

A Promise Made is a Debt Unpaid

Screenplay by:

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Based on the short poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee" by:

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January 29, 2015

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INT. FURNACE - NIGHT

A large black and white flame moves slowly and seductively in a brick cage. Yellow words pop up:

SUPER TITLE: "A Promise Made is a Debt Unpaid"

SUBTITLE: "©MMXV THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED"

The words pop away just as easily as they came. The flame continues to twist and contort.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

There are strange things done in the midnight sun, by the men who moil for gold. The Arctic trails have their secret tales that would make your blood run cold. The Northern Lights have seen many queer sights, but the queerest they ever did see was that night at the edge of Lake Lebarge.

EXT. TENNESSEE - DAY

We see a large brown and white, almost snowy-looking cotton field stretch across the land. A somewhat small two-storied orange house sits at one end.

SUBTITLE: "September, 1903"

OUR MAN (V.O.)

Now, Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and blows.

We see a cotton plant, with a prickly brown stem and a white puffy crown.

OUR MAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Only God knows why he left his warm home to prospect in the Yukon. He was making good money on his farm.

SAM MCGEE is lounging on a swinging bench in front of the orange home. He swings back and forth and plays "Lazy Moon" by Rosamond Johnson on his custom ukulele. A chocolate lab sits nearby and throatily howls while he plays, Sam laughs.

SMASH CUT:

EXT. RESTING POST - NIGHT

The wind screams and shouts, carrying big chunks of snow.

In black and white again.

Sam McGee and OUR MAN sit in the snow with layer after layer covering themselves. A fire burns between them, obviously it's not helping much.

Our Man is cold but can still feed himself without poking his cheek because of the shivers. Sam McGee on the other hand is pale and looks close to dying, he's so cold. The shivers have taken over him.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell. He'd often say in his homely way:

SAM MCGEE

(with a Southern drawl)

I'd much rather be in Hell.

EXT. DAWSON TRAIL - NIGHT

The duo stand together on a sleigh - Our Man then Sam. Eight huskies pull them through the endless snow.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

On Christmas day we trudged through the cold, and believe me when I say cold. You've never felt it like this, it stabs like a driven nail.

Our Man's face is covered in bits of snow, his eyes bloodshot. When he blinks his eyelashes seem to stick and it takes extra effort to reopen them.

OUR MAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

When we closed our eyes the lashes froze till sometimes we couldn't see. It wasn't fun, but only Sam McGee whimpered.

EXT. RESTING POST - NIGHT

Our Man and Sam McGee are tucked into the snow - where it's surprisingly warmer - with animal skins wrapped around them for extra warmth.

The running dogs are fed and lie close-by, some already

sleeping.

The stars shine bright and the Aurora Borealis dances ecstatically in the sky.

SAM MCGEE

Cap, I'm going to die on this trip.

OUR MAN

Sam...

SAM MCGEE

(cutting off Our Man)

And! If I do, I ask that you won't deny my last request.

Our Man nods to Sam.

SAM MCGEE (CONT'D)

It's the cold, I'm chilled through to the bone. This is half-life and I already feel dead, but I dread a chilling, icy grave. So I want you to swear that you'll cremate my last remains.

Our Man thinks for a beat or two.

OUR MAN

A pal's last need is a thing to heed, eh?

A beat. Then our man nods.

OUR MAN (CONT'D)

I swear. I love you, man.

Our Man smiles and the two shake hands. It's a sealed deal.

EXT. RESTING POST - NIGHT

It's morning but it's still dark. It is for months.

Our Man wakes up and pulls his body and animal skins out of the hole in the snow. The dogs get get up, excited in their movements.

Our Man squats down and taps Sam McGee on his ghastly pale forehead.

OUR MAN

Up up, Sam! Time to get going!

Sam wakes up and slowly pulls himself out, looking very unhealthy.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

I did not tell him, but he looked far worse in the morning.

OUR MAN

Would you like something to eat?

SAM MCGEE

I don't want to eat your food, Cap.

OUR MAN

It's our food as long as your sorry-ass is still around!

Sam smiles.

EXT. DAWSON TRAIL - NIGHT

Sam McGee slumps over the railing of the sleigh as the dogs mush with all their might. Our Man stands upright behind him.

We see quick, colorful flashes of the sunny field and orange house from where Sam McGee hails.

Sam starts to cry frozen tears; Our Man looks at him, worried.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

Before nightfall only a corpse was left of my friend, Sam McGee.

EXT. RESTING POST - NIGHT

Our Man sits by another fire, cuddling with one of the huskies. While Sam McGee's body is on the sleigh, frozen in it's place.

A series of tears lit by the fire rolls down Our Man's face; the husky - sensing Our Man's loss - licks his face.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

There was no easy breath in this land of death.

A gust of wind picks up and blows out the fire.

EXT. RESTING POST - NIGHT

Our Man lies in a new snow hole, without his buddy to jabber about Tennessee.

He has a cold look on his face, he's thinking, maybe even disturbed a little. He looks towards the sleigh where his friend lay.

He gets out of the snow hole, bringing some of the animal skins. He covers his friend in them and then climbs back into his snow hole.

EXT. DAWSON TRAIL - NIGHT

Our Man rides fast through the white landscape.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

I hurried, horror-driven. For something, anything that would allow me to give Sam McGee what he asked for in his last hours.

In a moment of delusion, Our Man sees Sam McGee's head twist around, cracking with ice.

SAM MCGEE

You might tax your brawn and your brain, but you promised through and through. A promise made is a debt unpaid, now cremate my last remains.

Our Man falls off the sled and into the snow, the dogs keep mushing. He gets up and shouts to the dogs:

OUR MAN

Halt! Halt! Halt!

He runs after them.

EXT. RESTING POST - NIGHT

Our man is on the back of the sled again, the huskies struggle to pull the sleigh up an incline.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

In my heart I started to curse that load.

EXT. RESTING POST - NIGHT

He sits by the fire, with his hands to it. The dogs lie around in a circle. Howling back and forth.

OUR MAN
Shut up! Shut up!

He gets up and kicks bits of the firewood towards the dogs, it hits one. The dog gets up and yelps. Our Man sits back down and puts his face in his hands.

OUR MAN (V.O.)
Oh God, how I loathed the body on
my sleigh. It made me mad, and
everyday I swear that thing got
heavier and heavier!

Our Man starts to whimper and cry.

OUR MAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
But on I went, because I had a duty
to my friend. Because I promised.

EXT. RESTING POST - NIGHT

Several nights later in the firelight, Our Man dances around and sings to the corpse of poor Sam McGee in a drunken status. He holds a bottle in his right hand.

OUR MAN
(singing)
*You bitch, you made me not rich,
you spoiled my catch, you asked me
to swear, you knew I don't lie, and
you fucking knew I'd say yes!*

He sits down and looks towards Sam McGee, where his head pokes out from the animal hides is a large grin and wide-eyes that stare into his soul.

Our Man smiles back at the bloating, icy corpse.

A dog comes up to Our Man and licks his hand.

OUR MAN
Sorry, buddy.

Our Man stares into the fire and drinks from his bottle, then spills some in the dog's mouth. A couple other dogs see this and come over to him, he gives them drinks too.

FADE OUT

EXT. LAKE LEBARGE - NIGHT

Our Man stands with his dogs, facing a very large frozen lake. A steamer ferry sits stuck in the lake, encased by ice. On either side, it reads "Alice May."

OUR MAN (V.O.)

Not until I came upon Lake Lebarge
did I find a fitting place for Sam.

Our Man looks at his frozen chum, who looks worse than ever.

OUR MAN

Here is your crematorium, Sam
McGee.

INT. ALICE MAY'S BOILER ROOM - NIGHT

Our Man wrestles wooden floorboards off of the ground. Some snap easily and others will not give. He also finds some charcoal in the boiler.

He loads the boiler with this wood and gets it ablaze. The fire soared and the furnace roared.

He then pulls his heavy, icy friend near and stuffs in Sam McGee, bit by bit, and then slams it shut.

EXT. LAKE LEBARGE - NIGHT

Our Man walks around Lake Lebarge with his huskies.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

I took a hike, I didn't like the
way he sizzled and popped.

Across the sky are familiar streaks of the Aurora Borealis,
and then new ones, steam from the boiler.

Sweat runs down Our Man's face.

OUR MAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Sure, I was out in that stabbing
cold, but a grisly fear made the
sweat roll down my face.

EXT. LAKE LEBARGE/ALICE MAY - NIGHT

The stars shine brightly and Our Man walks towards the Alice May.

OUR MAN (V.O.)

When the stars came out, I reasoned that he's been cooked, I can peep a look. But I approached that boat sick with dread.

He opens the door to go inside.

INT. ALICE MAY'S BOILER ROOM - NIGHT

The boiler roars furiously. Our Man slowly opens the door, it squeals loudly, and he peeps inside.

He stares in awe, horror, and confusion.

Sam McGee sits in the heart of the blaze with a genuinely huge smile.

Parts of his face and body burned away, his bones and flesh visible.

SAM MCGEE

Please close the door! It's nice in here, and I greatly fear you'll let in the cold. I haven't been this warm since I left Tennessee!

SMASH CUT:

BLACK

OUR MAN (V.O.)

There are strange things done in the midnight sun, by the men who toil for gold. The Arctic trails have their secret tales that would make your blood run cold. The Northern Lights have seen many queer sights, but the queerest they ever did see was that night at the edge of Lake Lebarge. Where I cremated Sam McGee.

The credits roll from right to left in bright yellow on black, and Rentaro Taki's song "Hana" accompanies this.