

THE CRONING

(Miniseries)

Written by:

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An adaptation, in four parts, of the novel

"The Croning",

by Laird Barron

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There is no cavern deeper than the human heart.

PART I

Stirrings

FADE IN

EXT. CASTLE, COURTYARD - DAY

A vibrant festival fills the scene. Colorful banners are raised here and there, announcing the spring equinox.

SUPER: Central Europe - Antiquity.

A young **QUEEN**, blonde, nine-months pregnant, is surrounded by noble folk amid the merriment. She seems disconcerted.

The middle-aged king appears briefly, among a group of boisterous officers who raise their flagons in a toast.

The Queen curtsies, excuses herself from her entourage.

A bright-eyed man, mid-20s, leans against a fountain, flagon in hand. He watches the Queen pace across the courtyard. He is her brother and **SPY**. He moves to intercept her.

SPY

What's the matter, sister? Why so
somber?

He follows the Queen's frightful gaze to a shadowy corner:

An ugly **DWARF** in a purple cassock sits on a stone bench beneath a willow tree. Hunched and scabrous, grinning with malice, he peeps at the gathering through glassy eyes.

The Spy sips from his flagon, turns to the Queen.

SPY

Who's the imp?

QUEEN

(eyes on the Dwarf)

He never told me his name. He's a
spawn of Hell.

The Dwarf - one booted foot dangling from the bench, the other tucked underneath him - tips her a sly wink, then fixates his glare on her prodigious belly.

SPY

(sensing trouble)

What's he about?

The Queen shakes her head, turns to face her brother.

QUEEN

He's been skulking around the palace
lately, while you were away. He...

She clears her throat, drapes her arms over her belly.

QUEEN

...he wants the child.

A raven CAWS from a high bough in the willow. The Spy looks up at the bird, then down at the bench - now empty.

He scans the courtyard. The Dwarf is nowhere in sight.

EXT. CASTLE, GARDEN - LATER

The Queen and the Spy stand alone under a gazebo decorated with wreaths of flowery garlands.

The mirth of the party-goers is faint in the background.

SPY

Have you told anyone else about this?

QUEEN

I'm not stupid. I know when to keep such matters to myself, thank you.

SPY

(eyes narrowing)
How did that rascal smuggle in the gold?

QUEEN

He didn't. He spun it.

The Spy rocks back on his heels.

INT. DUNGEON PRISON CELL - UNKNOWN TIME (FLASHBACK)

The peasant girl (future queen) rouses groggily to bright torchlight. Shivering, she sits up in her cot.

Her eyes widen, alarmed, as she takes in her surroundings: the treadle wheel in the center of the room, the dozen flax baskets arranged neatly against the far wall, the cell door with its small hatch window. She gasps.

QUEEN (V.O.)

I think he used some kind of alchemy. The stuff father read to us about when we were little.

She gets up, scampers over to the baskets: They are filled to the rim with gold wire.

She turns to the wheel: There's straw residue on the floor near it. Gold dust glitters on its drive band and table.

A soft metallic HUM rises slowly.

VISIONS:

-- The girl, lying on her cot, eyes open, distant. The Dwarf, in a black hooded cloak, sits hunched at the spinning wheel, which emits static discharges.

-- In a shadowy corner of the cell: a perfectly circular hole in the floor, three feet wide, depth unknown.

QUEEN (V.O.)

I don't recall much of it. I must have been in a trance. When I awoke, the dwarf was gone.

VISION:

-- The treadle wheel spinning on its own. The wall behind it shimmers, distorts, as though a series of waves passes through it.

QUEEN (V.O.)

All I found were the baskets stacked with gold wire.

VISIONS:

-- The Dwarf, standing over the cot, his gaze fixated on the entranced girl. The shimmering lights flash in the background, amid the vibrating hum.

-- One of the Dwarf's eyes, in closeup, filling with stars and nebulae. Inside the pupil, a fetus forms - grows into an infant - a boy - an adolescent - then the Spy flashes by, glancing over his shoulder. Faces cascade in rapid succession - a lineage across centuries. They end with and old man lying in a fetal position on a forest floor.

-- The eye snaps shut. The humming dies.

Black...

LATER

The cell door opens with a creak. A grinning **GUARD**, munching on a leg of mutton, pokes his head in. His smile disappears as his eyes fall on the baskets.

He glowers at the dumbfounded girl, who slowly steps back from the treadle wheel.

She spots a piece of parchment on the floor near the foot of the cot, bends down to pick it up.

The guard rushes inside, moves to inspect the baskets. He grabs a handful of gold wire, mouth agape.

The girl sits down on the cot, captivated by the note.

QUEEN (V.O.)

And there was a note. A formula
of sorts - tied to the
constellations.

MOMENTS LATER

The guard crouches by a three-foot wide ring of fine rubble in a corner. He runs a hand against the slightly darker flagstones within, which bear a web of hairline fractures - like a mirror cracked from the inside. He frowns.

He turns, calls over his shoulder.

QUEEN (V.O.)

It was all so strange. Like waking
from a dream. Like...the world was
being rearranged beneath me.

The king appears at the cell door, looking bewildered, accompanied by a scowling officer.

BACK TO PRESENT: CASTLE GARDEN - DAY

As the distressed Queen relates the events to her brother, a court jester ambles by, flanked by two coquetting maidens.

QUEEN

He will return on Midsummer's Eve
to collect his price. Unless...if
I can guess his name before then,
he will rescind this whole damnable
pact.

The Spy stares vacantly toward the edge of the garden.

In the courtyard: The king throws his head back and laughs heartily at a nobleman's joke.

The Spy turns back to his sister, inhales deeply.

QUEEN

What am I to do? We have ninety
days. After that, there's...

Her voice falters. She looks away, shameful.

The Spy gathers her in a warm, reassuring embrace.

MONTAGE: VARIOUS LOCATIONS AND TIMES

A) EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

The Spy travels on foot across a stretch of prairie land dotted with fir trees.

He spots a stream flowing through an outcropping of rock. He springs over to it, kneels down for a drink. He unstraps his waterskin. As he refills it, he hears a CROAK. He looks up.

In the sky: A raven circles slowly.

B) INT. CAVE - NIGHT

The Spy sits by a crackling fire, huddled in his cloak. He takes a bite of grilled sausage from a wooden stick.

Outside: The wind moans, stirring dust and shaking bushes near the cave's entrance.

C) INT. CASTLE, QUEEN'S BEDCHAMBER - DAY

The Queen has just given birth.

Two nurses tend to her with wet towels. The beaming **MIDWIFE** hands her the crying infant wrapped in white cloth.

MIDWIFE

It's a boy, my Lady!

Tearful, the Queen cradles the newborn against her bosom.

A nurse skirts around the bed to replace the sheets.

D) INT. CASTLE, QUEEN'S PARLOR - DAY

the Queen sits by a window, cuddling the baby. She murmurs soothing words to him, brushes a playful finger against his nose.

The tender moment is fleeting. She gazes out the window.

Outside: A dreary sky hangs over the garden.

QUEEN (V.O.)

You must succeed, brother. For me.
For father. For all of us. You
must learn the Dwarf's name.

E) EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - TWILIGHT

The Spy comes upon a group of traveling pilgrims dressed in white robes adorned with colored beads. They hold timbrels in their hands.

QUEEN (V.O.)

And if you can find that wretched
imp and stick a knife in his ribs
while you're at it, all the better.

The Spy exchanges words with the pilgrim leader, who hoists a clay jar over his shoulder. The leader points westward.

Beyond a far cluster of hills: A column of smoke rises.

INT. TAVERN - NIGHT

The Spy sits across from a rotund female **INNKEEPER**, at a table tucked away in a corner of the taproom.

INNKEEPER

I told you, I don't know his name.
But I've heard rumors.

(long beat)

They say he's a shadow flickering
in and out of reality. Some call
him a fallen assassin, now reduced
to begging and prostitution. Others
have it he's a descendant of the
Salamanca Seven, who consorts with
worms. And the Lord of Worms.

SPY

You've seen him in these parts?

The innkeeper nods, reluctant. She casts wary glances around, then leans over the table, closer to the spy.

INNKEEPER

A barmaid who used to work here
told me a harlot friend of hers
once saw him unhinge his jaw and
devour a screaming baby - a gift
from some rich merchant he helped.

The Spy rolls his eyes and crosses his arms over his chest.

INNKEEPER

(sneering)

Word has it her hair went from
auburn to snow white, overnight.

SPY

How about you cease the hearsay and
give me something tangible to go on?

The innkeeper shrugs, leans back in her chair.

The Spy throws her a cold glare, reaches into his cloak and
pulls out a small sack. He holds it up, jingling its
contents.

INNKEEPER

Last I heard, he was seen on a
caravan headed for the Western
Mountains. You might try your luck
there. That's all I can tell you.

The Spy tosses the coin sack to her. She nimbly catches it,
slides it under her apron and leaves the table.

The Spy watches her go, then stares at the hearth across the
room. The fire reflects dangerously in his eyes.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

The Spy treads across a moor scattered with ancient ruins
and barrow mounds. Mountains edge into view on the horizon.

LATE AFTERNOON

He comes upon a caravan track and squats down to inspect it.
He gazes westward, shielding his eyes from the sun.

NIGHT

The Spy camps beneath a rocky overhang ringed by bushes and
saplings. Lying on his back, he stares up at the cold,
impassive stars.

In the distance: A wolf howls.

DAY

The mountains loom closer, their snow-capped husks rising
ominously over the land.

Moving with purpose, the Spy spots an old **FARMER** in a straw
hat, tending a field just off the track.

The Spy veers in his direction.

FARMER

(waving)

Ahoy, stranger!

The Spy waves back as he approaches. The farmer wipes sweat from his brow with his sleeve and leans on his pitchfork.

They talk quietly for a few breaths. The farmer nods, sets his fork against a cart. He ushers the Spy back to the path.

LATER

They stroll along the dirt track. The Spy munches on an apple while the farmer fills him in.

FARMER

I seen 'im in a village, yonder near the mountains. Very strange place, I tell ye. Folks just call 'im "The Dwarf". Reckon 'e lives in a cave somewhere. Comes down to the lowlands for supplies, once or twice a year, during the festivals. The maidens ain't too fond of 'im. 'e's a homely bugger, that little man. And long-lived, too.

SPY

Long-lived?

FARMER

Aye. First I laid eyes on 'im, I was a sprat. Saw 'im again, caperin' along the road, last summer. 'e 'ad a sack slung o'er his hump. Must've 'ad a live goat in there, or somethin'!

The Spy stops, leans against the trunk of a tree, as he digests the farmer's words.

FARMER

(wagging a finger)

Ye wanna steer clear o' 'im and 'is little friends. Ye shall come to a nasty end, nosin' 'bout that gent.

SPY

(chucks the apple core)

He has friends?

FARMER

Ain't never seen 'em. Just 'eard of 'em. Cripples and deformed ones. Legless, crawling things.

He makes the sign of the cross and spits on the ground. The Spy turns a vacant stare at the mountains.

EXT. VILLAGE - LATE AFTERNOON

The Spy wanders amid buildings of mud-brick and thatch, their doors and windows sealed with sheepskin.

Strange pagan tokens hang above entry mantles. Animal bones litter the yards.

The villagers are dressed archaically - even for this era. They glance furtively at him, speaking in hushed tones. Occasional mutters are heard here and there.

Many pregnant women are about. Not a single child is seen.

LATER

As the Spy makes his way down one street, he catches sight of a dark temple perched atop a bluff, about a mile from the village. He slows his pace and gazes at it.

Three maidens brush by. One of them smiles, winks at him.

The Spy is oblivious. He walks on, his eyes riveted to the temple.

The echo of a feminine CACKLE rides the wind - sinister, mocking...

EXT. TEMPLE - EARLY EVENING

A small band of monks in brown cloaked robes heads down the path from the temple.

The Spy peeks from behind a brush. He waits until the monks are out of sight, then steps out from his cover.

He approaches the building, cautious, awed by its timeless, otherworldly grandeur: an edifice of black obsidian, its cracked, ornate pillars twisted with vines and mold.

Above the doors: A massive, brass open ring hangs - a segmented, skeletal worm, bent into a reverse "C" shape.

He pushes against the doors. To his surprise, they are unlocked.

He slips inside, like a shadow.

INT. TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

The interior is dim and cavernous. The only substantial light is cast by torches, some distance from the entrance.

The Spy walks stealthily along a passage lined with candle-lit alcoves on either side.

Inside the alcoves: flawlessly carved statues, depicting alien monstrosities from mankind's darkest nightmares. Each sculpture stands on a plinth, a nameplate below it.

The Spy catches glimpses of some of the names:

..."KASSOGTHA"..."Y'GOLONAC"..."SHUB-NIGGURATH"..."DAGON"...

He reaches the end, where the torches burn on two basalt pillars. Thick crimson curtains hang between them.

Hand on his dagger hilt, he parts the drapes and steps through.

MAIN CHAMBER

The Spy enters a nave flanked by colonnades.

At the opposite end stands an altar, carved from raw earth – a pyramid with a flat top. A shallow recess sits at eye level on its face.

Somewhere nearby: A faint SKITTERING sound.

The Spy stiffens.

He glances to the side, catches movement in the darkness beyond the colonnade: Small shapes dart past, their shadows flickering on the pillars – thin, fast, low to the ground.

Then, silence.

Mustering his nerve, he walks on.

Above the pyramid altar: a vast, intricate mosaic. At its center is another broken ring – this one appears to be made of countless black, interlocking fragments.

Incense drifts from cast-iron braziers, warping the air. The altar and effigy shimmer in the haze.

The Spy lifts a torch from a wall sconce, raises it toward the mural.

Mosaic: a revel in a forest alive with chaos – maidens fleeing, clutching infants, pursued by gray figures with glowing red eyes and spindly arms ending in talons.

The torchlight dances over the effigy.

Near the bottom edge of the mosaic, words are inscribed:

He slumbers like a bear in winter. Dreaming of us, his Children.
He wakes to feed and sate his hunger. In cycles beyond number.

Ring in the center: a giant worm or eel - made not of stone or metal, but of decayed bones and skulls. The remains of hundreds of infants, fused into a piece of unholy art.

The Spy recoils, eyes wide with abject horror.

A female voice drifts from somewhere behind him:

VOICE (O.S.)
(sharp)
Welcome to the house of Old Leech.

The Spy gasps. He turns, brandishing his dagger.

A **WOMAN** watches him from a shadowy alcove - late 40s, draped in a gauzy white gown. A diadem with a blood-red jewel rests at her brow. Voluptuous, exotic, dark of hair and eye. She radiates carnality.

SPY
Uh...hello, priestess...

The woman steps forward, predatory eyes stripping him bare.

The Spy stiffens, visibly smitten - and terrified.

SPY
This is uh...quite the church.
I'm not much for religion, but
I'll admit, I didn't expect
blasphemy so openly displayed.
(glancing around)
And the coin it must take to
keep this roof up...Ye gods!

WOMAN
These lands fall under the domain
of Count Mock, who is...partial
to the old ways. He's filthy rich,
and the Crown seldom pays heed to
the doings along the frontier.

SPY
Yes...but surely, my lady, there
are Christians among you. I would
think--

The woman comes up to him, her diadem jewel glinting.

His eyes glued to her bosom, he swallows the lump in his throat, takes a step back.

WOMAN

Christians are welcome. All are welcome.

(eyeing the mosaic)

All flesh is food of the god.

SPY

Who is...Old Leech? The name isn't one I recognize.

The incense from the braziers curls around the Spy. His eyes moisten, his breath slows.

WOMAN

That surprises you? There are over twenty thousand gods acknowledged to exist. You'd be lucky to name a hundred. But then...you don't strike me as the philosopher sort. A mercenary, perhaps?

SPY

(glances at the altar)

I'm just an ignorant clodhopper. Come to think of it, I ought to feel right at home here.

The woman chuckles softly into her cupped hand, watching him from the corner of her eye. He sheathes his dagger, sets the torch aside.

WOMAN

Curiosity killed the cat.

SPY

Ah! And what brings you to this charming chapel?

WOMAN

I'm to take part in a ceremony.

SPY

Let me guess. Rite of passage? Maidenhood and fertility giving way to wisdom?

WOMAN

(left brow raised)

I'm impressed.

SPY

(crooked grin)

I've shagged a pagan or two in my time...

The woman's expression cools. The shift is subtle, but unmistakable. The Spy sways on his feet, eyelids heavy.

SPY

So then...priestess. When...does
the rite begin?

As the woman speaks, there's a slight delay between her words and the movement of her lips - a hint of an echo in her voice.

WOMAN

It's already begun. And I'm not
a priestess. I'm a traveler.

(beat)

Your turn. What brings you
to this cozy little nook at
the ass-end of the kingdom?

SPY

I...seek the wealth of...the
mountain.

WOMAN

(coldly)

Then you'll find nothing but shit.

A GONG resonates from somewhere within the temple, stirring dust in the vaulted reaches above.

The woman flinches. Her expression shifts again - a flicker of fear...and exultation.

The Spy grabs her arm, tries to pull her into a kiss. She catches his wrist in an iron grip, shoves him back.

WOMAN

That's quite enough out of you today,
spy!

She turns and vanishes into the shadows. Her voice resonates strangely, as if rising from a deep chasm:

WOMAN (O.S.)

Go back, go back. There are
frightful things. The stables
never prepared you for this.

The Spy, dazed, rubbing his wrist, stares up at the worm ring sculpture suspended above the altar - woven from dozens of small skulls and bones.

A dark epiphany overtakes him. He shuts his eyes.

PHANTOM SOUNDS:

-- The distant wails of infants - rising, overlaid by the terrified screams of women.

VISION:

-- The mosaic of the frolic in the forest.

His eyes snap open.

With a grimace, the Spy spins on his heel and retreats into the shadows.

FADE TO:

EXT. FARMHOUSE - EARLY EVENING (2025)

A bucolic country neighborhood in late summer, nestled among wooded hills.

SUPER: *Waddell Valley, WA - August, 2025*

A three-story, mid 19th-century farmhouse comes into view - yellow and white, huddled at the base of a hill, framed by tall magnolia trees. Two ashlar chimneys climb up its sides.

A sleek, red 1965 Firebird pulls up in front of the house, where **MICHELLE** (80) waits - slender, poised, in a simple but elegant dress, kerchief and bonnet, light tinted shades. A smirk tugs at the corner of her lips.

Behind the wheel: her husband, **DON** (82) - tufts of white hair, neatly-trimmed goatee, prescription glasses, driving gloves, a checkered scarf around his neck.

He leans over, opens the passenger door and flashes her a beaming smile.

DON

We must hurry my sweet, or the
Grand Prix shall start without us.

Michelle frowns at his display. Don plucks a rose from his lap. He raises it to his mouth, clenches it between his teeth and pats the front seat.

MICHELLE

(tittering)
Oh, you old fool!

She climbs into the seat with the ease of a 30-year old, and shuts the door.

The car rolls off, winding along the road at the base of the hill and vanishing into the trees.

EXT. WASHINGTON STATE COUNTRYSIDE - LATER

The Firebird cruises along a scenic road through rolling, grassy hills. In the background, the dying sunlight glints off winding creeks and scattered ponds.

MICHELLE (V.O.)
 Couldn't we have taken the Volvo,
 or the minivan?

DON (V.O.)
 On an occasion like this? Not a
 chance!

The car veers onto a bridge exit joining the interstate.

INT. FIREBIRD - CONTINUOUS (MOVING)

The fires of sunset flicker in Michelle's shades as she gazes out her open window. Her bonnet ruffles in the breeze.

MICHELLE
 You do realize this car handles
 like a barge? And you, my love,
 are no spring chicken.

DON
 That so? You've dogged headhunters
 in Peru, ridden wranglers from New
 Guinea to Siberia, and you're scared
 of this old devil at the wheel?

Michelle turns and sneers at him. Her beauty is timeless, exquisite - a certain energy about her.

A thin, jagged white scar cuts from her left temple down to her collarbone - and beyond. It does nothing to mar her confidence, only deepens her mystery.

Don meets her gaze, his eyes betraying genuine love.

DON
 I'll never forget our first
 anniversary. The day you handed me
 the keys to this beast. Took out a
 loan and didn't tell anyone.
 (beat)
 You said if I can't be a rock star,
 at least I could drive like one.

MICHELLE

Best investment I ever made.

She reaches over and ruffles the tufts of his white hair, the smile lingering on her lips.

Outside: The "Welcome to OLYMPIA" sign flashes past, as they cross into town beneath orange skies.

EXT. OLYMPIA SUBURBS - LATER

The Firebird races between the majestic shadows of ancient maple trees, in a pleasant, historic neighborhood tucked along an inlet coast.

INT. FIREBIRD - CONTINUOUS (MOVING)

Michelle removes her shades and glances out her window.

MICHELLE

This is where you spend your Sundays
with your friends?

Outside: A refurbished Spanish mission sits atop a bald crest, several switchbacks above them.

EXT. SPANISH MISSION - LATER

The Firebird ambles along a potholed avenue, passing in front of the historic mission.

The building: sun-baked adobe brick, with a black shingled roof. Arched windows curve beneath the eaves.

DON (V.O.)

There's more to this place than
darts and billiards, my dear.

The sign over the front entrance: "INN OF OLD WALES".

INT. INN OF OLD WALES - LATE EVENING

The inside is vaulted and airy. Balconies hang over the oak bar and scattered dining tables. The darts and pool lounge is glimpsed through an arch, off the main gallery.

Don and Michelle approach an impatient-looking hostess.

DON

Miller, party of two.

The hostess nods, leads them up a curving staircase to the balcony. She points to a table overlooking the bay.

BALCONY

Murmurs, laughter and the clink of silverware drift through the air. A waiter passes by and lights candles in wrought iron sconces.

Over a dinner of roast lamb and herb wedges, Don and Michelle raise wine glasses, toast, and sip.

Michelle swallows a bite, peers out the window.

Outside: Sloops and barges bob in the harbor, their lights glittering on wooded hills streaked with the red and gold hues of dusk.

MICHELLE

Oh my! I'd forgotten how lovely
the bay is.

Don watches her. The ease, the grace, the years in her face.

DON

I've been meaning to bring you out
here for God knows how long. With
the twins coming tomorrow, and you
off to Turkey...figured it's now
or never.

MICHELLE

Well, I'm glad you chose now.

She eyes a wall of pennants and heraldic shields. Her gaze catches a stained-glass mosaic of Mary, its colors dancing across some tables. Her jaw tightens before she looks away.

MAIN GALLERY

On a small dais below the balcony, a white-bearded fiddler in a plaid jacket and bowler plays a soft Celtic jig.

BALCONY

Don and Michelle have finished their dinner. A waiter clears their plates. Two bottles of Chardonnay sit open on their table. Don sips from his glass.

DON

Wish like hell I could tag along.
But I promised to moderate some
lectures next week, at Redfield.
Argyle would crucify me if I bailed.

MICHELLE

Hmmm...It's a girls-only gig, dear.
 (quaffs some wine)
 Besides, we're not exactly going
 sailing on the Bosphorous. You
 know that.

She looks out the window at the gathering night.

Don catches the **MAÎTRE D**'s eye and gives a discreet nod. The maître d returns a quick thumbs-up, then slips through the swinging kitchen door behind the bar.

MINUTES LATER

Two cheerful waiters arrive with a chocolate cake - its icing topper: "Happy 60th Anniversary".

The maître d follows, presenting Michelle with an open mother-of-pearl box. Inside: a chain necklace.

Michelle's eyes dart between the box and Don, who offers a droll smile.

Blushing, lips quivering, she lifts the necklace into the candlelight: platinum, with a red quartz pendant.

The waiters light sparklers on the cake and step back, grinning.

A few nearby diners glance over, smiling or clapping softly. One middle-aged couple raises their glasses in quiet salute.

Michelle bursts into tears, buries her face in her arms.

DON

I'm just glad I've still got what
 it takes to make you happy.

Don downs the last of his wine. Michelle's shoulders shake harder, her response muffled in her arms.

DON

What's that, dear?

Michelle lifts her mascara-streaked face, eyes brimming.

MICHELLE

(sobbing)
 I am happy, damn it!

She snatches a hankie from her purse and hurries toward the lady's room, the necklace clutched in her hand. Don watches her go, inhales deeply. He turns his gaze to the window.

The soft Celtic tune strums in the background.

An elderly **GENTLEMAN** in a leisure suit and bowtie passes by, giving Don a gentle pat on the shoulder. Don blinks, pulled back into the room.

GENTLEMAN

Well, good luck mate.

The man's companion, a statuesque woman with tall, burnished hair, flashes Don a pitying smile.

DON

Eh? Er...yes, thank you.

As the couple moves on, he turns back to the window.

Outside: Far over the bay, dark clouds bruise the horizon.

INT. FIREBIRD - NIGHT (MOVING)

The car hums down an empty back road flanked by craggy knolls and clusters of trees. Its headlights barely cut through the darkness.

Soft music murmurs from the radio.

DON

So who else is going?

Michelle slumps in her seat. Her face is loose from too much wine, tinged green in the dashboard glow. The platinum chain at her neck catches the light. Her voice is slow, slurred.

MICHELLE

Me an' Celeste. Barbara an' Lynne--

DON

Lynne Victory? Oh, man alive. She's a looker.

MICHELLE

Shaddup. Barbara an' Lynne, and Justine French. Girl's club...

DON

I'm sure it's a hoot.

Don rounds a bend.

KA-THUMP! Something solid shifts in the trunk.

He flicks a glance at the rearview mirror.

DON

Probably just an excuse to get
soused and watch dirty movies - if
your friends are anything like mine.

MICHELLE

(left brow arched)

It's an occasion to discuss
important scientific theory an'
bond socially.

(shifts in her seat)

And for your information, we drink
chillers an' watch art films.

Don downshifts as the car hugs an incline. *KA-THUMP!*

He mutters under his breath.

He clears the incline, eases the car onto the gravel of a
wide shoulder nestled in a saddle of foothills.

Outside: On Michelle's side, the terrain rises steeply.

Don cranks the emergency brake, clicks on the flashers and
unbuckles his seat belt. Leaning across Michelle, he opens
the glove compartment. She tugs at his sleeve as he rummages
and pulls out a flashlight.

MICHELLE

Huh, whazzat?

DON

Don't worry, sweetie. I have to
check something. Just be a minute.

MICHELLE

(drowsy)

Huh-um. Don't get hit.

She lets her head fall to her shoulder and closes her eyes.

DON

Righto!

He steels himself, takes a deep breath and climbs out.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The darkness sprawls beyond the Firebird's dim headlights.

As Don circles to the trunk, treetops sigh and branches
crash in a high, rushing wind - a storm brewing.

He opens the trunk, sweeps the flashlight over: a tire, tire iron, a bandolier of wrenches and sockets.

The jack has come loose. He fastens it back into place with a grunt.

He checks the road behind him, his giant shadow stretching across the pale gravel. He gasps, freezes.

In the ditch bushes: A face stares at him. A cruel mouth, shark's eyes, black and glinting - horribly askew.

Don shines his beam straight into the brush, his hand trembling.

A gust lifts dead leaves, shredding them in the air. It sweeps the ground bare, revealing: the crosscut of a slab of slate, streaked and dotted with alkaline stains.

He exhales his relief.

DON

Jesus, Don!...get a grip.

He lifts his eyes to the seam between the trunk hinges and the rear windshield.

In the car: Michelle has twisted in her seat, her head turned his way. She watches him, her silhouette dimly lit by the radio dial. The ruby pendant at her neck glimmers.

The wind kicks up again, swaying trees and scattering twigs across the road in spiraling loops.

Don shuts the trunk and hurries back to the car.

INT. FIREBIRD - CONTINUOUS

Don pockets the flashlight, climbs back behind the wheel. He shuts the door, buckles his seatbelt.

DON

All fixed.

Michelle doesn't respond. Don glances at her.

She's slumped, fast asleep, a glint of drool at the corner of her mouth. Don frowns. He hesitates, then dabs her mouth gently with his jacket sleeve.

He eases the car back onto the road.

Moments later, he hits a pothole. *KA-THUMP!*

DON

Hang it!

He steps on the gas pedal and takes off into the night.

EXT. WASHINGTON STATE COUNTRYSIDE - LATER

The Firebird tears through the winding road, its taillights flickering as it vanishes around a bend.

Above: A veil of cloud surges across the stars, blotting them out one by one.

EXT. FARMHOUSE, BACKYARD - NIGHT

The house looms at the far end of the yard, dark and silent. A single light glows on the back porch — like a watchful eye.

The Firebird rests beneath a canvas carport, next to a minivan and a Volvo. Two massive magnolia trees flank the barn at the edge of the lot, their boughs stirring in the rising wind.

Above: The sky churns with low cloud, veiling the moon's ghostly glow. Lightning flashes.

INT. FARMHOUSE, MASTER BEDROOM - MEANWHILE

The room is dark, save for a faint yellow glow spilling in from a night lamp in the hallway. The door is open.

In bed, Michelle lies spooned up against Don, her breathing shallow. Her white hair fans across the pillow. Don faces the opposite direction — eyes open, body taut with unease.

From somewhere on a floor below: The SQUEAK of door hinges.

Don sits up slowly — sweaty in his pajamas.

He listens: only the steady moan of the wind outside.

A few beats of silence. Then...

Outside the room: SHUFFLING on the floorboards — something light, dragging in the hallway.

Don starts to move. Michelle's hand clamps his wrist.

He jerks around. Her eyes are closed. But her grip is iron.

DON
 Jesus - Michelle? You're...you're
 freezing!

MICHELLE
 (softly)
 Honey, don't...

Don's gaze shifts toward the open door.

In the hallway: another SHUFFLE - closer.

DON
 (sharply, tense)
 Thule?...Thule, is that you?

He tries to rise - Michelle's hand tightens. She pulls him
 back toward her.

MICHELLE
 (above a whisper)
 Don't leave me. The bed is cold.

In the hallway: A shadow stretches across the wall - long,
 low, unmoving.

DON
 Thule?

The shadow retreats quickly. Silence. Then...

Somewhere further away: a canine WHIMPER.

Don eases back down onto his pillow.

MICHELLE
 Shhh...

Within moments, she starts snoring.

Don stares at the open doorway - wide eyed, frozen.

EXT. FARMHOUSE, BACKYARD - EARLY MORNING

A threatening sky curves over the rustic vale, as daybreak
 creeps across the rear facade of the house. Above the barn,
 the magnolia boughs sway in the pre-storm wind.

The light on the porch overlooking the backyard still glows.

RADIO LADY (V.O.)
 ...as this front develops into a
 full-blown storm, expected to bring
 (MORE)

RADIO LADY (V.O.) (cont'd)
 heavy showers by noontime - possibly
 for the next three days. High wind
 and flood warnings have already been
 issued for Pierce and Thurston
 counties. So be on the ready, folks.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN - MEANWHILE

The room is gloomy.

Don sits alone at the table, wrapped in a bathrobe, fluffy
 slippers on his feet, a steaming mug in front of him.

The digital clock-radio on the table reads **6:25 AM**.

THULE, the family's golden retriever, lies snorting and
 whimpering on the tiled floor, near a sliding glass door
 that opens onto the back porch.

Don switches off the radio as ads begin. He pulls back the
 sleeve of his robe. His right wrist is slightly puffy,
 ringed with purple. He rubs it.

In the wall across from the table: A four-foot high, arched
 wooden door, painted a baby-blue color, stands ajar. Beyond
 the sliver: pitch darkness.

Don grabs the mug and takes a slow sip of coffee, unaware of
 light FOOTSTEPS behind him.

A pair of slender, manicured hands fall on his shoulders. He
 jerks, spilling coffee on his robe.

MICHELLE

Whoops! Better trim that hair in
 your ears, eh?

She tweaks his earlobe playfully. Don snatches a handful of
 tissues from the table.

DON

(dabbing his robe)
 Ack! For the love of Pete, don't
 sneak around like that! This
 isn't the jungle, you know.

Michelle kisses the top of his head and drifts off in her
 nightgown, grinning.

MICHELLE (O.S.)

I'm going to take a bath. Put more
 coffee on, will you? And peel some
 potatoes. There's a dear.

Wind slams the roof and raps the glass door. The porch light bleeding into the kitchen flickers.

LATER

Don pulls on a windbreaker hoodie and zips it up. Thule, on a leash, hovers anxiously by the glass door.

Don opens a wall cabinet near the sink, fishes out a small canister, eyes the label: "PEPPER SPRAY".

He casts an uneasy glance at the baby-blue door, still ajar. He crosses over to it, shuts it gently. He pauses.

Pocketing the spray can, he moves back to the glass door, slides it open and follows Thule out onto the back porch.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE, BACK ROAD - EARLY MORNING

Don walks Thule down a tree-lined trail through the dreary neighborhood. The dog stops now and then - sniffing a brush, a rock, a discarded tire. He lifts a leg and marks a tree.

MINUTES LATER

Up the road, a couple of kids walk a black Rottweiler, a dozen yards ahead. Thule strains at the leash, whimpers excitedly. The kids pass without a word or incident.

Somewhere in the distance: A buzz-saw whines.

MINUTES LATER

The breeze picks up as Don trudges past the iron gates of a sprawling Victorian mansion.

A placard on the gate reads: "ROURKE MANOR".

He stops, peers down the long gravel drive: The house looms beyond the hissing trees, its windows dark, turrets drowned in shadow - foreboding.

Through the shifting leaves: a glimpse of the back of a teenage boy in a loose red shirt and flat cap, moving across the overgrown lawn with a strange, hitching stride - like a bird hop. Then he's gone, swallowed by the closing branches.

Don freezes in his place for a few beats, brow knotted.

A sudden BARK from Thule snaps him back to the moment.

He leads the dog on, along the fenced border of the Rourke manor grounds.

MINUTES LATER

A wooden sawhorse stands beside a small gate leading into a garden of tightly packed dwarf evergreens.

A faded sign is tacked to the sawhorse:

**KEEP OUT! THIS AREA
HAS BEEN SPRAYED WITH PESTICIDE!
DANGEROUS TO PEOPLE & PETS NEXT 14 DAYS!
YOU ARE ON PRIVATE PROPERTY!**

Don walks on down the road, past the sign.

Near a junction, he comes upon a crew of three **WORKERS** toiling beyond the fence.

The men wear wide-brimmed hats, gardening gloves and coveralls caked with dust and sap. Sweat shines on their sallow faces as they mutter and hack at dead limbs, dropping them into wheelbarrows.

Don glances down at Thule. The dog GROWLS low, teeth bared, fur bristling.

The two men nearest the fence pause, aware of Don. They converse in a hushed, unfamiliar tongue.

One of them, a thick, barrel-chested Hispanic with long white hair - well over six feet tall - turns and calls out behind him in a shrill, fluting CRY. The joints in his neck - far too many of them - protrude unnaturally.

He turns back, locks eyes with Don, wearing a baleful, knowing sneer.

His call is returned from scattered locations amid the evergreens - like birds mimicking a warning.

Don stares. The man's eyes are black. Pupil-less. He calls out again - a strange, birdlike WARBLE - his gaze fixed on Don. His mouth opens and closes like an iris. Don blinks.

The second worker licks his lips, dragging a machete along his pant leg - like a barber stropping a razor.

Don offers a sickly nod, his fingers spasming around the can of pepper spray in his hoodie pocket.

Glancing over his shoulder, he hurries toward the junction, as casually as he can, dragging a GROWLING Thule behind him.

The three workers swivel their obsidian eyes to track him, unblinking, until they vanish behind the corner.

As Don scampers on, his own ethereal voice whispers to him from the dark recesses of his subconscious mind:

DON'S VOICE (V.O.)
They watch. They watch you, Don.
They love you...

Thunder RUMBLES in the distance. A light drizzle begins, hissing over the wooded hills.

INT. FARMHOUSE, PARLOR - MORNING

Don stands beside an armchair, backlit by a rain-glossed window. A kitchen towel hangs from his shoulder. He watches a news report flicker on television.

On TV: Aerial helicopter footage of a gaping sinkhole carved into a countryside like a massive black pupil. Emergency vehicles cluster along the cordoned perimeter. Personnel in hazard vests gesture at the crater's rim. A news chyron reads: "SALEM, OR – Aug. 29, 2025".

REPORTER (V.O.)
 ...geologists are calling this the
 deepest spontaneous sinkhole ever
 recorded in the region, at nearly
 two-hundred feet, with no prior
 seismic activity.

On TV: Pause, as the video zooms slightly, then shifts to static-laced drone footage panning over the pit's edges.

REPORTER (V.O.)
 Experts from USGS remain at a loss to
 explain the cause. Some speculate an
 underground collapse. Others argue
 the soil composition simply doesn't
 support that theory.

Don's fingers pinch his earlobe as he lingers on the image.

On TV: The sinkhole is perfectly round. Perfectly smooth.

Thule's BARK snaps him back to the scene.

Don turns to the window as a car pulls up onto the driveway. He squints at his watch, then moves toward the hall.

INT. FARMHOUSE, FOYER / HALL - CONTINUOUS

Don opens the front door.

Outside: His son **KURT** (47) and Asian daughter-in-law **KAIWIN** (44) step out of a Mini Cooper, into the drizzle. They close the doors and stroll up to the portico.

Thunder BOOMS on the horizon.

Kurt is bronzed, built like a linebacker, dark hair streaked silver at the temples. He's dressed smart, but casual.

Kaiwin, in a summer dress and sensible shoes, no makeup, is built like a dancer. She carries a transparent plastic bag.

They huddle under the eave, Kaiwin blinking away raindrops.

KURT
Pa, we made it! Real shit storm's
brewing.
(arm around his wife)
This is Winnie.

Kaiwin flashes a bright, superficial smile.

Don ushers them inside and hangs their coats on a rack.

Thule trots up to Kaiwin, tail low. He sniffs her, cautious. She crouches, offering her hand. Thule licks her fingers eagerly, tail wagging.

DON
Looks like he approves. First rule
of this house: if Thule likes you,
you're golden.

Kurt cackles as he shuts the door.

Kaiwin scratches Thule behind the ears, her eyes flicking to Don - measuring.

DON
How about some coffee?

KURT
Uhh...we'll take tea. Winnie
doesn't drink coffee.

KAIWIN
(nods)
I enjoy the smell, but not so much
the taste.

They head down the hall toward the kitchen, Thule padding along behind them.

KURT
I'm cutting back on caffeine. Blood
pressure thing. Doctor's orders.

DON
(shrugs)
Leaves more for me.

Kaiwin stops, glances at a wall of old black-and-white
family portraits.

Photos: rigid men in top hats, women in stiff dresses with
heavy bustles. All of them pale, grim-faced, against blank
backdrops - an austere lineage frozen in time.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN - LATER

An old arm clock on the wall reads 9:15 AM.

Don rummages through a cupboard. Kurt and Kaiwin sit at the
table.

KURT (O.S.)
So where's Mom?

DON
She's a bit hungover. She'll be
down, eventually.

Don pulls out a rusty tin from the cabinet: "HERBAL TEA".

He moves to the stove and spoons some tea into a boiling
kettle.

MINUTES LATER

Kurt and Kaiwin clasp steaming tea cups. Kurt takes a sip.
Don downs a mouthful of coffee and glances at his son. Kurt
nods, holds up his right hand, taps the back with a finger.

KURT
Yep. Right here. It's the size of
a rice grain. They track me by
satellite, so I can move freely
around our offices. Checkpoints,
sealed doors, security elevators,
you name it. It'd be a nightmare
without this puppy.

DON
(glancing at the
ceiling)
Are they tracking you now?

KURT

Uh no, Dad. I'm on vacation, for
Pete's sake!

DON

But how do they know where you are?
Who you're talking to? This could
be a nest of commie spies.

KURT

(sips more tea)
I signed a nondisclosure. The
penalty's twenty-five years and
forfeiture of my left nut, minimum.
(with a sour grimace)
What kind of tea is this? It
tastes like wet mulch!
(sets his cup down)
You don't have to drink that,
Winnie.

He gently extracts the cup from Kaiwin's hand and slides it
across the table. Her eyes flash - a brief, dangerous gleam,
unnoticed by Kurt.

KURT

Screw it! Any coffee left?

Kaiwin looks past Don at the small, baby-blue door. Her eyes
linger on it, head tilted with mild curiosity.

The door is ajar again.

EXT. FARMHOUSE, BACK YARD - DAY

Under an overcast sky, a beige '93 Land Rover crunches to a
stop in front of the barn, near a massive magnolia tree.

HOLLY (47), short and stout, shaggy blond hair, sun-worn
face, jumps out and rushes toward Don on the porch. She
grabs her father in a bone-crushing hug.

Kurt steps out onto the porch, smoothing his hair.

HOLLY

Hullo, brother!

She socks him in the arm, hard, her eyes flashing with bleak
humor. Kurt socks her back. Don winces.

KURT

(nods at her Jeep)
You still ride that fossil?

HOLLY

Mom drove her across Africa. I'm not about to trade for a Kia.

(winks)

Besides...she still outruns your midlife crisis.

Kurt socks her again. She socks him back.

Somewhere inside the house: A telephone rings.

DON

(looks up at the sky)

All right you two. Better grab your stuff before the storm hits.

They move to the Rover. Holly pops the trunk.

Inside: a towering stack of mismatched suitcases, duffle bags, and an old hiking pack lashed with climbing gear - enough luggage to outfit a small expedition.

KURT

Jesus, Hol! Planning to move in?

DON

(scratching his head)

How long did you say you were staying?

HOLLY

A week, tops. But I always like to prepare for the apocalypse.

Kurt grins. They start unloading.

HOLLY

Just so you know, I get the guest bedroom.

Holly lifts her carry-on and glances up at the house.

Second floor: Michelle is framed in a window, a phone handset to her ear, watching them. She gives a small wave.

INT. FARMHOUSE, HALLWAY / STAIRS / LANDINGS - LATER

A chaos of luggage clutters the floor, from the front door to the stairs. Don weaves through it like it's a minefield.

He climbs to the second floor landing, pauses by a window.

Outside: Rain pours, lightning flashes.

KURT (O.S.)
You sure this isn't a crawlspace?

HOLLY (O.S.)
(beat)
Quit whining and be a trooper.

MICHELLE (O.S.)
Ditto. It's either this or the barn.

Don reaches the top of the stairs.

The family is gathered on the attic landing. Kurt runs a hand on the slanting ceiling beams, an inch above his six-two frame.

INT. FARMHOUSE, ATTIC LANDING - CONTINUOUS

Kaiwin glances around, clearly charmed by the cluttered, yet cozy loft.

Among its features: a foldout bed - neatly dressed and made, double closet, an array of antique dolls on a cabinet, stacked crates, bookshelves, shadowy nooks and crannies.

KAIWIN
(smiling at Michelle)
I like it.

MICHELLE
The Princess of Honk Kong approves!

Kurt throws up his hands in resignation. The phone RINGS.

Michelle groans, hands pressed to her temples.

MICHELLE
The phone's been off the hook all morning. I swear, one more call and my head's going to explode. Holly, dear - would you mind taking that?

HOLLY
Sure thing.

She turns and heads down the stairs, her footfalls thudding as she goes.

Michelle takes Kaiwin by the hand.

MICHELLE
Come, darling. I want to show you something.

They start off. Michelle throws a look back at the men.

MICHELLE

And you two – be the dear gentlemen
and haul that luggage up before
someone breaks a hip.

Michelle and Kaiwin head for the stairs.

Don and Kurt exchange a glance. Don shrugs. Kurt exhales sharply.

Don sits on the edge of the sofa bed as Kurt paces around, scanning the cluttered loft space.

On the cabinet: colonial and tribal figurines, faded with age. Their faces are crude, expressions vacant. A few are faceless – just cracked porcelain masks.

KURT

I see you never got around to
clearing out this junk.

He runs a hand along a row of old magazines stacked in a bookshelf.

In a shelf corner: a wooden statue of a Cherokee chief, its angular face sunken, hatchet poised. The eyes seem hollowed by age...or judgment.

KURT

Stuffy as hell in here. And those
bloody dolls – they used to scare
the crap out of me.

In an alcove: an old Westinghouse projector, caked in dust, tucked on a shelf beside a dozen film canisters with yellowed labels.

Kurt steps closer, squinting at the labels: Most of them are illegible, the scribbled ink faded to ghosts.

A few are readable:

... "*Hierophant Exp. 10/38*"

... "*Mt. Fuji Exp. 10/46*"

... "*Crng. (Beatrice J.) 10/54*"

... "*Ur-trilobite organizational patterns (L. Plimpton) 8/78*"

... "*CoOL 8/89*"

Kurt lifts a canvas draped in stained muslin. Beneath it is an oil painting on an easel.

Painting: tall, upright worms with humanoid heads, twisting beneath a baroque ziggurat – a structure both architectural and organic. The brushwork is erratic, as if rendered by a cartographer gone mad – half field journal, half fevered dream.

Kurt stares at the painting. His eyes narrow.

DON (O.S.)

I didn't tell your mother about that. Figured if I showed it to her, she'd call it visionary and hang it above the fireplace.

In a corner: several wooden crates, weather-stained, stacked one atop the other. Their sides bear faded shipping stamps.

...Namibia ... Malaysia ... New Guinea ... Yemen...

On a stool near a wall: a poster-sized black and white photograph, yellowed, wrinkled near the edges.

Kurt lifts it into the light.

Photo: a tall, gangling man, with too many joints in his neck. He looms, in semi profile, over a misshapen dwarf, against a featureless background. Both figures are in suits and Hornburg hats. The man wears rimless black shades. The dwarf grins at the camera through a devilish beard.

At the bottom corner of the photo, a faded scribble:

"R & friend - 1931"

Kurt stares longer than he should. Don watches him, his expression unreadable.

KURT

(wry smile)

So this is how men in her family turn out? No wonder they kept a low profile.

He sets the photo aside, revealing a few more on the stool beneath it – scorched, their edges blackened and curled.

Kurt flips through the photos: Whatever images once lived there are now melted and gray, faces and forms wiped away.

A CRACK of thunder reverberates through the old house. The rain intensifies, drumming the roof like distant footsteps.

Kurt sifts through the magazines on the bookshelf, pulls one out: "ANTHROPOLOGY DIGEST – September, 1976".

Cover: Michelle in her mid-30s, arms crossed, wind in her black hair, no scar on her face. She stands defiantly in front of a ruined sandstone structure – windowless, save for a series of narrow, waist-high doorways.

Caption: "Gateways to Nowhere? San Francisco Anthropologist Uncovers the Mystery of the Subterranean Dwellers."

Subheading in a corner: "Dismissed by Academia. Funded by Fringe Fanatics. Is She Right After All?"

As Kurt eyes the cover, a door CREAKS shut somewhere in the house. The phone RINGS again.

INT. FARMHOUSE, SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY / DEN - DAY

Kurt carries a suitcase overhead – military-press style – as he ambles toward the stairs. Don follows with a carry-on in hand and a big duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

They pass the open doorway of the den. Don pauses.

Inside the den: Michelle and Kaiwin sit on a leather couch, surrounded by photo albums. Holly, a pen behind her ear and small notebook in her hand, leans over Michelle's shoulder, looking at an album on her mother's lap.

MICHELLE

And here's Kurt, playing Tarzan on the barn roof.

Kaiwin snorts. Michelle pauses, turns the page.

KAIWIN

Oh my God! That's adorable.

Kaiwin and Holly break into cackles.

Michelle glances toward the hallway. Her eyes catch Don in the half light.

MICHELLE

How's it coming, dear?

DON

(grinning)

Great. One more trip.

MICHELLE

Fabulous.

HOLLY

Argyle called. He's coming over
for dinner and bringing champagne.

DON

In this weather?

MICHELLE

(waving her hand)
He won't drown.

DON

But honey, Argyle can't drive.

HOLLY

(eyes the notebook)
He said he's coming with Hank...
Who's Hank?

DON

His nephew. Hangs with us at the
Old Wales sometimes. A jolly
fellow. You'll like him.

MICHELLE

Great. The more the merrier.

Don nods and moves on toward the stairs. Kaiwin's laugh
drifts down the hall behind him.

HOLLY (O.S.)

Hey! I do not remember wearing that
costume.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN - LATER

Kurt stumps in and catches Don inside the pantry, drinking
whiskey straight from a bottle.

KURT

For the love of Christ and the
Apostles, hand that over, quick!

He barges into the pantry, snatches the bottle and drains a
quarter of it. He wipes his hands with the back of his hand.

KURT

Hope you haven't become a closet
lush, Dad.
(glances around)
Literally.

DON

Well, gee, son. I don't guzzle
it like soda pop.

KURT

Yeah, yeah. I need to mellow. We're
about to lose a contract to Airbus.
Now the machinists want to walk. Can
you believe that crap? They got a
sweet new contract three years ago,
and look how they repay us.

(quaffs more whiskey)

Extortionist bastards.

DON

Ah, well. I live with your mother.
That's like being with an
undiscovered species.

He reclaims the bottle, takes a modest sip.

They move to the table. Kurt pulls out a pack of cigarettes,
lights one with a Zippo.

DON

Ahem, you can't smoke in the house.

He jerks a thumb toward the door. Muffled laughter echoes
from upstairs.

DON

It's the law.

KURT

Screw going outside in this shit.
If I don't have a drag, it's my
head that'll explode. Want one?

DON

Lord yes, I could use one.

LATER

They sit quietly for a beat, smoke curling in the lamplight.

DON

So what's the occasion?

KURT

What do you mean?

DON

I mean we get Holly once a year,
if we're lucky. And you're always

(MORE)

DON (cont'd)
busier than a one-armed paperhanger.
But here you both are - out of the
blue, I might add. So...what gives?

Kurt exhales smoke through his nostrils, long and slow.

KURT
Mom threatened us.

DON
Threatened you how?

KURT
Disinheritance. What else?

DON
(smirks)
Too late for that.

KURT
Ha-ha! I'm just kidding. Actually,
she asked Holly to visit, not me.
I came because I wanted to talk
about something.

His mouth opens, then closes - hesitant. Consternation
flashes across his face.

DON
Kurt...don't give me the warm-up
act. What's going on?

KURT
It's...well, it's weird.
(beat)
For starters, why'd you move here?
I mean you guys were doing fine in
San Francisco. View of the Bay,
grocers who delivered. I get the
summer retreat thing - the fresh
air and all that. But to uproot?
Sell the condo? Just...poof. Why?
Did she drag you out here?

DON
Not exactly. It's more like...she
drifted this way. Like some tide
pulled her. I just went along.

Kurt arches an eyebrow, echoing Michelle's signature look.

DON
She started digging into her family
tree. Said she'd chased enough
(MORE)

DON (cont'd)
 little people through enough
 jungles. Now she wanted to chase
 ghosts closer to home.

Kurt seems at a loss. A moment of silence passes.

DON
Genealogy, she calls it. I think
 she's looking for something buried.
 And I don't mean bones.

Kurt puts out his cigarette in a coffee plate, his eyes
 fixed on Don.

KURT
 You ask her?

DON
 More than once, trust me. Couple of
 years back, she locked herself in
 that study for weeks on end.
 Wouldn't come out, barely slept.
 I was leaving trays by the door
 like it was the plague. Bills piled
 up, phones rang. She just muttered
 through the door. Called me a
 blockhead.

KURT
 (chuckles)
 Sounds like mom, alright.

Don finishes his cigarette, gathers the coffee plates and
 moves to the sink. He opens the window, flings the cigarette
 buds outside, leaves the window open - just a crack.

DON
 She finally snapped at me one day.
 Said: "Leave a girl her secrets,
 Don."

As if on cue, Michelle's voice echoes from a vent in the
 ceiling:

MICHELLE (O.S.)
 Oh, boys! If you please, Holly has
 another trunk on the porch. We can't
 have her spraining something trying
 to lift it, can we?

Don looks up at the vent. Kurt rolls his eyes.

DON
 Right. The delicate flower she is.

KURT

To be continued.

Don nods as they shuffle out of the kitchen...past the small baby-blue door.

EXT. FARMHOUSE, FRONT LAWN - EARLY EVENING

The old house breathes with the storm. Sheets of rain lash the windows and hammer the front portico. Wind rattles the lanterns. Magnolia boughs creak and sway, their blossoms lit in flashes of lightning.

An SUV pulls into the driveway beside Kurt's Mini Cooper, windshield wipers thrashing.

INT. FARMHOUSE, FOYER / HALL - MOMENTS LATER

The front door BURSTS open. **ARGYLE** (75), burly, good head of hair, looms at the entrance. He's got a cane in one hand, a black wine bag in the other. He wears a dark gray suit that looks like it survived two world wars and a flood.

His gold prosthetic nose glints in the sparse light as he curses in a booming baritone:

ARGYLE

Damn it all! I'll have the Gods
know how they treated me this
night!

He stomps into the foyer, muttering under his breath.

HANK (32) follows - stately in a tight Norwegian sweater and crisp corduroys, dark hair slicked back. He balances a large glass bowl covered in foil. He closes the door behind him.

Michelle, Holly and Kaiwin appear from the parlor. Don and Kurt from the hallway.

MICHELLE

Argyle...long time!
(stepping toward him)
You're soaked!

ARGYLE

Bah! That storm's all bark and no
bite. Couldn't drown a flea.
(handing her the bag)
Brought the vintage. Don't ask me
what year. It's older than my
knees.

HANK
 Evening, everyone.
 (holding up the bowl)
 Hope you're hungry. I made chicken
 salad.

He sets the bowl down gently on a console table.

DON
 You cook, Master Hank?

HANK
 When the power's not out, yeah.

Holly grabs the bowl and pads off toward the kitchen. Argyle
 peels off his soaking jacket with a grunt. Don takes it and
 hangs it on a rack.

ARGYLE
 Now then, where's the hearth?
 This is the night we drown the
 storm in laughter, by God.

KURT
 Spoken like a true veteran.

Argyle waves his cane as they disappear down the hall.

Outside: Thunder BOOMS.

INT. FARMHOUSE, DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The mood is warm and cozy. Under soft chandelier light, a
 roast pork centerpiece steams amid trays of mashed potatoes,
 a gravy pitcher, a basket of bread rolls, champagne glasses,
 and Hank's chicken salad.

Thule chews a bone in the corner, near the plate cabinet.

ARGYLE
 So, how's the ancestral dig coming?
 Made any headway yet?

He sips champagne and gives Michelle a twinkle-eyed look.

MICHELLE
 It's...painstaking - for lack of
 a better word. Not as quick as I'd
 hoped.

ARGYLE
 Well, I've got connections beyond
 Redfield. Publishers I mingle with.
 (MORE)

ARGYLE (cont'd)
If you ever write something, let me know.

MICHELLE
Thanks, Argyle. I'll keep that in mind.

HOLLY
(raising her glass)
To new digs and even newer discoveries.

Raised glasses sparkle. The wind rattles the window panes.

KURT
Speaking of news...
(turns to Kaiwin)
When did this happen?

Kaiwin places a hand on her abdomen. The table quiets.

KAIWIN
Three months.
(glancing around)
We wanted you to hear it here.

Warm applause. Don reaches over and squeezes her hand.

MICHELLE
I knew it. You've been glowing, Kaiwin.

KURT
(to Don)
You're finally gonna be a grandpa.

DON
(beaming)
I couldn't be happier, son...truly.

ARGYLE
This calls for a real toast.
(raises his glass)
Here's to tiny feet and big destinies. To a new generation of Millers.

A cheerful toast all around. Even Thule feels the energy, barks excitedly.

ARGYLE
(smirking at Don)
Let's hope they skip your stubborn streak.

The table erupts into laughter, led by Argyle's booming guffaw.

LATER

The mirth has faded and the plates are cleared.

KURT

That salad was something else, Hank.
Gorgeous dressing.

HOLLY

I second that. You put mint in there?

HANK

(nods)
Dried mint, green pepper, sesame
seeds and pomegranate syrup.
Bit of a Mediterranean flair.

Michelle wipes her mouth on an apron and sets her fork down.

MICHELLE

On that note...
(sips champagne)
Holly's coming with me to Turkey.

Brief silence around the table. Don and Kurt freeze. An uneasy glance passes between them.

DON

You don't say...

HOLLY

Yeah. Last minute thing, really.

DON

(beat)
But what about your job?

HOLLY

I got a fifteen-month leave of
absence to prepare for my MBA.
Figured a vacation before the fall
semester is just what I need.

ARGYLE

Watch out for earthquakes over there.
They say the big nine is just around
the corner.

DON

Nonsense! No one can predict those.

MICHELLE

Argyle and Hank, you're witnesses.
If the earth opens up and swallows
us, I bequeath the house to whoever
feeds the dog first.

This draws chuckles all around - nervously from Don.

HANK

You know what's really weird?
Those sinkholes. They're popping
up everywhere.

DON

Yeah. You hear about the one in
Oregon? They're all clueless.

MICHELLE

I still say it's the Universe
spring cleaning.

ARGYLE

(belches)
Or maybe suffering indigestion.

The lights flicker, then go off, leaving them in gloom.

HANK

(glancing around)
Whoa! Lovely timing.

DON

Well...looks like it's dessert by
candlelight.

The house is quiet, except for thunder rolling overhead and
the rain hammering the roof.

INT. FARMHOUSE, SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY - NIGHT

A kerosene lamp sits on a low stool. Kurt lights it with a
match and retreats down the corridor.

He pauses for a few breaths, stares at a closed door with a
sign nailed to it in bold, typed letters:

"KEEP OUT IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU"

Across from the door, a console table stands against the
wall, under a brass-framed mirror. On it is a fern pot.

The flame wavers behind the lamp glass as Kurt walks on,
disappearing from view down the stairs.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN - LATER

A kerosene lamp on the counter casts a flickering cone of light.

Window over the sink: a glimpse of the back garden, yellow and white flowers sagging under the weight of the rain.

Don stands at the counter, arranging mugs, a kettle and a bottle of brandy on a tray. His posture is awkward – angled so his back isn't to the small blue door across the kitchen. He steals glances at it from the corner of his eye.

Near the blue door, Thule WHINES, low and anxious.

Muffled laughter and chatter echo faintly down the hall.

Don gently nudges Thule with his knee as he carries the tray out of the kitchen.

HALLWAY / PARLOR ENTRANCE

Don moves down the hall toward the parlor's open doorway.

ARGYLE (O.S.)
 Could have been Beirut, in '83.
 (beat)
 Or was it Da Nang?
 (beat)
 I'll be damned if I remember...

HANK (O.S.)
 You've said both. And Libya.

INT. FARMHOUSE, PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

The room is lit by a kerosene lamp and the fire in the hearth. The family sits in a loose circle of chairs and floor cushions.

Don enters, sets the tray down on a coffee table.

HANK
 (nudging Holly)
 I've heard six different versions
 of the nose story.

Kurt chuckles as he grabs a mug and offers it to Argyle.

KURT
 Remember those fake bronze noses
 you gave Holly and me in elementary
 school?

HOLLY

Oh yeah! Oh my gosh - we wore those for weeks! Thought it was high fashion.

ARGYLE

High fashion? Damn right! I had those custom-made. Should've patented 'em.

Warm laughter echoes. Shadows play on the walls.

LATER

The storm has settled into a steady hiss of rain.

Don, Kurt, Kaiwin, Holly, Michelle, Argyle, and Hank sit by the crackling hearth fire, each with a steaming mug in hand.

Argyle leans forward in an armchair, gesturing theatrically.

ARGYLE

...and there he was, rifle trained on what he thought was a wounded German ...only it wasn't. My father swore the thing was crawling, all twisted like a broken puppet - eyes like glass buttons, skin the color of grave moss. It dragged itself into the trees and vanished. No footprints. Just a smell...like boiled vinegar and rot.

He leans back, savoring the general hush. The fire snaps.

Don has a wry smile on his face.

DON

(raising his mug)
Well told, Argyle. Well told. Too bad you're full of bull chips.

Hank whispers something in Holly's ear. She chortles, nearly chokes on her drink.

KURT

Well how about it, Holly? Spin us the yarn about that poor hapless Pumpkin.

Holly coughs, shakes her head.

HOLLY

Nobody wants to hear about Pumpkin.

KURT
Sure we do! Come on.

Kaiwin and Hank nod excitedly. Don shifts uncomfortably in his chair. Holly rolls her eyes, grinning despite herself.

HOLLY
Alright, fine. But it's dumb.

She settles deeper in her pile of cushions, takes a slow breath. Her gaze shifts to the rattling window shutters, as she remembers...

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN - AFTERNOON (FLASHBACK: 39 YEARS)

...Holly (8), opens the small, baby-blue door. A shadowy staircase leads down to the cellar.

She descends the rickety steps, pulls a cord, lighting a bare bulb.

HOLLY (V.O.)
It was the summer before third grade. Mom asked me to fetch a jar of preserves from the cellar.

CELLAR

Holly crosses a cracked flagstone floor to a shelf rack cluttered with mason jars, boxes and small crates.

As she scans the contents, something catches her eye.

She turns. A tabby cat is perched atop a wine rack, further back in the cellar. It stands motionless, staring out the high window.

HOLLY (V.O.)
Pumpkin was down there, acting strange. Very strange.

Holly creeps closer to the wine rack. The cat doesn't blink. Only the tip of its tail twitches - barely noticeable.

HOLLY (V.O.)
Pumpkin...?

No reaction from the cat. Holly drags over a small ladder, climbs up beneath the window and peeks outside.

The backyard: empty - the barn in the distance, the grass swaying in the wind.

Holly turns back, waves a hand in front of the cat's face.
Again, nothing.

HOLLY (V.O.)
I called her name. I waved at her.
She didn't even flinch.

Holly leans in to touch the cat - then pulls back, hesitant.
Something about the stare unnerves her. She looks out the
window again.

The backyard: nothing unusual.

She climbs back down and heads to the shelves, glancing at
the cat with the corner of her eye. As she reaches to grab a
jar, she hears a crooning voice - half meow, half human:

VOICE (O.S.)
I'm a good kitty...

Holly freezes, eyes wide as saucers. She snatches the jar of
preserves, bolts up the stairs to the kitchen, and kicks the
blue door shut with her leg. Dust rises in her wake.

On the wine rack: Pumpkin is still motionless, staring out
the window.

On the stone floor: A short trail of blood droplets leads to
an antique, black coal stove.

In a corner by the stove: two miscarried cat fetuses, curled
and red, still in their translucent placentas.

BACK TO PRESENT: FARMHOUSE, PARLOR - NIGHT

Silence hangs heavy. The fire flickers low. Rain whispers
against the shutters.

MICHELLE
(scoffing)
Kids and their imaginations...

KURT
I think you made that humdinger up
'cause you're allergic to cats. You
had it in for puss from day one.
Admit it.

Holly hurls a cushion at him. Kurt ducks nimbly, laughing.

HOLLY
I know what I heard. It wasn't old
pipes moaning or shrews nesting in
(MORE)

HOLLY (cont'd)
an eave. And I never went in that
cellar again.

HANK
I've always said it. Cats see
things we don't.

KURT
Maybe she saw one of Mom's little
people.

Don shoots Michelle a sharp look. She smiles for a moment.
Her scar seems to glow in the firelight. Then, with a voice
that is syrupy sweet - dangerous:

MICHELLE
(left brow arched)
What was that?

Kurt fidgets in his seat. He coughs, looks around for a
rescue.

KURT
Just...y'know. Kidding.

MICHELLE
Oh, sweetie. Everyone knows there's
no such thing as little people...
(beat)
Right?

She flashes a wide grin, baring too many perfect teeth for
her age. She then drains her mug.

Don breaks the tension.

DON
Hank? Got a story for the fire?

HANK
Can't say I do. I'm no storyteller
either way.

Kaiwin turns to Kurt, soft-spoken, almost shy.

KAIWIN
Tell them about the witch.

Kurt stiffens.

KURT
Nah. That one's not really...
(uncomfortable beat)
Holly's got the best stories.

Kaiwin places a delicate hand on his arm. She tilts her face to meet his eyes, smiles innocently.

Don watches, amused.

KAIWIN

Your story is very frightening.
I shivered when you told it to me.

KURT

It's barely a ghost story. Mom,
don't you have any?

MICHELLE

Nope. Only true and excruciatingly
boring ones. Yours sounds far more
interesting. I don't think you've
ever mentioned it before.

ARGYLE

Good grief, lad. Are you whining?
Stop that nonsense!

HOLLY

(devilish grin)
Yeah, bro. Let's hear it.

The others murmur their agreement. Kurt sighs, defeated.

KURT

(shakes his head)
Jesus. You people are relentless.

He pours brandy into his mug and takes a swig. He stares at his drink, jaw clenched, temples twitching. His eyes cloud and his voice is thick as he tells his story.

KURT

Alright...but bear with me. This
is...summer of '96. My senior year.
I stayed in San Francisco, while Mom
and Dad came out here, like always.
I'd made varsity linebacker. Led the
team in sacks. That got me in with
Nelly Coolidge, the cheerlead
captain and hottest girl in school.

FLASHBACK (29 YEARS):

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE, BACK ROOM - DAY

Kurt (18), hauls heavy boxes through a cluttered receiving area. Fluorescent lights flicker overhead.

KURT (V.O.)

Her dad owned that store on Potrero Hill. Remember it? You guys used to buy all your camping gear there. He gave me a summer job - stocking, hauling freight, closing. The usual backbreaking gig.

He pauses to catch his breath, wipes sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

INT. FIREBIRD - LATE AFTERNOON

Kurt and **NELLY** (blonde, 16, perfect tan) are tangled in the back seat of the car, parked near the Bay beachfront. The sun slants low through the car's windows.

KURT (V.O.)

One afternoon, while we were necking in the back seat of my...uh, your car actually, Dad...she told me about a woman who'd hanged herself in the store, during the Great Depression. Ever since, the place was haunted.

Nelly leans in close, serious, whispers in Kurt's ear.

KURT (V.O.)

She said her ghost still wandered the place. The previous owners also saw it. A spindly thing with a wicked grin.

(beat)

Totally spoiled the mood.

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE, STORAGE SECTION - NIGHT

The place is a dark, overstocked maze of aisles and shelves. There's barely enough room for a person to turn sideways.

KURT (V.O.)

Nelly got this idea: We needed to provoke the spirit - summon it, and then banish it.

EXT. STOREFRONT - LATER

Nelly stands at the door with two Goth girls: **SAMANTHA** and **CASSIE** - long black clothes, bangs over heavy eye makeup, all business.

KURT (V.O.)

She knew these two girls who were into Ouija boards, moon blocks, all kinds of occult shit. Total outcasts. Even the stoners and chess nerds wouldn't talk to them. I still remember their names. Samantha and Cassie.

Kurt unlocks the door. The girls slip inside.

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE, STORAGE SECTION - LATER

Fluorescent bulbs cast sickly green light across the narrow aisles and high, teetering stacks.

Kurt, notepad in hand, works alone.

In a spacious corner near the office door, Sam and Cass kneel on the concrete floor. They spread out candles, chalk, a thick black book. Their hands move with eerie precision as they trace a pentagram.

KURT (V.O.)

They scribed this big circle on the floor. Said it would trap spirits. I thought it was total BS. Just left them to it.

BACK ROOM

Kurt is in mid-lift when Nelly rushes in, grabs his arm.

KURT (V.O.)

Next thing I know, she's dragging me back. Tells me everyone's waiting. For what?

STORAGE SECTION

A tin bowl bubbles with burning hair and lighter fluid. Thick smoke curls up. Candles flicker at the points of the pentagram. Shadows stretch long.

Sam and Cass, swaying rhythmically, chant in an arcane language. Kurt and Nelly kneel behind them. She clings to his arm.

KURT (V.O.)

Normally, I'd have been all about Nelly pressing up against me. But the sisters had me locked in.

(MORE)

KURT (V.O.) (cont'd)
Sounded like they were invoking
Beelzebub.

Samantha draws symbols with chalk, her fingers trembling.
Cassie rocks, her eyes rolled back in their sockets.

LATER

Nelly, Sam and Cass sit in a triangle around the brazier,
hands linked. The pentagram glows in the candlelight.

KURT (V.O.)
Cassie told us to sit Indian style.
I said hell no - until Nelly
whispered: "Cluck, cluck, cluck."

He rolls his eyes and sits. The triangle becomes a diamond.

LATER

Sam chants alone. Cassie removes a dagger and pricks her
finger. She lets blood drip into the smoldering bowl. She
passes the dagger to Sam, who follows suit.

FWUMP! A jet of flame bursts upward, three feet, startling.

Then, silence. They all stare into the bowl, hypnotized.

The flames die. The room stills.

KURT (V.O.)
Nobody moved. They just stared -
swaying, like they'd smoked some
kind of crack.

Everything turns pitch black. Nelly SCREAMS. Cassie SHRIEKS.

KURT (V.O.)
I couldn't even see my hand in front
of my face. The air...it turned
thick. Electric.

From somewhere: a hollow, disembodied, dry SNICKER - quiet
at first, then sharper, louder. Mocking.

Strobe light flickers behind the office window - an erratic
pulse of white and shadow. Kurt squints at the glass.

OFFICE

A grainy female figure in a wrinkled nightgown sits on the
desk, motionless. In semi-profile, her right cheek and nose
catch the flickering light. Black hair hangs like seaweed,
her nightgown stirring in an ethereal breeze.

The apparition rises slowly, turns her head to the window. She casts no reflection in the glass.

On the other side of the window: Kurt stares back, wide-eyed, paralyzed with terror.

All at once, phones start RINGING - seven or eight of them, scattered throughout the building.

On the other side of the window: Kurt shuts his eyes, covers his ears.

EXT. DEPARTMENT STORE - NIGHT

The four teens burst out the front door, gasping on the curb. They stare into the blackened storefront. Flickers still dance in the back.

The street is dead. No people, no traffic, just wind blowing papers and leaves in the gutters. And the ringing...

The four of them turn, as one, when a phone booth down the street joins the chorus.

KURT (V.O.)

Wouldn't have gone back in there
for a million bucks. But I didn't
want Herb Coolidge skinning me
alive if the place got looted.

Kurt steels himself, turns, hurries back to the store. He fumbles with the keys and locks the glass door.

ALLEY

Kurt runs around to the back of the building and slams the rear door shut.

He exhales, then sprints off into the night.

BACK TO PRESENT: FARMHOUSE, PARLOR - NIGHT

Kurt sits near the hearth, still staring into his mug.

KURT

And that was it.

(chuckles dryly)
Handed in my resignation the next
day. Didn't give two weeks. Nelly
dumped me and went steady with a
lineman. I didn't care.

(MORE)

KURT (cont'd)
(slugs some brandy)
Had nightmares until Thanksgiving.
Maybe longer.

The others sit still, bathed in the flickering firelight, faces thoughtful, solemn. Except Michelle. She watches Kurt - like a feral cat right before pouncing on its prey.

INT. FARMHOUSE, MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

The storm has calmed. Rain patters steadily on the roof. Wind hums at the eaves.

Don lies alone in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Argyle's voice echoes in his head:

ARGYLE (V.O.)
*That was one hell of a story,
Master Kurt. Too bad you're full
of bull chips.*

Don smiles faintly, then turns to the bedroom window.

He holds his breath, listening: the faint creak of timbers, wind chimes knocking dully against a clapboard, a muffled giggle from another room - drifting through a vent, a lone frog croaking beneath the dormer.

He listens for a few breaths. Then his eyes drift shut.

EXT. FARMHOUSE, FRONT LAWN - DAY

The rain pools in shallow dips along the gravel drive, where Kurt's Mini Cooper sits.

The farmhouse looms in the background - quiet, brooding.

A seamless cloak of gray hangs low over the hills.

INT. FARMHOUSE, DEN - MEANWHILE

Rain beads on the windows. The curtains are drawn back against the gloom. A big kerosene lamp, perched on the hearth next to stacks of old magazines, lights the room.

The arm-clock above the mantelpiece reads 9:45 AM.

The den is much like the attic landing: shelves stacked floor to ceiling with trinkets, books and vintage curios.

A small forest of floor lamps, some covered with drop cloths, occupies a corner.

Photo albums and loose prints sprawl across the long table – beside a plate of pretzels and two steaming mugs of tea.

Michelle lounges in one of two rattan chairs, a knitted throw draped over her knees. Kaiwin sits cross-legged on the leather couch, a mug clasped in both hands, attentive.

A low chuckle escapes Michelle.

MICHELLE

God fashions a figure from clay,
animates it with a single word, and
lo and behold...a living golem who
doesn't know right from wrong.
And from his rib, a lowly female
to serve and keep him company.
Then their children come along and
procreate through incest?

Kaiwin smiles awkwardly, unsure whether to laugh or defend.

KAIWIN

(lightly)
What if it's not meant to be
literal? It could be...what's that
word...allegory.

Michelle tilts her head, amused, eyes gleaming.

MICHELLE

Oh, I know what it's meant to be.
But sometimes I wonder if we've
mistaken a curse for a parable.
Maybe the story isn't about
creation at all. Maybe it's about
possession.

Kaiwin frowns faintly, intrigued despite herself.

KAIWIN

That's...an interesting way of
looking at it.
(sips some tea)
But then...I'm not convinced by
that evolution thing. DNA is just
way too intricate to be random.
You know what I mean?

MICHELLE

Oh, I absolutely agree. You see,
that's the thing, dear: They have
(MORE)

MICHELLE (cont'd)
 us stumbling blindly between two
 extremes. But the truth...
 (shakes her head)
 ...is almost never at the poles.

A long beat. Rain rattles faintly against the windowpanes.
 Somewhere in the house: a telephone rings - muted.

KAIWIN
 So...how do you think it happened?

Kaiwin grabs a handful of pretzels from the table. A knowing
 smile curls on Michelle's lips.

MICHELLE
 Ever heard of the Sky Fathers,
 Earth Mother and Her Children?

Kaiwin munches on a pretzel, frowning thoughtfully.

MICHELLE
 Here's the short of it: The Sky
 Fathers mounted Earth Mother.
 Lightnings flashed with their
 orgasms. When they moaned, it was
 thunder. Their gushing waters
 seeded her womb.

Her voice lowers - hypnotic, like reciting an ancient spell.

Outside: lightning flashes.

MICHELLE
 Earth shuddered...and bore fruit.
 Humans, fully grown, sprouted forth,
 just as plants do. Somewhat like us,
 but feral. Androgynous. Like a sketch
 before the final stroke.
 (leans in, slightly)
 Then, other entities decided to
 meddle. And those Children started
 clawing their way from the muck as
 males and females. Earth stopped
 bearing human fruit. Her Children
 mounted each other. Bore their own
 fruit. Then, the entities tampered
 again. And the feral Children became
 what science calls "homo-sapiens".

Michelle grabs a mug from the table. Kaiwin blinks, stunned.

KAIWIN
 That's quite a theory! Where did you
 get that?

MICHELLE
A certain Sumerian tablet.

KAIWIN
So it's a myth?

MICHELLE
I've lived long and read too much.
And I'll tell you this: The myths
are truer than the scriptures.
Truer than anything we're told.
(sips tea)
You just have to know how to read
them, dear.

Outside: Thunder BOOMS. The rain intensifies once more.

MICHELLE
(glancing toward the
window)
Looks like our Sky Father still
hasn't gotten it out of his system.

They both cackle – a sharp, knowing laugh.

Light footsteps approach from the hallway. Holly enters, a
towel slung over her shoulder.

HOLLY
Did I miss tea hour?

She flops onto the couch next to Kaiwin, who grabs the
second mug from the table and hands it to her.

HOLLY
Thanks.

MICHELLE
Not at all, sweetheart. We were
just talking about...family pre-
history.

Her eyes linger on Kaiwin for a moment – warm, but faintly
predatory.

HOLLY
(to Kaiwin)
Kurt still drowsing?

Kaiwin nods.

HOLLY
Let him have his beauty sleep. He
needs it.

(MORE)

HOLLY (cont'd)
 (to Michelle)
 Celeste called. She wanted to know
 if we packed for the trip yet.
 (with a smirk)
 She said she procrastinates...like
 you.

MICHELLE
 (mock-affronted)
 I don't procrastinate.

Holly throws glances at the clutter in the room.

HOLLY
 Hmmm...this den begs to differ. You
 guys have been living here for two
 years, and this place still looks
 like someone hit "pause" mid-move.

Michelle flicks a pretzel at her.

MICHELLE
 I'll have you know, some of us
 believe in archival precision. And
 your father can barely sort his sock
 drawer, let alone a spreadsheet.

They all laugh — a light moment, snug against the murmur of
 the rain.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN - EARLY EVENING

Rain taps steadily at the window above the sink, overlooking
 the garden. The kerosene lamp flickers on the counter.

Plates of half-eaten meat pies and glasses of juice crowd
 the table, where the family is gathered.

Near the sliding back porch door, Thule hunches over a
 plastic dish, scarfing down his dinner with noisy gusto.

KURT
 How long you think before the power's
 back?

DON
 Could be anywhere from five minutes
 to two days.
 (shrugs)
 Welcome to the joys of rural living.

Holly watches the dog slurp greedily.

HOLLY

At least Thule's got his priorities straight.

She chews a mouthful, washes it down with some juice.

KAIWIN

He's been restless, though. Last night, he kept pacing outside the loft.

MICHELLE

He's always like that — worse when the weather's gloomy. Jumps at every shadow like it's a threat.

DON

(grimacing slightly)
You know...speaking of which...
the other night, I heard some weird noises.

The table quiets slightly. Thule licks his empty dish.

DON

I couldn't sleep — figured it was him scratching around. But then something creaked...and I swear I heard footsteps...

(beat)

Or dragging. Just outside our room.

HOLLY

(sits up)

What if it's a raccoon? Remember when one squeezed down the chimney and we found it in the parlor? Totally freaked-out and covered in soot?

DON

(shakes his head)

Didn't see any prints this time. And no toppled vases. Just the noises.

Kurt helps himself to another serving of pie.

KURT

I've always said you should put a cap on that shaft.

DON

I'm sure I meant to get around to it.

He picks at his food absently.

HOLLY
(straight-faced)
Yes, Dad. The mighty woulda-coulda-
shoulda strikes again.

MICHELLE
(with a sneer)
Who's on the hook, as always?

Kaiwin chuckles. The lamp flickers.

Thunder murmurs in the distance.

INT. FARMHOUSE, SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY - NIGHT

A faint flame flickers from the kerosene lamp atop the stool. The old house is silent - only the ticking of the clock from the den.

Kurt, barefoot, hair tousled, in shorts and a cotton T, pads down the stairs to the landing. He moves past the lamp, past the den's open doorway.

He halts by the closed door to Michelle's study:

"KEEP OUT IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU"

Dim, flickering light seeps from beneath the door.

Inside: muffled voices and soft laughter - Kaiwin's.

Kurt strains to hear, but the words are barely audible.

KAIWIN (O.S.)
...and how do you know it's a boy?

MICHELLE (O.S.)
I showed you the patterns - how it
all adds up.

Kurt steps to the door, slowly, puts his ear to the wood.

MICHELLE (O.S.)
Besides, I can smell the bitter
male seed. Another Miller blockhead
in the works.

Inside: more giggles - from both women. Then, a SHUFFLE.

Kurt tenses, holds his breath.

MICHELLE (O.S.)
 Is that really what you want? To
 be mothering a teenage brat when
 you're sixty?

Inside: A loud SNAP. The SCRAPE of a chair leg. FOOTSTEPS.

A shadow cuts across the strip of light under the door. Kurt jerks back and slinks away, on his tip toes, vanishing down the gloom of the staircase.

Inside: Michelle's voice drips through, closer to the door.

MICHELLE (O.S.)
 Remember what I told you last time -
 how it can skyrocket your career.
 And that's only the beginning.
 (beat, softly)
 Think it over.

Window at the top of the stairs: a flash of lightning.

DREAM SEQUENCE (DON'S POV)

A) INT. FIRST HALLWAY - LATE EVENING

A strange place. A long corridor unfolds ahead, washed in the lurid red of sunset bleeding through arched windows in its left wall.

Don's voice echoes as he calls out in a cathedral silence:

DON (V.O.)
Michelle...?

Shadows stretch impossibly tall across the floor and right wall - where niches are set at regular intervals.

In the niches: glass cases housing live, giant insects - a Hercules beetle, assassin bug, Goliath stick, horned scarab, earwig...all twitching silently in the crimson glow.

Don's footsteps carry him forward, past the niches - slow, hesitant.

DON (V.O.)
Michelle...?

At the end of the hallway, a divan waits in the light, near an elbow junction. Kurt (18) lounges there, a smoldering joint in his hand, one leg crossed casually over the other, feet in slippers. He whistles a soft, tuneless melody.

KURT

*Hi, Pop. Bronson gave me this.
It's the good stuff.*

He exhales a lazy plume of smoke.

DON (V.O.)

Where's Michelle?

KURT

*She had an accident. But she's
okay now. She's in the kitchen.*

Don turns the corner, stops.

Ahead: An adjoining corridor, windowless, with closed doors on both sides. The same red light glows at its opposite end, beyond a single, open door.

B) INT. SECOND HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Don shambles down the corridor, past the closed doors. Kurt's whistling drifts behind him - faint.

Don reaches the end, finds himself standing at the doorway of the farmhouse kitchen - bathed in the murky red glow.

Inside: Michelle (early 50's incarnation) is at the stove, stirring a pot with a wooden paddle, her back to him. She's in bra and panties - wrinkled, soiled with mud and grime, her hair a wild mess.

DON (V.O.)

(calm)

What are you doing?

Michelle turns, glowers at him. Her eyes are bloodshot - dark crescents underneath.

The jagged scar runs from her left temple, all the way down to her hip bone - black, pulsing like a vein.

MICHELLE

(cold, flat)

*I'm making porridge for Johnathan.
What does it look like?*

A hunched dwarf SHUFFLES across the kitchen, carrying a lumpy burlap sack over her shoulder. She wears poulaines with pointy tips, a headscarf tied under her chin.

DON (V.O.)

Why is she here?

The dwarf turns. It's Holly - stunted, scabrous, knobby knees, misshapen hands gripping the sac, bird-claw fingers, filthy black nails.

Michelle hacks out a wet, phlegmy cough that shakes her to the core. She spits into the pot, keeps stirring.

MICHELLE

She's helping with some chores.

Dwarf-Holly sneers and disappears through the small door. Wooden steps creak as she descends to the cellar.

From somewhere nearby: a voice calls Don's name.

C) INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Don enters, drifts to the sliding glass back porch door.

Outside: Where the barn once stood, a circular sinkhole yawns beneath a hellish red sky. At its rim, two men stand, cackling, in loincloths and shades. One is lanky, with a mustache. The other is burly, clean-shaven. **FRICK** and **FRACK**.

FRICK

*We heard you were in the hospital.
Came to check on you.*

They point at Don, laugh, then begin a grotesque dance near the lip of the hole.

The dance goes on for a while, and then:

FRACK

*(jeering)
Oh! Look behind you!*

Don turns.

Michelle is gone. The kitchen has changed. Now decrepit, rotting - cabinets split, fridge rusty, tiles cracked and grimy, cobwebs heavy.

On the stove: the pot is full of rancid sludge. Plastic baby doll arms and legs bob in the ooze.

HEAVY FOOTSTEPS thunder up the cellar stairs. A bestial GROWL echoes from below.

The whole house begins to quake - walls buckling, windows rattling.

The small cellar door shudders, BURSTS open...

INT. FARMHOUSE, MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

Don jolts awake, chest heaving. His eyes dart, wide and unfocused, before finding the dim shape beside him.

Michelle lies on her side, her quilt slipped away, snoring softly in the hush of the room.

Don sighs in relief, draws the blanket over her, then sinks back, rubbing his face.

He listens to the steady hiss of rain outside.

EXT. SEATAC AIRPORT, DEPARTURE LANE - DAY

The storm has passed. Patches of sunlit blue break through the clouds. The pavement still glistens from recent rain.

A valet boy pushes a luggage cart stacked with suitcases. Holly walks beside him, chatting and gesturing.

In the foreground, Don's minivan idles at the curb.

Nearby, Don hugs Michelle, who wears casual clothes and a wide bonnet, a large tote bag slung over her shoulder.

MICHELLE

Don't forget to visit Luther.

Don nods. She kisses him briskly, then hurries after Holly toward the sliding glass doors.

Don watches her go, unease tightening his expression.

INT. SEATAC AIRPORT TERMINAL - LATER

Michelle and Holly stand at the departures desk. The air is calm and sterile, the terminal nearly vacant.

Overhead, an intercom voice announces:

INTERCOM (V.O.)

Last boarding call for Pan Am Flight
117 to Boston. Please proceed to Gate
9. Final boarding - Gate 9.

The smiling desk attendant stamps Michelle's passport.

Passport: next to a recent photo of Michelle (with face scar), her surname, given name, and birth date are glimpsed - "MOCK, MICHELLE". "21 MAR 1945".

EXT. SEATAC AIRPORT RUNWAY - LATER

A Pan Am jet climbs into the noontime sky. The aircraft banks southeast, swallowed by a horizon of white and gold.

FADE OUT

End of Part I