

THE LONG HOME

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Based on the novel by William Gay

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AUDIO IN:

OVER a BLACK SCREEN come strange, distant RUMBLINGS. Thunder? Artillery? Giants?

FADE IN:

EXT. MORMON SPRINGS LANDSCAPE - SUNSET

Slope-shouldered hills - eternal, mythic - stand against the dying sun. A YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE speaks with a rural Southern accent.

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Thomas Hovington was walking across his land late one day when he heard a sound that froze him to the spot.

EXT. HOVINGTON/HARDIN FARM - SUNSET

THOMAS HOVINGTON, a wiry, youngish man in 1920'S-PERIOD CLOTHES, stands with his family: PEARL his wife, who's about the same age; and AMBER ROSE, their infant daughter. They're transfixed, trying to figure out the origin of the noise they just heard. PULL BACK slowly to reveal more of the surroundings: a low RIDGE in the background with a spring-fed hollow cut in its side.

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

It seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, like great, round stones... Hovington had just commenced bootleggin', and some remnant of childhood religion made him fear retribution.

BOOM!! An eruption about 50 yards up the hollow sends a GEYSER of rock and water into the air, knocking Hovington off his feet. The ground SHAKES VIOLENTLY, then stops.

HOVINGTON

(getting up)

They Goddamn.

He looks up the hollow where the geyser appeared.

EXT. HOLLOW - SUNSET

A fissure has been ripped into the earth by the eruption. The ABYSS.

Fine debris still hangs in the air, creating an other-worldly HAZE. Hovington approaches slowly, fearfully. Picking up a ROCK, he prepares to drop it in.

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

At first there was no sound at all, but eventually there was - a murmur from deep inside, deep in the earth.

As he nears the edge, SOUNDS become audible.

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Some folks likened it to a swarm of bees; others reckoned it was just subterranean water. Hovington just called them the 'voices.'

He drops the rock, waits to hear it hit bottom. It never does.

FADE TO:

TITLE CARD - "THE LONG HOME"

FADE TO:

EXT. THE ABYSS - NIGHT

It lies as before - a ragged gash in the earth - while a fearsome THUNDER STORM splits the night. Beyond, in the distance, the main Mormon Springs Road is visible.

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

He never helped me much, but he might've if he hadn't been so sick.

A FIGURE appears on the road, striding angrily through the stormy night.

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

That was about when Dallas Hardin showed up and took over. I was just a kid when they put my ol' Pa in the ground. He may've felt a little foolish at first, worryin' about 'divine retribution'... But it turns out that's exactly what he got. We all did.

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

NATHAN WINER, SR., 30 and ropy from hard work, shouts up at the house. He was the figure on the road.

NATHAN WINER, SR.
I need to talk to you, Hardin!

INT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A number of years have passed. Hovington, bedridden and bent-double by some wasting disease, gazes out at Winer in the yard. AMBER ROSE, now 7, is holding Hovington's hand. Responding to the knock, DALLAS HARDIN strides into the room. In his mid-30's, he has the angular leanness of a natural predator. He opens the front door.

HARDIN
Then come on in out of the rain.

NATHAN WINER SR
I want to talk to you out here.

Hardin grabs a hat from a nail beside the door and goes out.

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

It's raining hard.

HARDIN
What is it you wanted said that had to be said in the rain?

NATHAN WINER SR
I found your whiskey still on my land. Now, I don't care if you make whiskey till you're ass-deep in it, but don't make it on my land. If the law found that still, they'd come down on me, not you.

HARDIN
That's about the way I figured it too. Did you bust it up?

NATHAN WINER SR
You damn right I did. I broke that whiskey, too.

Hardin gives a sly, malevolent smile. IN HIS POCKET, his hand closes around the PISTOL he has hidden there.

HARDIN

Now, you ornt done that.

NATHAN WINER SR

Why Goddamn you. If the son of a bitch hadn't been so heavy I'dve dumped it in your front yard. Now I don't know what you got on Hovington to be here, but if piece one of that thing goes up on my ground again, me and you goin' around and around.

Hovington watches through the window as Hardin's eyes narrow.

HARDIN

I never took a order in my life from a tenant-farmin' redneck and I'm too old to start now.

He pulls the gun from his pocket, but is felled by a gut-punch from Winer that puts him on the muddy ground. Shaken, Hardin fumbles for his gun as Winer pulls out a PEARL-HANDLED KNIFE and advances rapidly. But not rapidly enough. BAM! Hardin's shot catches him in the left eye and Winer falls dead on top of him. The front door opens and out runs Pearl. Slatternly to begin with, she's gotten fleshier with age.

PEARL

Dallas?

HARDIN

SHUT THE FUCKING DOOR!

She does. Winer pushes the dead body off him and picks up the knife. He puts it in his pocket.

EXT. ABYSS - NIGHT

It's raining even harder as Hardin drags Winer's corpse to the lip. He puts his foot on it.

HARDIN

Get your last look at this world -
it sure looks dark in the next one.

He rolls the body over the edge. The last thing Hardin sees before it vanishes is Winer's frozen, startled face.

FADE TO:

EXT. DEEP WOODS - DAY

WILLIAM TELL OLIVER (late 60's) hikes through the thick brush and stops to inspect a plant under a tree. He pulls it, puts it in his sack and moves on. Getting to a spot where the woods open onto a broad view of the valley, he sits wearily on a rock.

Below him is Hovington's house, which is a bee-hive of activity. A 1930'S-PERIOD TRUCK is being unloaded by a GANG OF MEN under the supervision of Hardin. It's BOOTLEG WHISKEY, hidden under BALES OF COTTON. As the work progresses, Pearl and Amber, still about seven, stand nearby watching.

YOUNG WOMAN'S (V.O.)

Dallas Hardin moved through life the way a shark feeds - taking everything into its belly, sucking out what it needed, shitting out what it didn't. No one really knew where he came from originally - he showed up in the county and started setting up his stills, blowin' up the competition or simply burnin' 'em out. As Pa got sicker, Hardin smelled it like blood in the water. He took over his operation, his house, even his wife... Everything Pa had, Hardin believed was now his.

The truck having been unloaded, Hardin follows Pearl into the house, giving her ass a little squeeze as he goes.

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Those were lean times, but Hardin prospered. It seems the harder things are for most people, the better they are for people like Hardin.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Super: TEN YEARS LATER.

In pretty-much a MATCH SHOT of the shot before, Oliver trudges through the forest, leaning on his staff for support.

BY THE ROCK

Oliver again sits down for a rest. Below him, as before, is Hovington's farm - except now it's essentially Hardin's property.

Things look serene at first, but then a POLICE CAR - early 1940's era - speeds toward the house from the road. It stops and DEPUTY COOPER hops out. He begins gesturing and shouting, too far away to hear, then Hardin calmly steps out and counts MONEY into Cooper's hand. Cooper leaves and almost immediately the place is again vibrant with activity.

Hardin backs his PACKARD to the edge of the porch where Pearl and Hovington's daughter AMBER, NOW 17, begin stacking CARTONS OF WHISKEY neatly in the trunk. Finally the car is loaded and Hardin takes off, leaving a trail of dust behind. Not long after the SHERIFF'S CAR, along with TWO STATE POLICE CARS, barrel up the drive, SIRENS WAILING. On the porch, Pearl leans against a support indifferently as the place is raided.

Oliver shakes his head and begins walking home just as the first drops of RAIN start falling.

EXT. OLIVER'S HOUSE - DAY

Oliver sits in his porch swing watching the rain fall. A figure approaches: a boy in his mid-to-late teens. NATHAN WINER, JR. A tall, strapping youth, he tends toward quiet introversion.

OLIVER

(yelling)

Boy, you better get in out of this mess.

His is the voice we heard in the opening voice-over.

WINER

It's too late now. I don't see how I can get any wetter.

Winer gets to the porch.

OLIVER

Old man Weiss could've at least run you home.

WINER

I guess he just didn't think about it.

OLIVER

He'd've thought of it if he had to walk two miles through it.

WINER

He's got a lot on his mind, his wife dyin' and all... He's pickin' up and leavin' to Nashville he says, so I guess I'm fresh out of a job.

OLIVER

Back to Nashville, eh? That's about the way I figured it'd be. You want some coffee?

WINER

I might drink a cup.

Getting up, Oliver disappears in the house and then comes back out with TWO CUPS. He hands one to Winer as the boy settles into the swing next to him.

WINER (CONT'D)

I got to find me a job.

OLIVER

How much was you makin', if you don't mind me askin'?

WINER

Two dollars a day.

OLIVER

Great God, boy! I wouldn't grieve long over a job like that. You can make more money trompin' the woods for ginseng and black root.

WINER

I might could if I knew what it looked like.

OLIVER

I'll show ye next day the weather's fit for it... You want something dry to put on?

WINER

It'd just get wet again.

Oliver keeps looking at Winer's feet.

OLIVER

I got somethin' I been aiming to give you if it wouldn't make you mad. You reckon it would?

WINER

I doubt it.

Winer follows Oliver into the house.

INT. OLIVER'S HOUSE - DAY

It's spartan but neat. The no-nonsense home of a practical old man.

OLIVER

I bought me a pair of shoes through the mail a year or two ago and then couldn't wear 'em. I been kindly keepin' a eye on them feet of yourn and I believe they've growed a size or two since spring.

They pass into Oliver's bedroom. He hands Winer a PAIR OF SHOES.

OLIVER (CONT'D)

Here we go. Hold 'em up agin ye shoes there and measure 'em.

WINER

(doing as he's told)
How much do you want for them?

OLIVER

Nothin'.

WINER

I'll pay you.

OLIVER

Take 'em on. They ain't doin' nobody no good settin' there.

WINER

I'd rather pay you.

OLIVER

I may get you to sell my sang for me some Saturday. Either my legs ain't what they used to be or they keep scootin' town a little farther west ever year.

WINER
Well, thank you.

EXT. OLIVER'S HOUSE - PORCH - DAY

Oliver watches Winer go, carrying the shoes, til he's out of sight in the rain.

EXT. WINER'S HOUSE - DAY

WINER'S MOTHER is a bitter, sullen woman - she and Winer rarely talk. He's sitting at the kitchen table as she scolds him.

MOTHER
Ain't I told you? That's just like him...
(spitting the name)
Weiss! I always knowed he was no account. Come in here throwin' his money around and buildin' his big chickenhouses and now where is he? Did he pay you at least 'fore he left?

WINER
Well, it's Friday. He pays off every Friday.

He gives her some MONEY, which she puts in her apron.

MOTHER
Well? What do you aim to do now?

Winer gets up.

WINER
I don't know yet.

He turns to go outside.

MOTHER
Just go - walk out and pull the door to. Gone, and never a word to nobody. Just like your father did.

Winer stops. It looks for a moment like he might say something, but he doesn't. He just leaves.

EXT. WINER'S BACK YARD - EVENING

Winer goes out to an old TREE HOUSE and begins climbing the ladder to it. ON WINER as he pauses on the ladder. HIS POV of the tree house above him DISSOLVES TO:

FLASHBACK - TREE HOUSE CONSTRUCTION

The same POV, only it's now a sunny Spring day. Nathan Winer Sr. is above us in the treehouse, nailing FLOORBOARDS in place. He glances over at us, full of a father's love and pride. OVER this, we hear the voice of YOUNG WINER, about 12 years old.

YOUNG WINER (O.S.)
He never run off...

CUT TO:

INT. WINER HOUSE - KITCHEN - FLASHBACK - DAY

YOUNG WINER is arguing with his mother. He's about 12 years old now.

MOTHER
Well, do you see him anywhere? You reckon he's behind the door playin' a prank on you?

Off Young Winer's sullen glare, we

CUT TO:

INT. TREE HOUSE - PRESENT - EVENING

Winer stares out at the falling rain. Finally he picks up a BOOK and begins reading.

FADE TO:

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Winer follows Oliver down a steep hillside.

OLIVER
It likes to grow on the north slope of a hill. Shadier there I reckon.
(MORE)

OLIVER (CONT'D)
 It's funny stuff - some places
 it'll grow and some places it
 won't. And it don't come up ever
 year.

Oliver pauses to point with his stick toward an arrowhead-shaped fern.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
 See that? Now that's a pointer.
 Where you find that you'll
 generally find some sang, though it
 ain't no ironclad guarantee.

They continue walking.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
 (as they walk)
 It's like gamblin' or drinkin' or
 runnin' women or whatever you get
 habited to. You get started huntin'
 sang and it just gets in your
 blood.

LATER

Winer & Oliver stand on the ridge above Hardin's property and watch as A MAN comes out of the house and begins to shovel a cleared area marked off by STAKES and BATTERBOARDS.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
 One thing about gettin' old - you
 can watch another feller work and
 not feel guilty about it.

After a moment Hardin comes out onto the porch, with Amber Rose at his side. ON WINER as he takes special note of Amber. With Hardin here now, the man digging begins digging faster.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
 I guess he'll get it now. There's
 Old Nick in the flesh.

WINER
 What do you suppose he's buildin'
 down there?

OLIVER
 More room for his meanness, I
 guess.

They walk off through the woods.

FADE TO:

EXT. THE ABYSS - DAY

The voices murmur unintelligibly below as dark clouds press down from above. The first fat rain drops begin to fall.

MONTAGE - THE DELUGE

The rain becomes almost Biblical in scope.

- The creek behind Winer's house overflows, carrying away small BRANCHES and DEBRIS.

- Oliver moves his GOATS to higher ground as his yard begins to flood.

- Inside his house Oliver discovers leaks he'd never known before.

INT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - DAY

Hardin sits at a table in his make-shift honkytonk counting money. It's just the front room of the house, with several TABLES, a JUKEBOX and a BAR. The place is empty except for TWO DRUNKS arguing loudly over a WHORE. Hardin, annoyed, stops what he's doing and goes outside.

EXT. HARDIN'S FRONT YARD - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Hardin looks up at the sky. More of the same.

HARDIN

Then rain some more, by God.

He continues walking.

EXT. THE ABYSS - DAY

Hardin rounds the corner of the hollow and discovers a thin line of SPRAY over the rim of the pit. He can hear BOILING and CHURNING in the depths and a stream of MUDDY WATER cascades away into the woods. Hardin watches for a few moments then turns and goes back toward the house.

EXT. SKY - DAY

The clouds are beginning to thin.

EXT. OLIVER'S HOUSE - DAY

Oliver looks up at the sky. For the first time in days he can see the sun. With a BUCKET in hand he heads out.

EXT. OLIVER'S PROPERTY - DAY

Oliver approaches a SPRINGBOX completely inundated by floodwaters, which he wades into.

OLIVER

Waist-deep in water and havin' to
tote a bucket for more. If that
ain't the beat.

He sets the bucket down and peers into the springbox. Something's there, stuck inside. Reaching in, Oliver works the object out and is stunned to find himself holding a HUMAN SKULL with the left eye blown away. Off his astonished expression we

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - DAY

Hardin cracks open the door on THREE WOMEN dressed in their Sunday finery. A HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGE is parked out front.

WOMAN #1

We come to see about Brother
Hovington.

Hardin opens the door wider and stands aside. Behind him, Pearl uneasily chimes in:

PEARL

Come in.

WOMAN #2

How is he?

HARDIN

You can see for yourself. Yonder he
lays. Brother Hovington has fell on
hard times.

Lying under a comforter, Hovington is all skin and bones - the only thing alive about him are his darting black eyes. Amber is sitting with him. As the women approach Hovington, Hardin escapes into the other room.

PEARL

Get yins a seat. Rose, you get some more chairs out of the kitchen.

Rose gets up and comes back with three chairs. The women sit.

AMBER

Can I get yins' bonnets?

WOMAN #1

(touching Amber's shoulder)

Ain't she a little lady?

WOMAN #2

Ain't she the prettiest thing you ever saw...

PEARL

Can I get yins a cold drink? We never thought about no company.

WOMAN #1

Nothin' for me, thank ye.

The other two shake their heads.

WOMAN #3

We just come up here from church. Brother Hovington's name come up in the service as one afflicted and we prayed for him. We come by to see did he need anything.

Hardin peeks his head out the bedroom door.

HARDIN

Pearl?

PEARL

I'll be with yins in a minute. Let me see what he wants.

She steps into the other room. The women whisper to each other.

WOMAN #1

(*sotto* - to the others)

As if Hardin were the husband...

From the other room comes HUSHED LAUGHTER. Then the bedsprings CREAK. It gets faster, repetitive - the sound of sex. Pearl MOANS loudly. The three women sit aghast. Getting up, Amber flees outside. After a few more moments the women rise.

WOMAN #2

I believe Brother Hovington's gone to sleep.

WOMAN #1

Poor soul. I expect he needs his rest.

They leave, rushing past Amber on the porch.

EXT. TOWN CENTER - ESTABLISHING - DAY

1940's-VINTAGE CARS line the main street.

INT. UTOTEM MARKET - DAY

BY NOVEL RACK

Winer, sipping a COKE, is perusing the PULP NOVELS when he's approached by BUTTCUT, a buddy from high school - the star-athlete type.

BUTTCUT

Goddamn if it ain't old Winer.

WINER

Hey, Buttcut.

BUTTCUT

Boy, where you been keepin' yourself? We figured you was dead or off to the wars.

WINER

Na, I'm still around... Just workin', that's all.

BUTTCUT

You seen old Shoemaker? I heard he was lookin' for you. Tryin' to fix up some way for you to graduate or somethin'...

WINER

I don't know. If he did, he never said so.

BUTTCUT

Maybe not, then. You oughta be there this year, though. They're drivin' old Toby crazy, the Seniors is. Nobody even crackin' a book - just fuckin' off is all.

A GIRL in a WHITE UNIFORM behind the soda fountain speaks up.

GIRL

Watch your mouth... It's ladies in here if you didn't but know it.

BUTTCUT

If you see one, holler at me and I'll tone it down.

A VOICE comes from behind the MEAT CASE.

VOICE

Hey, Winer...

Winer turns. No one around but TWO LADIES shopping.

VOICE (CONT'D)

Hey, Chicken Man.

Winer turns a little further: a DEAD CHICKEN slowly rises past the edge of the meat case until its feet rest on the chrome rail. It begins to dance.

BUTTCUT

Oh Jesus - it's Motormouth, true-to-form.

VOICE

(demented)

Ha, ha, ha!

The chicken begins a slow, lascivious bump-and-grind. The two ladies shake their heads and leave in disgust. OLD MAN CHRISTIAN comes flying down the aisle toward the meat case, furious. Buttcut turns to go and Winer follows.

BUTTCUT

Time to go - this could get ugly.

EXT. UTOTEM MARKET - DAY

Winer leans against a tricked-out CHRYSLER parked on the street. Looking up, he sees MOTORMOUTH HODGES storming out of the market. He's almost 30 and all Id - impulsive yet ultimately likeable. He's followed close behind by Old Man Christian, still yelling.

INT. MOTORMOUTH'S CHRYSLER - DAY

Motormouth is in the driver's seat, Winer next to him. He backs the car into the street and begins driving.

WINER

He fired your childish ass, didn't he?

MOTORMOUTH

Old Man Christian was supposed to've been in Nashville till tomorrow. I been cutting up like that all day. How's I supposed to know the son of a bitch was back?

WINER

I guess you weren't. Did he not think it was funny?

MOTORMOUTH

That whorehopper can't take a joke... Was that Buttcut Chessor you were talkin' to?

WINER

Yeah... He said he was goin' down to the show to see if he could pick up any girls when it let out... What's your old lady going to say?

MOTORMOUTH

I guess she'll up and go home to Mama. She's been lookin' for an excuse and this is made to order. She's always throwin' up I can't hold a job.

WINER

Yeah...

MOTORMOUTH

That and those Blalocks... They're like a pack of Goddamned dogs around her...

(MORE)

MOTORMOUTH (CONT'D)

Had to do it all over, I'd marry
somebody so ugly no one would fuck
her.

Winer, saying nothing, sips his coke.

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT

Motormouth's car roars by, weaving ever so slightly.

INT. MOTORMOUTH'S CAR - NIGHT

Countryside zips past the window as Motormouth drives,
fiddling with the radio while holding an OPEN BEER. Some mad,
midnight PREACHER is howling over the airwaves. Motormouth
sips his beer and listens.

RADIO PREACHER

Send me that foldin money! The
Lord's work don't get done with
them old clankin nickels and dimes.
The Lord likes that quiet money.

He gets more quiet.

RADIO PREACHER (CONT'D)

Praaaaaise the Lord! For only a 10
dollar donation we will send you a
mighty prayer cloth capable of
doing WONDEROUS things. Spread it
over any afflicted area and you'll
witness miracles. MIRACLES!

MOTORMOUTH

(opening another beer)
Reckon it would make my dick grow
an inch or two?

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD loom the mostly darkened buildings of
a FARM. Motormouth pulls over and parks a safe distance away.

EXT. BLALOCK FARM - NIGHT

Motormouth runs from his parked car, a shadow dodging
furtively through the moonlight. In a few moments he is at
the house, face pressed against the window. INSIDE is a
pretty young woman, MOTORMOUTH'S WIFE, standing over a bed on
which lies a man in his late 20's to early 30's - CECIL
BLALOCK. His wife strips off her dress and flips off the
light. Outside the window, Motormouth can hear the GRUNTS AND
GROANS of them having sex.

He unzips his own trousers and begins masturbating. He comes long before they do, with a particular intensity followed by bitter self-loathing. He leaves.

IN THE DRIVE

Motormouth kneels by the gas tank of Blalock's PICK-UP, pouring a SACK OF SUGAR into the gas tank..

MOTORMOUTH
(to himself)
One lump or two...?

Finished, he replaces the CAP and slips away.

DOWN THE DRIVEWAY

Motormouth is about to pass the barn when he hears the SHUFFLING OF HORSES in the pen next to it. He stops and pulls out a PAIR OF WIRECUTTERS.

BY THE PEN

Motormouth kneels in the tall grass, wirecutters poised over the first line of tightly-drawn BARBED WIRE. He snips, and the wire breaks with a TWANG. He does the same with the SECOND WIRE, then the THIRD. He stands.

IN THE DRIVEWAY

Motormouth hurries away into the darkness. A moment later the first HORSE appears, almost like a surreal vision, and trots off into the moonlight.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HARDIN FARM - ESTABLISHING - NIGHT

The same broad view of the valley Oliver saw earlier. Cars line Hardin's driveway and the place is jumping. LOUD VOICES and JUKEBOX MUSIC drift all the way up here.

INT. HARDIN'S - NIGHT

It's crowded. Too crowded, really: Stateside SOLDIERS and their WOMEN, traveling SALESMEN heading to Memphis or just TOWNSFOLK looking for a drink and a good time.

Amber is waitressing. Holding a TRAY OF EMPTY GLASSES, she's passing a table when a DRUNK grabs her and pulls her into his lap.

DRUNK

You look like jus' the type to keep
a lonely man company, darlin'.

AMBER

(trying to get up)
Let go of me.

Hardin, passing nearby, comes over and presses Amber back in the man's lap.

HARDIN

She'll set with you a while - ain't
no service we won't consider to
keep our customers happy.

Leaving Amber there, Hardin goes to the bar and pours himself a whiskey. Looking up, he sees Pearl on the lap of an INEBRIATED SOLDIER. They exchange glances, and Pearl whispers something in the soldier's ear. They both get up and go outside.

EXT. HARDIN'S - NIGHT

Pearl is giving the soldier a blow job out of sight of the house when suddenly Hardin appears from behind a tree. Wearing BRASS KNUCKLES, he knocks the guy out, takes the CASH from his wallet and heads to the bar.

FADE TO:

INT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - DAY

Amber Rose sits on the edge of the bed, tenderly dabbing a WASHCLOTH at Hovington's face. Putting the cloth aside, she gets up and goes into the kitchen.

IN THE KITCHEN

Hardin sits at the table with a deck of cards as Pearl washes DISHES at the sink. Amber enters, looks at them both.

AMBER

He's dyin'.

HARDIN

Well there's no news in that. He's been dyin' ever since I knowed him.

AMBER

He's coughin' up blood again.

With a sigh of affliction, Hardin gets up.

IN THE FRONT ROOM

Hardin touches Hovington's forehead and then wipes the cold sweat onto his trousers.

AMBER (CONT'D)

You reckon he needs a doctor?

HARDIN

Undertaker more like it.

He walks away, out the door and onto the porch, where he lights a cigarette.

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - PORCH - DAY

Pearl comes out of the house.

HARDIN

Stay with him. It's him in there dyin', not me out here.

PEARL

He wantin' somethin'.

HARDIN

I don't doubt it for a minute. In his place I might could think of a thing or two I'd want myself.

PEARL

He wants that Winer woman brought up here. He wants to talk to her.

Something shifts subtly in Hardin's gaze.

HARDIN

Say he does?

PEARL

That's what he asked for.

HARDIN
He's out of his head.

PEARL
Maybe, but he ain't never asked for
nothin' else.

HARDIN
That's crazy and a waste of time
besides.

PEARL
All these years and he's never
asked for nothin'. Only what a
preacher could give him and he
never even got that. Just laid
there all this time and took what
come.

HARDIN
That's all any of us can do, take
what comes.

She starts to cry.

HARDIN (CONT'D)
Just shut it up. Don't you think
it's a bit late in the day for
this? He made his bed and by God
you made yourn.

Pearl doesn't stop. Hardin sighs again.

HARDIN (CONT'D)
Then by God get her. But get her on
your own book. I've got more to do
than run up and down the road.

He moves away toward the barn as Pearl goes back inside. In a few moments, Amber Rose hurries from the house and away down the road.

INT. HARDIN'S CAR - DAY

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD, two figures rapidly approach. Amber and Mrs. Winer. Driving, Hardin slows until he's alongside them.

HARDIN
(through the window)
Looks like you had a long, hot trip
for nothin', Miz Winer. Brother
Hovington passed away a minute ago.
(MORE)

HARDIN (CONT'D)

I thought I'd save you the rest of the trip.

MS. WINER

It wadn't no trouble... I hate to hear about Mr. Hovington.

HARDIN

Well I guess he can rest easy now. Get in and I'll run you back home.

Amber comes around the side of the car, opens the door, and gets in without speaking.

MS. WINER

What was it he wanted me for anyway?

HARDIN

He never said. Get in and I'll take ye home.

MS. WINER

No, I'll just walk.

HARDIN

Suit yourself then.

He drives off.

EXT. HARDIN FARM - ESTABLISHING

From this angle, we can see that part of the marked-off area has been scraped free of dirt, but not much else has been done.

INT. HARDIN'S - DAY

Hardin is sitting at the table across from CHARLES LIPSCOMB, 30's, a jack of all trades - especially talking. He was the guy Oliver and Winer watched working at Hardin's from the ridge. As he talks, Hardin whittles a PIECE OF WOOD with a PEARL-HANDLED KNIFE. The same knife, in fact, that Winer. Sr. tried to use on him in their fight years before.

HARDIN

I got 'em packed in here cheek-to-jowl, Lipscomb, and it's cutting into my business. I need my new honkytonk, and I need it now. How long will it take you to build it?

LIPSCOMB

Well, Dallas, I could go at it night and day until you run me into an early grave and it still won't get done. I need to get me some help. Someone who knows a thing or two about buildin' would be best.

HARDIN

Got a name in mind?

Lipscomb shakes his head.

LIPSCOMB

Jus' somebody who'll keep his head down and do what he's told. There must be some kid around like that.

Hardin, still whittling, thinks. He notices the knife and stops, holding it up thoughtfully.

HARDIN

I might have somebody.

CUT TO:

BLACK SCREEN

A woman's voice hisses urgently OVER.

WOMAN'S VOICE

Tell! Tell!

FADE TO:

OLIVER'S DREAM SEQUENCE

OLIVER'S WIFE leans over us in POV. She seems spectral in the cold moonlight, her nightdress undone. A desolate WIND sighs outside the window.

OLIVER'S WIFE

Get up, Tell. He ain't come in, Willie ain't. I heard him at the door a while ago, but he ain't come in.

EXT. MORMON SPRINGS ROAD - DREAM SEQUENCE - NIGHT

Hastily dressed, Oliver stands on the hardpan, looking up at his house in the moonlight.

His wife stands watching in the doorway, her head chopped off by the porch's shadow. Her eyes glare like cats' eyes. Oliver begins walking away down the road.

DOWN THE ROAD

Oliver is passing some kind of ORCHARD. There begins a RUSTLING, as if from leaves in the wind, but then the rustling turns into WHISPERS. They're saying a name.

WHISPERS
Willie... Willie...

Oliver looks. What he thought were leaves on the trees are actually BIRDS. Thousands of them - nightmarish, salamander-like. They're the ones saying the name.

BIRDS
Willie... Willie...

They all take off at once, causing Oliver to duck.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NIGHTMARE ROAD - DREAM SEQUENCE - NIGHT

Oliver is walking toward a pit that was torn, bloody and raw, from the Earth. Around its rim stand crazy expressionistic TREES, bent as if by a strong wind. The salamander-birds begin alighting in these as Oliver disappears around a curve.

EXT. PIT - DREAM SEQUENCE - NIGHT

At the bottom of the pit is what looks like a lake, its surface frozen over. Pausing at its edge, Oliver steps onto the ice, which CRACKS and fissures. Far above, the nightmare trees have filled with those nightmare birds.

BIRDS
Willie... Willie...

Oliver looks down. There he is - his son WILLIE. About Winer's age, he stares up with lifeless eyes through the surface of the ice. Seeing him, Oliver falls to his knees as great anguished SOBS pour out of him.

BIRDS (CONT'D)
Willie... Willie...

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. OLIVER'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Oliver comes awake in his bed, disoriented by the dream.

OLIVER
(foggy)
Willie's going to kill Hardin...

He shakes a little of the fog away.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
No, no... Winer's gonna kill
Hardin.

He gets up out of bed.

IN THE LIVING ROOM

Oliver rummages through a BOX he's pulled from the closet. Finding what he was looking for, he sits heavily onto the couch and stares at it: the skull he found in the springbox, the one with the left eye blown out.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
(to himself)
When that boy finds out, nothing's
gonna stop him and he'll spend the
rest of his life in the pen... I
shoulda killed Hardin myself long
ago.

EXT. WINER'S HOUSE - DAY

Hardin's Packard pulls to a stop near the porch. Hardin honks the horn a couple times and then Winer steps out of the house.

HARDIN
(through the window)
What say, Winer?

WINER
(uncertainly)
Hidy.

HARDIN
You got a minute? I got a little
business I need to talk with you.

WINER
I reckon so.

Winer approaches the car.

HARDIN

I hear you run out of a job.

WINER

Yeah. I was working for Weiss.

HARDIN

Me and you might be able to help one another. You need work and I need it done.

Hunkering down, Winer begins scratching meaningless hieroglyphics in the earth with a stick.

WINER

What was it you wanted done?

Hardin grins.

HARDIN

I ain't trying to hire you to kill somebody. I don't sub that work out.

(lights a cigarette)

You know that buildin' I'm putting up there? Gonna be a big ol' honkytonk with a jukebox and a nigger cook in the back fryin' up hamburgers... But I need some help on it. I hear your daddy was a carpenter.

WINER

That's right.

HARDIN

I heard he was a damn good worker. I heard lots of folks say you're a pretty damn good worker yourself.

WINER

I don't know about that.

HARDIN

I want that place finished before cold weather. What I want is somebody'll be there to work ever day the weather's fit and give me a day's work for a day's pay. From what I hear that's you, Winer.

WINER

What are you paying?

HARDIN

I might tell you a dollar an hour
and be underpayin' you. I might say
two dollars a day and be paying you
too much. What say you come down
Monday mornin' and we'll try each
other out.

WINER

Well, that sounds fair enough to
me.

HARDIN

I been lookin' for a likely feller
I could trust. A young man want to
make his mark.

Despite his doubts, Winer likes the sound of that.

WINER

I'll see you Monday then.

HARDIN

(nodding toward the house)
You get in there and rest up. Me
and you's got a honkytonk to build,
Winer.

Putting the car in gear, he peels away.

EXT. THE ABYSS - NIGHT

A starlit night, illuminated by a waxing crescent moon. From
the abyss come the VOICES, distant and mesmerizing...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - DAY

A dreamy morning world of sunlit mist. Then, as if from some
legend, THREE HORSES, a stallion and two mares, materialize.
They saunter over to a miserable little GARDEN and begin
nibbling on what they find there.

ON AMBER, standing in the drive, as she sees them.

AMBER

(calling)
There's horses in the garden!

Wearing only a pair of tailored slacks, Hardin emerges onto the porch holding his COFFEE CUP. He sees the horses.

HARDIN

Them's Morgans. Look at that big, beautiful son of a bitch. Ain't he somethin'?

Putting the cup down, he slowly approaches the horses, descending into the yard.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Be a shame to see horseflesh like that go end over end down a hole in the ground... Go in there and roust Wymer out. He's on that old car seat.

Amber does as she's told as Hardin continues his approach.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Easy now... Look at me, then... Get your eyes full, you sweet bastard. Fore this is over, you aim to see a lot of me.

LATER - BY THE HORSES

Hardin, holding a BUCKET of sweetfeed, has a fist-full of the stallion's mane as he whispers in its ear. Amber, WYMER - a bald, rheumy little man - and Pearl watch nearby. Gradually, he coaxes it across the drive toward the PEN.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

(to Amber)

Get that lot gate open - now.

Amber rushes to obey as the two mares begin to follow the stallion.

LATER

Hardin and Wymer stand by the crude pen and watch the horses inside. Hardin offers Wymer a CIGARETTE and lights it with his lighter.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Who do you reckon they belong to, Wymer?

WYMER

Nobody 'round here got any Morgans
but them Blalock boys over on
Harrikan. They got to belong to
them.

Watching the horses, Hardin takes a long drag on his own
CIGARETTE.

HARDIN

Man owns horseflesh like that
oughta tend his fences.

EXT. TOWN CENTER - DAY

It's bustling with the usual mid-day activity. Oliver,
wearing a felt hat, marches down the street with an OLD
SHOEBOX under one arm.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE SHERIFF BELLWETHER'S OFFICE - DAY

Holding his hat, Oliver sits on a bench outside the locked
office as SHERIFF BELLWETHER, 30's, and Cooper return from
lunch. The shoebox is on the bench next to Oliver. He looks
at his watch.

OLIVER

You need to set your watch,
Sheriff.

BELLWETHER

(unlocking the door)
I expect I do. But if I did it'd be
the only thing working right around
here... Something I can help you
with, Mr. Oliver?

OLIVER

I wanted to talk to you a few
minutes.

BELLWETHER

Come on in here and get you a seat.

Remaining seated, Oliver glares at Cooper.

OLIVER

What I had to say was just for you,
not for this young feller here.

BELLWETHER

Well, he's a deputy sheriff in this county. I reckon whatever you had to talk to me about had to do with law enforcement.

OLIVER

Yeah, it did. That's why I'd just as soon this feller here didn't know nothin' about it... The man I come to see you about totes this feller in his pocket like a handkerchief. He's bought and paid for and I don't like where the money come from.

Cooper's face grows red with rage.

COOPER

Why, hellfire. A string of lies!

OLIVER

I seen you drivin' out to Hardin's place. I seen him hand you money and you and him had a regular get-together. Then you left and they flew to totin' out whiskey like the house was on fire. Time the rest of the laws got there, that place was bare of whiskey as a Baptist foot-washin'.

Cooper takes a menacing step toward Oliver.

COOPER

You Goddamned lyin' troublemaker...

BELLWETHER

(raising a hand)

Why don't you go to the General and grab yourself a coffee, Cooper? Bring me back one.

COOPER

Sheriff...!

BELLWETHER

Go get that coffee, deputy.

Cooper stands a moment looking uncertain, but finally gives up.

COOPER
Damn it, Sheriff...

He stalks away as Oliver rises to his feet.

INT. SHERIFF BELLWHETHER'S OFFICE - DAY

Bellwhether enters with Oliver, holding the box, right behind him. Bellwhether heads for his desk.

BELLWHETHER
If that story's true, you ought
to've told me long before this, Mr.
Oliver.

OLIVER
It wadnt nothin' to me. That's
yins' lookout. It just I come to
talk to you about Hardin, and if I
wanted him to know my business, I'd
just as soon cut out the middleman
and deal with him direct.

Bellwhether takes out a CIGARETTE and stares at it
thoughtfully without lighting it.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
This other thing, though - I ort to
have come about it... I knowed yins
would work it around or blame it on
me, and I didn't want that boy
thinkin' that it was me killed his
pa. I reckon I'd've brought it
anyway if I hadn't knowed he'd kill
Hardin and throw his own life
away...

BELLWHETHER
(interrupting)
Here, slow down a little - I can't
follow whatever it is we're talkin'
about here...

OLIVER
'Course I couldn't care 'bout him
killin Hardin, 'cept for him
messin' his own life up. I think a
right smart of that boy...

BELLWHETHER
Who are we talking about here, Mr.
Oliver?

OLIVER
(impatiently)
Hardin, Hardin... Somethin's gotta
be done about him. Somebody's gonna
have to waste a cartridge on him
and I wish I'd done it myself a
long time ago.

Holding the cigarette, Bellwether looks at Oliver.

BELLWETHER
Do you have something I can use
against Dallas Hardin or is this a
general complaint?

Oliver puts the shoebox on the sheriff's desk and takes the
lid off. He steps back away from it.

OLIVER
There he is. He's yourn. I've done
with it.

Bellwether leans forward and peels back the tissue paper
covering the skull of Nathan Winer, Sr. Seeing the skull,
Bellwether leans back in his chair and lights his cigarette.

BELLWETHER
Tell me a story, Mr. Oliver.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE SHERIFF BELLWETHER'S OFFICE - DAY

Bellwether is showing Oliver, who's no longer holding the
shoebox, out.

BELLWETHER
Well thank you for bringing this to
my attention, Mr. Oliver. We'll get
that skull to the state lab in
Nashville to see what the forensics
boys can tell us.

OLIVER
Don't see the point. They can only
tell us what we already know.
That's Nate Winer, Sr.

Before Bellwether can answer, Cooper arrives, holding TWO
COFFEES. He and Oliver exchange acid glances as Oliver
leaves.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

ON AMBER, dressed for school, waiting for the bus. It stops, she gets on, and it departs. Standing next to Lipscomb the carpenter, Winer watches. Lipscomb nudges him, none too gently.

LIPSCOMB

Hey boy, look alive - give me a hand nailing these tees together.

Winer bends to comply.

LATER

Under a blazing sun, Winer and Lipscomb have erected a skeletal wooden FRAMEWORK. Winer looks up. The school bus has returned, and Amber disembarks. Lipscomb nudges him again.

LATER

Amber comes out onto the rear porch of the house dressed in WHITE SHORTS, holding a GLASS OF ICED TEA. She sits in a lounge chair, watching Lipscomb and Winer work. Noticing, Lipscomb gives Winer a lewd twirl with his eyes. On the porch, Amber dons a PAIR OF SUNGLASSES and settles back in the chair, her hands folded over her stomach. Lipscomb abruptly stops working, stands, and pulls off his shirt. Throwing it aside, he continues to work bare-chested. Behind his back, Winer rolls his own eyes.

INT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - DAY

Deputy Cooper sits at one of the tables across from Hardin, who is whittling a PIECE OF WOOD as he talks.

HARDIN

I don't mind buyin' a pig in a poke if I figure I might ever have use for the poke... But hell - you don't even know what sort of poke it is you got.

COOPER

Well, it's more a feelin' than anythin' else. I know he told Bellwhether somethin' about you and I know it was purty serious. He give Bellwhether somethin' he brought in a shoebox too but I don't know what it was...

(MORE)

COOPER (CONT'D)

And he wanted me gone from there as well. Got right fiesty about it. He seen me and you together and seen me take money.

HARDIN

Seen it or heard about it?

COOPER

He says he seen it.

HARDIN

Yeah, I guess he did at that... I wished I'd killed that old son of a bitch long ago when I had the chance.

He viciously slices away a piece of bark.

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - LATER - DAY

A TRUCK with a HORSE TRAILER comes roaring up the drive, where it stops and begins backing toward the enclosure with the three horses. "BLALOCK" is stenciled on the door of the truck.

BY THE TRUCK

As CECIL BLALOCK, the man whom Motormouth spied sleeping with his wife, is backing up the truck, Hardin approaches from the house.

HARDIN

You tearin' my yard all to hell,
Blalock. Ain't you had no raisin'?
I never heard you say could you
cross it or kiss my ass or nothin'.

Blalock looks out at him from the pick-up.

BLALOCK

I come for my horses.

HARDIN

Can you prove they're yourn?

BLALOCK

You know damn well I can.

HARDIN

I sort-of thought you could...
 (turns back toward the
 house)
 Get out a while and we'll talk
 about it.

He goes up on the porch, where he squats on his haunches.
 Blalock remains in the truck.

BLALOCK

There ain't nothin' to talk about.
 I come after 'em. Figure up what I
 owe you for their keep and send me
 a bill.

HARDIN

Whatever you say - you're the
 doctor. I guess we could dicker
 about it, but I'd say you owe me
 somewhere in the neighborhood of
 \$800.

Blalock is so astonished he suspects his hearing.

BLALOCK

Eight hundred dollars? For what?!

Hardin stands and points to the withered little garden across
 the drive where Amber first found the horses.

HARDIN

I had me a fine corn crop there,
 and they done wiped me out before I
 knew they was on the place. They
 came in the night.

Apoplectic, Blalock leaps out of the truck and stalks over to
 the garden. He makes a show of looking around.

BLALOCK

And where is this fine corn crop?

HARDIN

(picking his teeth with a
 match)
 I thought I said - it's gone. They
 eat it. They wiped me out.

BLALOCK

Why, they're ain't a Goddamned
 thing out here but rocks and
 sawbriars. You couldn't hire a
 fuckin' stalk of corn to grow here.

HARDIN

I admit it don't look like much now, but you ought to have seen it before your horses got to it.

His rage building, Blalock crosses the drive toward the house.

BLALOCK

If you think I'm giving you \$800 for a few bales of hay, you're crazy as hell. I'll give you what I think is fair, and you can like it or not.

Hardin descends from the porch and heads toward the horses. Blalock is forced to follow.

HARDIN

I'll make you another deal. I'll count you out five one-hundred dollar bills for that horse right here and now.

(points to the big, red stallion)

Then we'll go have a little drink and forget we ever had words.

BLALOCK

That horse ain't for sale, and even if it was, that wouldn't even make the down payment.

Hardin turns and faces Blalock, forcing him to a dead stop.

HARDIN

Alright, then here's the new deal - if you so much as trespass a foot farther onto my property, they will carry your dead ass out of here on a stretcher. They will load you up and haul you away. Do you understand me?

Blalock looks at him with fresh astonishment.

BLALOCK

You're crazy! You're the one that's gonna get hauled away!

HARDIN

Not so crazy I don't know whose property we're standing on.

BLALOCK

Nor me either - Thomas Hovington's.

Hardin's eyes narrow for a long beat and Blalock fears for his life. Finally:

HARDIN

Like I said, it's on you. You can bet or fold.

Blalock stands his ground a moment longer, then turns back toward his truck.

BLALOCK

I'm suin' you. I'm gettin' a lawyer right now.

He climbs into the truck, starts it, and throws it into reverse. Hardin turns back toward the house.

BLALOCK (CONT'D)

(through the window)

I'll get them papers, and I'll be back!

HARDIN

That don't surprise me one bit.

EXT. OLIVER'S PROPERTY - DAY

Oliver is mending the fence of his goat enclosure as Winer watches, looking a little shame-faced.

OLIVER

So - you say we're out of the Sang business?

WINER

I reckon, now that I'm working for Hardin.

OLIVER

Just as well... I'll be gone 'fore long. I look for an early frost and a long winter. Long and cold. Signs are there, if you know where to look.

WINER

You reckon I oughta work for him or not? I'm a little undecided.

Oliver's face puckers slightly, as if he's weighing whether to tell Winer about the skull. He decides against it.

OLIVER

Boy, you gotta do what you want to do. As long as you keep your head straight and stay out of his business, you'll be all right.

WINER

Would you work for Hardin?

Oliver shoots him a look of distaste.

OLIVER

Lord, no. I'd scratch shit with the chickens before I'd take a nickel that passed through his hands.

WINER

Why? Because he's a bootlegger?

OLIVER

No - I got nothin' against bootleggin'. Been around it my whole life. Thomas Hovington was a bootlegger, and I never had anything against him, 'cept he let folks run over him. Let Hardin do him out of business, his place, even his woman. A man like Hardin - he can spot that in a feller and use it. He knows who he can shove around and who he can't. Just see he don't get started off that way with you. You a good worker. Don't sell yourself short, and don't let him run nothin' over on you.

Winer nods, although he still looks a little uneasy.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

A high sun bakes the valley. As Winer and Lipscomb work, the school bus once again drops Amber off. Winer once again watches.

LATER

Amber is back in place on the back porch, dressed again in shorts and wearing sunglasses.

MUSIC from the radio drifts through the open window. Amid the construction work, Lipscomb pauses to remove his shirt.

LIPSCOMB
 (to Winer)
 She's got a case on one of us, and
 somehow I just don't believe it's
 you.

He turns back to work and drops his hammer as a clumsy excuse to bend and look up Amber's shorts.

LIPSCOMB (CONT'D)
 (standing up)
 Black drawers. Godadmighty damn.
 Black drawers.

Suddenly, Hardin comes out onto the porch and sits down next to Amber. Ignoring her now, Lipscomb goes back to hammering, gearing it up a notch or two.

LATER

From the edge of the property, by the stream, Amber appears in a bathing suit, drying herself off with a towel. She passes Winer and Lipscomb on her way into the house. Once she's gone, Lipscomb lays his hammer down.

LIPSCOMB (CONT'D)
 If that ain't a invite, then I
 don't know one. Here goes nothin'.

He crosses to Amber's window and peers inside, watching her change. From where he's standing, Winer can see Hardin approach around the other side of the house.

WINER
 (calling)
 Hey!

Lipscomb ignores him as he stares through the window.

WINER (CONT'D)
 (calling)
 Hey, Lipscomb!

Lipscomb turns from the window like a staggering drunk and wipes imaginary beads of perspiration from his brow.

LIPSCOMB
 Oh, Lord. Oh Lordy Lord...

By this time, Hardin has reached the corner of the house. He watches Lipscomb cross back to the construction site in great, loping steps, extravagantly mimicking masturbation.

HARDIN

How high a fever you run with the fits? You reckon I ought to send that boy after Doc Ratcliff for you?

Lipscomb stumbles and turns toward Hardin, his face blood-swollen.

LIPSCOMB

There ain't nothin' wrong with me.

HARDIN

The hell there's not... You wanna step 'round here a minute? I need a word with you.

Glancing at Winer, Lipscomb disappears with Hardin around the side of the house. Winer continues to work as they're gone, looking up every few moments as if expecting to hear a gunshot. Finally, Lipscomb re-appears alone and, still red-faced, begins gathering his TOOLS.

LIPSCOMB

Get your shit gathered up. We're draggin' up.

WINER

(pausing)
What?

LIPSCOMB

We're quittin', by God. We're goin'.

WINER

'We,' hell - I didn't know we came in a set like salt and pepper shakers.

Lipscomb straightens up and glares at him.

LIPSCOMB

Why, you snotty little bastard...

WINER

(cutting him off)
I'll make up my own mind about quittin'. You never hired me.

LIPSCOMB

I ought to just slap the hell out
of you.

WINER

Why don't you, just like you did
Hardin?

LIPSCOMB

(taking a step toward him)
By God, I believe I will...

Holding his hammer, Winer does not retreat. Lipscomb finally stops and his eyes grow fierce and malignant. Grabbing his toolbox, he begins to leave.

LIPSCOMB (CONT'D)

I'd like to stay and see the mess
you'll make out of things. You
couldn't build a fuckin' chicken
coop if you had a book to go by.

He leaves. Winer goes back to hammering as before.

LATER

Winer's still hammering as Hardin saunters up, pairing his
finger nails with the bone-handled knife.

HARDIN

Well, I had to let ye runnin' mate
go... I couldn't afford union scale
for winder-peepin'.

Winer continues to work.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Hold up a minute. You ain't gettin'
paid by the nail nohow.

Winer stops and looks at Hardin.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Ain't you worked past quittin' time
anyhow?

WINER

I don't know. I don't have a watch -
we used his. Besides, I wasn't sure
what you wanted.

HARDIN

I told you what I wanted when I hired you. I want a honkytonk built. Can you do it?

WINER

Well, I can do most of it. There's some things that're hard for one man to do, like puttin' up the joists and rafters. And I can't raise the walls and plumb them by myself.

HARDIN

That's all I wanted to hear. You measure 'em and nail 'em together, and I'll grab a handful of these highbinders I'm always waist-deep in, and we'll raise 'em for you. Just holler. Alright?

WINER

I'll give it a try.

HARDIN

Shore you will. You can do it.
(a beat)
Ain't you goin' to ast me about the money?

WINER

What about it?

HARDIN

About how much I was payin' him? I'm payin' it to you, now. You're the architect and the carpenter and the hired help, too. You fuck up, we'll know who to blame it on.

Winer grins.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Come on, and I'll run you home. Can't have my builder walkin' to work, totin' his tools. Folks'll be talkin' about me.

Still grinning, Winer follows Hardin to the house.

EXT. WINER HOUSE - DAY

Having just been dropped off by Hardin, Winer approaches the house. He notices fresh TIRE TRACKS in the yard before he goes in.

INT. WINER HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Winer marvels at the stacks of gleaming, new COPPER POTS & PANS on the counter top.

WINER

Great God.

His mother materializes from the shadows.

MRS. WINER

What?

WINER

Where'd you get all this stuff?

MRS. WINER

I bought 'em.

WINER

Bought 'em? Why?

MRS. WINER

Because I always wanted me a set of cookers like that.

WINER

(awe-struck)

Well - what'd they cost?

MRS. WINER

Never you mind what they cost. It won't be a nickel out of your pocket.

Scowling, Winer begins climbing the ladder to his room.

EXT. WATER HOLE - DAY

A section of creek near the house that forms a pool deep enough to swim in. Carrying a bar of soap and towel, Winer arrives and begins undressing.

LATER

Winer is carefully shaving with a STRAIGHT-EDGED RAZOR, using a MIRROR balanced on a tree branch.

EXT. WINER HOUSE - DAY

Winer's mother is waiting for him on the porch when he returns from his bath. She lays a hand on his arm.

MRS. WINER

I got a friend. Sells them pots and pans.

It takes Winer a moment to understand that she means a man.

MRS. WINER (CONT'D)

I think you'd like him, Nathan. He wants to see you.

WINER

Well, sure. Where is he?

MRS. WINER

He's supposed to be here next Friday.

Winer nods awkwardly.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

Another bright, hot day. The framework for the honkytonk has mostly been erected. Looking up from his BLUEPRINTS, Winer notices the school bus depositing Amber once again at the end of the drive. His eyes linger on her for a moment, then go back to the drawings.

LATER

Hunkered low over the drawings, Winer at first doesn't notice Amber standing over him, holding a JAR OF PEACHES.

AMBER

You reckon you can open this? Me nor Mama can't.

Taken aback at first, Winer lays his pencil aside.

WINER

I might can.

He stands up, bringing himself closer to her. He first notices her eyes, staring back as if unaware of the electric effect they have on him.

AMBER

Well, go on and open them if you can. Mama's waitin' on me.

Winer unscrews the jar and hands it back to her.

AMBER (CONT'D)

You're very strong.

She has the open jar, but makes no move to leave. Winer is still mesmerized by her eyes.

AMBER (CONT'D)

What are you starin' at? Is my face on crooked?

WINER

I just thought you had the prettiest eyes.

When Amber smiles, it's like a burst of sunshine.

AMBER

Well, you can talk. I didn't know if you could or not. You ought to try it more often.

WINER

I might if I had someone to talk to. No need in telling myself things I already know.

Still smiling, Amber turns back toward the house.

AMBER

Next time I need a can of peaches opened, I reckon you can talk to me.

She leaves.

EXT. WINER HOUSE - PORCH - EVENING

A GREEN STUDEBAKER is parked in the drive as Winer sits with his mother and her "friend," LEO HUGGINS, a pudgy fast-talker. There are only TWO CHAIRS, so Winer sits on the floor, his back propped against a support beam.

HUGGINS

You mama tell me you a wood
butcher.

WINER

I reckon.

HUGGINS

I reckon it's all right if you can
make any money at it. I never could
make a livin' at public work. Had
to do what I could with my brains.

Tired from work, Winer yawns. He gazes out to the distant
ridge line as Huggins continues talking.

HUGGINS (CONT'D)

I come up from nothing in Arkansas,
from folks who never had nothing
nor wanted nothing, folks in
shotgun shacks with cracks in the
floor so you could keep an eye on
the chickens, and I figured, 'Leo
Huggins, if you're ever gonna be
anything, you're gonna hafta do it
on your own hook...'

Winer's mother, enraptured, follows every word as Winer
himself falls into a light doze.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

Winer's trimming a TWO-BY-FOUR on the SAWHORSE while Hardin
trims his fingernails with his knife. For the first time,
Winer gets a good look at it.

WINER

Where did you get that knife?

HARDIN

(holding up the knife)
Lord, son, I don't know. I had it,
I guess... Ten or twelve year.

WINER

Let me see it a minute.

Hardin hands the knife to Winer handle-first. Winer examines
it closely. A tiny, hand-filed "W" has been scratched into
the blade.

WINER (CONT'D)

This is my father's knife.

Abruptly, he smells it.

HARDIN

What'd you do that for?

WINER

I don't know... He always had a plug of tobacco in the same pocket as the knife, so it always smelled just like old Red Ox twist.

Hardin regards him sympathetically.

HARDIN

I remember where I got that knife, now. It was a holler or two 'cross your line, in kind of a cedar grove, where I reckon he'd been cuttin' fencepost. I remember the knife was layin' on a sandbar in a spring in the mouth of the holler.

He watches Winer look at the knife, the play of emotions on the boy's face.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Your pa lit out, didn't he?

WINER

I don't know what happened to him. I never did believe he lit out, and I don't believe it now.

HARDIN

Well, folks is funny... And, remember, times back then was tightern a banjo string. Lots of folks on the road. He might've just throwed up his hands and said 'Fuck it' and lit out.

WINER

No.

HARDIN

My own daddy cut out on me in February of the year I was eight years old. This was in Cullman, Alabama. I never will forget it, not Christmas of that year... 'Course, they never was much - a apple and a orange and a handful of penny candy. But this year they wadn't nothing in our socks.

(MORE)

HARDIN (CONT'D)

I wondered what the hell it was we'd done. I went out where Pa was standin' in the road, lookin' off down it, though there wadn't nothing to see... After a while he noticed us, me and my sister, reached into his pocket and gave me a quarter. 'Git yins some Santy Clause,' he told me... That was when I was eight years old. By the time I was nine, he was long gone and we were livin' with my aunt, who was sleepin' with some sectionhand used to take a strop to us just to hear us yell.

He looks at Winer, who says nothing.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Life is hard, Winer. You just gotta get hard with it.

WINER

What'll you take for this knife?
You found it.

HARDIN

Hell, take it, if it means somethin' to ye... Seems to me it's a damn poor substitute for a pa, but such as it is, you're welcome to it.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

The cedar grove Hardin described in his account of finding the knife. Winer scans the trees, the hollow with the spring, the sand bar at its mouth. From the sand bar, he walks up the hollow a short distance until he comes upon miscellaneous WRECKAGE: bits of metal, sorghum buckets, five-gallon jugs.

Winer surveys it all, a certain profound - if not entirely conscious - understanding taking root in him.

WINER (V.O.)

Did you ever know Pa to make whiskey?

The LINE BRIDGES as we

CUT TO:

EXT. OLIVER'S HOUSE - DAY

Oliver sits under a mature PEAR TREE, peeling PEARS into an old WASHPAN. Winer is sitting on the grass nearby.

OLIVER

(answering Winer's
question)

Good God, no. Why? Are you thinkin'
about settin' up and runnin' Dallas
Hardin outta business?

WINER

No. I just got to wondering.

OLIVER

Get you one of these pears.

He tosses a pear to Winer, who takes a bite out of it.

WINER

(as he eats)

I found an old still back in there
where the cedar grove is, over by
King's Branch. I just wondered who
put it there.

OLIVER

Well, I can't tell you who it was,
but I can tell you who it wadn't.
Not talkin' agin' your pa, but he
was downright intolerant about some
things. Now, I don't mind
bootleggin' myself, but
whiskeymakin' looked shiftless to
him. Though there's a world of hard
work wound up in it, as anyone who
ever shouldered a hundred-pound
sack of sugar through the woods
could tell you.

WINER

Whose would you say it was, then?

OLIVER

When Dallas Hardin first come to
this part of the county and didn't
have the money to buy the law like
he does now, he used to set up his
operation across Hovington's lines -
or somebody else's - in case the
revenueers found his rig.

He glances up at Winer and gets a sudden start: the boy has stopped chewing, a distant, intense expression on his face.

OLIVER (CONT'D)

(bemusedly)

No, wait a minute - that ain't it at all. My mind's goin' in my old age, just like the rest a' me's done gone... Old man Cater Loveless lived back there, and when that tornado came through it just blew the whole house away. And he made whiskey, Cater did. That was 'fore your pa bought the land for the taxes on it.

WINER

Then it must have been Loveless' still?

OLIVER

Likely it was.

Winer goes back to chewing his pear. Oliver looks relieved.

INT. SHERIFF BELLWETHER'S OFFICE - DAY

Bellwether sits across from Oliver.

OLIVER

You got anything back on that skeleton yet?

BELLWETHER

(correcting)

Skull... And, yes - we heard back from that lab in Nashville. It was Winer all right.

OLIVER

We knowed that... Have you told that boy yet?

BELLWETHER

No. I've got to, though. It's not something I look forward to.

OLIVER

I wish you'd hold up just a little... He'll kill Dallas Hardin and turn 21 in Brushy Mountain state pen.

BELLWHETHER

No, he won't. There's no proof that Hardin even shot him, Mr. Oliver.

OLIVER

(indignant)

Well, shitfire - you know as well as I'm sittin' here that Hardin shot him.

BELLWHETHER

Knowin' ain't provin'. A jury's gonna want to know how I know.

Looking disgusted, Oliver rises to go.

OLIVER

Young Winer ain't that picky.

EXT. EMPTY LOT - DAY

A dusty vacant lot behind the main drag through town. Winer is sipping a COKE as Buttcut hurls ROCKS at an EMPTY SODA BOTTLE for fun.

WINER

You haven't seen Motormouth lately, have you? He's not been at his house.

BUTTCUT

(hurling a rock)

Yeah, the reason why is his wife kicked him out. His ex-wife. The house is in her name.

WINER

You don't say.

BUTTCUT

Yeah - it's hard for him to show his face, really, her runnin' around on him the way she does.

(hurls another rock - misses)

First time was right after they was married. You know that?

WINER

No, I did not.

BUTTCUT

Motormouth caught them in the backseat of an old Ford. The kid was so scared he couldn't even get his pants on. A high school junior. 'He's not even on the Goddamned football team,' he told her.

Winer takes an amused sip from his coke.

BUTTCUT (CONT'D)

But this whole thing with Cecil Blalock - Motormouth really outdone himself on that deal.

WINER

You don't say?

BUTTCUT

Cecil took to wantin' to screw Motormouth's wife, so he got his brother Clyde to go over and get Motormouth to go coon-huntin'. They was coon-huntin' pretty heavy there for a while. Motormouth was always braggin' about it - he thought they wasn't nobody like Clyde Blalock. Me and Clyde this, me and Clyde that. And all the while Cecil screwin' her right in Motormouth's bed.

He flings a rock, which pings off the empty bottle.

WINER

You got something against that there empty bottle?

BUTTCUT

Just target practice is all. Gotta keep yourself sharp. Anything could be a weapon. Even that bottle itself.

WINER

Yep.

BUTTCUT

Fill 'er up with gasoline, stick a wick in it and you got a bomb. That's what they're doin' over in the War - usin' 'em against the Russians. They even have a name for it: Molotov Cocktail.

WINER

That so?

BUTTCUT

Yeah. Anything can be a weapon. Or anybody.

He flings another rock. This one connects squarely with the bottle, shattering it.

INT. LONG'S MARKET - DAY

Sam Long finishes ringing up a FAMILY at his register and glances out the window. Grabbing his TICKET BOOK, he hurries outside.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE LONG'S - DAY

SHORTEN SCENE

Long intercepts Winer as he walks by on the sidewalk.

LONG

How ya doin', Nathan? I ain't seen you in the last few weeks, and got to wonderin' about you.

WINER

Well, I haven't been getting into town much. I'm working over at Hardin's and staying pretty busy.

Long holds up the ticket book.

LONG

I was wonderin' when you could do somethin' about what you owe me. Your grocer ticket.

WINER

What needs to be done? I've been sending the money into you on Saturday like always.

LONG

(shaking his head)
I'm afraid not.

Winer looks confused.

LONG (CONT'D)

Here, look - I'll show you the tickets.

WINER

I wouldn't know any more if I looked than I do now... Somethin's not right here. I've been sendin' the money in here every week.

LONG

Well, for a long time you did. You or your mama'd come in and settle up like a clock tickin'. Then about a month or so ago, your mama started comin' here with that Huggins feller sells them pots and pans. She quit payin' but she kept on buyin'. I didn't think nothing 'bout it for a while 'cause you always been good for it.

Winer remains in stony silence for a long beat.

EXT. WINER HOUSE - DAY

Winer approaches from the road after work. Huggins is on the porch, swinging on the PORCH CHAIR. Winer ignores him as he goes into the house.

EXT. WINER HOUSE - BACK - DAY

The back door SLAMS and Winer trudges down the path to the water hole, SOAP, TOWEL and SHAVING SUPPLIES in hand.

EXT. WATER HOLE - DAY

His hair wet, Winer is again shaving with the mirror balanced in the tree. He's shirtless, and the effect of all that physical labor is showing in his chest, shoulders and arms. HUGGINS' VOICE behind him causes Winer to jump, nicking himself with the razor.

HUGGINS

What do you know, good buddy?

Winer turns toward him, wiping a trickle of BLOOD from his chin.

WINER

What is it? I came up here to take a bath.

HUGGINS

I know ye did. I just wanted to talk to ye a minute and wanted to catch ye by yourself...

Winer waits, knowing exactly what Huggins will ask for.

HUGGINS (CONT'D)

Reckon you could loan me about five til Wednesday?

Wiping the lather from his face with his towel, Winer pulls out his WALLET and begins fishing out the money.

WINER

I guess I can.

HUGGINS

(eyeing the MONEY in the wallet)

Just let me have ten if you can spare it, good buddy.

WINER

If five'd do a minute ago, how'd we get up to ten?

HUGGINS

Well... Five'd do, I reckon. I'll get by on it, I s'pose.

He takes the FIVE Winer gives him and slips it into his pocket.

WINER

You'll have to get by on it. I'm paying my own grocery ticket this week.

HUGGINS

(confused)

Do what?

WINER

I wanted to ask you about my grocery ticket out at Long's. I've been sending money out there every week, and somehow or other I seem to owe him more all the time.

(MORE)

WINER (CONT'D)

Do you know how a thing like that could be?

Huggins starts to get a cornered look to him.

HUGGINS

Lord, no. I guess you better ask Sam Long. His tickets must be messed up.

WINER

His tickets are all right. Mine's the ones that are messed up... What are you trying to pull on me?

HUGGINS

You need to talk to your mama...

WINER

(cutting him off)

You say talk to Sam Long, or talk to my mama. I'd as soon talk to you as anybody I know.

HUGGINS

I ain't no book-keeper.

WINER

No, you ain't no book-keeper... There's two or three things I can think of that you are, but you ain't no book-keeper... And I'll tell you something - I work for my pay. And if you think I'm busting my ass every day so you can drink it up at the pool hall or pay for goddamn pots and pans, then you're living in a dream world.

This pushes Huggins too far, and he makes an attempt to look like a grown-up facing back-talk from a child.

HUGGINS

You got a good bit of a mouth on ye for a youngen, ain't ye?

Winer glares back, unintimidated.

HUGGINS (CONT'D)

Boy, me and you's goin' to have to get somethin' straight: you work with me, and I'll work with ye... But ye make it hard on me and I'll hand it right back to ye.

(MORE)

HUGGINS (CONT'D)

Your mama thinks a right smart of me, we might be gettin' married one of these times... We might just all pack up and go north. Me and you'll be in the same family then, and you know as well as I do that a family ain't got but one boss.

WINER

Why, Goddamn you...

He lunges forward, grabbing a fistful of Huggins' shirt. Doing so, he knocks from its perch his own mirror, which shatters on the ground. Huggins suddenly looks afraid.

WINER (CONT'D)

I'll tell you right now - what you and her do is your business. But it'll be a cold day in Hell when you boss me around.

He releases Huggins, who staggers back, shocked, almost tripping over some loose stones.

HUGGINS

You sorry shitass... You stuck-up little prick...

He continues backing away - fixing his shirt, running his hand through his hair - until he's a safe distance from Winer.

HUGGINS (CONT'D)

We do get married, the first thing I'm doin' is puttin' your ass on the road.

He hurries away toward the house. Winer watches him go, then turns back to the broken mirror, with its shattered pieces of himself. He begins gathering his things.

EXT. WINER'S HOUSE - DAY

Holding his things, Winer passes the house. He looks at it. His mother is in the window, looking at him somberly. Putting his head down, Winer continues on his way.

EXT. CORN FIELD - SUNSET

Winer heads across the field, toward the road. The sun has sunk to the horizon, making everything there look on fire.

EXT. OLD BUICK - EVENING

The remnant of some long-ago accident, it sits forgotten and overgrown near the highway. Winer approaches and wrestles the CREAKING front door open.

INT. OLD BUICK - EVENING

Tossing the towel and other items in first, Winer gets in the front seat and settles back to sleep.

FADE TO:

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

More of the wooden framework of the honkytonk is in place now. Winer, holding a PLUM LINE against a corner, notices that he has an audience: Hardin and Amber, both sitting on the porch in LOUNGE CHAIRS, idly watching him work.

LATER

Winer is nailing a CROSS-BEAM in place. The place has started to get crowded. CARS line the driveway, and MUSIC and LOUD VOICES drift from inside the house. Winer looks: a GROUP OF SOLDIERS, newly arrived, encounters a GROUP OF SAILORS already here. They begin arguing.

INT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - DAY

Like usual, the place is way too crowded. Now you can tell there's a war on: most of the clientele is in uniform and PERIOD MUSIC blasts from the jukebox. Behind the bar, Hardin grabs a CIGARBOX and surreptitiously slips into the bedroom.

IN THE BEDROOM

Hardin sits on the bed, pulling CASH from the overflowing cigarbox and wrapping it into bundles which he holds in place with RUBBER BANDS.

LATER

Hardin is kneeling by the open closet - the one guarded by his WINCHESTER in the corner - putting the wads of cash into a glass FRUIT JAR already about half-full with other bundles. MORE JARS, already full, are stacked behind.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

Winer's work is interrupted by LOUD VOICES. The soldiers who arrived earlier, now drunk, are arguing with the sailors. One of them throws a punch, and in a moment there's a full-blown brawl in the yard. More SOLDIERS and SAILORS stream from the house to join, and in no time the brawl becomes a near-riot. The ruckus brings Hardin out onto the back porch.

HARDIN
 (to himself)
 Goddamn it all to hell...

He disappears into the house and reappears a moment later with his SUNDAY KNUCKS on. Hardin wades into the melee.

WIDE

The back and side yards are full of SOLDIERS, SAILORS, DRUNKS and WHORES all beating each other senseless. Both Buttcutt and Motormouth are among their number. Winer has climbed onto a TOP PLATE to avoid being mistaken for a participant.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Morning. A GROUND MIST clouds the forest. Oliver's already out, hunting for ginseng. He looks up as an apparition resolves itself: Hardin on the back of Blalock's big Morgan, the Winchester cradled in the saddle. Seeing Oliver, he rears the horse back.

HARDIN
 What the fuck are you doin' out here?

OLIVER
 Just mindin' my own business. A pastime I ain't noticed much of lately.

HARDIN
 Your business, hell - I reckon you think anything moves in these woods is your business. Don't think I ain't seen you up there prowlin', stickin' your long nose in my affairs.

OLIVER

(angry)

You don't own this property. You better check your lines.

HARDIN

My lines is where I make 'em. And I make a new set everday.

He spurs the horse, intentionally knocking Oliver into the brush as he passes. As he lies, stunned and furious, Oliver looks at Hardin's departing back. There's a SHOVEL strapped there, its blade encrusted with fresh clay, as well as a GUNNY SACK tied to the pommel, filled with what look to be FRUIT JARS.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

Winer and Amber stand out of sight around the corner of the house. They are face-to-face, conspiratorial.

AMBER

(teasingly)

Now why would I want to do a thing like that? I'd be liable to get caught.

WINER

So what if you did? What is he to you? It looks to me like anybody could slip out of a honkytonk for a few minutes.

AMBER

I can't.

WINER

Can't or won't?

AMBER

Anyway, why should I have to slip out and meet you in the woods?

WINER

I just wanted to see you.

AMBER

(flirtatiously)

Then I guess that's your reason. Have you got one for me?

He leans down to her, lifting her chin with his finger. Her mouth opens slightly just before they kiss. Afterwards, she looks at him in full seriousness.

AMBER (CONT'D)

You know I want to.

WINER

I'll know you want to when I see you coming.

AMBER

I'll try.

EXT. CLIFF - NIGHT

Winer comes alone and sits, looking out over the branch of the river below. SOUNDS OF CAROUSING float through the air from the honkytonk. Winer lies back onto the shelf of stone.

TIME LAPSE

While Winer lies waiting, the night passes. The constellations roll through the sky. A harvest moon rises and sets. Finally, it's dawn. Winer rises and leaves.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

Winer sits amid the half-built honkytonk on his lunch break. He's sipping COFFEE, irritable from lack of sleep, when Amber approaches tentatively from the house.

AMBER

I can't stay but a minute, and if you're going to fight, I'll just go back in.

WINER

I never sent for you.

AMBER

You did last night.

WINER

Yeah, for what good it did.

AMBER

I wasn't goin' to tell you this, but the reason I couldn't come was he made me set with a man.

WINER

Who did?

AMBER

Hardin. Dallas.

Winer sneers.

WINER

He made you, did he? He hold a gun
to you?

AMBER

No.

WINER

I don't guess he had to.

AMBER

Just shut up. You don't know
anything about anything.

WINER

I know I spent all night in the
mouth of that holler like a fool
holding the sack on a snipehunt.
That's all I know.

AMBER

Well, I couldn't help it.

WINER

(sarcastically)

Sure, you couldn't. I'll bet you
couldn't help telling every soldier
in there about it either. Well, you
better enjoy it, 'cause it's the
last laugh you'll get out on me.

AMBER

Nathan, I really wanted to - I
swear to God. His eyes were on me
every minute.

WINER

How come he made you sit with a
man? Who was it, anyway?

AMBER

I don't know - some fat farmer.
He'd just come back from sellin'
his cows or somethin'.

(MORE)

AMBER (CONT'D)

He was waving his money around and Dallas made me set with him til it was all gone. I thought he was never goin' to pass out.

WINER

How'd he make you?

AMBER

I don't know... He just told me I had to.

WINER

What would he do if you didn't?

AMBER

I don't know.

WINER

Do you always do what people order you to? What if I'd 'ordered' you to meet me? What would you have done then?

AMBER

All this is easy for you to say, Nathan. You just put up your tools every night and go home. I'm already home. There's nowhere else for me to go. You don't know him.

WINER

I believe I know him about as well as I need to.

Looking in his eyes, Amber suddenly understands something about Winer.

AMBER

You know him better.

WINER

(looking away)

I know him well enough to know he's not payin' me to shoot the breeze with you. I've got to get back to work. This has been a long day anyhow.

AMBER

I might could get out on a Sunday. There's nobody much around here then and Dallas don't pay me much mind.

WINER

I'm once a fool. Twice don't
interest me.

AMBER

I'll meet you anywhere you say.

They look at each other in silence a long moment as Winer takes the measure of her words.

WINER

All right. Back in that holler.
Meet me there Sunday evening.

EXT. CLIFF - DAY

The same one Winer sat on waiting for Amber before. She's here now, sitting on a BLANKET, hugging her knees while Winer sits a few feet away.

AMBER

How come you quit school?

WINER

I didn't. I'm going back next year.

AMBER

I'm not. I wouldn't set foot inside
that school house for a thousand-
dollar bill.

Winer studies her profile in silence a moment, then pulls her toward him. She yields and they kiss - a short one; then a deeper, longer, more passionate one.

LATER

Winer and Amber lie on the blanket. Amber's skirt has been pulled to her waist and her blouse and bra undone, leaving her breasts exposed.

Leaning over, Winer kisses Amber while his free hand slips beneath the waistband of her panties. Amber moans softly, then pushes Winer's hand further down. Her hand guiding his, Winer massages Amber for a moment. Then she removes her hand and fumbles for Winer's zipper. She pulls it down, and when she begins masturbating him, Winer lets out a shuddering gasp.

Pausing, Amber hitches her waist up and slips the panties off.

She then unbuttons Winer's pants and pulls them to his ankles. He has to stand to shuck them the rest of the way off. Amber looks up at Winer as he pulls off his T-shirt.

WINER

Pull off your dress.

AMBER

Do it for me, if you want to.

Kneeling, Winer pulls the dress over her head and starts to fold it before Amber stops him.

AMBER (CONT'D)

No, let it go - it don't matter.

He drops it and climbs on top of her as she lies back, carefully balancing his weight on his elbows.

AMBER (CONT'D)

I'm not made of glass. You won't break me.

He lies on top of her for a moment, gazing into her eyes, feeling her breath on his face.

AMBER (CONT'D)

(breathlessly)

Go on... I want you to.

Reaching down, Winer fumblingly attempts to guide himself inside her. Finally, she reaches down to help.

AMBER (CONT'D)

Here, let me.

He raises his hips and squeezes his eyes shut as she eases him inside herself. She pauses, and when Winer opens his eyes, he can see Amber clenching her own shut tighter than his were. Her hand is gripping his arm tightly.

WINER

(whispering)

I don't want to hurt you.

AMBER

It's all right. Go on - I want you to.

They complete the penetration.

LATER

Still lying on the blanket, Winer watches Amber dress. She's anxious to go.

AMBER (CONT'D)
 (as she dresses)
 You thought I was a whore, didn't you?

WINER
 No - I never thought that.

AMBER
 But you thought I'd done it before.

WINER
 I figured you had.

AMBER
 I guess I've heard them talk about everything two people can do to each other, but I never did any of it. Mama always watched me like a hawk and Dallas - he's even worse.

She staggers a little as she tries to hop into her panties and Winer grins.

AMBER (CONT'D)
 Quit looking' like that. You know I've got to go... I always used to have the idea that Dallas was goin' to sell me off, you know, to the highest bidder. A auction. Sacrificin' a virgin...

She gathers the last of her things and smiles ruefully.

AMBER (CONT'D)
 I guess this is one time he got beat.

She leaves.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

An abandoned cabin deposited on the riverside by earlier floodwaters. Motormouth's Chrysler is parked nearby. Motormouth himself and Winer sit by a fire, over which perches a COFFEEPOT. They both look up at the sound of SOMEONE APPROACHING.

MOTORMOUTH
 (recognizing who it is)
 Oh, shit... More Goddamned divorce
 papers.

He stands and fades away into the brush moments before Sheriff Bellwether, wet from the waist down, appears from the river-side of the cabin. He sees the trail leading away.

BELLWETHER
 Are you telling me there's a way
 from the road? Well, Goddamn.

He turns to Winer, still sitting by the fire.

BELLWETHER (CONT'D)
 So you're squattin' out here with
 Motormouth Hodges now?

WINER
 He got evicted - his wife owns the
 house. He was afraid you were
 comin' with more bad news.

BELLWETHER
 No - it was you I was lookin' for.
 You a hard feller to find.

WINER
 Didn't know I was lost.

BELLWETHER
 Well, you may not be, but your mama
 thinks you are. She asked me to try
 to find out where you was. She
 wants to see you about somethin'.

WINER
 What?

BELLWETHER
 Best I can gather, her and Leo
 Huggins is gettin' married. He's
 got promises of a job over in
 Arkansas, and you and your mama's
 supposed to go with him.

WINER
 (defensively)
 Who said so?

BELLWETHER

(placatingly)

Just tryin' to get word to you,
like I said I would. What you do is
your business.

WINER

Well - thanks for tellin' me,
anyway.

BELLWETHER

You goin' down there, I'll run you
by. I told her I'd let her know if
I saw you.

WINER

I'll just have Motormouth run me
down sometime.

BELLWETHER

Suit yourself, then.

He hesitates a moment.

WINER

Somethin' else?

Bellwhether shakes his head finally and leaves, heading first
the way he came - by the river bank - and then remembering
the trail to the road. He changes course and goes that way
instead.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WINER HOUSE - PORCH - DAY

Approaching from the road, Winer trots up the steps. He peers
through the window. Inside is an empty house, the occupants
gone. Winer steps away from the window and sits at the edge
of the porch. He gazes at the distant ridge line - once so
familiar, now less so.

FADE TO:

EXT. FOREST - DAY

The leaves are starting to turn. Oliver, out on a late-season
ginseng hunt, is bundled up against the slight chill.

EXT. THE ABYSS - DAY

Oliver approaches from the direction of the ridge. Stepping carefully by the edge, he peers in. Hovington's "voices" burble from the depths.

Oliver looks away sharply as a cold wind rises.

OLIVER
(to himself)
Season's changin'...

EXT. CLIFF - DAY

The same spot overlooking the river, within earshot of the honkytonk, where Winer met Amber last time. Holding her by the hand now, he approaches, then pauses by a hollowed-out stumphole where he pulls out the blanket he's hidden there.

LATER

Winer and Amber lie naked beneath the blanket, holding each other close against the slight chill of the day.

WINER
This is nothing but trouble. I've got to get a car somehow. A way of getting around so we can get away from him.

Amber's head is lying at the base of his neck.

AMBER
This is all right. You take everything too serious.

WINER
It's better than all right, but we've still got to get a car. We could go into town any time we wanted.

AMBER
(after a beat)
Or anyplace else we wanted to go.

Winer thinks about it a moment.

WINER
It seems like I have to be with you all the time.
(MORE)

WINER (CONT'D)

When I'm not, it's like I'm drunk or on dope or somethin'... I just drag through the day waitin' for night to come. Everything else just seems dead.

Amber rubs his chest sympathetically, but says nothing.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Sitting on his cot, feet up on an old crate, Motormouth is holding a GLASS OF BOOTLEG WHISKEY AND 7-UP. Winer is lying on the other cot, reading a BOOK. Light is supplied by a KEROSENE LANTERN and MUSIC is drifting through the window from the car radio outside.

MOTORMOUTH

You look like a man pickin' cotton. 'Cept what you grabbin' is trouble, with both hands. Stuffin' it in a sack and never once lookin' back over your shoulder.

WINER

What are you talking about, Motormouth?

MOTORMOUTH

Listen at ye - you may not be as slick hardy as you think you are.

Winer looks up from his book.

WINER

I never was one for parables and hard sayings. You got anything I need to hear just say so straight out.

MOTORMOUTH

You think you're in tight with him. But when he finds out - and he damn sure will - he will kill your ass and hide you or rig it up so it looks like he killed you in self-defense.

WINER

I'm still kindly left in the dark.

MOTORMOUTH

Hardin. He wanted her hisself.

Winer looks at him silently for a beat, then turns back to his book.

WINER
She's not his to have.

INT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - DAY

Hardin's in the back bedroom, putting more CASH into ANOTHER FRUIT JAR. Standing up, he glances out the window. OUTSIDE, Winer is standing by the half-built Honkytonk, chatting with Amber. She says something, he laughs, and Amber reaches up to lightly caress his face.

ON HARDIN as he starts growing suspicious.

EXT. STUMPHOLE - DAY

Coming along the path, Winer stops by the stumphole for the blanket and is shocked to find it gone. He searches but fails to find it. His eyes fill with dread at the implications of this.

EXT. CLIFF - EVENING

Despite his discovery, Winer sits waiting for Amber at their usual spot. Over the river, a CRESCENT MOON hangs in the sky.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CLIFF - MORNING

The SAME SHOT, except the moon has now been replaced by the brilliant first rays of the rising sun. Winer, who hasn't moved, gets up from his spot and leaves.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - DAY

The honkytonk is nearing completion. Winer is plastering the outside walls. He glances up as Amber comes through the back door of the house to fetch some LAUNDRY from the line. Finished, she returns to the house without exchanging a word with him.

EXT. HARDIN'S - BACK YARD - ANOTHER DAY

Hardin is paying CASH into Winer's hand at the end of the work week.

HARDIN

Winer, me and you got a pretty good business arrangement goin'. You work to suit me, and I pay to suit you... And I got other plans for us too, plans got some real money tied up in 'em.

He pauses. Winer can guess what's next.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

I don't wanna make you mad, but you kindly steppin' on my toes here slippin' around with that girl, and I'm goin' to have to put a stop to it. I thought you'd do me straighter than that.

Folding his money, Winer slips it into his jeans.

WINER

You? I don't see that it's got anything to do with you.

HARDIN

Say you don't? I told you I had plans. Son, I got plans workin' in my head ever minute and they don't all concern you. I got plans for her, too.

WINER

What kind of plans?

HARDIN

What they are ain't nothin' to you. I'm just tellin' you we got to keep things on a business footing here and leave all this personal shit out of it.

WINER

What kind of plans?

HARDIN

Well, I told you - it ain't none a' your business. But have you ever really looked at her? And let me tell you, they don't look like that for long. Like a peach hangin' there on a tree.

(MORE)

HARDIN (CONT'D)

One day it ain't hardly right, and then there's a minute when it is, and then it's rotten and the yellerjackets is eatin' it. You see? The time's right now - there's a world of money to be made and I can't have anybody muddyin' the water. Even you.

He looks at Winer, offering him a chance to reply. When Winer doesn't take it, he continues.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Let's just leave it at that. Let's just say I'm concerned about her welfare. She's like a daughter to me...

WINER

(cutting him off)

Don't hand me that shit... You don't seem to be considering what she thinks. Are you?

HARDIN

(surprised)

Do what?

WINER

You heard me. Don't hand me that 'daughter' shit. Save it for someone that believes it.

A primal anger begins to rise in Hardin.

HARDIN

Nobody talks to me that way anymore, Winer. I done growed up out of puttin' up with it. Now, me and you... here, you wait a minute...

But it's too late - Winer has already turned his back to him and is walking off the property.

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT

Winer's sitting by the fire, waiting for the COFFEE to boil, when a wash of HEADLIGHTS from Hardin's PACKARD almost blinds him. Stopping the car, Hardin throws the passenger door open.

HARDIN
(calling through door)
Get in here where it's warm. I need
to talk to you.

INT. HARDIN'S CAR - NIGHT

The engine IDLES as Winer and Hardin sit.

HARDIN
Winer, I don't want me and you to
have a fallin' out. I think maybe
we got off on the wrong foot back
there and I think we ort to work it
out.

WINER
I don't guess there's anything left
to work out. You want me to do
something I can't do and I guess
that's all there is to it.

HARDIN
Well, you kind-of got me backed
into a corner on this thing, and
you ornt fuck with a man backed in
a corner.

WINER
If you're in a corner then it's a
corner you picked yourself... You
act like I'm going to mistreat her.
I wouldn't hurt her for the world.

HARDIN
Goddamn it, Winer - you're goin' to
have to make up your mind. Just
what is it you want? Pussy? Winder
curtains? A little white house
somers with roses climbin' on it?
It ain't like that! It never was.
All it is, is a hole and over half
the people in the world's got one.
Ain't that right?

WINER
No.... You paid me off tonight and
we're even now. Let's stay that
way. You find somebody else to
finish your building and I'll find
another place to work.

Hardin looks suddenly, irrationally exasperated.

HARDIN

You dipshit fool! You think I couldn't have found a dozen carpenters better than you? Wake up, Winer. You been livin' in a dream world.

WINER

Then why did you hire me?

The question catches Hardin off-guard and he looks perplexed for a moment.

HARDIN

Damned if I know... I reckon deep down I was just fuckin' with you.

WINER

What do you mean?

HARDIN

(somewhat taciturn)

Just let it be. It ain't got nothin' to do with this.

Opening the car door, Winer gets out. Before closing it again, he leans back in.

WINER

I aim to see her. There's nothing you can do to stop me.

HARDIN

Hell, you done been stopped! You was stopped the minute I kicked them come-stained blankets out of that stumphole. You was stopped and never even knowed it.

He roars away.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - DAY

A gray Fall day. A POLICE CRUISER stops in front of the house and Deputy Cooper gets out, holding a PAPER.

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - PORCH - DAY

With a somewhat puzzled look on his face, Hardin is standing just outside the door, holding the paper Cooper has just handed him. Pearl and Amber stand nearby.

COOPER

It's a summons, Mr. Hardin. It means you got to go to court. There's goin' to be a hearin' - about them horses. He got it up at Franklin, Blalock did. It come down this mornin' and I brought it on out.

Hardin nods.

HARDIN

I reckon you didn't have no selection. You doin' all right, Cooper, and Bellwether ain't goin' to be sheriff always. We might fool around and run you next election they hold.

COOPER

You know I always try to work with you, Mr. Hardin.

HARDIN

Shore you do. But that Bellwether, now... He's aimin' to wake up one of these times out of a job. Or just not wake up at all.

He sits down thoughtfully in a ROCKING CHAIR.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

What'd happen if I just don't show up at this hearin' or whatever?

COOPER

If one of you don't go, then the othern gets a judgement agin' him. Like if you don't show, the judge'll automatically find for Blalock. He gets them horses back and you don't get nothin'.

HARDIN

Goddamn him.

COOPER

I can't help it. That's the way it works.

HARDIN

I know you can't. But he ain't gettin' them fuckin' horses. If he does, it'll be when I'm dead and gone... All these sons-of-bitches startin' to shove me around, Cooper, and I don't aim to have it.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Amber Rose, emerging from the school with the OTHER STUDENTS, stops at the sight of Winer leaning against Motormouth's Chrysler, parked at the curb.

AMBER

What're you doing with Motormouth Hodges' car?

WINER

I borrowed it. You want to go for a ride?

AMBER

I don't know. How'd you learn to drive so fast?

WINER

Motormouth showed me. He said I was learning from a master.

AMBER

(laughing)

Oh, Lord... I never rode with a master before.

She gets in the car.

INT. MOTORMOUTH'S CAR - DAY

Winer drives as Amber gazes out the window, enjoying the freedom.

WINER

Where do you think Hardin's at?

AMBER

I don't know and I don't care. He can't stop me if I'm with you, can he?

WINER

What did he say to you about those blankets?

AMBER

Nothin'.

Winer gives her a skeptical glance.

EXT. HARDIN'S - DAY

Hardin and a STATE PROSECUTOR survey the "garden" Hardin says was destroyed by Blalock's horses. The Prosecutor doesn't seem impressed and heads for his car as Hardin, none-too-pleased, glowers toward the honkytonk.

INT. HONKYTONK - DAY

Hardin swings open the door and heads to the bar. He looks - in the far corner Motormouth is slouched over, a beer in front of him, looking close to death. Hardin's new bouncer, JIMINEZ, a Mexican mountain of a man, gestures at Motormouth.

JIMINEZ

(to Hardin)

You want him gone?

HARDIN

He here by himself?

JIMINEZ

Some kid dropped him off then left.

Hardin thinks a moment.

HARDIN

(after a beat)

No.

He pours himself a cup of coffee and takes a seat across from Motormouth. He lights a cigarette.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

You know what your trouble is, Hodges?

He doesn't expect Motormouth to answer and he doesn't.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

You let people run over you. You don't stand up for yourself. Hell, no wonder Blalock's fuckin' your old woman. I guess he figures it's all right with you. You ain't never had it out with him, have you?

MOTORMOUTH

Well, we ain't never talked about it right out.

HARDIN

Talkin don't settle nothin. You got to let him know where you stand. You just lettin him railroad you... You supportin her all this time and him fuckin her and layin back laughing about it.

MOTORMOUTH

Yeah, he done that all right.

HARDIN

And you let him. Where I come from we do things a little different. What it boils down to is the edge. You let him get a foot in the door and never said a word and let him get a edge over you. You got to get one of your own. You get a edge over him and you can lead him around like a lapdog.

Motormouth looks skeptical.

MOTORMOUTH

Hell, you know Blalock. How overbearin' he is.

HARDIN

Nobody ain't going to just hand you a edge. Like everything else in this world you got to take it. Back home we'd take a feller like Blalock to see Patsy.

MOTORMOUTH

You do what?

HARDIN

Take him to see Patsy. You take a feller with his hatsize growed a size or two too big and tell him Patsy wants to see him real bad. She's got the hots for him. It ain't no trouble to get him to believe it - I never seen a feller yet wouldn't believe some gal has the hots for him. Then we'd take him out to someplace don't nobody live and tell him to go to the door and Patsy'd be there waiting on him. He'd go struttin up to the door like a bantyrooster and some feller with a shotgun'd jump out hollerin about folks leavin his daughter alone - 'course we'd have the shell doctored, all the shot out of it, but the feller didn't know that. He'd get right lightfooted. And you know what? They wasn't ever the same after that. They'd lost their edge. They just didn't have it no more.

He lays on the table a waxed shotgun shell and turns it toward Hodges to show him it's empty.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

I got a plan for you. You want my advice or not?

Motormouth is listening.

BY THE BAR

Hardin approaches Jiminez.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

See if you can get Blalock on the telephone. Tell him I said come and get his horses.

Jiminez starts looking up the number in a thin PHONE BOOK.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

When he comes, if I ain't here you go out with Hodges and take four or five of these highbinders with you. Hodges got a trick he aims to play on Blalock.

Jiminez nods, takes the phone off the hook and dials.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

What I like about you is you never
ask me why. Why is that, Jiminez?

JIMINEZ

I'm afraid you'd tell me.

EXT. HARDIN'S - DAY

Hardin approaches and enters the wire fence enclosing the horses. The stallion gazes at him - half arrogant, half inquisitive, its breath steamy in the cold air.

HARDIN

(to the horse)

You want to ride around awhile or
see us a show here directly?

He lights a cigarette and pulls a SHOTGUN CARTRIDGE from his pocket. The empty one he showed Motormouth. Hardin looks up - Blalock's truck is coming up the drive. He turns back to the horse.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

All right, we'll ride then.

He swings himself into the saddle.

BY THE STREAM

Hardin and the Morgan are fording the stream when the GUNSHOT comes. He does not look back.

ON THE RIDGE

Hardin looks down at his property from the Morgan's back. He sees a tableau of men gathered around Blalock lying motionless on the ground with a large piece of his chest torn away. Motormouth is sprinting headlong down the drive. Hardin watches a few more moments then spurs the horse along.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MOTORMOUTH'S CAR - DAY

Winer and Amber sit parked a short distance down the road from Hardin's drive. From here, the Packard is visible by the house.

WINER
Will he hurt you?

AMBER
He never has, really.

WINER
Tell me if he does.

AMBER
Why? What will you do? Kill him?
Defend my honor?

Her mockery makes Winer feel more helpless.

WINER
All I want right now is for you to
never get out that door.

Amber looks at him sympathetically, kisses him, then gets out anyway.

AMBER
You'll see me soon enough. Tonight.
I promise.

She leaves.

INT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

TIGHT ON A HAND MIRROR that reflects Amber's face. She's putting on LIPSTICK. Hardin appears in the reflection behind her.

HARDIN
Think you're goin' somewhere?

AMBER
Nathan Winer's takin' me to the
show.

HARDIN
No, he's not.

AMBER
Yes, he is. Mama's done said I
could go.

HARDIN
Mama don't call the shots around
here and never did, if memory
serves.

AMBER

Well, she calls them with me.
You're not my daddy.

HARDIN

I'm damn sure not, and never
claimed to be.

Hardin's reflection approaches until his bulk fills the frame, wrapping itself around her from behind. Each hand cups a breast. Feeling helpless, Amber pretends to struggle.

AMBER

Quit it.

Hardin does not.

AMBER (CONT'D)

Mama's crazy. She'll kill you one
of these days.

HARDIN

(massaging her breasts)
I'm like a cat - I take a lot a'
killin'.

AMBER

I'm a grown woman, Dallas. And if
I'm of a mind to pick up and leave
here with Nathan Winer or anyone
else I want to, you can't stop me.

HARDIN

I just did, and it didn't hurt a
bit, did it?

He twists her body toward him forcefully, but she keeps her face turned away.

AMBER

Quit it... Quit it, Dallas...

HARDIN

You think I don't know? You think
I'm gonna let you throw yourself
away on some redneck with dirty
fingernails and no idy at all what
he's got?

He releases her, stepping back to light a CIGARETTE.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Throw your things in a suitcase. As long as you're all dressed up, we might as well go somewhere.

AMBER

Go where?

HARDIN

You'll see when we get there.

AMBER

If you think I'm going anywhere with you, you're badly mistaken.

HARDIN

Get it packed, or you'll by God go without it.

He turns on his heel and leaves the room just as Pearl enters. She looks at Amber. Neither says anything.

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - ESTABLISHING - NIGHT

A new, if still not completely finished, honkytonk has risen behind the house. CARS fill the drive, and the place appears to be jumping.

EXT. HARDIN'S HOUSE - PORCH - NIGHT

Dressed for a date, Winer approaches the SCREEN DOOR and knocks. PEARL'S VOICE answers.

PEARL (O.S.)

Who's there? Get away from that damned door.

WINER

It's Nathan Winer. Is Amber Rose here?

After a moment, a huge, WHEEZING bulk approaches from the shadows and Pearl stands in the doorway, leaning against the jamb, drunk.

PEARL

What is it?

WINER

I just wanted Amber Rose. We were supposed to go to the show in Ackerman's Field.

Pearl snorts bitterly.

PEARL

Well, she ain't here, Nathan. She's gone off to Columbia or somewhere's with Dallas.

WINER

(confused)

We were supposed to go to the show. She said she wanted to.

PEARL

Dallas didn't say for sure where they were goin' or when they'd be back.

She holds up a WHISKEY BOTTLE and takes a generous swig from it. She holds it out toward Winer.

PEARL (CONT'D)

Get you a little drunk, there?

WINER

I wouldn't care for any.

PEARL

Come in and set awhile with me. We'll wait on 'em together.

Winer shakes his head.

WINER

No... Thanks. If you were guessin', what time would you guess they'd be back?

She thinks, then takes another swig.

PEARL

I guess when I seen them comin'.

EXT. ROAD OUTSIDE HARDIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Winer emerges from the drive, anxiety over Amber's fate rising higher and higher within him. He even takes a few steps down the road, as if intending to chase after her, before he stops in deep frustration at his own helplessness.

INT. LONG'S MARKET - SODA FOUNTAIN - NIGHT

Winer, still dressed for his date, sits on one of the stools as the waitress - the same one Buttcut talked back to - approaches.

WAITRESS

Can I get yins something?

WINER

Have you seen Buttcut Chessor around?

WAITRESS

No, I ain't, and I ain't likely to. He's barred from here. He come in here the other night and started a fight and they like to tore the place apart.

WINER

I guess he's down at the poolhall, then.

WAITRESS

I wouldn't know... Why you want to waste your time on a crazy thing like that?

WINER

I just wondered where he was.

WAITRESS

That other buddy of yours is long gone, ain't he? Motormouth?

WINER

So they say.

WAITRESS

Reckon he really killed that Blalock feller? I heard Hardin had it done.

Winer gazes out the window at the darkness.

WINER

I don't know.

WAITRESS

(after a beat)

You look lonesome tonight.

Winer looks at her and gets up to go.

WINER
I'm not lonesome.

WAITRESS
(as Winer leaves)
You may be later on.

Winer leaves.

INT. POOL HALL IN TOWN - NIGHT

Buttcut's at a table, shooting pool, as Winer enters and finds him.

WINER
Hardin's got Amber Rose.

Buttcut looks up at him.

BUTTCUT
What do you mean he's "got" her?

WINER
We were supposed to go to the show tonight. I go to pick her up, and her Ma says Hardin took her off somewheres... God knows where. For God knows what.

BUTTCUT
You know there was a killin' over there, right? Motormouth shot Cecil Blalock. He's crazy but I didn't think he had the nerve to kill nobody.

WINER
He got set up. Hardin set him up somehow - I know it...

BUTTCUT
What are you going to do?

WINER
I figure I gotta do something, but I don't know what. I'm goin' crazy.

BUTTCUT
Hell, let's go. I need a drink. Let's go to Hardin's.

WINER
I don't know.

BUTTCUT

You ain't got a hair on your ass if you don't go. You got to take up for yourself. You let these sons of bitches run over you and it'll be somebody runnin' over you all your life.

Winer mulls it over, then a look of resolve settles onto his face.

WINER

All right. Let's go.

INT. HONKYTONK - NIGHT

Winer and Buttcut enter. The place is moderately crowded, with a BARKEEP and a Jiminez the bouncer seated at the bar. Amber Rose, in a demure white dress, sits at a table near the back with a FAT MAN drinking whiskey from a bottle. When she sees Winer her eyes momentarily widen before she lowers them.

WINER

Let's get out of here.

BUTTCUT

Hell, no. Ain't this a public place? There's Rose. Who's that goddamn salesman or whatever with her?

WINER

I don't know.

BUTTCUT

(looking at him)

Say, you look kindly down in the mouth, son. How about a little drink?

WINER

Why not? I guess I might as well.

Buttcut orders a beer at the bar for himself and Winer. They both sit and study the fat man with Amber across the length of the room.

BUTTCUT

You gotta go over there and talk to Rose.

(indicating the bouncer)

Don't worry about the guard dog. I got him covered.

WINER

It's my fight, Buttcut, not yours.

BUTTCUT

I aim to try him sooner or later anyway. You might as well get a little something out of it.

Winer thinks, then finally grabs his beer and goes to the table with Amber and the fat man.

WINER

(sitting)

Hello, Amber Rose.

FAT SALESMAN

Do you know this young man?

Amber doesn't reply.

FAT SALESMAN (CONT'D)

(to Winer)

All these other tables are unoccupied. Perhaps you'd care to sit somewhere's else.

Winer drinks his beer.

WINER

No. I like it here all right.

The fat man has a hand on Amber.

FAT SALESMAN

Well, we'll leave it to you.

WINER

(to Amber)

I've got to talk to you.

She shakes her head, looking like she might cry.

AMBER

(to the fat man)

I don't want to move.

FAT SALESMAN

What's going on here? Is my money not good enough for you or what?

She looks at Winer.

AMBER

Go away, Nathan.

WINER

Then you go with me.

AMBER

I can't. You know I can't.

WINER

It's easy. All you have to do is
put one foot in front of the other.

AMBER

I can't.

She reaches to touch his face. The fat man turns to Winer in disgust.

FAT SALESMAN

I've paid her good money. Or paid
it to Hardin. And I aim to get the
benefit of it. Now, I don't know
who you are or what your status is
but I suggest you get your ass out
of here.

Buttcut steps up behind Winer and then leans across the table.

BUTTCUT

Are you havin' words with this
young feller here?

FAT SALESMAN

None that concern you.

BUTTCUT

Funny. I was settin' way back on
that stool over there and I thought
I heard you say something about him
gettin' his ass out of here. I
reckon you got the deed to this
place ridin' in your shirt pocket?

Fat salesman doesn't say anything.

BUTTCUT (CONT'D)

Did I hear that or not?

FAT SALESMAN

I don't see how it concerns you.

Winer rises from his chair.

WINER

It's not worth fightin' about.

(to Amber)

I'm leavin'. Are you goin' with me
or stayin' with these folks?

Amber hesitates, torn. Finally she rises and grabs her purse.

AMBER

(to the fat man)

I'm sorry.

FAT SALESMAN

(grabbing her arm)

The hell you are. I got a forty-
acre farm tied up in you already.

Winer hits the fat man in the face as hard as he can. A mist of blood sprays down his shirt and he falls over backward. Suddenly Jiminez the bouncer flies into action, coming over with a POOL CUE as a weapon. He doesn't get too far before Buttcut smashes a CHAIR over his back and he falls to the ground.

BARKEEP

They Lord God.

PATRONS scramble out the front door, leaving HALF-EMPTY DRINKS on the tables. On the ground, Jiminez tries to slip on a pair of BRASS KNUCKLES but Buttcut kicks him squarely in the head before he can.

BUTTCUT

You think you're hell on boys?
Let's see how you do with a man.

Jiminez gets up and approaches him, ducking Buttcut's punches. He swats away Buttcut's right hook and knocks him into a pinball machine. Shaking his head, Buttcut hits Jiminez in the face. Meanwhile, the fat man is on his hands and knees trying to find a handkerchief for his BLOOD.

FAT SALESMAN

A doctor. A doctor...

Winer rushes to Buttcut and tries to pull him off Jiminez.

WINER

The law's coming.

BUTTCUT

(to Jiminez)

I'll learn you. Now beg me to quit.

JIMINEZ

Fuck you.

Suddenly, Cooper and a couple HIGHWAY PATROLMEN burst through the front door. Cooper goes for Buttcut who swings and connects with Cooper's face hard enough to draw BLOOD. The other cops grab Winer and try to hustle him toward the door. Amber swings into Winer's arms and holds him tight. One of the patrolmen tries to pull her off but she won't budge. Breaking free, Winer strikes him in the jaw. The other patrolmen takes out a BLACKJACK and whacks him in the head. Winer goes down.

FADE TO:

INT. SHERIFF BELLWETHER'S OFFICE - DAY

Bellwhether once again sits across from Oliver.

BELLWETHER

I asked him was there anybody he wanted to let know. He first said no, then he named you.

OLIVER

What's he charged with?

BELLWETHER

Disorderly conduct and assault.

Oliver sighs.

OLIVER

What about that Chessor boy?

BELLWETHER

Them two plus public drunkenness. Resistin' arrest with intent to commit murder. Destruction of private property, destruction of city property...

OLIVER

They Lord God... Did you tell Winer 'bout his pa?

BELLWETHER

Not yet... But I'm goin' to have to.

OLIVER

I wish you'd wait up...

BELLWHETHER

Mr. Oliver, I have. People've started talkin' about it - I can't wait any longer. The boy has a right to know.

Oliver rises to go.

OLIVER

Not much of a right if it lands you in the pen the rest of your days...

INT. JAIL - DAY

Winer and Buttcut look up as the JAILER opens the bullpen. He motions to Winer.

JAILER

The governor called. Your pardon come through at the last minute.

Winer gets up and begins gathering his belongings.

BUTTCUT

What about me?

JAILER

They just left word to let Winer out. They ain't set your bond yet, and I doubt they's a man in the county can go it when they do.

BUTTCUT

Well, hellfire...

INT. SHERIFF BELLWHETHER'S OFFICE - DAY

Winer sits across the desk from Bellwhether, a deep frown on his face.

WINER

And you say you're sure it's my Pa?

BELLWHETHER

That's what the government dental record said. He was in World War I... It's him all right.

Winer remains silent for a long moment.

WINER

It was Hardin. Hardin did this.

BELLWETHER

Now we don't know that for sure,
son. There's nothing we've got
strong enough to issue a warrant.

Winer gets up to go, but pauses briefly.

WINER

It was Hardin.

He leaves.

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT

Winer sits outside the cabin, staring into the campfire. Presently, he pulls an object from his pocket: his father's KNIFE, in its leather SHEATH. He turns it over in his hands, as if appraising it. Finally, he flings it blade-first into the ground near the fire. He gazes at it there a moment, then reaches and yanks it out of the ground. He gets up to go.

EXT. HARDIN'S - NIGHT

Motormouth's Chrysler pulls up the drive with Winer behind the wheel. He parks behind the last of a ROW OF CARS lining the drive.

Getting out, Winer takes a look around. The first thing he sees is Hardin's Packard, parked near the house. After pausing to work out his options, Winer sneaks toward the honkytonk.

BY THE HONKYTONK

Winer peers through a window. INSIDE he can see Hardin behind the bar, Jiminez on a stool in front of him. Winer can also see Amber Rose, again sitting with a FAT FARMER.

Winer steps back and thinks. Then he notices something: a GARBAGE CAN full of EMPTY BOTTLES by the back door. He gets an idea.

BY MOTORMOUTH'S CAR

Winer sneaks back from the honkytonk with as many empty bottles as he can carry and a length of GARDEN HOSE slung over his shoulder. Easing them to the ground, Winer fishes out his knife and starts cutting the brass nozzle from the end of the hose.

BY THE GAS TANK

Winer has one end of the garden hose in the open tank and the other end in his mouth, ready to begin siphoning. Before he does, however, a new idea strikes him. He looks toward Hardin's Packard.

BY THE PACKARD

Using the hose, Winer siphons the gasoline from the Packard's tank into the last of the formerly empty bottles. When this is mostly full, Winer wets a SHIRT he pulled from the clothes line with the stream of GASOLINE from the hose and begins tearing it into strips, letting go of the hose when he's done to spill the rest of the gas from the tank onto the ground.

INT. HONKYTONK - NIGHT

Hardin's behind the bar, drinking JACK DANIELS on the rocks next to Jiminez as Winer enters. Amber notices him immediately and she blanches.

HARDIN

What do you want, Winer?

Winer approaches the bar.

WINER

I want to talk to you a minute. By yourself.

HARDIN

Anything you got to say can be said right here.

(indicates Jiminez)

I believe you met this feller. His name is Jiminez. I brought 'im up from Memphis to help with some of the light work. He used to bust heads in the meanest whorehouse on Beale Street.

(to Jiminez)

Winer used to be a pretty good feller till he got 'im a little pussy. Then he just flew all to pieces, forgot who his friends were anymore. Just can't keep off that ol' thin ice.

JIMINEZ

Pussy warps a man's head worse than codeine ever did.

(MORE)

JIMINEZ (CONT'D)

I guess next to gettin' caught,
Pussy has caused me more trouble
than anything else.

WINER

(determined)

I want to see you outside.

HARDIN

I look jus' the same in here.

He pours another glass of Jack Daniels and sits twisting it,
watching the patterns of dew it leaves on the counter top.

WINER

(glancing at Amber)

I'm goin' to see her.

HARDIN

Goddamn it, Winer! Does it really
have to be spoonfed to you like
this? I've got money tied up here.
I've bought her clothes and fed her
and by God raised her and now you
think you'll get her off somewhere
thinkin' about dishes and baby
buggies and such shit, and it all
goes out the winder. Like hell it
does! Folks around here beginnin'
to think they can shove me this way
and that, and I reckon I'm gonna
have to start bangin' some more
heads together. Now pick up that
long face and draggy ass and `get
out of my place. You n' your money
ain't no good in here.

WINER

I'll tell you what, Hardin - why
don't you put me out?

Hardin slams the whiskey glass hard on the counter top.

HARDIN

(yelling)

No, you won't tell me what! You
won't tell me jackshit! I'll tell
you what - I don't have to put you
out. I got Jiminez... He'll have
you out of here so fast, all you'll
remember about it was how bad it
hurt.

Winer turns to Jiminez.

WINER

Take me out, Jiminez.

JIMINEZ

The man pays me off on Friday gives my orders.

Hardin looks almost weary.

HARDIN

Then take him out.

JIMINEZ

(downing his shot glass)
Easy money...

He gets up and approaches Winer.

Winer throws first, but Jiminez ducks expertly and the punch slides right off his greasy hair. He responds with a one-two punch to Winer's gut that sends him flying back into a table, scattering DRINKS, DRUNKS and CARDS everywhere. Gasping, on the verge of passing out, Winer struggles to his feet as Jiminez comes after him again. Winer hurls a CHAIR, which Jiminez easily deflects. Winer slams his fist into Jiminez' gut with all his strength, then does a cross with his other fist across the Mexican's jaw. His head jerks back a bit, but Jiminez responds with a punch that lands full in Winer's face, sending him sprawling. He lies there, stunned, as Hardin watches impassively from behind the bar. He pours himself another drink.

HARDIN

Mark him up a little. Mess them smooth jaws up. Ever' time he looks in a shavin' mirror, I want him to remember how sweet that pussy was.

JIMINEZ

Then let him get up. I don't like hittin' a man when he's down.

HARDIN

He'll get up. You couldn't keep 'im down with a fuckin' logchain. He ain't got sense to lay down and quit.

Winer once again is struggling to get up.

WINER

(gasping)
You better make him kill me.
(MORE)

WINER (CONT'D)
 Because if I live, you won't.
 You're a dead man.

HARDIN
 (sipping his whiskey)
 I know the words to that old song -
 I've heard it often enough.

JIMINEZ
 You gettin' up or stayin' down?

Winer finally does get to his feet and makes a last-ditch flight at Jiminez who swings, but whose bulk now works against him. Winer ducks under the Mexican's fist and hits him square in the gut, knocking him backwards into the bar. As Jiminez lands on the floor, Winer turns toward Amber.

WINER
 If you wanna go, now's your chance.

Amber hesitates only a moment before nodding. She gets to her feet.

FAT FARMER
 Now, see here...

She tosses the man's DRINK in his face.

AMBER
 (to Winer)
 Let's go.

She and Winer run out the door as Jiminez, back on his feet, begins pursuit.

EXT. HONKYTONK - NIGHT

Amber runs out the door first followed by Winer, who stops suddenly.

WINER
 Run to Motormouth's car. It's just
 down a ways.

AMBER
 What are you goin' to do?

WINER
 Buy us some time.

He grabs one of several gasoline-filled bottles stashed by the door. Pulling a LIGHTER from his pocket, Winer lights the wick just as Jiminez appears in the open doorway.

Winer hurls the bottle, which shatters in the doorway, setting both it and the Mexican ablaze. Jiminez falls back, screaming.

Winer lights another bottle and hurls it through the doorway into the honkytonk. It shatters inside, setting aflame the jukebox and a portion of the wall. Winer hurls another bottle.

PATRONS begin fleeing the building in panic, creating utter chaos. The flames are spreading, beginning to consume the bar. Winer keeps on throwing gasoline-filled bottles through the door until he's out. Then he runs for the car.

BY MOTORMOUTH'S CAR

Amber waits, anxiously watching the growing inferno as the bar's former patrons scatter around her. She looks relieved to see Winer when he runs up.

WINER (CONT'D)

Let's go.

AMBER

Where?

WINER

Anywhere we want.

He goes around to the driver's side as Amber gets into the car.

BY HARDIN'S HOUSE

Bathed in the light of the honkytonk, which is now fully engulfed in flames, Hardin arrives at the back door of the house. He pauses long enough to see Winer in the distance, getting behind the wheel of Motormouth's car. Hardin disappears inside the house.

He comes out a moment later holding the Winchester. By this time, Motormouth's Chrysler has joined the convoy of vehicles fleeing the scene. Hardin takes aim with the rifle. It's an impossible shot, and the first one misses, but the second one miraculously connects. In the distance, the Chrysler fishtails, flips, and goes off the drive into the thicket of sawbriar by the hollow. Hardin begins racing toward the crash scene.

EXT. CRASH SCENE - NIGHT

Holding the Winchester, Hardin scrambles down the embankment to find Motormouth's battered Chrysler on its side, propped against a tree, its one remaining headlight shining crazily into the woods. No one's here.

Hardin goes around to the open driver's-side door. He bends close to examine it. There's BLOOD. Looking into the trees for signs of a trail, Hardin soon finds one and begins heading off in pursuit.

DOWN THE TRAIL

Winer and Amber Rose are fleeing the wreck. Winer has been injured: blood is flowing freely from a gash in his forehead into his eyes, and he's limping from a broken - or, at the very least, sprained - ankle. Amber, who is relatively intact, is holding him up.

AMBER

You think he's after us?

WINER

Yes.

AMBER

He could've burned up in the fire.

WINER

Hardin won't burn.

As if on cue, Hardin calls out from behind them.

HARDIN'S VOICE

(shouting)

Winer! Amber Rose! You stop this foolishness, now. You ain't goin' fast if that's the way you're goin', into the trees and up the hollow. And I know one of you is hurt.

Winer turns to Amber.

WINER

Keep going. I'll hold him off.

AMBER

He'll kill you!

WINER

I can live with that better than
him killin' you.

Amber shakes her head and grabs Winer's arm.

AMBER

No - you're not gonna put that on
me, either.

She pulls/carries him along the trail.

EXT. ABYSS - NIGHT

Amber and Winer emerge from the trees. Seeing the abyss,
Winer stops.

WINER

Whoa, whoa, whoa... Stop.

AMBER

What?

Hardin's voice bellows again from behind them.

HARDIN'S VOICE

(shouting)

I can even see you! You're by that
big pit of a thing... Which, it so
happens, is soon goin' to be your
permanent home.

WINER

(looking at the abyss)

We can use this.

AMBER

How?

WINER

I just need to get him close enough
to it. Go around to the other side.

AMBER

I told you I'm not leavin' you
here...

WINER

(cutting her off)

Just go! I don't wanna hafta worry
about where you are as well as him.

Amber hesitates, then nods. Before running, she plants a little kiss on Winer's lips.

AMBER

I love you.

She runs away into the darkness. Winer hobbles around, blood flowing into his eyes, to face Hardin. He appears a moment or two later, holding the rifle casually, as if it were a toy.

HARDIN

Well, well, well - you made it out here by yerselves. How mighty thoughtful of you. Makin' it so convenient for me 'n all... So I don't have to drag the bodies that far to get rid of them, I mean. And I do mean bodies, because I think you done ruined that girl for me. Made her way too willful... She's no good to me now. You can blame yourself for that one too, Winer.

WINER

Fuck you, Hardin. It's just as likely you's goin' down that pit as me.

Hardin grins.

HARDIN

Well, that strikes me as a little unlikely, son. Seein' as it's me holding a thirty-ought-six and you got - what again?

Winer pulls the sheath from his pocket, pulls the knife from its sheath. He holds it up. This time Hardin actually laughs.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

A knife. I got a gun and you got a knife. You got balls, boy - I gotta give you that. But that's all you got really. 'Cause what little brains you got are soon gonna be splattered all over them rocks back there.

He holds up the rifle and FIRES. Winer just has time to duck behind a tree before a big piece of it gets blasted away by Hardin's slug.

IN THE TREES

Winer moves as stealthily as he can as Hardin once again shouts after him.

HARDIN'S VOICE

(shouting)

Okay, you got lucky that time, but how many moves like that you got left in you? I mean, really - I seen how bad you was limpin'.

Winer pauses behind a tree, waits for Hardin to get between him and the abyss. He doesn't have to wait long. When he does appear, Hardin is holding the rifle up, ready to take the first shot he gets.

HARDIN

(shouting)

You still got options, boy - you can make this quick, or you can let me play around with you once I do find you. You know what that means - I don't have to tell you that... and I will find you -

With a mighty roar, Winer hurls himself at Hardin with as much force as he can muster. He throws Hardin off balance, and their combined momentum takes them almost to the edge of the pit. But only almost.

Hardin pivots and throws Winer to the ground. Winer grabs the rifle at the last moment and rips it from Hardin's grip. His own grip isn't strong enough to hold onto it, however, and the rifle flies away into the abyss.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

(growling)

That's all right - I don't need a rifle to swat a fly.

He lunges at Winer and grabs him before Winer can retrieve his knife from where it landed. Hardin begins dragging Winer to the lip of the abyss.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

Say hi to your daddy when you see 'im... Tell 'im I give him my regards and wish I was there to spit in his face personally... You'll do that for me, won't you, boy?

WINER

Fuck you, Hardin.

HARDIN

Fiesty to the end... I gotta admit,
I like that about you, Winer. It's
almost a shame I'm gonna hafta do
this - I might even miss you once
or twice.

He begins pushing Winer over lip. Winer struggles as hard as he can, but he's wounded and Hardin is bigger. It looks like a losing battle until Winer notices Amber several feet away, looking frantically about for a weapon.

Seeing Winer's eyes shift, Hardin turns around and catches Amber just as she picks up a LARGE STONE.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

You - you couldn't even have enough
sense to keep runnin' and save
yourself...

Winer lunges for the knife. Grabbing it, he launches himself at Hardin and buries the blade into his neck. Hardin screams as a fountain of BLOOD erupts from his punctured jugular.

HARDIN (CONT'D)

(turning to Winer)

You little fuck!

Winer lunges again, this time burying the knife in the middle of Hardin's chest. Hardin's eyes widen in response, almost as if he were surprised, scandalized. He opens his mouth to speak, but only blood comes out.

With the knife in Hardin's chest, Winer pushes him to the edge of the abyss. He puts his hand on Hardin and pushes while yanking the knife free. Hardin falls, disappearing into the depths.

Amber comes to Winer's side as he watches the darkness swallow Hardin up.

AMBER

Is he dead?

WINER

I can't be sure, but I can't see
anyone coming back from that.

They look at each other.

AMBER

Now what?

WINER

Well - the law's comin', if they ain't here already... I just got out of jail and the first thing I did was come and burn down Hardin's bar. Plus, they won't be able to find Hardin. That don't look good for me.

Amber thinks about it, but only for a moment.

AMBER

Well, we should run. Let's go.

WINER

You serious? You'll go with me?

She nods, a grin spreading on her face at the idea.

AMBER

Yeah - neither one of us has got anything here.

They stand for a moment, as if waiting for the other to say something. But there isn't anything left to say. Leaning again on her for support, Winer and Amber Rose disappear into the woods.

WINER

You goin' to miss this place?

AMBER

Not even for a second.

FADE TO:

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Spring is now in full bloom. Oliver approaches along a path, poking the ground with his stick. He pauses when he feels it strike something solid.

OLIVER (V.O.)

Nathan Winer Jr. had been gone for six months when I found the first jar of money.

Bending, Oliver digs away the dirt until he uncovers one of Hardin's fruit jars.

EXT. RIDGE - DAY

Leaning on his staff, mantled in flame by the setting sun, Oliver stands at the spot that overlooks Hardin's property, now overrun by SCAVENGERS: local people tearing up the scorched wreckage in search of the hidden cash they'd heard about.

OLIVER (V.O.)

All that Spring, the scavengers came, tearing up what was left of the place... All these greedy folks doing more work than they'd ever done before, just so they could find Hardin's fortune 'fore anyone else did.

Shaking his head bemusedly, Oliver turns and walks away.

INT. OLIVER'S HOUSE - DAY

Oliver has pried up the floorboards and is now stowing a FRUIT JAR FULL OF CASH below, where several others have already been hidden. He's marking the spot with a METAL ROD.

OLIVER (V.O.)

By the last of August, I had found four other jars. I hid 'em under the floorboards, and even drove in a metal stake beside each jar, in case the house burned and all I'd have to do is kick through the ashes to find 'em. For it was young Winer's money, owed for a wrong done long ago.

EXT. MORMON SPRINGS LANDSCAPE - DAY

The same slope-shouldered hills from the beginning. It is now Spring. In a TIME-LAPSE, the seasons pass and it becomes Fall.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Dressed against the Autumn chill, Oliver again approaches along a path in search of ginseng. The RIDGE of the hill is beyond. Once again Oliver stops when his staff hits a buried object.

OLIVER (V.O.)

But time passed, and I began to feel that Winer wasn't comin' back. Him and Amber Rose. They had gone with no luggage save his father's knife, and no destination 'cept the horizon and what was beyond. Maybe they were dead - the world is wide in its turning, and full of dark alley ways...

As he says this in VO, Oliver bends and digs the JAR OF MONEY from the ground. He holds it up, examining it - weighing it, considering it. Finally he comes to some kind of decision and puts the jar down squarely in the middle of a nearby TREE STUMP. He starts walking away toward the ridge, now limned by late-afternoon sunlight.

HOLD ON THE STUMP with the jar of money in the foreground as Oliver grows ever-smaller in the background.

OLIVER (V.O.)

I never needed nobody anyway. I had the white road in the noon-day sun, the treeline, the summer storms... At night, the moon ran its course and the whippoorwills sang in the dark. That's all that matters. Those are the things that time doesn't take away from you. They are the only things that last.

Oliver has gotten to the ridge. He proceeds over it, disappearing from view.

FADE TO BLACK.