The bus lets out a loud noise as the doors close. Then the bus pulls away.

Joe is gone. But as the bus drives off, we PAN in the opposite direction... to see Joe running up the street as fast as he can, clutching his bag.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. EARLY EVENING.

Joe throws open the door, out of breath. None of the lights are on in the house.

JOE

Mom??

Joe runs down the hall, looking into each room. He finds Jeanette sitting on the edge of her bed, in a modest dress. She is barefoot and holds a drink. One of her books of poetry lies open next to her.

JOE (CONT'D)

Look outside. Did you see? It's really coming down.

The blinds are closed. Joe rushes to the window to open them. Jeanette glances at the snow, without seeming to register it.

JEANETTE

What were you doing out so late?

Joe leans over her.

JOE

Mom. It's snowing. This means Dad will come home.

Jeanette looks away, absentmindedly leafing through her book.

JEANETTE

Yes, your father called earlier.

JOE

He did? When?

JEANETTE

This morning. While you were sleeping. I guess they aren't needed any more. He said he should be home tonight.

She takes a sip of her drink. Her face is unreadable.

JOE  
We should do something for him.

JEANETTE  
Like what?

JOE  
I don't know. Something. To  
celebrate.

JEANETTE  
He's only been gone a few days.

A car pulls up outside, honks. Joe runs down the hall and out the front door to greet his father. Jeanette doesn't follow.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

Joe barrels down the lawn as Jerry walks up the drive. Joe throws his arms around his father and holds on tight. A dirty car, packed with other men, pulls away from the curb.

JOE  
I thought it would never snow.

Jerry laughs. He looks different, his face tanned.

JERRY  
Let's get inside before we're  
buried in the stuff.

He takes off his hat and puts it on Joe. Joe holds onto him as they walk up the drive.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

Jerry and Joe step inside. Jeanette comes down the hall to greet him.

JERRY  
Hello, Jean.

JEANETTE  
Hello, Jerry.

He puts out his arms for her to come to him. She does not. Jerry laughs, uncomfortable.

JERRY  
I don't know who I'm waiting to  
impress here. Come kiss me.



Jeanette crosses to him and kisses him lightly on the cheek.

JEANETTE  
You smell like a campfire.

JERRY  
I should, I've been out in it.

He tries to embrace her, but she walks away from him.

JEANETTE  
Would you like a beer or something?

JERRY  
I'm fine. We ate on the road.

JEANETTE  
You must be tired. Why don't we  
all sit down then?

Jeanette sits, and gestures for Jerry to sit across from her.  
After a beat, he does. Nothing feels normal.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)  
Well? How was the fire? Did you  
put it out?

JERRY  
We did as much as we could. The  
snow should do the rest.

JEANETTE  
That's good.

Jerry looks to Joe for some explanation for this strangeness.  
Joe looks at his feet. Jerry sits forward.

JERRY  
It was hell out there. I can't  
tell you. I had to stop a man from  
running into the fire. I dragged  
him down.

JEANETTE  
Sounds dangerous.

JERRY  
It was. I'm happy to be home.

JEANETTE  
Well. I'm glad you came.

Another silence. The feeling in the room is very strained.  
Jerry forces a smile onto his face and turns to Joe.

JERRY

I have some good news. A man up there spoke with me about a job with the Forestry Department. Out in Choteau, on the Eastern front. They'll even provide us with a house.

JOE

We'd move again?

JERRY

It isn't that far. It's a good time to be up there.

Jeanette suddenly stands.

JEANETTE

I have something to tell you, too.

Jerry and Joe look at her.

JERRY

I'm sorry. I'm running on here. What is it, Jean?

JEANETTE

I've taken an apartment for myself. In town. I can move in tomorrow.

Silence. Joe is open-mouthed in shock. Jerry blinks, slow to absorb the news.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

It's a tiny place, but I can afford the rent. And there will be room for Joe, if he wants to come.

Jerry opens his mouth, but words don't come out.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

It's a surprise, I know. I'm surprised myself.

Finally Jerry finds his voice:

JERRY

Have you gone crazy?

JEANETTE

No. I don't think I have.

JERRY

Jean, you can't be mad at me just because I went to some fire.

JEANETTE

I'm not. I was. But I'm not anymore.

JERRY

Well, what then? What in the world?

JEANETTE

I need some time. To figure things out.

JERRY

Figure what out?

Jeanette shakes her head, unable to answer. Jerry looks out the window, as if something was out there, then turns back.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Jean? Are you stepping out on me?

Jeanette pales but her gaze is steady.

JEANETTE

Yes. I am. But this doesn't have to do with that.

Jerry stands abruptly. Jeanette recoils at his sudden movement.

JERRY

What the hell, Jean. What in the hell are you thinking? Who is it? Never mind, I don't care who it is-

JEANETTE

It's Warren Miller.

Silence. Jerry stands, frozen. Joe watches, terrified.

JERRY

*Miller?*

JEANETTE

Yes.

JERRY

Are you moving in with him?

JEANETTE

Joe, go to your room.

Before Joe can move:

JERRY

JEAN. Are you moving in with him?

JEANETTE

No. I told you. I found an apartment. The Helen Apartments. They're down by the river.

JERRY

I know where they are. Christ almighty.

Jerry yanks off his shirt and throws it to the floor. The violence of his movements frightens Jeanette into stillness. Then, quietly:

JERRY (CONT'D)

What is it? Have you had a hard week?

JEANETTE

No. Not very hard.

JERRY

Are we not getting along then? Is that it?

JEANETTE

I think so.

JERRY

Boy, boy, boy.

Jerry shakes his head. He begins to laugh.

JEANETTE

I'm not going to have this conversation with you if you don't take me seriously.

He laughs harder.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

Stop it. Don't act this way in front of the boy.

Jerry looks at Joe like he just landed from outer space.

JERRY

This is a wild life, isn't it son?

JEANETTE

Leave him be. He doesn't know what  
is and what isn't.

Jerry looks Jeanette up and down, as if seeing her for the  
first time.

JERRY

I think I'm wasted on you.

JEANETTE

I think you are too. We're all  
wasted on everything nowadays.

She leaves the room. The sound of her bedroom door closing.

EXT. STREET. MERMAID BAR. LATER.

A SEEDY BAR with a MERMAID SIGN. A few BEAT-UP TRUCKS parked  
outside. Snow blows down the empty street.

Jerry's car pulls up and parks. Jerry and Joe get out and  
cross the street, Joe holding his jacket closed to the wind,  
running to keep up with Jerry.

INT. MERMAID BAR. NIGHT.

Jerry and Joe sit at the bar. The BARTENDER places a piece  
of pie in front of Joe and a beer in front of Jerry.

JERRY

Your mother never likes to go to  
places like this. She grew up  
around this kind of thing and  
doesn't like to be reminded. Well,  
cheers to the real people, right?

Jerry clinks his bottle against Joe's glass, then takes a  
long gulp. Joe watches him, too anxious to eat. Jerry  
smiles, to push down his bad feeling.

JERRY (CONT'D)

These things happen for a reason.  
Your mother wasn't happy here and  
wanted to let me know it. Well,  
I've heard her. Loud and clear.

He takes a sip of his beer.

JERRY (CONT'D)

It'd be nice to live on the Eastern front, wouldn't it? Think your mother would take a chance on it?

JOE

Sure, Dad.

JERRY

She just needs something to believe in again. You'll see. Go on. Eat that delicious pie.

Joe takes a bite and chews. It is like sand in his mouth. His eyes stay on Jerry, who is trying to hang onto his positive attitude. But he can't let it go:

JERRY (CONT'D)

I'm surprised about this Miller, though. Has it been going on a long time?

JOE

I don't know, Dad.

JERRY

It's hard to believe that she would choose him. An old man. And married, at that.

JOE

He's not married anymore.

Jerry's puts down his beer and looks at Joe.

JERRY

You know him, then?

Joe scrambles, unsure what to say, not wanting to lie.

JOE

No. I mean...I met him. Once.

Jerry tries not to react, but his face grows tight and cold.

JERRY

How did you happen to meet him?

JOE

He stopped by the house a couple days ago. Mom's been teaching him at the Y.

JERRY  
What happened when he stopped by?

JOE  
Nothing. He borrowed a book.

JERRY  
And you never saw him again?

Jerry watches Joe decide what to tell him.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
Where did you see him again?

JOE  
...Mother and I went over to his house. We had our dinner there.

JERRY  
You did? When?

JOE  
A few nights ago, I guess.

JERRY  
Did you stay all night?

JOE  
No. We ate and then we left.

JERRY  
And that's all?

Joe nods, but his mouth is dry. Jerry looks Joe in the eye.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
Did you see your mother do something that you wouldn't like to have to tell me?

Joe doesn't know what to say, so he is quiet.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
Joe. I think you must have seen your mother with this Miller. Not just about dinner, I mean. Did you see them? Together?

JOE  
...Yes.

Jerry breathes out hard.

JERRY  
Where were they?

JOE  
In the house.

JERRY  
In our house?

Joe nods. Jerry stands, face inscrutable.

JOE  
Where are you going?

JERRY  
Nowhere. Finish your pie.

Jerry goes to the pay phone in the back of the bar. Joe watches him. Jerry looks in the phone book, finds a page, then *rips it out*. He walks back over to Joe.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
Come on. Let's clear our heads.

INT. CAR. LATER.

They drive in silence, the windows down. Jerry is silent, his jaw tense. It is very cold, but Joe just holds his coat closed tight and doesn't say anything.

EXT. GAS STATION/INT. CAR. JUST AFTER.

Joe waits in the car. In the rearview mirror, he watches Jerry talk to the gas station attendant. Jerry opens the trunk and the attendant puts something in it, but Joe cannot see what it is. Jerry shuts the trunk and gets in the car.

JERRY  
Your mother's boyfriend, does he live at 736 Prospect Street in Black Eagle?

Joe doesn't want to answer the question.

JERRY (CONT'D)  
You said you went to his house. Is that where he lives?

JOE  
...Yes.

Jerry turns the engine on.



INT. CAR. LATER.

Jerry and Joe drive slowly down Warren Miller's street, looking at the house numbers.

JERRY

Your mother's boyfriend doesn't live on a very glamorous block, does he? It's not a good deal for her. Not that I can see.

JOE

Can we go home now, Dad?

Jerry pulls the car to the side of the road and stops in front of Warren Miller's house.

EXT. WARREN MILLER'S HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

The living room light is on in Warren Miller's house, and there is the faint sound of music. Jerry crosses the street, toward the house. Joe stands on the running board of the car to get his father's attention.

JOE

Dad!

Jerry gestures at him to be quiet. He peers in Warren's windows. Joe waits, afraid. After a moment, Jerry returns.

JERRY

Get back inside the car, Joe.

JOE

Can you see anyone in there?

JERRY

I think they're in the bedroom.

Jerry looks down the empty street.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Gone less than a week. Maybe things were not as solid as I thought. I guess that's evident.

He laughs shortly and looks up at the sky.

JERRY (CONT'D)

This is an odd day, isn't it? An important day. I feel exhausted by it.

JOE  
We should go home, Dad. Please.

JERRY  
We should. We certainly should.  
We'll do that in a minute.

Jerry goes to the trunk, opens it, and grabs something from inside. He walks back towards Miller's house.

Joe sees: Jerry is carrying a GAS CAN.

Before Joe can react, Jerry uncaps the can and starts sloshing gasoline all over Warren Miller's porch.

Joe runs across the street and up onto the lawn.

JOE  
Dad! What are you doing?!

JERRY  
Go back to the car!

Warren Miller throws open the front door. He is wearing only a robe.

WARREN  
What the hell is going on?

Jerry and Warren stare at each other for a moment.

WARREN (CONT'D)  
Jerry?

Jerry lights a match and drops it. The porch ERUPTS IN FIRE. Warren Miller slams the door shut.

JOE  
Dad!

JERRY  
Miller! Come out here!!

JOE  
Dad, you're on fire!

Joe runs and tackles his father, pushing him off the fiery porch. They fall onto the lawn.

Joe immediately jumps to his feet, pulls off his jacket and hits Jerry with it, to put out the fire. Jerry lies there, coughing. The flames on Jerry's clothes go out, but Joe keeps hitting his father, some deep well of rage and fear released inside him.

JOE (CONT'D)  
 How could you do that? They'll  
 take you away! They'll take you  
 away and lock you up!!

The front door opens and Warren Miller runs out, trailed by  
 A VERY YOUNG WOMAN, also wearing a bathrobe. Joe stops at  
 the sight of them. Warren sees Jerry, collapsed on his lawn.

WARREN  
 God damn it, Jerry! You're a  
 goddamned drunk! You hear me?  
 You're a fool and a drunk and  
 you've ruined my house.

JERRY  
 ...Go to hell, Miller.

Warren Miller grabs Jerry by the shirt, and punches him in  
 the face. Jerry falls. He tries to right himself, but  
 Warren hits him, again and again. Joe throws himself in  
 front of Jerry.

JOE  
 Stop it! Stop! STOP!

Warren raises his fist. Joe flinches in anticipation...but  
 Warren drops his arm. He wheezes for breath.

Warren's house continues to burn, but the fire is starting to  
 smolder, dampened by the snow. Joe goes to his father, still  
 on the ground.

JOE (CONT'D)  
 Dad? Are you okay?

Jerry holds his cheek, which has split open, and gestures  
 wildly at the Young Woman, naked under Warren's bathrobe.

JERRY  
 Who the hell is that?

WARREN  
 That's none of your business.

JOE  
 Dad, let's get out of here.

JERRY  
 Where is my wife?!

WARREN  
 How should I know? God damn it,  
 you have a son here.

(MORE)

WARREN (CONT'D)

What do you think's going to happen now? The police are coming. They'll put you in jail.

JERRY

I don't care.

Joe is shocked by Jerry's admission. Sirens wail closer, lights flashing. A fire truck pulls onto the block.

WARREN

I have a gun inside. I could shoot you right now and no one would blame me. A house burner. And in front of your own son. I'd be ashamed.

JERRY

Then shoot me. Shoot me if you want.

Warren shakes his head, disgusted--then limps away toward the truck to speak with the firemen. People from neighboring houses have gathered on the street, watching.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Joe, give me a hand.

Jerry extends his hand, but Joe does not take it. He looks down at his father, who seems small and human and flawed to him for the first time.

JOE

Why did you do that?

Jerry looks up at him, helpless on the ground.

JERRY

To get things back on track, I guess.

Joe takes a step back from his father's outstretched hand.

JERRY (CONT'D)

You understand. Don't you son?

Joe takes another step back.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Joe?

Jerry reaches for him, but Joe turns and runs.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Joe!

Joe runs as if his life depends on it. He doesn't look back.

EXT. GREAT FALLS STREET. LATER.

Joe is sprinting as hard as he can, past house after house, tree after tree. He runs until he can't breathe, his body reaching a breaking point.

He stops, panting, and looks around. His deep breaths glow in the cold.

Empty street, dark woods. He has no idea where he is or what to do.

EXT. POLICE STATION. LATER.

The lights are on in the police station. Joe jogs up, gasping for air in the cold night.

INT. POLICE STATION. JUST AFTER.

Joe enters. There is an OLDER POLICEMAN at the front desk.

OLDER POLICEMAN  
Yes, can I help you?

Joe leans on the desk. He tries to gather his breath to talk.

OLDER POLICEMAN (CONT'D)  
What is it, son?

JOE  
I... I'm lost. And I think--I  
think my father might be in here.

Joe tears up with sudden emotion, surprising himself. The Older Policeman stands and hands him a handkerchief.

OLDER POLICEMAN  
It's okay, kid. We'll sort it out.

Joe nods and tries to control his tears.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. LATER.

The lights are on in the living room. A police car pulls up.

Joe gets out of the car. The police car pulls away. Joe stands on the lawn and looks at the house.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

Joe opens the door cautiously, unsure of what he will find. Jerry and Jeanette are sitting on the couch. Upon seeing Joe, they both stand.

JERRY  
Where'd you go?

JEANETTE  
Are you okay?

JOE  
I went to the police station.

He looks at his father, whose face is now bandaged.

JOE (CONT'D)  
Why aren't you in jail?

JERRY  
I spoke to Mr. Miller. We agreed it was a misunderstanding. He's not going to press charges.

JOE  
What's going to happen?

JERRY  
Nothing. I'm in the clear.

JOE  
No. What's going to happen to us?

Jeanette looks at the floor. Jerry tries to smile.

JERRY  
Everything is okay now.

JOE  
No, Dad. Everything's *not* okay.

Joe looks at Jeanette. She is still looking down.

JOE (CONT'D)  
Mom. What's going to happen to us?

She raises her eyes to Joe. They are full of feeling.

JEANETTE

I don't know.

Silence.

JOE

I'm going to bed. I have school tomorrow.

Joe walks by his parents, toward his room.

JEANETTE

Joe.

Joe stops, and turns.

JEANETTE (CONT'D)

I won't blame you if you hate me.

He looks at her, his eyes torn.

JOE

Goodnight.

And he goes into his bedroom.

EXT. BRINSON HOUSE. JUST AFTER.

From outside the window, we see Jerry put his head in his hands. Jeanette goes to the kitchen and brings him a glass of water. She stands next to him, silent, as he cries.

In the window next to the living room, Joe gets ready for bed. He eventually turns out his light.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. MAIN STREET. GREAT FALLS, MONTANA. MORNING. SPRING 1962.

It is Spring, early morning. The streets are empty.

EXT. GRANARY. DAY.

Trucks parked outside, ready to transport product.

EXT. OIL REFINERY. DAY.

The refinery gleams in the sun.

EXT. TRAIN. DAY.

The train pulls into town. Workers unload cargo from the freight.

EXT. BASEBALL FIELD. AFTERNOON.

A ground ball is hit and the out is made. The team comes in as a group. The coach says a few words, then they break.

The players walk off toward the parking lot. Joe, a little taller and broader, is among them. He piles into a car with a couple of his team mates, laughing at some private joke.

EXT. SPORTING GOODS STORE. EARLY EVENING.

A mid-range sporting good store. Through the window, we see a man turning off the lights.

He exits. It is Jerry. He locks the door behind him.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. EVENING.

Jerry enters the house carrying the mail.

JERRY  
Sorry I'm late!

JOE (O.C.)  
That's okay.

Joe comes out to the living room freshly showered. He is buttoning up his shirt.

JERRY  
You eat?

JOE  
We got something in town after practice.

JERRY  
You get your homework done?

JOE  
Yep.

JERRY  
Good.



Joe goes into the bathroom. Jerry flips through the mail. They shout from room to room, easy companions.

JERRY (CONT'D)

We gonna watch the game tonight?

JOE

I promised Ruth I'd study with her. Maybe I'll catch the end with you.

Jerry stops on a small envelope. His face changes but his voice stays neutral:

JERRY

Joe. Letter for you.

Joe comes out of the bathroom. Jerry hands him the letter. Joe opens and reads it. Jerry watches him closely.

JERRY (CONT'D)

What does she say? Is she still in Portland?

JOE

(Reading)

...She's fine. She wants to come visit. She bought a ticket.

JERRY

When?

JOE

She arrives 5 pm on the 23rd.

JERRY

April 23rd?

Joe nods.

JERRY (CONT'D)

That's tomorrow.

Joe nods again. They both stand there, thinking their private thoughts.

JOE

Can I have the car? I can pick her up after school.

JERRY

Don't you have practice?

JOE  
I'll ask Coach if he'll let me go  
early.

JERRY  
She may not stay long, Joe. We  
don't know her plans.

JOE  
I know. It's fine.

JERRY  
Okay.

JOE  
So can I have the car?

JERRY  
Sure. Of course.

JOE  
Thanks.

There is a honk outside. Joe puts the letter on the kitchen table and gives his dad a quick hug.

JOE (CONT'D)  
I won't be late.

JERRY  
Okay. Say hi.

Joe runs out of the house. Jerry stands there for a moment, staring at the letter on the table.

EXT. BUS DEPOT. LATE AFTERNOON.

Joe stands across the street from the depot, waiting by his car. He shades his eyes to watch as a bus pulls up. People disembark. More people. Jeanette is not among them.

Finally, when the bus is almost empty, Jeanette steps out. She is carrying a small suitcase. She looks around.

Joe takes her in. Her hair is shorter. She looks younger and older at the same time. Still beautiful. Still his mother. He is momentarily overwhelmed by his feelings.

He finally reaches into the car and honks the horn. She spots him. He crosses the street to her, his emotions fading, a smile breaking out on his face. They embrace.

He takes her bag and offers her his arm. She holds onto him as they cross back to the car.

INT. BRINSON HOUSE. NIGHT.

Joe and Jeanette sit at the table, waiting for supper. They just look at each other, taking in the changes.

JEANETTE

You've grown.

JOE

Well, I'm trying to. Couple more inches would be nice.

He smiles at her, trying to make her laugh. She smiles back, but is full of mixed emotions. He tries to ride over the strangeness.

JOE (CONT'D)

So? How's Oregon?

JEANETTE

It's not always what I expected. But I'm getting along. I've made some good friends at work.

Neither knows what more to say. Jerry comes in with a meatloaf and vegetables, begins to serve the table.

JERRY

Did Joe tell you his good news?

JEANETTE

What news?

JOE

Dad.

JERRY

He made honor roll for the third semester in a row.

JEANETTE

That's wonderful. I can't say I'm surprised.

JOE

Well. I work hard for it.

JEANETTE

How's your work Jerry?

JERRY

The customers like me. Turns out,  
I do fine as a salesman. I'll send  
you some money if I can.

JEANETTE

You don't have to do that.

Silence. No one knows what to say.

JOE

How long will you be staying?

JEANETTE

Just through the weekend.

JERRY

That's a long way to go for such a  
short trip.

JEANETTE

I have to be back at work on  
Tuesday. They've hired me on full  
time now at the school.

Another little silence. Joe turns to Jeanette.

JOE

Will you come by the photo shop  
tomorrow? I want to show you  
something.

JEANETTE

Are you still working there?

JOE

On weekends.

JERRY

They've promoted him.

JEANETTE

Is that so?

JOE

I'm taking portraits now, too.  
Will you come? Both of you?

JEANETTE

If you want us to.

JOE

I do.

JEANETTE

Well then, we'll be there. Right,  
Jerry?

Jerry looks at her and nods. They eat.

EXT. GREAT FALLS MAIN STREET. DAY.

The day is sunny. Jerry and Jeanette walk behind Joe, a little space between their bodies as they silently follow him. A BOY on a bike speeds past. Jerry takes Jeanette's elbow to pull her out of the path of the bicycle.

JERRY

Watch out.

JEANETTE

Thank you.

Jerry lets go of her and they resume walking.

INT. PHOTO SHOP. DAY.

Joe takes Jerry and Jeanette through the photo shop.

JOE

We have some cameras and frames.  
Film, of course. People come in to  
get their negatives developed.

JEANETTE

And you can do that for them?

JOE

Sure.

He pulls aside a curtain at the back of the room. Jeanette and Jerry follow him.

JOE (CONT'D)

And this is where we take the  
portraits.

There are three chairs set up against a pale blue backdrop. All the lights are on and a camera is set up on a tripod.

JEANETTE

Very official.

JOE

Okay, Mom, you sit here.

Jeanette pulls back, surprised.

JEANETTE

No, Joe. I didn't even set my hair.

JOE

It doesn't matter. This is just  
for me. Dad, you go there.

Jerry shrugs and takes his place. After a moment, Jeanette sits too, an empty chair between them. Joe goes to the camera. Jeanette gets anxious with him looking at her through the view-finder.

JEANETTE

Why don't I take a picture of you  
and your Dad instead?

JOE

Because I want all of us in it.  
Hang on, I just have to check the  
exposure.

Joe adjusts the lights. Once everything is set up, Joe comes and sits between his parents, holding a remote console attached to the camera with a cord. He takes Jeanette's hand. She registers the gesture.

JOE (CONT'D)

Ready?

After a beat, Jeanette nods. Jerry nods too.

JOE (CONT'D)

Okay. One, two...

They smile. Joe hits the button. The flash goes off and the camera clicks.

They sit there, close to each other.

Quiet.

Black.

THE END.