

To all those Birds of Time

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EXT. COUNTRY COTTAGE - FRONT GATE - DAY

A picturesque view. A pleasant silence. The stunning cottage stands tall before two rows of flower gardens. The greenery reflects the rural roots of the American Northwest.

NOLAN WIDE SHOT. At its gray gates, a girl approaches. She is CLAUDIA. Brunette in a white dress. Very pretty.

FRONT GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

She walks passes the rose garden. The smell is overpowering. She takes it in.

ALLEY WAY TO BACKYARD

Walking slowly along the length of the home, she begins to hear voices. A soft racket beyond.

BACKYARD

Derelict. An atelier for woodworks continues to accumulate dust. To its left, stairs leading to basement. Cob webs spread among the backyard like an opaque coat.

As Claudia approaches, the voices become clearer. A man and a woman in a heated conversation. They are JOHN and ANNA. Middle aged. Loving parents.

JOHN

They won't admit to the corruption.
I'm telling you... change doesn't
start with a whimper.

Anna shakes her head then grins at him.

ANNA

John, it's all cyclical. Change.
Forward. Backward. Doesn't matter.
The universe decides when it's time.

JOHN

(sardonic)

Didn't know you were this in tune...
I'm tempted to ask for a Patriots
victory or should I reinvest--

ANNA

(coy)

No no, not telling... although I can
give--

John stops and turns O.S., noticing Claudia at the bottom of
the stairs. Anna hesitates at first then turns to the
stranger as well.

Their bewildered looks push Claudia into uneasiness.

CLAUDIA

I-I'm sorry, I-uh, seem to be lost.

JOHN

I'd say.

ANNA

Surely you're not from around here...

Claudia takes a step back.

CLAUDIA

No ma'am, I was left here.

John and Anna look at each other. More concerned now.

JOHN

What do you mean left here? That
doesn't sound right.

CLAUDIA

My boyfriend likes practical jokes.
Certain ones. And I don't.

Oh. Their uncertainty begins to dissipate. John lowers his
head.

JOHN

(sotto)

Way too many assholes out there.

Claudia builds some courage.

CLAUDIA

I'm sorry to bother you, but I just
need to use a phone.

ANNA

Can't help you there. No service
here. We always have trouble.

A sigh of defeat.

CLAUDIA

Oh that's alright. I'll be okay.

She starts to back track. Anna stops her. A smile forms across Anna's lips. A mother's smile.

ANNA

I doubt it. Half the village is out celebrating its anniversary, three hills over in Casper. They won't be back till sun down.

JOHN

And... that's what happens when you let damn bureaucrats draw lines. Anniversaries across rivers and valleys.

Anna pursues her lips.

ANNA

John...

JOHN

Yeah yeah, I know. Tone down on the politics.

Claudia just lingers by. A robust sorrow forming on her adorable face.

ANNA

Stay for lunch. And then worry about the rest.

Claudia secretly a little more hopeful.

CLAUDIA

Oh I don't-- that wouldn't be right. I'd--I'd be intruding.

The couple's little girl emerges from inside. SOFIA. Precocious and her cuteness too strong to contain. She waves at Claudia. Sofia's wave warms her.

ANNA

Please stay. We would very much enjoy your company. And it looks like Sofia likes you.

Claudia mulls it over then walks to the table.

ANNA (cont'd)

Good. I'll grab another plate.

Anna heads back inside. Claudia sits and gazes past the trees and plants in the backyard.

CLAUDIA
It's beautiful here.

JOHN
Oh yeah. Built by Anna's parents when she was a little girl. Good place to escape to. There aren't too many like it left.

Sofia smiles up at her. But now Claudia returns a faint frown and furrowed brows.

Anna's back with another plate and a side dish.

CLAUDIA
Are you sure it's okay for me to stay?

ANNA
Come now, you're our guest. And you must be hungry.

CLAUDIA
Yes ma'am.

ANNA
Anna, call me Anna.

JOHN
Where's Caleb?

Claudia's jaw tightens at the name.

JOHN (cont'd)
He's always the last one to the table. That boy...

ANNA
He said he was looking over something on the computer. Said it was important.

JOHN
Didn't know Netflix constituted as important. You know that's what he said last time with his Pokemon collection.

Sofia giggles. Claudia joins in. John beams at the both of them.

ANNA

Leave him be. He's still very upset for what happened. Besides, didn't you collect marbles as a child...

JOHN

Yeah well, that was the only way to relax after reaping crops all day. I didn't have it easy.

ANNA

Yes yes, we all know the "when I was a kid, I had to move two mountains across two rivers" story...

JOHN

(to Claudia)

I'm just saying... wouldn't you agree...uh...?

CLAUDIA

Oh Claudia. Well--

Anna spins the conversation.

ANNA

Well, that's a pretty name.

SOFIA

Really pretty.

JOHN

I'm just glad it's not Mary, Susan or Barbara. People just didn't think outside the box back then. You can tell we did, Caleb and Sofia. Imagine what our parents said.

Anna grabs her husband's hand and smiles.

ANNA

That's not to say it doesn't make for good conversation. You see, Caleb is the scientist of the family. We're the business end. So--

CALEB, the son, exits the cottage. His eyes immediately go to Claudia. He looks like he's seen a ghost.

Claudia attempts to hide her surprise, unlike him.

ANNA (cont'd)
 (shaking her head)
 Speak of the devil. No hello, no
 nothing. Just show up and gawk at our
 guest.

Caleb rolls his eyes and shoves his hands in his pockets.

ANNA (cont'd)
 (calm)
 Okay okay. Just come sit down
 already, it'll get cold.
 (re: Claudia)
 This is Claudia. She's a little lost,
 but not too lost I hope.

Anna and Claudia exchange warm regards. Caleb seems skeptical
 so he presses on.

CALEB
 Really? Lost? Didn't know people
 could get lost in the middle of
 nowhere.

JOHN
 You would know huh? Nobody likes a
 smartass.

Anna throws John another look, nostrils flaring.

ANNA
 Caleb. Start eating.
 (re: John)
 You too.
 (back on Claudia)
 So tell me, what takes up most of
 your time? Are you a student?

CLAUDIA
 I was, but decided it wasn't for me,
 so I chose a different path.

Claudia glances at Caleb, but pretends he can't feel it on
 him.

ANNA
 But I hear it's difficult to find
 anything without the proper
 education. Your parents weren't
 opposed to the idea?

Claudia plays around with her food. A catch in her breath.

CLAUDIA

My parents died when I was very young. But I still don't think they would have minded. They would have wanted me to be happy.

ANNA

I'm sorry to hear that. I... I can't imagine.

JOHN

And... are you happy?

Anna scowls at him. John lets go and clears his throat to rephrase.

JOHN (cont'd)

I mean. Are where you want to be?

Claudia looks up at Caleb once more. This time, his green eyes meet hers. A calm washes over her.

CLAUDIA

Aside from being stranded, I'm getting there.

Cheers all around.

JOHN

Well, speaking of dreams, passions and fine wine, my son here has got some far-fetched dreams--

CALEB

--Dad... we talked about this...

JOHN

So I had to rein him in and get him to pursue something honorable. Now if he'd stop wasting his time with silly games, that'd be perfect. Not to mention there's that **girl**...

Claudia coughs up her water. Caleb stays quiet, looks away.

CALEB

Come on Dad...

JOHN

A very mysterious one, for that matter...

Anna interjects with another more pressing concern.

ANNA

No no, I don't buy that you didn't like college, I mean you seem too bright to just say no. What did you study?

CLAUDIA

Uh, medicine.

ANNA

And it was too much?

JOHN

Anna, leave the girl alone. Let her eat.

Tension rises and falls.

ANNA

You're right. I'm sorry.

CLAUDIA

No, I don't mind. I was almost done but something happen. Something personal. I-I... I just couldn't... There was someone, it began causing problems...

Caleb watches her. Agonized. Something in her words taunts him.

ANNA

It's alright. We understand. Forget I asked.

The chatter dies down and they eat in silence. Caleb ponders Claudia's words carefully.

He drops his fork and knots his fingers.

CALEB

(direct)

So where are you from? You look like you're from a small town.

ANNA

CALEB. What has gotten into you?

John watches Claudia and Caleb intently. Something's not right here.

CALEB

I'm just curious.

Claudia swallows hard.

ANNA
Honey, just ignore him.

CLAUDIA
I'm from a small town. Near Elk Mountain.

ANNA
That's a long way out. Well I'd understand why you'd be mad.

JOHN
Elk Mountain... That sounds familiar. Isn't that where those businessmen were **kill**--

Wait. He looks at Sofia and rephrases.

JOHN (cont'd)
--**retired** after they were found running a black market. Trading all kinds of things. The worst kinds of things.

The ruse continues. Claudia looks down at her plate.

CLAUDIA
...I hadn't heard.

Sofia, quiet all this time, throws a wrench in the exchange.

SOFIA
Mommy, why would someone retire someone else? Were they bad people?

Anna and John scatter to formulate a PG answer.

ANNA
It means-- uh--

JOHN
Well, it's when--

Claudia spares no expense, responding with uncanny confidence. A burning passion in her eyes.

CLAUDIA
It means they were taken to a special school to be taught to... Never. Ever. Do what they did again.

The words awaken a disturbance in John. He doesn't lose face, but there's a clear change in his demeanor.

Anna, oblivious of what's actually happened, just grins from ear to ear.

ANNA

Well I guess that's one way of putting it.

Claudia hopes she hasn't been discovered. But it's too late.

John alternates between Caleb and Claudia. Knowing glances. A dark notion beginning to form.

He takes his time to speak his next words. A calculating look on his face.

JOHN

You know Caleb, I think it would be a good idea if you showed Claudia more of this beautiful property. Show her the rolling green fields.

ANNA

After dessert surely.

JOHN

Let's wait for dessert. Dessert is always better after a breath of fresh country air. What do you say?

Caleb knows what will have to happen. But he doesn't protest.

CALEB

Yeah. Sure.
(to Claudia)
Ready?

She's a little uneasy, uncertain if she wants to finish her food. She goes for her last piece of potato, chewing slowly.

CLAUDIA

More than I'll ever be.
(to Anna)
Thank you for the lovely meal, it was more than I could hope for.

The quick change of pace irritates Anna. She glares at John for a moment then back at Claudia with a familiar smile.

ANNA

It was my pleasure. Anytime. I'll have dessert ready.

They leave the table, down the stairs and start west towards the rolling hills.

Caleb turns to look back at his father who gives him a slight nod. Barely detectable but it's there.

BACKYARD - OUTSKIRTS

As soon as the two are out of earshot of the cottage, Caleb stops Claudia. Her attitude has changed. Stronger. Uncompromising.

CALEB

Why'd you come here?

CLAUDIA

You know why I'm here.

Caleb strokes his hair, exasperated.

CALEB

Why do you persist? You told me how much I meant to you. Regardless of my family. Of who I am.

Claudia turns away towards the glistening hills. A stunning sight. But she can't hide her hesitation. His words clearly gnaw at her being.

CALEB (cont'd)

Was it all just to get close to us?
Or did you really love me?

Claudia casts away any doubt. Her face hardens. Something sinister underneath.

CLAUDIA

When your parents are murdered in front of you, it's a little hard to lose focus.

CALEB

Don't do it... Claudia please don'--

She doesn't let him finish before pulling a knife from a thigh holster and attacks him straight on.

He dodges with surprising speed. And so the deadly tango begins.

Both take turns on the offensive. Skilled. Both at top fighting levels. Clearly these aren't regular country folks.

A steady pace until:

Caleb executes a reversal, grabs the knife and, in the blink of an eye, shoves it into Claudia's rib cage. Her eyes widen.

He looks away, tears swarm his eyes as he holds on tight. Almost afraid to let go.

CALEB (cont'd)

Goddamn it...

Claudia's fading body falls on the emerald grass.

Caleb, beside himself, looks deep into the horizon. Knife still clenched.

NOLAN WIDE SHOT. A dead Claudia. Caleb fixated on the dying sun. A thousand yard stare.

Seemingly out of nowhere, John appears and puts his hand on Caleb's shoulder. Like a loving father to a lost son. Caleb turns to face John, coming out of his trance. Emotions still raw.

JOHN

Come on, I'll have the boys clean it up.

With incredible shame, Caleb follows his father back towards the cottage.

TWO SHOT - TRACKING. John feels the weight upon his son's shoulders. He musters up the courage for something wise.

JOHN (cont'd)

Caleb... they say that in the blackened forest, time makes no sound.

Caleb's face tightens. He looks towards his father, but can only see Claudia:

INSERT: TWO SHOT - FLASHBACK. Claudia and Caleb. Bedroom overlooking the seaside. She looks fondly at him and leans in. She whispers into his ear:

CLAUDIA

(in Romanian)

You awaken a great passion in me.

And kisses him softly.

BACK TO PRESENT. Caleb wipes his mouth in pain and nods back to his father.

And they continue to walk back to the cottage. A storm brews over the rolling hills.

CUT TO: BLACK