

LET THE EVIL GO WEST



written by

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DAY
NIGHT

FADE IN ON

THE VAST ALPINE-DESERT OF SOUTHEASTERN WYOMING

Petrified country stretching far back to a jagged horizon.

We can just make out a horse-drawn wagon -- a speck against the landscape -- moving leftward. Thin trail of dust in its wake.

THE COVERED WAGON

is piloted by HOWARD, late 20s, easygoing.

And sitting beside him is

CURTIN

30s, cleaning a six-shooter, leaned back. At ease, but nonetheless his resting face is intense, guarded.

INSIDE THE WAGON

prospecting tools CLANK around.

PAUL

19, naive, good-natured, perpetually grinning.

Sitting across from him is

DOBBS

30s, uneasy, using a knife to tighten screws driven in at weird angles around the top of a

LARGE WOODEN KEG

with the words "BLACK POWDER" branded on the side.

PAUL

Ain't it funny, Uncle Dobbs? Us stumblin across this before we even make it out West.

DOBBS

Us?

PAUL

Well, you. But the particular person, that was just timing.

DOBBS

Timing amounts to quite a bit in Nebraska.

HOWARD (O.S.)
 (correcting)
 Wyoming.

DOBBS
 Already?

PAUL
 All I'm sayin is that was a stroke
 and a half of good luck for us.

Dobbs' countenance darkens at the sound of that word: "us".

PAUL (CONT'D)
 Real good.

EDGE OF A FOREST

Wagon pulled over. Nascent sunset casting spindly shadows over an auburn ground.

A few yards away, the four men sit just outside the tree line, eating a supper of biscuits and bacon.

Dobbs stares into the wagon, at the black powder keg.

CURTIN
 You feelin alright?

DOBBS
 I'm pondering.

CURTIN
 What on?

DOBBS
 What a man could do with all that.

PAUL
 What four men could each do with a
 quarter of all that.

HOWARD
 Still a whole lot.

CURTIN
 (wary)
 And what d'ye figure you'd do with
 it?

Dobbs is staring at the ground, perhaps considering the question, or maybe deep in another thought altogether.

HOWARD
 (chuckles, to Curtin)
 I think our friend's been drinkin
 s'more.

PAUL
 Uncle Dobbs?

He snaps out of it.

DOBBS
 We better get that thing tucked
 away. Indians happen by and get a
 look, that'll be the end of us.

He gets to his feet.

DOBBS (CONT'D)
 Give me a hand, kid.

FOREST

The sinking sun tints the trees almost mauve.

Paul struggles to drag the heavy keg while Dobbs, holding a
 shovel, examines a clearing in the forest.

DOBBS
 This feels right.

Paul lets out a sigh.

PAUL
 Thank God.

He straightens up

THE KEG

Its presence dominates the rest of this scene, the remaining
 action playing out in BG.

DOBBS
 Do me a favor. Feel the soil
 there. Tell me if it's soft.

Paul crouches, his back to Dobbs.

PAUL
 Well, how soft is sof--

CLANG!

Dobbs cracks the flat of the shovel over Paul's head, and Paul crumples.

Dobbs looks over his shoulder to make sure the coast is clear.

Paul groans.

CLANG! CRUNCH!

Dobbs hits him twice, waits a beat to make sure he's dead, then stomps the shovel into the earth.

He grabs Paul's feet, about to drag him when the sound of a PISTOL COCKING makes him spin around.

Curtin enters frame, pointing a gun at Dobbs.

CURTIN

Goddamn you, Dobbs. I was tellin
myself I was wrong.

DOBBS

The kid was gonna try to take it
from me.

(beat)

And so are you.

Dobbs reaches for his own holster, but BANG!

Curtin shoots him square in the chest and Dobbs drops to the ground.

Curtin backs away, gun still trained on Dobbs, but the moment he drops his guard, Dobbs snatches his own pistol free from his belt and BANG BANG BANG!

Dobbs lands three nonfatal shots before Curtin can shoot once, hitting Dobbs in the stomach this time.

Curtin stumbles to the ground, falling into a bush.

Dobbs fires three more times, only one of those bullets finding Curtin, but that's all it takes.

CLICK. Dobbs tries another shot but he's dry.

Curtin isn't moving.

Dobbs chucks his gun.

Howard rushes in a moment later.

HOWARD

Oh, Jesus. Aw, Jesus, what the hell happened?

DOBBS

Help. I need help.

Howard kneels by Dobbs.

HOWARD

Dobbs--

Dobbs unsheathes a knife and plunges it into Howard's stomach. Howard falls back in shock.

Dobbs gets onto all fours and pulls the knife from Howard's stomach and jams it into his throat and forces the blade across until Howard is half-decapitated.

Dobbs attempts to stand, but he's too badly wounded. He crawls to the keg. Pulls his upper body up onto it and then collapses, slumped over the keg, bleeding, panting.

DOBBS

Please...

Blood oozes down the side of the keg.

His breathing stops.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN ON

A BIG CORRAL

Cattle grazing among the chaparral.

Evergreen-dotted mountains almost black against a bright, cerulean sky.

TITLE CARD: 1867

ABNER (O.S.)

Few years back, '64 or so, I knew a fella. Edward. Company G, 6th Battalion, Pittsylvania. Me and him were color guard, stood shoulder to shoulder. Edward spent five years up in New York before the war, learnin engineering.

PULL BACK SLOWLY as V.O. continues.

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

I watched Edward tear clean in half from cannon fire. Died before he could build a goddamn thing with all that schoolin. Makes a man wonder. There was plenty more like him. You see that in a war, and it makes a man wonder what his thing is and whether he gets to do it.

And now we've PULLED BACK to the point where we realize we were looking outside through an open door, from within a shack. Much darker in here than outside.

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

My wife ain't much for plans. Me, I think a plan's the only thing you can't take away from a man, so I always had mine. Marry the girl, win the war, make somethin of myself.

Continue PULLING BACK until we see the man we've been listening to -- ABNER ELLIS, late 30s, heavy beard -- a dour intensity to his face and his words. Wearing whatever a man can find for cheap in 1867.

He's standing in front of a table where a MAN IN A HAT sits, his back to us, listening to Abner too.

At Abner's feet is a blue-merle Border Collie. Her name is BISCUIT. She sits patiently, watching the Man in the Hat.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Up 'til now, my plan was get here, talk to you 'bout one of them bulls outside. I sold everything but these clothes to put this money in my pocket -- everything I brought with me to Colorado, the piss poor crops I could get out the soil we settled on, I even sold my horse. Walked four days, just me and Biscuit here, to get to your ranch, talk about one of them bulls. And now I'm here, and the plan is a cow-calf operation. Raisin' beef. Got my heifers back home -- three of em, all proven. A bull from you sets it in motion.

The man at the table leans back in his chair, sizing Abner up.

ABNER (CONT'D)

You ever wonder if there's a bigger thing than you to put your life toward? My wife and my boy, I reckon maybe they're it.

MAN IN THE HAT

Family's the biggest thing there is.

ABNER

They say the land out here tests a man. Puts him on his last legs and sees if he can still stand. Well, here I am. Standin in front of you. It's right now or it ain't at all. The money I got here, it ain't what most fellas would call "enough", but it's every penny I got to my name. So I figure what I'm askin is for you to help a family man and his family not end up like that fella Edward. Passin on...unspent.

CATTLE RANCH

Abner leads his new bull by a rope. Biscuit keeping pace. The ranch behind them.

Slung over the bull is a satchel and a holstered rifle.

On Abner's face, a yonderly expression we'll get used to.

He notices a foot-long rectangle of torn fabric snagged in dead sagebrush. He pulls it free. A fig leaf pattern, sun-bleached into near oblivion.

Abner cracks a smile, stuffs the cloth into his shirt pocket.

WILDERNESS

Abner within the glow of a modest campfire, cooking a single potato in a re-purposed tin.

He pulls the potato off the fire, cuts a small chunk off, blows on it to cool it down.

He WHISTLES to get Biscuit's attention, then tosses her the piece. She catches it.

HILLY PLAINS

Abner crests a golden hill and lays eyes on --

HIS HOME

A couple hundred yards away. Isolated. Modest, even at this distance.

And in an animal enclosure near the home, a plume of smoke billows from a heap atop the grass.

ABNER

panics. Drops the bull's reins and rips the rifle from its scabbard and takes off toward the house.

Biscuit giving chase.

A hundred yards out.

ABNER
Elspeth! Elspeth!

Closing the gap.

ABNER (CONT'D)
Benjamin!

And Abner is close enough now to see that in the enclosure is

A PILE OF CHARRED CATTLE

Three of them. Shotgun holes in their heads. Tiny flames still licking at the carcasses.

Abner stops and stares for just a moment, then starts for the house again -- but the sight of the blackened cattle keeps him from leaving.

ABNER (CONT'D)
Elspeth!

Abner hops the fence into the enclosure, toward the cows.

Out of the house wanders

BENJAMIN

10, freckled. Insouciant.

Abner, desperate, flings dirt onto the cows to put out the stragglng flames.

ABNER (CONT'D)
 (to Benjamin)
 Where's your ma!

Before the boy can answer

ELSPETH (29)
 hurries out of the house, ready to allay Abner's panic.

ELSPETH
 (Scottish accent)
 We're okay, Abner.

The fire is dead and Abner deflates, realizing now how late he is.

ABNER
 Cheyenne? Or Sioux?

ELSPETH
 I did it. They got sick, the lot of em. First one, then by day after it was the other two.

ABNER
 Sick how?

ELSPETH
 There were sores on their tongues, their legs. And they weren't acting like theirselves. They seemed frenzied. Dangerous. Frightening. I had to do it. There was something very wrong /with em.

ABNER
 (over)
 You tie em up and keep em separate! Ain't no need to...

It's obvious he doesn't even believe his own argument, but he's too overwhelmed to be reasonable.

ELSPETH
 You don't know if an affliction like that can pass on to people. Ben and me were...

ABNER
 Were what?
 (points at dead cattle)
 That was all of it! Everything!

Abner glances over his shoulder, at that bull still up there on the hill -- useless now.

ELSPETH

(pleading)

I had to kill em, Abner.

Without a word, Abner walks away, toward the house.

ANGLE THROUGH WINDOW

shows Abner inside the spartan farmhouse stacking up blankets and pillows on a bed. He drops to his knees and buries his face into the pile of bedding and SCREAMS. Several times.

It's too muffled to tell if these are words or formless guttural noises, but we can still hear the anguish through his attempt to stifle himself.

He pulls back and collects himself. Stands.

He heads outside and stops a few paces past the door.

He stares at Elspeth.

He walks over to her. Places a hand on her shoulder.

ABNER

Okay.

IN THE HOUSE

Benjamin sleeps while Abner and Elspeth sit at a small table.

ABNER

That pile of bones out there, that was food, and firewood, and blankets, and supplies. I mean, that was...that was our strategy.

ELSPETH

I know, love.

She squeezes his hand. She has a sheepish look to her, clearly still feeling guilty. And Abner's lamentations aren't making things any easier.

ABNER

What's next? I didn't have another plan.

ELSPETH

We have this family. That got us all the way from Virginia.

(MORE)

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

It got you through a war. It built this house.

That doesn't seem good enough for Abner.

ABNER

I'm set here waitin still, for that knowledge of what it is I'm here in this place to do. It sure don't look like cattle-raisin'.

ELSPETH

You're here to survive.

Abner stews.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

All of us are. And I know you'll do what ye need to. As will I.

She notices the fabric stuffed in Abner's shirt pocket, pulls it out, inspects it.

ABNER

Found that. Reckon you can finally patch up your dress like you been wishin you could.

ELSPETH

I sold me needle and thread weeks ago. For those potatoes.

(smiles)

But you're sweet for thinkin of it. Is this a fig leaf pattern?

Abner gives a weak nod. He stares out through a window.

ABNER

Captain once told me -- this was in Richmond or thereabout, after the 6th took a beatin -- he told me a man who believes there's a bigger purpose to himself is often harder to kill. I told him back, "If you're right, Cap'n, then I reckon I can't never die."

He smirks at his own cleverness. But that light in his eye is brief.

ABNER (CONT'D)

(beat)

More and more that's seemin like a punishment.

ANIMAL ENCLOSURE

KSSHT! A shovel plunges into the earth.

Abner flings a pile of dirt out from a chest-deep hole. He's sweaty, angry, pensive.

The burnt cows are still on the surface, waiting to be rolled into the mass grave.

Benjamin watches from the other side of the fence, mimicking Abner's movements, using a large stick as his shovel.

Abner tosses another pile of dirt. He notices Benjamin, and his face softens, the anger fading.

ABNER

You waitin for me to finish?

BENJAMIN

Can we play a battle?

ABNER

I got this to do.

BENJAMIN

Will you get sick if you touch them?

ABNER

No, your ma burnt that all away.
(beat)
You don't have to be scared.

Benjamin unlatches the gate and walks over to Abner. The boy eyes the cows.

BENJAMIN

Will you bury them upside down?

ABNER

Why would I do that?

BENJAMIN

If you bury a horse upside down then your soul gets to ride it after you die and the devil won't never catch you.

ABNER

Says who?

BENJAMIN

Ma told me.

ABNER

Your ma's got superstitions I ain't never even heard of. You know what superstition means?

Benjamin nods.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Don't bother with em.

(re: cows)

These are goin in the ground any which way they fall. They ain't no horses. And I ain't gonna raise cattle in the afterlife, I can tell ya that.

BENJAMIN

Will I raise cattle when I get bigger?

ABNER

You get to decide that.

BENJAMIN

James says he's gonna do whatever his Pa's doing in Chicago.

ABNER

James got folks that don't know no better than to tell him that. Don't pay him no mind. Just hear me. A man -- and you'll be one soon -- he needs to have a thing in mind and then put every bit of himself to gettin that thing. Don't let no one convince you different, not James, not even your ma. There ain't enough time in life to not know what you're gonna do when you wake up in the mornin.

BENJAMIN

What if I don't know?

ABNER

Then you might as well be a piano key. And what does a piano key do?

Benjamin shrugs.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Whatever the fella playin it wants it to do. And that ain't no kinda life.

BENJAMIN
Well I wanna be...

He furrows his brow, as deep in thought as a nine-year-old can be.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
Hmm...

ABNER
You'll figure that out.

BENJAMIN
I will?

ABNER
That's why we moved West. Land of opportunity.

WIDE on Abner standing in the grave, the dead cattle beside him awaiting their burial.

THE WOODS

A rifle barrel glides across frame until we see the face of the man holding it:

ABNER
aiming down the sights as he stalks through the trees.

ABNER
You hear that?
(beat)
There's someone in here. In the trees.

BENJAMIN
stands abreast of his father, holding his large stick as a rifle now, mimicking Abner's stance.

He points his "rifle" in a new direction.

BENJAMIN
Over there!

He makes a gunshot noise with his mouth and runs up to a tree.

Abner runs with him, drops to one knee and makes a gunshot noise.

Benjamin fires again.

ABNER

You got him.

They walk to a spot on the ground and look down at the dirt. Abner mimes nudging a body with his foot.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Well done. I ain't even seen him.

Benjamin beams with pride.

BENJAMIN

I think I'll be a soldier.

ABNER

When you get older?

BENJAMIN

Like how you were.

ABNER

Need a war on first.

BENJAMIN

It's either that or...hmmm...

The boy reaches into his pocket and pulls out a penny.

ABNER

What are you doin'?

BENJAMIN

Flipping this to choose what I'll be when I get big.

He flips it up high and Abner snatches it out of the air.

ABNER

Where'd you get this?

BENJAMIN

I won it from James because I beat him in a race up the hill.

ABNER

You know what this is?

BENJAMIN

A penny.

ABNER

It's money. Even this.

Abner scrutinizes the penny.

BENJAMIN

I won it fair and square. And James didn't take it neither. He got it from his grandpa for milking their cow last week.

Abner stares at the boy intensely, struck by a sudden thought.

THE ELLIS HOME IN BACKGROUND

As Abner walks away from it.

REVERSE ANGLE

shows us he's making his way to another house. His "neighbor" in this vast landscape.

OUT FRONT OF NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE

Abner KNOCKS on the door. He stares at the penny in his hand.

A COWBELL JINGLES. Abner looks up at a single cow in a small enclosure adjoining the house.

SOUND OF A LATCH on the other side of the door. Abner hides the penny in his pocket before

THE DOOR OPENS

And standing in the doorway is JIM -- late 50s, smiling.

JIM

Abner.

ABNER

Hey, Jim. Ask you a question?

INSIDE JIM'S HOUSE

The men at a table. Windows behind them frame a woman and young boy out back, tending to the cow.

JIM

Cow-calf operation, that's...you're talkin a business. Business need hell of a lot more'n two piece o' inventory. What happened to your heifers is the reason why. And my bull a few months ago. Bit by a rattler. Naw.

ABNER

My bull, your cow, that's only the beginning. It sounds small, but you gotta start small, don't you? Only way to get bigger.

JIM

I don't got the stomach for endeavors. My daughter and grandson, that's enough occupation.

ABNER

I'm okay with runnin things myself. Nothin'll change for you, 'cept the money you'll be makin.

JIM

I'm old enough to know that's never how these things work out.

ABNER

How's that?

JIM

The way one plans em.

Abner stares out the window, frustrated. There's no convincing this man.

ABNER

What'll you leave behind for em when you pass? This claim that can't grow nothin? This house? One cow?

JIM

Yes. And on top of that I'll leave em every day that I spent with em. Everything I taught her, and she passed onto him. And maybe that don't cut it for some, but dammit that's a sight better than my father left me.

ABNER

You're right.

JIM

Oh?

ABNER

That ain't enough for some.

Beat.

ABNER (CONT'D)

How'm I supposed to make somethin
outta nothin?

JIM

Ain't that the question. This
country... A man come out here
naked and penniless, well, that's
probably how he'll leave the world,
and not long after.

(beat)

Hell, I don't mean to discourage
ya.

Abner waves it off.

ABNER

Been thinkin about the war. Say
what you will about that, but it
put money in my pocket.

JIM

If war's what you're lookin for,
there's one up north, in Julesburg.
War against nature. Up in them
plains.

Abner looks confused.

Jim's lips peel back a xanthic grin.

JIM (CONT'D)

Railroad's comin. They fixin to
build it all the way West to
California.

ABNER

Railroad...

Jim nods.

JIM

Mornin, night. Way I hear it, they
never stop. You'd fit right in.

INSIDE A WAGON

Full of hopeful workers. Thin shafts of light outlining the
dust within, kicked up by the horses that are pulling this
thing.

ABNER

Squeezed between two men.

He's turning the penny over in his hand. A Native American's head on one side, "ONE CENT" on the other.

FRONT OF TRACK

A FOREMAN cups hands over mouth.

FOREMAN

Down!!

We get a glimpse of all the different jobs as WORKERS build:

Hauling the rails into place.

Dropping rail spikes at regular intervals.

Setting cottonwood ties under the iron.

Tipping over empty carts so a horse at full gallop can deliver the next one.

All to the ceaseless drumbeat of sledgehammers pounding spikes into the ground.

Advancing the track almost as quickly as a man can walk. In perfect synchronicity -- a singular organism. It's a sight to behold.

LAND on DAN & JACK -- brothers, Irishmen, 40s, dressed in fur-trimmed military jackets.

They size up Abner, who stands before them.

DAN

No.

ABNER

No?

DAN

No.

JACK

Ye don't have the build fer it.

ABNER

Word was the Union Pacific's takin any man makes the journey up here.

JACK

Aye, any man who's got the build fer it.

ABNER

I can swing a sledgehammer.

JACK

How quickly? How many times a day?

DAN

We don't stop movin out here but for death or dinner.

JACK

Central Pacific -- that's the rail comin this way from Sacramento -- they're buildin their line East even as we build ours West. So we've got to build faster'n them.

DAN

No, there's no place for you on the front of track. But we can put you to work on the grading team.

ABNER

What's that.

JACK

Clearin the land ahead of these boys. Make sure it's flat by the time they get there.

ABNER

Grading.

DAN

Grading.

ABNER

How's that pay?

DAN

Two dollars a day. That's competitive.

ABNER

I heard rate starts at three a day.

JACK

Aye. Fer fellas layin rail. Fellas who've got the build fer it.

Abner looks off into the distance as he considers.

ABNER

Where do I go to take that job?

DAN

Hundred odd miles West, into Wyoming. Medicine Bow. We've got wagons runnin men up there. Just watch out fer them Indian savages. They've an appetite for anything foul.

JACK

And if you go up, for fuck sake don't run off at the first mention o' gold and silver. We're losin more men than we bring in off that speculatin. There's no fortune to be had here. It's nothin but stories. What you'll find is men workin hard. Earning.

ABNER

Earnin two dollars.

DAN

And that's competitive.

MEDICINE BOW FOREST

Looking out over a cliff edge. Smooth, variegated tors jut out from a dense evergreen forest below.

PANNING LEFT across the gorgeous vista --

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Fire in the hole!

-- until we're looking at what's up here on this rocky cliff top.

A COUPLE DOZEN GRADERS

Dirt-cloaked, sweaty clothes matted to their skin. Some crouched, some standing, crowding together watching something O.S.

BOOM! Somewhere ahead of them, an explosion. A few of the men gawk or grin, but for the majority of them the novelty of exploding granite has worn off.

The CLACKING of airborne rock returning to Earth.

The men disperse. Back to work. Among them is ABNER, holding a pickaxe.

A CLOUD OF DUST

hangs in the air from the explosion.

Some men pile rock bits into wheelbarrows. Others drill the next hole for explosives.

Abner finds a stone chunk and CRACK! busts it up with his pickaxe. Other men do the same.

He finds another rock that's too large to lift. CRACK!
CRACK! It crumbles.

A BOOM reverberates from somewhere in the distance. Another grading crew further ahead.

A GANG BOSS oversees the work, and right next to him is

NATHANIEL

40, black, wearing tattered Union blues and holding up a wheelbarrow. He scans the sky. Something catches his attention. And then he claps eyes on Abner.

NATHANIEL

Over there! Get out the way!

Abner looks at him, confused.

Nathaniel drops the wheelbarrow and sprints toward Abner and TACKLES him to the ground. A split second later --

CRUNCH! A melon-sized, jagged hunk of granite smashes into the spot where Abner was just standing.

Abner stares at the impact mark, in shock. A couple of the Graders laugh.

GANG BOSS

To work, fellas! You too,
Nathaniel. That ground ain't no
bed!

Nathaniel stands. Abner sits up, still recovering.

NATHANIEL

You new?

Abner nods.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D)

Well, that crew up ahead of ours,
they use too much powder. The
bosses don't do nothin about it
because they're clearing more rock
that way. But every time they set
it off, we gotta watch the skies.

ABNER

Yeah.

NATHANIEL

You alright?

Abner nods.

ABNER

Thank you.

GRADING CAMP

Dozens of campfires, more men sitting at some than others.
Supper time.

At a fire on their own are Abner and Nathaniel.

ABNER

This don't bother you none?

NATHANIEL

You get used to the food.

ABNER

I ain't talkin about the food. I'm
talkin about all this. Wake up,
work, supper, sleep, then do it
again. A man needs a goal.

NATHANIEL

In this wilderness, survival's a
lofty enough goal. Country out
here ain't like settled places.
There's somethin ancient about it
all. The land watches you back,
out here. Should give a man pause
to lay track through this.

(beat)

Not the Union Pacific.

ABNER

Why are you out here?

NATHANIEL

The War done put back together
North and South, but this still
ain't a country 'til they connect
East with West. That's what we a
part of.

ABNER

Us and a couple thousand other men.

NATHANIEL

I don't fuss over having my name on the record. I get to go back home to my children and tell them I built the railroad. I had a part in the greatest thing men ever made.

He raises his eyebrows.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D)

How's that for a goal? And in the mean time, I'm just tryna earn.

ABNER

Earn two dollars a day.

NATHANIEL

(facetious)

Hey, that's a competitive rate.

Both men start laughing.

MOUNTAIN CUT

Early morning mist.

A crowd of GRADERS stare at

A MAN ON HORSEBACK

GRENVILLE DODGE. Early 30s, Union Army coat and cavalry hat.

Near Dodge, the Gang Boss stands, arms crossed like an officer staring his men into submission in the company of a high-ranking guest.

DODGE

Reason I traveled up here from the track is because Mr. Durant -- and for those of you who don't know, that's the man paying you -- Mr. Durant asked me to come here to tell you all about the deal he has with the government. See, the Union Pacific takes in money from what you gentlemen are doing -- money it uses to pay you for your hard work so you can do more of it, and then to pay for the rail our other boys lay on the ground you clear. You see, that's a system.

(MORE)

DODGE (CONT'D)

But the Union Pacific doesn't earn money on every inch you clear, or even every mile. Washington only pays for every 50 miles of graded land. That's continuous grade. Now, you've all got less than a half-mile of granite between your two teams. Call me proud but I think you can close the gap by supper tonight.

A few graders shake their heads at Dodge's gall.

DODGE (CONT'D)

They tell me you're blasting at both ends, and I think that's a fine idea, but there's one angle you're forgetting. That's up top. So what we're doing today is taking a third of the men from both teams here and forming another gang. Those boys'll blast their way down, and then start working outward from the inside.

IRISH GRADER

We're already dodgin rocks all day as it is. Me nephew lost his leg on account o' the black powder. Men'll die today.

GANG BOSS

Quit your complaining! He calls the shots!

Dodge holds up a hand to calm Gang Boss.

DODGE

I want to ask you gentlemen to take a look at me. Now, he's right. I call the shots. I ride the horse. But do you know what separates you all from me? Absolutely nothing. I ended the war as a Major General, but I didn't start it that way. Work hard. Show the Union Pacific your devotion. Any one of you can become me.

(nod to Nathaniel)

Even a negro can pull himself up by his bootstraps.

NATHANIEL

Once I can afford the boots, I'll try it.

Some of the men laugh.

GANG BOSS

That's enough out of you!

DODGE

(upset now)

Every mile the CP and their Chinamen build, that's a mile we don't build. That's a mile Mr. Durant doesn't draw government bonds off. A mile you all don't clear. Now are you more capable than a Chinaman or are you not? Because every mile they cash in on is a mile we don't. So get to work.

LATER ON

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! Abner holds a drill bit up to an outcropping of stone while another man pounds it in with a sledgehammer.

BOOM! An explosion nearby. Rocks tumbling everywhere.

Men working frantically.

GANG BOSS

You heard the man! We're gettin this rock out our way today! We deserve this, boys! The railroad and the glory! Faster now!

The man hammers Abner's drill faster. CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG! A swing just barely hits the drill, glancing off it and sending the sledgehammer into the stone right by Abner's hands.

GANG BOSS (CONT'D)

At pace now, ya goddamn Nancies!

The two men exchange nervous glances. CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG! Another miss.

CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG! And right as we think the next swing will miss and crush Abner's hands --

GANG BOSS (CONT'D)

Powder!

Abner pulls the drill out. Nathaniel comes over, pours black powder into the hole, sticks a fuse in and --

GANG BOSS (CONT'D)

Fire in the hole!

-- lights the fuse.

THE MEN

gather at a safe distance, watching

THE FUSE

being eaten away. And right as it reaches the hole in the rock, it stops burning.

A pregnant beat.

THE MEN

Nervous. This is dangerous. They exchange looks and all eyes fall on Nathaniel.

He inches toward the fuse.

Finally he's there and he pulls the fuse out a little further...

AN EXPLOSION echoes from one of the teams further up ahead.

Nathaniel relights the fuse, and at that moment --

SPLAT!

AN ARM

or at least half of one, lands on the ground near Nathaniel.

He stares at it, mortified.

FSSSSS!

THE FUSE.

Nathaniel snaps out of his daze and runs, but

BOOM!

the rock blows, sending him staggering sideways and over the edge of the cliff.

The men gawk, stunned.

Abner runs to the edge.

ABNER

Nathaniel!

IRISH GRADER

I told you it would happen didn't
I?

ABNER

Shout somethin if you're alive!

GANG BOSS

He's gone. There's nothing to be
done. We're losing daylight.

ABNER

Nathaniel!

A PAINED WAIL echoes from the trees below.

THE SIDE OF THE CLIFF

as Abner rappels down the nearly vertical 40-foot slope.

Several men up top belaying him.

As Abner descends, the SOUNDS OF PICKAXES, WHEELBARROWS, ETC
fade until he's at the forest floor and the grading happening
above is almost inaudible.

The trees are dense down here, blocking out much of the
sunlight.

Abner spots

NATHANIEL ON THE GROUND

His breathing labored.

MOMENTS LATER

Nathaniel, rope tied around his waist and chest, is lifted up
slowly.

Abner looks around the forest as he waits.

Something catches his eye.

He takes a few steps forward, squinting at a peculiar sight

DEEPER IN THE FOREST

A leg. Sticking out from behind a bush.

Abner skulks past trees into the core of the woods, his eyes fixed to that leg, and when he gets close enough he stops, aghast at the sight of

FOUR DEAD MEN

scattered within a few feet of one another. Shot, stabbed, bludgeoned. A while since death but seemingly unmolested by scavengers.

One body is slumped over a standing 50-pound wooden keg which has the words "BLACK POWDER" branded on the side.

ABNER

On alert now. He wrests a pistol from the deathgrip of the corpse by the bush. Crouches and swings his gaze in a 360.

After a moment of tense paranoia, Abner straightens up again and moves to the powder keg.

He shoves the body off it.

There's a stain on top where blood pooled and then dried. A streak down the side of the keg.

The top of the keg appears to have been pried off and then re-secured with screws.

Abner lays the gun atop the lid and pulls out his penny. Uses it to undo the screws. Pulls up the lid and looks inside where there is only

DIRT

Red, sort of sandy. Not local dirt. This traveled here.

Abner places the lid on the ground. He looks from body to body and then back at the keg. He runs his fingers through the dirt, absentmindedly.

But he feels something underneath. Pulls out a

ROCK

just slightly bigger than his penny.

He brushes some of the dirt off the rock and his eyes widen.

He spits on the rock, rubs it on his pant leg, holds it up.

GOLD.

He digs into the keg and comes up with a handful of gold nuggets of varying sizes. He plunges his other hand in and pulls out more.

His breathing intensifies.

DISTANT VOICE (O.S.)

Ellis!

The men calling to him through the canopy. Back at the cliff slope, the rope waits for

ABNER

who opens his mouth, but stifles himself before uttering a word.

The briefest malaise. And then he scoops up fistfuls of dirt from the forest floor and sprinkles it into the keg, obscuring the gold once more.

He uses the pistol handle to HAMMER the screws back in place instead of twisting them in, to save time, and then DRAGS the keg -- deeper into the forest, away from the cliff and the rope and the graders as they CALL OUT to him.

Dragging the heavy powder keg.

But suddenly he stops. Something occurring to him.

He hurries back to one of the bodies and digs into the dead man's pockets and pulls out a couple dollars and stuffs the money into his own pocket. And moves on to the next corpse.

EDGE OF THE FOREST

Looking at the tree line from outside the woods.

A SOFT SCRAPING sound, growing louder until Abner emerges with the keg.

A HORSE NICKERS. Abner whips around, startled, and sees a

PERLINO MUSTANG

Emaciated, yoked to a covered wagon. It's standing within a circle of dirt surrounded by grass, having eaten every bit of flora its tethers would allow it to reach.

Beside the mustang is a

DEAD HORSE

This one a bluish roan, also tethered. Chunks torn out of its neck and belly.

THE PERLINO'S SNOUT

is smeared with blood.

Desperate times.

Abner approaches, his hands out before him in a calming gesture.

The mustang shies away. Abner rips up some grass and holds it out.

The horse eats. Abner pets its neck.

He crouches by the dead one and begins undoing its bridle.

MOMENTS LATER

A heap of chattel outside the back of the wagon.

Abner appears and tosses out some clothes and blankets.

He hops out of the wagon and sizes up the

POWDER KEG

Now fitted tightly with the dead horse's harness.

He grabs it by the straps and lifts, letting out an exertive GROAN as he hefts the keg until it clears the wagon floor and he rolls it in.

Something's missing. Abner stares at all the junk on the ground. He grabs a filthy blanket and climbs inside the wagon.

MOMENTS LATER

Abner settles into the driver's seat of the wagon. He disengages the break lever.

The horse NEIGHS and begins walking, the wagon crawling behind it.

THE WAGON INTERIOR

is totally empty, save for the powder keg under that blanket.

DISSOLVE TO:

ARID VALLEY

We can just make out a horse-drawn wagon -- a speck against the landscape -- moving leftward. Thin trail of dust in its wake.

THE WAGON

TIGHT ON ABNER

That simmering disquietude we've seen before.

And then something more erupts to the surface: confusion, worry. He looks over his shoulder into the wagon, as though expecting someone to be in there.

Nothing. He turns back to the road ahead.

ABNER'S EYEBROWS

Furrowed again in confusion.

He slides to the left and leans past the side of the wagon to get a good look behind them. Is someone following?

Nothing but the empty landscape.

But Abner can't let this feeling go. He tugs on the reins, slowing the horse to a stop.

He pulls the break lever and hops off and marches back just past the wagon.

Scrutinizing the land without obstruction.

He is alone out here.

A SMALL CAMPFIRE

But nobody in the vicinity.

PUSHING IN on the wagon which sits nearby, until we're inside, and by flickering firelight we can make out

ABNER

half-draped in the blanket, back against the powder keg.

Dead man's pistol at the ready. Leering at that fire, at anything that might enter its glow.

MORNING

Abner asleep now.

He twitches. One eye opens, then the other. Groggy. And then he JOLTS upright. Rips the blanket off, making sure the keg is still there and intact.

He lets out a SIGH of relief.

THE ELLIS HOME FROM AFAR

The perline hauling Abner and the wagon steadily toward that little house.

ABNER
notices something up ahead. He waves.

BENJAMIN
waves back enthusiastically and then breaks into a sprint for Abner.

BENJAMIN
Pa!

Abner pulls the horse to a stop.

Benjamin reaches the wagon. The boy is ecstatic at the sight of his father.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
Pa, you're home!

ABNER
That's right.

BENJAMIN
Is that your horse?

ABNER
Our horse. And our wagon.

BENJAMIN
Can you teach me to drive it?

Abner smiles.

ABNER
I can do that. But first, go fetch your ma for me. I got good news.

BENJAMIN
Ma's at the lake, filling buckets.
Can I ride in the wagon?

He runs around to the back and peers into the wagon and then freezes, staring at the blanket with curiosity.

ABNER
Hey. Go on, now. Tell her I'm at the house.

BENJAMIN
 (reluctant)
 Okay.

Benjamin runs off.

Abner watches his son.

By degrees, the fatherly twinkle in his eye dissolves, and something else creeps onto his face -- that same paranoid expression we saw earlier. As if he just discovered some horrible truth.

BEHIND THE HOUSE

The mustang hitched to a post. Wagon unattended.

PANNING LEFT until we find Abner, once again dragging the keg. Away from the house. Toward a cluster of trees.

THE WOODS

As Abner shovels the last few heaps of dirt out of a hole and then rolls the keg into it.

He scrapes the dirt back over the keg as quickly as he can.

He grabs a gnarled stick and stabs it into the earth above the keg.

BACK BY THE HOUSE

Elsbeth and Abner. Benjamin petting the horse in BG.

ELSPETH
 They wouldn't take ye on?

ABNER
 They did. 'Bout a week. But after that, I got cut. Couldn't afford to pay us all.

ELSPETH
 Enough for that horse and wagon, at least.

ABNER
 Figured in the long run they'd help.

ELSPETH

For runnin post and deliveries
again?

ABNER

I ain't doin that no more.

ELSPETH

What then?

ABNER

(stern)

I ain't doin that no more.

Elsbeth takes a beat, caught off-guard by Abner's sudden brusqueness.

ELSPETH

A good day's work is its own
reward. And it'd buy you time
until ye found the next job.

ABNER

Next job. Show me someone with
faith and I'll show you someone
with no plan.

ELSPETH

Faith doesn't need a plan.

ABNER

Well...I do.

INSIDE THE ELLIS HOME

As the family eats supper by candlelight.

ABNER

Every week -- on the rail -- every
week, they get a hundred men. By
the end of the same week, hundred
men run off in search of gold. Up
in them mountains.

BENJAMIN

Do they find any?

ABNER

Maybe some do.

(beat)

You imagine if I were to find some?

ELSPETH

I don't think I could. Hard work
and me family's fine enough,
though.

She winks at Benjamin, never missing a chance to teach him something.

ABNER

You ain't got dreams?

ELSPETH

What's the use for em?

ABNER

The hell they teach little girls in
Scotland?

ELSPETH

How about cattle? Ye could buy
cattle and start that up again.
That business of yours.

ABNER

I reckon with enough gold -- the
right amount -- I could do somethin
else altogether.

ELSPETH

We came out here for your cow-calf
business.

ABNER

Cattle was just a path to what we
came out here for.

(beat)

Cattle. What happens to them
cattle when I'm dead?

ELSPETH

Nothing ye'd have to worry about.

ABNER

I want somethin that's mine. I
want a piece of this country that's
really mine.

ELSPETH

Ye've got that already.

ABNER

This don't amount to nothin.

ELSPETH
(hurt)
This is our home.

BENJAMIN
Pa?

ABNER
Mm.

BENJAMIN
Who was in the wagon?

Beat.

ABNER
What d'you mean "who"?

BENJAMIN
In the wagon, sleeping under the
blanket.

Elsbeth reacts.

ABNER
There weren't nobody in the wagon.
Only thing under that blanket was
some firewood, lil straw for the
mustang.

BENJAMIN
But I saw someone. Their shape.
Under the blanket.

ABNER
I don't know what to tell ya, Ben.
(beat)
Hey, you wanna go out and pet that
horse?

BENJAMIN
Yeah!

They get up from the table.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
Can we name him Riley?

ABNER
Riley ain't no name for a mustang.

Their voices fade as they head outside.

Elsbeth watches them leave. Perturbed. Suspicious.

MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

Abner and Elspeth asleep.

Moonlight wandering in through the dust-speckled windows.

And the tranquility is shattered by BARKING outside.

Elsbeth stirs, sits up. Concerned, she nudges Abner awake.

It takes a moment, but he snaps into alertness, jumps out of bed clad in long johns, grabs his rifle, and without any shoes on he hurries

OUTSIDE

where Biscuit is pulling taut her leash (a rope) and BARKING at something in the woods.

Abner squints at the

TREES

but from here all looks calm and well.

ABNER

pulls off the leash and

BISCUIT

shoots off like a fucking slingshot, straight for the trees.

Abner hangs back, waiting, but the dog doesn't slow down.

Abner sets his rifle to half-cock, opens the breech to check that there is a bullet inside.

THE WOODS

Abner ducking past low-hanging branches. Much less moonlight here.

He finds

BISCUIT

GROWLING, rooted to her spot now.

Abner follows the dog's eyeline up to the top of a tree.

He aims his rifle at the tree and pulls the hammer back to full-cock.

BACK AT THE HOUSE

Elsbeth steps out into the night and looks around for Abner. Her eyes land on the wagon.

THE WOODS

Abner leans in, squints at the treetop. But there's nothing there. He lowers the rifle.

Biscuit circles around and Abner realizes that the dog is actually glaring at an empty point in space.

Just a few feet away.

A point in space that hovers above the gnarled stick which marks the buried powder keg.

He points his rifle at the empty space.

THE WAGON

Elsbeth looks inside.

THE FILTHY BLANKET
in a bundle on the floor.

She climbs aboard.

THE WOODS

Abner stretches a hand out to that spot in the air, approaching painfully slowly, reaching for whatever he might not see.

THE WAGON

Elsbeth, staring down at the blanket. She reaches out.

Grabs it with both hands.

And then she yanks it away and shakes it out.

There's nothing underneath.

THE WOODS

Biscuit growls as Abner reaches out, but

ABNER'S HAND

touches nothing. Only empty night air.

Abner eyes the dog. Then he kneels, sets the rifle down, and digs the dirt up with his bare hands.

BISCUIT

Now backing away as she snarls.

THE POWDER KEG

Partially visible now. Abner yanks it upright by the tethers that are still wrapped around it.

BISCUIT

barks, her teeth fully bared.

ABNER

Hell's botherin you, girl?

He takes a step forward but her bark gets even more ferocious.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Git.

(beat)

Git!

Biscuit bolts, deeper into the forest.

ABNER

inspects the keg. Lid still held in place. Nothing amiss. His gaze lingers.

He undoes the harness around the keg and pries out the screws (which are now loose from being hammered in), his actions becoming more and more frenetic.

He shoves the lid off and swipes away the top layer of dirt inside the keg, and finally he is looking at his treasure.

With great care, he tips over the keg and pours out

THE GOLD

And just in case we weren't convinced, it's now crystal clear that this keg is filled to the fucking brim with nothing but gold nuggets.

Abner is captivated.

SMALL LAKE

Abner stands in the lake, right at the edge, the water just below his waist.

On the bank is the empty keg. Next to the keg, on the dirty blanket, is the massive pile of gold.

Abner takes a single gold nugget and dips it into the water, shakes it dry and then drops it THUNK! into the keg. He continues doing this, carefully, meticulously, one piece at a time.

DISSOLVE TO:

THE HOUSE

Benjamin scans the land around him.

He walks to the empty animal enclosure, where Abner sits on the fence, scribbling in a journal.

Abner shakes his head, scratches something out, mutters under his breath.

BENJAMIN

Pa?

ABNER

(after a few seconds)

Mm.

BENJAMIN

Where's Biscuit?

ABNER

She got riled up last night,
wouldn't let me tie her back up.
Likely wanderin around. She'll be
back when she's hungry.

BENJAMIN

Can we play a battle?

ABNER

I got this to do.

BENJAMIN

What's that?

ABNER

Things I needa figure out.

BENJAMIN

What things?

ABNER

The dog'll be back, boy. Play with her, or on your own.

OFF Benjamin, eyes downcast from his father's rebuff.

THE WOODS

A large stick glides across frame until we see the face of the person holding it:

BENJAMIN

Skulking through the forest, holding his stick as a rifle.

He aims down the barrel, lining up a shot. He makes a gunshot noise with his mouth and then runs and ducks behind a tree. He "fires" twice more.

He runs into an invisible crossfire and then spins and falls to the ground, clutching his arm as though he were just shot.

He crawls up to a hollow log -- some fallen ancient tree, partially buried in the dirt -- and, using his "good" arm, drags himself

INSIDE THE LOG

where he mimes bandaging his wound.

FOOTSTEPS nearby. Benjamin freezes.

A beat, and then he smiles.

BENJAMIN

Pa?

He crawls toward the other end of the log, but he stops once he hears the FOOTSTEPS DIRECTLY ABOVE.

And now he's scared.

The footsteps continue atop the log, walking the length of it. And then they're back on the ground, walking away.

Benjamin doesn't move a muscle until the footsteps have faded.

When he starts moving again, he goes cautiously, trying to make as little noise as possible.

Finally he emerges back into

THE WOODS

and scans the trees, searching for whatever it was he just heard.

BENJAMIN

Biscuit?

But there's nothing there.

BACK AT THE HOUSE

Elsbeth uses a spoon to dig into the soil by the front door. She pulls a half-potato from a bucket with only a couple more spuds inside, and plants it in the hole.

She glances at Abner, still sitting on the fence, busy with his journal.

ELSPETH

Where'd ye get off to last night?

ABNER

See what the dog was barkin after.

ELSPETH

And what was it?

ABNER

Don't know.

ELSPETH

You were gone all night.

ABNER

Well, I wanted to know.

ELSPETH

But you don't.

ABNER

Maybe it was nothin.

ELSPETH

Maybe it was something to do with that horse.

ABNER

Weren't barkin at it durin the day.

ELSPETH

Or the wagon.

Abner looks up from his journal.

ABNER

The wagon?

ELSPETH

At whatever was inside.

ABNER

What was inside?

ELSPETH

Well, I don't know, do I?

He scribbles in the journal again.

ABNER

'Course you do. I told you at dinner. Kindlin for the journey.

ELSPETH

(beat)

Benjamin claimed he saw someone sleeping.

ABNER

And I set him straight. You were there.

ELSPETH

He wouldn't make that up.

ABNER

He's a boy. Always playin war games out here, usin sticks for rifles. 'Course he'll see a body under that blanket.

ELSPETH

Tell me -- and not word of a lie, Abner, I want the Lord's truth -- tell me how you came to be in possession of that horse and that wagon.

Abner snaps his book shut.

He looks away, lets out a sigh.

ABNER

Thing I had under the blanket in that wagon was a keg. Black powder keg I found up in Wyoming.

(MORE)

ABNER (CONT'D)

Only it wasn't fulla black powder
it was fulla...it was fulla dirt.
But mixed in with all the dirt was
a couple pieces a gold.

And that hits Elspeth with an almost physical force, her brow wrinkling, her body language shifting, leaning forward in anticipation of the answer to the question:

ELSPETH

How much?

ABNER

Not a lot. But some.

ELSPETH

How much, Abner?

ABNER

Handfulla nuggets.

A jittery, excited laugh escapes her as she clasps her hands together.

ELSPETH

How'd ye find it?

ABNER

It was in the woods, in them
foothills where we were gradin the
land. I went off on my own and
found it there.

ELSPETH

It must've belonged to someone.

ABNER

Weren't nobody around for it to
belong to.

ELSPETH

Why'd ye say nothin of this til
now?

ABNER

I was waitin til I knew what to do
with it.

ELSPETH

Where is it?

ABNER

It's safe.

ELSPETH

Where?

ABNER

(end of discussion)

It's safe.

ELSPETH

Is that why you were sayin all that at supper? About findin gold?

ABNER

We can do more than just raisin' beef. Somethin bigger'n cattle. Somethin bigger'n the gold itself, even.

ELSPETH

What's bigger than gold?

Abner thinks on this one for a moment.

And then it hits him:

ABNER

More gold.

ELSPETH

How d'you suppose /we--

He leaps off the fence.

ABNER

(over)

I'm goin in the house.

He goes to the door.

ABNER (CONT'D)

And I'll be busy in here, you understand? Got some plannin to do.

He enters and shuts the door behind him.

ELSPETH

(sotto voce)

Right. I'll be here. Doin this.

She kneels and plants another half-potato, a foot from a withered sprout -- dead before it could become anything.

She stops mid-action. Fuck it. Pulls the potato out of its hole and tosses it back into the bucket.

Stands, brushes the dirt from her dress.

She walks over to the wagon, eyes it intensely. The blanket on the floor in the back. She stoops low and looks underneath the wagon, scrutinizing the dirt.

FOOTSTEPS close by. At first she doesn't notice. But when the pace quickens to a run and they're right behind her, Elspeth whips around just as

BENJAMIN
zips by.

BENJAMIN

Pa!

ELSPETH

What's wrong, me love?

BENJAMIN

Where's Pa?

ELSPETH

Look at you, Ben, you're filthy.
Pa's inside. He's busy.

BENJAMIN

I heard Biscuit in the woods! She was walking and then she was on top of the log and then she /jumped onto the grass again and went away--

ELSPETH

(over)

I've told you not to play in that log. You're filthy with dirt and God knows what.

BENJAMIN

What if she's lost? Pa has to find her!

ELSPETH

He's busy.

BENJAMIN

But she's lost!

ELSPETH

Did I say somethin, or didn't I?
(softens)
I'll help you look for her. Come.

BENJAMIN

I want Pa.

Elsbeth holds her hand out.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

But Pa has a gun.

ELSPETH

(beat)

Why does that matter?

Benjamin backs away.

Elsbeth turns to face the woods, disconcerted now.

THE WOODS

As Elsbeth forges a serpentine route through the trees, eyes darting about in search of

ELSPETH

Biscuit!

THE HEM OF HER DRESS

catches on a twisted stick half-buried in the ground --
Abner's marker.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

Biscuit!

The stick tears through the fabric.

Elsbeth turns and yanks her dress back. She notices the stick. Curious, she stoops down and wiggles the stick to get it loose. As she does, it scrapes against something hard.

What the hell?

She clears away the dirt until she notices wood under it. She taps the stick against it.

She digs more, widening until she's found the edges of the powder keg.

She stands the keg upright, the gold inside shifting audibly as she does so.

She undoes the harness wrapped around it. And at this point, the screws holding the lid slide out easily.

She lifts off the top and is instantly transfixed.

THE GOLD

No longer obstructed by that top layer of dirt. Its luster gorgonizes Elspeth. It beckons to her.

ELSPETH

snaps out of her trance, and a flurry of conflicting thoughts plays out on her face.

She sets the lid back on the keg.

IN THE HOUSE

Abner at a rickety table, scribbling in his journal.

A KNOCK at the door. Abner stops writing, annoyed.

Another KNOCK.

OUTSIDE

The door swings open.

ABNER

Dammit, Elsie, didn't I--

Standing at the door is Jim (the neighbor).

JIM

Bad time?

ABNER

Depends.

JIM

I was just hopin for a minute 'n' a half.

ABNER

For?

JIM

Well, Tabitha and the grandson are headin to Chicago tomorrow mornin, visit m'son-in-law. Thought I'd go with em.

ELSPETH

emerges from the woods, notices Jim at the front door, heads toward him.

JIM (CONT'D)

And I was thinkin on your cow-calf business and how you need a heifer and, well, I noticed ya have a new horse.

ABNER

You're sayin you wanna trade.

JIM

Well, I just know ya need the heifer.

ABNER

And there I was, beggin you for her not long ago.

Jim takes off his hat, fiddles with it self-consciously.

JIM

Things is different now.

ABNER

Truly they are. Y'ain't wrong about that, Jim.

Abner stares Jim down, forcing the old man to break the silence.

JIM

I reckon ya want sumpin extra thrown in.

ABNER

I don't have a mirror to check by, but I can imagine I got a look on my face right now. You may not recognize it yourself, but that's the look of a fella got a lot bigger things to do.

JIM

What are you sayin?

ELSPETH

is within earshot now.

ABNER

Jim,

(he leans in)

I wouldn't take that shit cow of yours if you were throwin in your goddamn house and family with it.

Abner shuts the door.

Elspeth is aghast at what she just heard.

Jim notices Elspeth, stares at her for a beat, dumbstruck, then walks away.

IN THE HOUSE

As Abner eats dinner, Elspeth watches him with equal parts concern and bewilderment.

LATER ON

Elspeth is staring at the ceiling, Abner asleep beside her.

A single cricket CHIRPING outside, emphasizing the long hollow silences in between.

She glances at Abner. Carefully...slips out of bed.

THE WOODS

Elspeth, staring at the gold inside the open keg.

She looks over her shoulder.

PRE-DAWN FOG
hangs between the trees.

She reaches into the keg and pulls out a single nugget.

She shudders, imbued with whatever force this treasure holds.

OUTSIDE

The sun just beginning its rise as Elspeth, barefoot, makes the quarter-mile walk to

JIM'S HOUSE

where Jim, Tabitha, and James load up a wagon with a few supplies and belongings.

One by one, they notice Elspeth approaching.

When she arrives, she goes straight to Jim.

JIM
Mrs. Ellis?

Glances at the Ellis home.

JIM (CONT'D)
Somethin wrong?

ELSPETH
I've an offer for ye, but ye can't
ask any questions.

ELLIS HOME

Sunlight.

Benjamin wakes from his sleep.

Something draws his attention out the window.

A COW
Not the bull, but a smaller female. Cowbell RINGS softly as
the animal stoops down to graze.

OUTSIDE

Benjamin stops a few paces short of the cow.

BENJAMIN
Pa got another cow?

ELSPETH
No, I-- Mr. Dooney gave us this
cow.

BENJAMIN
For free?

ELSPETH
He gave it to us as a gift.

Something dawns on Benjamin.

BENJAMIN
(beat)
Biscuit's gone, isn't she? You
have a new pet.

ELSPETH
No, Benny, of course /not--

BENJAMIN

(over)

I hate it! I want Biscuit back!

ELSPETH

This is not a replacement, the cow is our business. With her, we can get right back to--

ABNER (O.S.)

What's this?

ABNER

behind them, regarding the cow with suspicion.

BENJAMIN

(devastated)

It's a cow, Pa.

ABNER

(to Elspeth)

Whose is it?

BENJAMIN

Mr. Dooney's, but he gave it to us, and I hate it /and I just want Biscuit to come back instead of this stinky old cow.

ABNER

(over, to Elspeth)

Why would he do that?

ELSPETH

(over Benjamin, to Abner)

He was leavin for Chicago.

BENJAMIN

Pa, I heard Biscuit in the forest yesterday, /I swear I did.

ABNER

(over)

Where's the horse?

He takes a few steps out to look past the corner of the house. He lays eyes on the mustang.

ELSPETH

There was no trade, he gave it to us.

ABNER

I told him I didn't want it.

ELSPETH

Perhaps he had sense enough to realize we still needed it.

ABNER

I don't need him takin pity on me.

ELSPETH

What's it matter why we have this heifer? We've got the mate for the bull now. You were right about havin somethin like a business. It'd be good for us. Ye found that gold for a reason. Ye can use it to buy /a dozen more--

ABNER

We ain't raisin' no cattle. I got somethin better in mind.

ELSPETH

Somethin better in mind? That's what you said when you told me we were movin out here. To raise cattle. Now, it's clear you've got your eye on greatness, but you can be great in Colorado.

ABNER

I don't wanna be great. I wanna be remembered.

He lets that sink in.

ABNER (CONT'D)

And I got it figured out now. It came to me, like someone was tellin me all about it, how to do it right.

ELSPETH

Do what right?

ABNER

What's bigger'n gold?

BENJAMIN

Biscuit!

Benjamin takes off toward

BISCUIT

wagging her tail and limping to Benjamin.

ELSPETH
Benjamin, be careful!

She starts after him, but --

ABNER
Elsbeth!

She turns back to Abner.

ABNER (CONT'D)
What's bigger than gold?

ELSPETH
(sighs)
More gold.

ABNER
What's bigger'n that? What's
bigger'n all the gold a man could
have?

ELSPETH
(tired of this game)
I dunno.

Abner digs his fingers into the earth and gouges out a chunk of dirt and grass. He holds it up and lets it sift through his fingers.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
Land.

BENJAMIN & BISCUIT
cavort and roll in the grass, the boy ruffling his friend's fur, the dog licking Benjamin's face.

ABNER
It ain't just land. It's people.
It's futures.

ELSPETH
We have land.

ABNER
I need the right land. And a lot
of it.

ELSPETH
(playing dumb)
How much land could a handful of
gold buy ye?
(beat)
Or do ye have more?

ABNER

I have enough.

ELSPETH

And I suppose you know where to find the "right land".

ABNER

Wyoming. 'Round where I was workin, there's land that could turn gold into more gold.

ELSPETH

And when you have more gold what's to stop you chasin the next increment?

Abner smiles.

ABNER

Exactly.

ELSPETH

We have a home here. We settled down.

ABNER

We set up camp. That's four walls and a roof. It ain't no home.

ELSPETH

I thought it was. Y'know, a person is allowed to be satisfied, Abner.

ABNER

That what your folks taught you in Scotland?

Beat.

ABNER (CONT'D)

We can make a home over there in Wyoming. A real one. A proper one.

Benjamin runs up to them.

BENJAMIN

Pa, Biscuit's back!

Biscuit keeps her distance from Abner, whining quietly, tail between her legs.

Abner remains focused on Elspeth.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

Pa!

ABNER

I can see her, Ben.

Benjamin seems confused that Abner isn't reciprocating.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Elsie...

ELSPETH

Still mulling over Abner's proposal.

ELSPETH

What'd ye see in Wyoming that we
couldn't find here?

Beat.

ABNER

The railroad.

SERIES OF SHOTS

INSIDE THE HOUSE

Stripped of its meager furnishings.

OUTSIDE

As Father, Mother, and Son carry armfuls to the wagon.
Gorgeous landscape in BG.

THE HOLE

in the woods where the keg was buried until now. The gnarled
stick nearby.

THE WAGON

Packed half-full. It'll take us a moment to notice the
blanket covering the keg, tucked behind a little table.

BEHIND THE HOUSE

Biscuit shying away from Abner as he carries a chair to the
wagon.

WAGON SEAT

Abner gripping the reins, flanked by

ELSPETH

wearing the unmistakable look of uncertainty, and

BENJAMIN

leaning past the edge of the wagon cover and watching the
house recede in BG behind them.

INSIDE THE HOUSE

PUSHING IN until we're TIGHT on a corner. And in that corner: the Indian Head penny.

PLAINS

Horse and bull pulling the wagon.

BUMP in the road. A CLATTER behind them. Benjamin turns, looks into the wagon.

His eyes fix on Biscuit, her ears perked, staring attentively at the

BLANKET

covering the powder keg. Only, for some reason it looks less like an upright keg and more like a person -- curled into a fetal position, fabric stretched taut over shoulder, knee, head.

Benjamin leans forward to get a closer look at the keg.

He holds out a hand --

ABNER

Ben, stop foolin with the belongings. It'll rattle even more if you loosen it up.

Benjamin faces front.

Abner looks him over.

ABNER (CONT'D)

You wanna drive?

Benjamin smiles.

Abner hands him the reins and then lifts the boy onto his lap. Benjamin is loving it.

BENJAMIN

Where to?

ABNER

Quick stop in Fort Collins.

He glances at Elspeth.

ELSPETH

The house. Will it be big?

Abner nods.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

And fancy?

Abner smirks.

ASSAY OFFICE

Abner has his keg in front of him, the lid off.

An ASSAYER stares down at the exposed treasure.

ASSAYER

Look, I don't wanna get dead center
in some mixup.

ABNER

Ain't no mixup here, fella.

ASSAYER

That's a whole lotta gold.

ABNER

That's why I'm talkin to you.

ASSAYER

Where'd you find all this?

ABNER

Somewhere.

ASSAYER

We couldn't even afford to pay you
for that.

ABNER

And I wanna know exactly how much
you can't pay me.

WILDERNESS

The Ellis family huddled around a fire, eating potatoes.

Abner stares at a receipt in his hand.

Biscuit is tied to the wagon, far from the fire.

BENJAMIN

Pa?

ABNER

Mm.

BENJAMIN

How come Biscuit can't be warm by the fire with us?

ABNER

She's a dog. Her fur keeps her warm.

This upsets Benjamin.

BENJAMIN

I don't wanna eat potatoes. If you have so much money now, how come you don't buy us bacon? Or apples?

ABNER

This money ain't for bacon or apples.

BENJAMIN

What's it for, then?

ABNER

That's a surprise.

BENJAMIN

I don't believe you. I never even seen the gold.

ABNER

You'll believe it when you see what it does.

They eat quietly.

Biscuit WHIMPERS.

Benjamin notices. He follows the dog's sightline past Abner, into the night.

And the campfire carries just enough effulgence to throw the faintest glow upon a

FIGURE

looming behind Abner. Corporeal but obscured in shadow. A partial outline is all that can be made out, and even that will take a moment to register.

Benjamin notices this figure. He leans forward, trying to get a closer look, straining his eyes in the dark.

A POP! from the fire startles Benjamin and he lets out a frightened yelp.

ELSPETH

Benny--

Biscuit starts BARKING.

BENJAMIN

Pa, there's someone behind--

But there's nothing there anymore.

Abner whips around.

ABNER

Where?

ELSPETH

There's nothin there.

Benjamin shoots to his feet.

BENJAMIN

He was right behind Pa.

ABNER

Ain't nothin here, Ben.

Benjamin backs away. Then he turns and runs behind the covered wagon.

ELSPETH

Benny!

Biscuit still BARKING.

ABNER

If he's tryna make it so we turn
and head back home, it ain't gonna
happen.

(beat)

Quiet, Biscuit!

The dog shuts up.

Elsbeth goes behind the wagon.

BENJAMIN

(sheepish)

I saw him.

ELSPETH

But there's nothin there. It was a
trick of the fire.

Benjamin peeks past the wagon.

ABNER
Alone. No one else in sight.

BENJAMIN
Confused.

BENJAMIN
I saw him.

FRONT OF TRACK

SLOW-MOTION SHOTS OF:

SMOKE
billowing from a locomotive, and

THE TRAIN
covered in white residue, a by-product of a boiler cooled
with alkaline-rich water, and

MEN ON TELEGRAPH POLES
stringing wire, and

HANDS
prying iron rails off a cart and onto ballast, and

BOOTS
caked in red soil, and

SHOULDERS
coated in the same white residue as the train, and

GAUGERS, SPIKERS, & BOLTERS
measuring, squaring, and pounding the rail, most clad in
shades of blue, their boots stained red, their heads and
shoulders white -- American avatars laboring assiduously,
unrelenting in their forward movement. The train idling on
the rail behind them.

BACK TO 24FPS.

Jack & Dan (the same Irishmen who hired Abner before) just
outside the furor, Dan studying a paper receipt in his hand.

DAN
Abner Ellis.

ABNER
faces the brothers. Elspeth and Benjamin on the wagon in BG.

ABNER
There's a number underneath the
name.

Jack reads over Dan's shoulder. His eyes go wide. The brothers exchange glances, then Jack looks at Abner, astonished.

PASSENGER LOCOMOTIVE (STATIONARY)

DOC DURANT -- clean-shaven, nice suit and stovepipe hat -- front and center. Behind him, three other sharply dressed BUSINESSMEN.

DURANT

Mr. Ellis, I'm a Christian man and I serve God, but the Union Pacific serves Mammon, if you understand what I mean by that.

ABNER

nods, though from the look of it, he doesn't know what Durant means by that.

DURANT (CONT'D)

Good. It's our understanding you're in possession of quite a bit of money.

Leaning against a bureau over Durant's other shoulder is Grenville Dodge (guy on horseback who gave the speech on pg24).

DODGE

You'll need a boodle and a half if you intend to make a dent in the railroad.

DURANT

Forgive Mr. Dodge. He's our chief engineer, and possesses a certain frankness.

ABNER

(to Dodge)

I intend to make a big one.

DODGE

It takes a lot of raw materials to make even a small one.

ABNER

Raw materials?

DODGE

Iron rails, spikes, wood ties,
telegraph wire. At the rate we lay
it down, we're in constant need.

ABNER

That's all my money'd be doin'?

DODGE

How else do you suppose we build a
rail?

DURANT

(chastising)
Dodge...

DODGE

You'll forgive me any antagonism,
but I've seen no shortage of men
intent on setting their name in
stone with no understanding of how
a chisel works.

ABNER

I ain't one of them. I know what a
thing costs when I set out to do
it.

DURANT

We guarantee a ten percent return
on investment within one year.
That's competitive.

ABNER

Doesn't a fella get a say how his
investment's put to use?

DURANT

Well, normally that's left to our
discretion.

ABNER

Normally? Do fellas normally show
up to the front of track with a keg
fulla gold and tell you they wanna
put it in the rail?

Durant lets out a polite laugh.

DURANT

I suppose not.

He exchanges glances with the men behind him.

DURANT (CONT'D)

It's just that the way we do things here is precise to an infinitesimal degree, if you understand what I'm saying. It's all very mechanical, you see. We can appreciate that an investor likes an input in the company he buys a stake in, but our engineers and our accountants have it all worked out that the way we do things is the most efficient and in all other manners simply the best possible way to go about it. It's a system. That's the nature of an operation like ours.

ABNER

That it ain't exciting?

Dodge chuckles.

DURANT

That it's systematic.

(beat)

But don't be mistaken, Mr. Ellis -- when you're a part of this, it's plenty exciting.

(beat)

And do you know why?

He leans forward in his chair.

DURANT (CONT'D)

This isn't America yet. Not until you can get from Philadelphia to San Francisco without having to shoot an Indian in Nebraska or take a boat through Panama. We're not just making America accessible... we're making America. And we'd like you to make it with us.

Durant stands, holds out his hand to Abner.

DURANT (CONT'D)

So what do you say to a hundred shares in the Union Pacific Railroad Company?

But Abner remains seated.

ABNER

Way I hear it, the Central Pacific got ten thousand of them Chinese.

(MORE)

ABNER (CONT'D)

Tunnelin through the Sierra Nevadas faster'n anything anybody's ever seen. I'll bet they'd even hire another ten thousand if they could find the money to do it.

Now he stands.

ABNER (CONT'D)

I fought in the war. For the South. Not for any reason other than fightin in the war was the purpose they gave to me at the time, so I set myself to it. Well, we all know what the score was. But I tell you, when I came home after that, I decided: next thing I did, I'd do it right. Next thing I went for, I'd accomplish. So, fellas, I'm aimin to get what I'm after. You're at war now, with that Central Pacific. And in a war, one side's always willin to give a little more to a fella makin an offer.

He turns to leave.

Durant's face betrays the briefest glimpse of panic at Abner's departure.

DURANT

Mr. Ellis!

(composes himself)

You're right. This isn't a typical situation and we've lost sight of that. Please, have a seat.

Abner does.

DURANT (CONT'D)

I happen to believe that the American People are entitled to this. To our Transcontinental Railroad. We deserve this. But of course my company has to build it first. And it's important to me -- to all of us -- that you're here and offering to help us in that endeavor.

(beat)

So. How do you think your money would best serve the Union Pacific?

Abner savors the moment before answering.

ABNER

A town.

DURANT

Which town?

DODGE

(smiles)

One his money will build.

(to Abner)

Am I right?

ABNER

On your railroad. And that part's important.

DURANT

You mean a stop.

ABNER

A destination. 'Tween Chicago and Salt Lake, there ain't nothin for a family to set course to, 'cept for empty land with no guarantees to it. But this town'll--this city'll be it. Where a man'll go to achieve, make his mark.

DURANT

What will be in this city?

ABNER

Everything there can be.

DURANT

How do you get the people there?

ABNER

What d'you mean? The train.

DODGE

I think he means: what will there be to make people come? What makes your town the destination rather than a stop?

ABNER

That'll work itself out.

DURANT

I see.

(feigning)

Well that's a fine idea, Mr. Ellis.

Durant flashes an ophidian smile.

DURANT (CONT'D)

And I think that at five hundred shares, that's something we'd be prepared to make happen.

ABNER

That is a boodle and a half.

DURANT

You've given the sense that you're aiming to make a loud proclamation. Money is how a man shouts without raising his voice. Now, you've got a keg full of gold, and the deeper you go into it, the louder you'll be and the more people will hear you. And with a five-hundred-share stake in the Union Pacific Railroad, people will hear you from New York to Sacramento.

Abner smirks.

FLAT LANDSCAPE

Abner on a raised, flat ridge -- graded land waiting for the rail to be laid -- gazing upon his new home

AS THE SUN BEGINS TO SET

over the broad expanse of land. A few lone trees scattered throughout. River in the distance.

Abner beams. Nods, satisfied.

ABNER

This feels right.

ELSPETH & BENJAMIN

at normal ground level, a few feet below the track bed.

ELSPETH

How much of this is ours?

ABNER

Six-hundred forty acres.

BENJAMIN

Is this where we're going to live,
Pa?

ABNER

This is where we're gonna build.

He turns to

DODGE

Standing near Abner. A wagon full of railroad spikes behind him.

ABNER (CONT'D)

I can see it.

DODGE

Good soil here. Sturdy. You'll want to be wary of the Cheyenne. They're nothing to underestimate. Tore up a half-mile of rail a few nights ago. Scalped two men and rode off.

ABNER

When'll the workers be here?

DODGE

Few days' time.
(beat)
Oh--

He goes to the wagon, pulls out a box, brings it to Abner.

DODGE (CONT'D)

A gift.

Abner takes the box.

DODGE (CONT'D)

From Durant. He apologizes in advance if the fit is off.

Abner pulls the lid off and admires a folded suit inside. He runs his fingers over the fabric, smiles, bemused.

ABNER

That material...

DODGE

The waistcoat's made of silk.

ABNER

They always this soft?

DODGE
Only the expensive ones.

Abner grins.

DODGE (CONT'D)
So tell me... What'll you name your
city?

Abner waits a beat before responding, sounding it out in his
head first.

ABNER
Ellis.

MONTAGE

ABNER
tapping a rail spike halfway into the dirt and moving on a
few feet and doing it again. Benjamin behind him, pulling
twine around the spikes, outlining a street. A few building
foundations already staked out on either side.

ELSPETH
using a piece of charcoal to draw a star on that rectangular
scrap of fabric with the faded fig leaf pattern. Beside the
star is written the word "HOME". She underlines the word
several times -- almost looks like stripes. A homemade flag.

ABNER
scribbling in his journal.

FATHER & SON
laying down a large footprint at the end of Main Street. At
the center of this footprint, Elspeth's flag ripples in the
breeze. Nearby stands a hefty but leafless deciduous tree.

THE WOODEN FRAME OF A TRAIN STATION
We peer through it from atop the elevated ridge. Sign
propped against a beam reads: *ELLIS STATION*. PAN RIGHT,
looking straight down the rail bed, perfectly flat and still
bare, stretching out into the empty horizon.

ELSPETH
hammering a wooden post into the ground. Dozens more posts
outline a cattle pen. In BG, a small team of men raise a
frame for a shop.

MORE BUILDINGS
framed along Main Street.

THE TRAIN STATION
Partially walled.

A team of workers using canvas to seal the roof and remaining sides off from the elements. ANOTHER ANGLE reveals Abner staring intensely at this building.

LOOKING DOWN THE RAIL BED AGAIN

But this time we can start to make out a train and workers laying rail just before the horizon.

BENJAMIN

holds a dead branch like a rifle, stalking through the bones of this fledgling town. He perks up, looks off to the side. Abner is calling to him. He drops his toy and goes to his father.

MAIN STREET

The small town all framed up. At one end is the now completed train station. On the other end is the roped-off footprint of the Ellis house. The only building yet to be started. ANOTHER ANGLE reveals Elspeth staring longingly at this empty space.

LOOKING DOWN THE RAIL BED

The rail crew has gotten closer. Only a couple dozen miles away now.

OUTSIDE

Pitch black. A lit torch stabbed into the earth.

Elspeth squats within the firelight, her nightgown gathered up around her waist, peeing on the grass.

She stands, pulls the torch out of the ground, and heads back to the station.

Just outside the door, Elspeth notices

ABNER'S JOURNAL

on a battered wooden chair.

Elspeth hesitates before she picks it up.

By firelight, she can read the pages. And at first it seems ordinary enough -- short entries, random ideas. But as she turns the pages, the writing gets sloppier, more frenetic, and the entries longer and longer, until it's totally illegible and each entry is pages long -- essays of chicken scratch.

Elspeth, disturbed now, skips further ahead, and now the words are replaced by tally marks -- dozens, hundreds of them, in one massive unending journal entry.

WIDE on Elspeth -- journal in one hand, torch in the other -- the only glow amidst the ink-black night.

She looks up from the journal, scanning the shadows around her.

Off her paranoid expression,

DISSOLVE TO:

MAIN STREET

Abner, eyeing a building frame as he jots something down in his journal.

WORKER (O.S.)
Mister Ellis?

Abner turns to see a group of six men, hats in hand, clustered together. His WORKERS.

One slightly out ahead of the others.

WORKER (CONT'D)
Well...we ran outta lumber. Got the siding up on part of that hotel. Y'know, the big one yonder. But we're fresh out now. Gonna have to talk to the boys up ahead for more.

ABNER
That it?

WORKER
Well... The boys and me, we was talkin. Well, this work up here, it ain't just bustin up rocks. We're out here buildin up a whole town and doin a bang-up job, and we all think that two dollars a day just ain't as fair as it could be.
(off Abner's silence,
uneasy)
Y'know we're out here buildin a town.

ABNER
You're buildin a city. My city. And two dollars a day, that's competitive.
(MORE)

ABNER (CONT'D)

But if you wanna go back to gradin
mountain passes and watchin the
skies for flyin rock, there's
plenty of fellas waitin to trade
you for this here.

Silence. The workers looking at their shoes.

ABNER (CONT'D)

That it?

WORKER

Yessir.

They start walking away.

ABNER

Thank ya for the opportunity, Mr.
Ellis.

The workers turn around.

ABNER (CONT'D)

(angrily)

Thank ya for the opportunity, Mr.
Ellis!

WORKERS

(staggered)

Thanks for the /opportunity--

ABNER

(over)

And if you want them two dollars,
get back here with more lumber.
And be fast about it.

OUTSIDE (ESTABLISHER)

Biscuit sits leashed to the flagpole in the footprint of the
unbuilt house.

PAN 180 degrees to FIND the train station at the other end of
Main Street, cloudless sky bathing the building in moonlight.

EMPTY TRAIN STATION

Benjamin asleep in bed. A peaceful slumber.

Until

AN EERIE MOAN

rouses him from his sleep. Brief, as though someone has shouted themselves awake from a nightmare.

As Benjamin gets his bearings, it takes him a moment or two to become aware of SOFT FOOTSTEPS elsewhere in the room.

He sits up. Looking around.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

He gets out of bed, and pads toward a corner of the room segregated by sheets hanging from the ceiling -- his parents' "bedroom".

REVERSE ANGLE

through the hanging sheets. We can see only the foot of the bed. Benjamin is a shadow on the other side.

BENJAMIN

reaches a hand toward one of the dividing curtains, but then he notices that

THE FRONT DOOR IS WIDE OPEN.

He walks over, sticks his head out.

BENJAMIN

(whispering)

Pa? Ma?

...

Biscuit?

Growing worried now, he shuts the front door and returns to the hanging sheets.

He reaches out. Scared. Anxious.

His fingers curl around the edge of a curtain.

He pulls it aside, slowly.

By moonlight, we notice a bedpost. Blanket. Elspeth, asleep. Abner beside her, sleeping on his side. And when enough of the curtain is pulled back, we see

A BONY FOREARM

resting on Abner, a claw-like hand cupped over his shoulder, almost as if someone were spooning Abner. Though all we can see -- and it's just barely a glimpse -- is that ghoulish arm.

Benjamin SCREAMS and runs back to his bed and jumps in and pulls the covers over his head.

A few seconds later, Elspeth emerges from behind the curtains, followed by Abner.

ELSPETH
Benjamin! What's wrong?

BENJAMIN
The hand!

ELSPETH
The what?

BENJAMIN
Someone's in your bed!

ABNER
There's nothin there.

BENJAMIN
But I saw it! I saw it in the bed,
right next to Pa!

ABNER
Understand me now, boy, there ain't
nothin in that bed.

Benjamin looks to Elspeth for support.

ELSPETH
It's just me and your pa.

ABNER
Whatever mess you got in your head
makin you see things, you best get
it outta there.

Abner marches back to bed.

BENJAMIN
(to Elspeth)
Do you believe me?

Elspeth tucks Benjamin in.

ELSPETH
Go back to sleep, me love. There's
nothin here gonna harm ye.

She goes back to Abner and the bed, disappearing behind the curtain.

BENJAMIN
Alone.

ELSPETH

In bed. Pensive. Abner beside her, eyes shut. She glances at him. Wondering.

CATTLE PEN

Elsbeth unlatches the gate, then lugs two large buckets full of water to a wooden trough.

Something catches her eye.

THE ELLIS HOME FOOTPRINT

Still nothing more than spikes and twine.

ELSPETH

stares at it wistfully.

She dumps water into the trough.

She looks at the bull on one side of the pen, and the heifer on the opposite end. Totally disinterested in one another.

ELSPETH

(angry, at the cows)

Well, are ye's gonna do it or aren't ye!

RIVER

A one-hundred-foot-wide, slow-flowing body of water.

ABNER

Clothes dripping wet, standing under a twisted elm tree on the far river bank, holding a rope. He begins tying the rope around the trunk of the elm.

The other end extending from Abner's hands into the water.

ON THE OPPOSITE RIVER BANK

the powder keg lies on its side, tied up several times over with the rope.

FOOTPRINT OF THE ELLIS HOME

Benjamin, holding a stick, leads Biscuit around the twine border of their future house.

BENJAMIN

(pointing with stick)

That's where there's gonna be a fireplace.

(MORE)

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

And that's where we're gonna eat dinner. And Ma and Pa's room is gonna be up over there, on the second floor. And my room is gonna be far away on the other side because...

His thought worries him. Beat. He forces a smile, trying to play it off, but it looks more like a grimace.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

So I don't have to hear Pa when he snores sometimes.

He ruffles Biscuit's fur.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

And you can sleep in there with me, I don't mind.

Benjamin walks over to the big, leafless tree just outside the footprint.

Open crates of rail spikes are stacked at the foot the tree. The perlino mustang is also bridled to a rope tied around the wide trunk.

Benjamin sizes up the crates then stares up at the treetop. He climbs onto the crates, using them as steps, and from there he stands on the horse. The animal shifts uncomfortably, causing Benjamin to wobble, but he manages to hoist himself up onto the lowest tree branch.

BISCUIT

watches from below as

BENJAMIN

makes his way up the tree.

RIVER

Abner pulls on the rope, and when it's fully taut, it rises up just over the river's surface, and the keg drags across the dirt and into the water.

Abner continues pulling the keg through the river.

THE TREE

Benjamin, higher up now.

From up here we get a wide view of the beautiful Wyoming landscape.

Benjamin reaches for another branch, but pauses when he notices

ABNER

on the far bank of the river, pulling the keg through the water and toward him.

The keg breaks the surface on the other side...

...only now it's not a keg at all.

Even from this distance, it's clear that the thing Abner is pulling from the water is

A HUMAN BEING

Or at least a humanoid figure. Completely naked and an unnatural dark grey in color.

We get only a fleeting glance before

CRACK!

The branch sags under Benjamin's weight and the boy loses balance and falls, just barely managing to grab a lower branch. He tries to pull himself up, but he loses his grip and lands on the grass below.

The mustang nickers.

Biscuit runs over. She barks and then licks Benjamin's face.

Benjamin pets Biscuit's head, sits upright. Some scratches on his arms, and perhaps a few bruises developing, but no serious injuries.

He scrambles to his feet, and runs, Biscuit chasing behind him, until he can see

ABNER

at the river. Shoveling dirt back over a hole.

Whatever Benjamin saw, it's either gone or buried in the ground.

MAIN STREET

Abner, shovel in hand and soaking wet, approaches Elspeth.

She stops in her tracks at the odd sight.

ELSPETH
You're soaked through.

ABNER
Yeah.

He continues right past her.

ELSPETH
Abner.

He stops.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
When d'you figure them shops and
everythin'll be finished?

ABNER
Soon as the boys get back here with
that lumber.

ELSPETH
When'll that be?

ABNER
Week's end.

ELSPETH
And what about the house?

He turns around to face her.

ABNER
What about it?

ELSPETH
The rest is up and makin progress,
/but our house--

ABNER
(over)
It'll get there.

ELSPETH
When'll that be?

ABNER
When'll that be?

ELSPETH
Yes. When'll that be.

ABNER

When them other buildings are up.
First things first.

ELSPETH

I thought it would be first.

ABNER

We're doin just fine outta the
/train station.

ELSPETH

(over)

That station's not a house. You
promised me we'd have a h-- a big,
/fancy house.

ABNER

(over)

You'll get your house.

ELSPETH

Our house.

Abner's grip tightens around the shovel handle.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

You've spent so much money and so
much time on your town. How much
is left? Will you ever be
finished?

ABNER

Our town.

Abner takes a step toward her.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Our city. That sign's carryin all
our names, not just mine.

ELSPETH

I never asked for a city. Just
that house.

She walks off.

Abner glares at her. White-knuckling the shovel.

EMPTY TRAIN STATION

Abner strips off his wet clothes.

He opens the box that Dodge gave him. Inside is the suit. Abner gazes at it. Into it.

He straightens up his posture.

LATER

The family at dinner.

ABNER
in his suit. Watch chain dangling from weskit, wrists and ankles somewhat exposed. The suit's too small. His face dirty, hair matted. He's a perverse sight.

They eat in silence.

Elsbeth watches Abner who is focused on his meal.

BENJAMIN

Did they give you a hat?

ABNER

Reckon I'll have to get my own.

ELSPETH

I think I've figured out why them cattle don't associate.

She waits a beat. No one asks her to elaborate.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

Jasmine's pregnant.

BENJAMIN

How can you tell?

ELSPETH

When a bull leaves a female alone, sometimes it means the girl's already pregnant. Maybe she was when Jim gave her to us. He used to have his own bull too.

ABNER

Didn't realize they weren't couplin up.

ELSPETH

Well you've been busy. Buildin your town.

ABNER

Alone.

Benjamin's eyes snap up to something in the corner of the room. He tenses up.

ELSPETH

I'm tendin to the cattle. Alone.
And without the benefit of anythin
your gold /could buy.

ABNER

(over)

Ain't no money to spare for that.

Benjamin pushes his chair back, as if to leave.

ABNER (CONT'D)

(to Benjamin, threatening)

Y'ain't goin nowhere til you're
done that supper.

Benjamin stays put. His head swivels slowly, as if he's following someone who is inching toward the dinner table. And with each passing moment he grows more and more distressed.

Elsbeth doesn't notice this.

ELSPETH

Cattle are what'll get us the
money, not this town you'll /never
fin--

ABNER

(over)

City!

(beat)

And the money ain't none of your
concern.

ELSPETH

I'm killin meself with these cattle
because it is.

Benjamin is now looking at

THE SPACE ABOVE ABNER

Empty air, framed as though someone were supposed to be standing right behind the man.

Benjamin sees something we don't.

ABNER

What happened to "good work is its
own reward"?

ELSPETH
Once you get more, you're allowed
to want more, aren't ye?

ABNER
"Allowed"... It ain't no option
for me.

Benjamin averts his eyes, staring straight down at the table.

ABNER (CONT'D)
I'm keepin what money I got left,
so I can use it to get more. My
way. 'Cause what we got ain't
enough.

Tears are cutting though the dirt on Benjamin's cheeks.

ABNER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
You and them goddamn cattle.

Benjamin is trembling.

ABNER'S FACE
warps with incredulity at some sudden revelation.

BENJAMIN
whimpers.

ELSPETH
finally notices the state her son is in.

ELSPETH
It's alright, Benny. Your Pa's had
a difficult--

ABNER
Where...

Elsbeth turns back to Abner.

ABNER (CONT'D)
Where...how...did you end up with
that heifer?

ELSPETH
Jasmi--

ABNER
How!

ELSPETH
Abner, you're scarin the boy.

He rises from his seat.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
 Jim didn't fancy carin for it
 anymore. I told you. He wanted us
 to have it.

Abner glowers.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
 You're scarin the boy.

BENJAMIN
 It's here again.

ABNER
 Quiet.

Abner picks up his knife and presses its point into the table
 until it's buried deep.

ABNER (CONT'D)
 How much gold would a cow like that
 /fetch ya?

ELSPETH
 (over)
 I didn't use none of your gold.

BENJAMIN
 Pa--

Abner slams his hands on the table.

ABNER
 Enough! Enough outta you, boy!
 (to Elspeth)
 I'm runnin low as it is. So how
 much did you take from me, woman?
 And understand me that I'm askin
 this question just the once, and
 your answer now's the one you're
 held to later.

ELSPETH
 I swear to you, I took none of your
 gold.

After staring at her for a beat, Abner's face softens. He
 sits.

He tugs the knife out of the table --

ABNER

Let's finish this supper, then.

-- and tucks into his meal.

Benjamin's tears are falling onto his plate, but he tries to remain quiet.

Elsbeth slides her hand onto Benjamin's. He flinches.

Elsbeth looks at the space Benjamin was staring at a moment ago. But she can't see whatever he saw.

LATER

Benjamin in bed.

Elsbeth sitting on the edge, a candle in hand.

BENJAMIN

Can Biscuit sleep here with me?

ELSPETH

You know your pa doesn't want her in here.

BENJAMIN

Why not?

ELSPETH

I don't know. But it seems as though she'd rather not be around him anyway.

(beat)

Do ye know why that is?

Benjamin shrugs.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

Somethin tells me ye do.

She glances at the curtains across the room, the ones that define her and Abner's private space.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

(quietly)

At supper, you said "it's here again." What is "it"?

Benjamin looks down, reticent.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

Is it the person you saw before?

BENJAMIN
You don't believe me.

ELSPETH
I'll believe you if you tell me
exactly what you seen.

Benjamin hesitates.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
Benny, I promise you, me love.
(beat)
Is it the person you saw before?

BENJAMIN
It's not a person.

This hits Elspeth.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
It looks a little like one, but
it's not. And it follows Pa around
sometimes and talks to him.

ELSPETH
What does it say?

Benjamin shrugs.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
(beat)
Is it here right now?

Benjamin shakes his head.

But Elspeth is still tense. She gazes at the dividing
curtains.

She stands, and with palpable trepidation she crosses the
room--

BENJAMIN
It's not, ma, I swear.

--and pauses at the curtains.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
Ma...

Elspeth raises a hand to pull back a curtain.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
(crying)
Please, ma, don't open it.

Elspeth comes to her senses. Rushes back to Benjamin and hugs him tight, devastated to see him in the grip of such fear.

ELSPETH
I'm sorry, Benny. It's alright.
It'll be alright.

BENJAMIN
sniffles. Safer now in his mother's arms.

ELSPETH
The picture of uncertainty.

THE BIG TREE

Right by the Ellis home footprint.

THWACK! An axe blade takes a bite.

Abner pries it out and swings again.

THUNK.

ELSPETH
May I speak with ye?

ABNER
What is it?

She waits for him to stop working, but he doesn't.

THUNK.

The perlino mustang, still tethered to the tree, flinches at every hit.

ELSPETH
It's about Benjamin.

THUNK.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
Ye've been different since you came
back from the railroad. With that
gold.

ABNER
Thought you said this was about
Ben.

ELSPETH

It is. It's about Ben. And your gold.

THUNK. Abner leaves the axe buried in the tree and turns to Elspeth.

ABNER

What about my gold?

ELSPETH

There's a change in you. And Benny saw it long before I did. But it is there. And it's on account of that gold, I know it.

ABNER

You ain't one for plans, so you don't know a thing about this here. But it's bigger'n you. Bigger'n Ben. Bigger'n me. This is the biggest thing there is.

ELSPETH

What is?

He stabs a finger into the air, pointing at his town.

ABNER

This.

ELSPETH

Me sister was like you, always makin plans. The problem was that any time she got somethin she wanted, she was already wantin the next thing.

ABNER

That's why I tried for her hand first.

That stings Elspeth -- a mixture of hurt and disbelief on her face.

ELSPETH

(beat)

There's an evil in that gold. Old Scratch tempts /mankind by--

ABNER

(over)

Old Scratch-- The devil take me now if that gold's his.

ELSPETH

Don't speak it!

ABNER

I found that powder keg out in the woods. Fella it used to belong to, he was dead right beside it. So ain't nobody comin for it. And even if they was, this is the frontier -- you take it, it's yours. Man or devil himself. I own this now. Ima do with it what I set to.

ELSPETH

And what of your son?

ABNER

He ain't the one gotta worry.

ELSPETH

He already does. That's no coincidence, Abner.

ABNER

None of this is. Look at it all. This here's work. It's plannin. It's money. And it ain't nobody's design but mine. You're set there, tellin me to give this up like it's somethin I stepped in. I made this happen.

ELSPETH

Then make it stop! I'm not askin you to pitch the gold. Just spend it all instead of plottin and plannin. Buy every cow and bull in the state. We'll never need anythin else.

ABNER

That ain't my plan. This city--

ELSPETH

Who're you even buildin this for?

ABNER

Everyone! Goddammit! Everyone!

He pulls the axe from the tree.

ELSPETH

You're doin this for one person
only.

(incredulous)

"Look at it all..." What a grand
city it is, indeed.

(beat)

I want that big house, and I want
what's inside it to be deservin of
its bigness. I won't stand for a
shack no more. Or a city full of
em. Something's amiss with ye and
you're too busy play-actin a
railroad tycoon to notice it.

Abner flings the axe to the ground.

He snatches his rifle from its scabbard, cocks it.

ELSPETH

goes pale, frozen stiff.

Abner strides up to her and gets real fucking close.

ABNER

If it's my eternal soul you're
rusltin over, I'll put ya at ease.

He levels the rifle at the horse's head and FIRES.

BLACK.

ELSPETH

Wide-eyed, backing away, utterly horrified.

BLACK.

THE TREE BY THE ELLIS HOME FOOTPRINT

Abner's body heaving as he catches his breath. SPECKLES OF
BLOOD pepper his face and shirt.

THE BULL

strains against its yoke, around which is tied a rope leading
back to something behind the bull.

A TREE BRANCH

acts as a fulcrum. The rope slithering over it as the bull
pulls O.S.

A SHOVEL

breaks bloody ground. A boot kicking it deeper into the
earth.

WIDER ON ABNER

knee-deep in a hole. Hacking at tree roots with his shovel.
Drops of blood rain from somewhere above him.

THE MUSTANG

is hog-tied, hanging upside-down from the tree branch, over a
narrow hole. Head fucked up and dripping blood.

ABNER

looks up at the horse. Unsheathes a knife.

And he SLASHES the rope and the horse drops and we

CUT TO BLACK.

THE MUSTANG'S GRAVE

A hoof pokes out from the dirt.

BENJAMIN

stands at the grave, looking up at the

TREE BRANCH

where the rope still hangs, cut at both ends.

ABNER (O.S.)

Buried him upside down.

The boy flinches, spins around. He freezes, eyes wide,
horrified.

ABNER

smiling, but not with his eyes. Mustang's blood still on
him. Rifle in hand.

And behind Abner looms

A CHARCOAL-GREY HUMANOID BEING

Faceless. Sexless. Tall and creepily osteal. Skin
grotesquely perforated, like a lotus pod.

ABNER (CONT'D)

You know your ma and her
superstitions.

BENJAMIN

is terrified, quietly shaking.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Sometimes a fella's gotta do
somethin to shut a woman up.

THE CREATURE

lifts a gnarled hand up to its face and utters mouthless whispers into Abner's ear.

ABNER (CONT'D)

I got somethin important to show you.

Benjamin doesn't move.

But Abner doesn't either.

Benjamin relents, takes hesitant steps toward Abner.

TALL GRASS

As Abner leads Benjamin somewhere.

The creature in BG, out of focus, following them.

RAIL BED

Still without a track, but not too far in the distance is the steam locomotive and its rail crew, closer than ever.

And Abner stands there pointing them out to Benjamin.

ABNER

You see that? It's almost here.

He looks to Benjamin for a reaction but the boy is too uneasy, keeping tabs on his peripherals.

ABNER (CONT'D)

You know what makes that possible?

Behind them the thing still looms.

ABNER (CONT'D)

You know what makes that possible.

Benjamin's panic multiplies by the second, making each response more and more rushed.

BENJAMIN

(unsure)

Men building it?

ABNER

And why are the men here?

BENJAMIN
Because it's their job?

ABNER
(tinge of annoyance)
And what's a job?

BENJAMIN
It's where you do the same work
every day.

ABNER
For?

BENJAMIN
Money!

Abner points at him: "there it is".

TWO-SHOT BEHIND FATHER & SON
Camera CREEPING IN very slowly as the scene plays out.

ABNER
And the company owns the rail--you
know what a company is?

BENJAMIN
Yes.

ABNER
The company owns the rail, why are
they buildin it?

BENJAMIN
So that the train can go across?

ABNER
And people'll ride the train.
After they buy tickets from the
company that built the rail. You
understand what I'm sayin? And the
company that built the rail gets...

BENJAMIN
Money.

Abner smiles, proud.

ABNER
That's called a system. Remember
when I told you 'bout how every man
needs to have a plan? A system's a
plan that's workin.

He crouches, points to the train and the men advancing the rail.

ABNER (CONT'D)

And that's one that's so big and workin so good that everybody knows about it. And your son and his son, they'll know about it too. And this city I'm buildin, it'll be the same way with that. And it'll carry your name. So everyone'll know it comes from you and yours. And you know what's makin that possible?

BENJAMIN

Money.

ABNER

You get it. Your ma don't. She ain't one for plans. But that's okay. As long as you know what's what. And you do. Don't ya?

Benjamin nods.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Say it.

BENJAMIN

I know what's what.

Mostly Benjamin in FRAME now, camera PUSHING IN toward the back of his head.

ABNER

Fella told me the other day that money...all money is, is speech. And that gold of mine, it's loud. That's the key. That's the heart of this. It's doin good things. Ain't nothin wrong with it. Okay? Gold is good.
(beat)
Gold is good.

Benjamin nods.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Say it.

BENJAMIN

Gold is good.

Right as we're only inches behind the boy, he whips around.

The creature is gone now.

Or at least Benjamin can't see it.

He looks around, but it's just him and Abner now.

Abner spins the boy back around to face the railroad in the distance. Puts an arm around his son's shoulder.

ABNER
 (re: the railroad)
 It's comin.

EMPTY TRAIN STATION

Benjamin in bed.

Awake.

He glances around. Empty.

On the bed beside him lies Elspeth.

Benjamin leans close to her face, confirming she's asleep.

He inches out of bed, careful not to wake his mother.

Stalks throughout the station, in search of something. But whatever it is, he can't find it.

Eyes the dividing curtains in the corner.

He creeps toward them, his trepidation setting him at half-speed.

He waits a beat, then shuts his eyes before pulling back a curtain.

Deep breath. And then he opens one eye.

ABNER
 in bed, asleep. No creature. Nothing else there. Except for

ABNER'S RIFLE
 propped against the wall.

BENJAMIN
 locks on to the rifle. Bingo.

UNFINISHED TOWN

A rifle barrel glides across frame until we see the face of the person holding it:

BENJAMIN

Weaving through the bones of the half-built town, real gun in his hands now, pointed ahead.

A sheet of canvas hung from a beam ripples in the evening breeze. Benjamin peeks behind it. Nothing there.

FOOTPRINT OF THE ELLIS HOME

Benjamin ensures that the coast is clear before he crouches by Biscuit and pets her. She wakes up, looks up at him sleepily, tail half-wagging.

BENJAMIN

Stay here where it's safe.

He kisses the dog on her head, gets back up and stalks away.

RIVER

Benjamin, walking along the bank.

The peaceful babble of the slow-flowing water sounds eerie in the empty darkness.

He stops, looks out across the water at the twisted elm.

Benjamin searches the ground, picks up a piece of driftwood almost as long as he is tall. He dips it vertically into the water, measuring the river's depth. The full length of the stick plus Benjamin's arm still aren't enough to touch bottom.

It's deep.

But Benjamin is on a mission.

He undresses down to his underwear, slings the rifle scabbard over his shoulder, takes a breath, and jumps into the water.

WIDE

as he cuts across the placid surface, from right bank to left.

He reaches the other side. Pulls himself up and goes to the elm tree.

He digs with his bare hands until he hits something and jerks his hands away with fright.

He stands and points the gun at the hole. He uses his foot to clear away more dirt. But then he notices something. The texture. It's hard. This is...wood?

He crouches to get a better look at what's buried here.

He knocks on the keg. It's not a human or a demon or a ghost.

Benjamin glances around, confused, searching for his quarry.

A beat.

And then he backs away from the hole and dives into the water, heading back to his side.

EMPTY TRAIN STATION

Benjamin tiptoes right up to Abner and carefully places the rifle back against the wall.

As soon as he turns to leave,

ABNER'S EYES
snap open.

BENJAMIN
nudges through the curtains.

ABNER
Furious. He turns his attention to that rifle. He knows what Benjamin's been up to.

He looks out the window.

BENJAMIN
climbs carefully back into bed.

THE DIVIDING CURTAINS
still rippling.

BENJAMIN
brings Elspeth's arm over him and then shuts his eyes.

BACK ON THE CURTAINS.

HOLD for a beat...

But nothing emerges from behind them.

OUTSIDE

Elspeth carrying buckets of water, sleeves rolled up.

She notices something up ahead and perks up. Sets the buckets down and runs up to

A NEWBORN CALF

struggling to stay on its feet as its mother licks it clean.

ELSPETH

Jasmine!

ELSPETH

is smitten, staring at this calf with a mixture of pride and profound gratitude.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

How'd ye's get out?

She continues up the slight hill, to the

CATTLE PEN

And then her face falls, jubilation contorting into confusion, then disbelief, then horror.

EMPTY TRAIN STATION

Benjamin sleeping.

PANNING around the big, hollow room, we LAND on the front door right as it BURSTS open.

Elspeth runs in and heads straight for her son.

ELSPETH

Benjamin.

She shakes him.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

Benjamin!

The boy wakes up.

Elspeth is anxious, rushed.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

Wake up. We have to leave.

BENJAMIN
Where are we going? /Where's Pa?

ELSPETH
(over)
We're going somewhere else. /Pa's
outside and he can't come with us,
okay?

BENJAMIN
(over)
Where'd Pa go? How come? /Is he
hurt?

ELSPETH
(over)
Benny, put on your shoes.

Benjamin gets out of bed and walks toward the door.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
Don't go outside!

We can see in Benjamin's eyes that he's assembling some
horrible scenario in his head.

BENJAMIN
It got Pa? The thing /got Pa?

ELSPETH
(over)
No. We're just going somewhere,
you /and m--

BENJAMIN
(over)
I have to help him get away!

Benjamin opens the door and runs out.

ELSPETH
Benjamin!

She hurries

OUTSIDE

and sees Benjamin sprinting down Main Street. She'll never
catch him.

But she's gonna fucking try.

BENJAMIN

hauling ass like only a scared ten-year-old on a mission can. Looking in every direction, searching for his father.

Elsbeth SHOUTING protestations somewhere behind the boy.

Benjamin spots his father from afar, in the cattle pen.

BENJAMIN

Pa...

Benjamin gets closer --

and then he stops so suddenly he almost topples over. He looks ahead in terror, at

THE BULL

On its side in the grass. Dead.

But what's got Benjamin horrified is

ABNER

Bloodied railroad spike clutched in one hand, mallet in the other. He's still wearing his suit, only now an animal pelt adorns his head.

Not just an animal -- a dog, its face pulled down over Abner's as a mask, ragged holes where its eyes once were. Upper teeth still fixed in place.

And not just any dog.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

Biscuit!

Abner turns his head slowly, and then starts for the boy.

Benjamin runs back where he came from, whizzing past his mother.

ELSPETH

Benjamin!

She notices Abner coming and she spins around and follows Benjamin back into the

EMPTY TRAIN STATION

where Elspeth drags the bed over to the front door.

But Abner shoves it open and squeezes inside. Heaving and staring them down from under the maw-visor of his former dog.

ABNER

Don't you know I gotta hold ya
accountable to your choices.

Elsbeth grabs the rifle and cocks back the hammer.

ABNER (CONT'D)

That ain't loaded, Elsie.

He tucks his mallet into his belt loop and pockets the
railroad spike.

Elsbeth eyes the bullet pouch hanging from a hook behind
Abner.

She lowers the rifle, changes her grip to better use it as a
blunt weapon.

ELSPETH

Abner, don't harm the boy.

ABNER

You two are a sight, for sure.
Should see how silly you look. Set
there, afraid. But afraid's got
you payin attention now, huh? This
is what happens when you fight me.
When you go doin things you
oughtn't. You forced me to get ya
to that place. I'm sorry it's what
it took. I am. But I'm tryna
multiply a fortune here. And now
you're payin attention, maybe you
finally realize that this is what
the cusp of success looks like.

He takes a step toward them.

ABNER (CONT'D)

I ain't askin for your understandin
no more. That track's gonna get
here in days, and not long after,
crowds of folk lookin to get out
West. Where the opportunity is.
Where a fella can multiply a
fortune. And they're gonna land
here. And they won't have to go no
further. 'Cause they found Ellis.

He moves closer.

Elsbeth backs away, pushing Benjamin back with her.

ABNER (CONT'D)

(beat)

So the both of you're gonna stop fightin me and bein so concerned with somethin I can't even figure what. Frettin over somethin ain't there. 'Cause this is yours, too. Do you want it or don't you?

BENJAMIN

You killed Biscuit!

ABNER

You killed her! What you force me to do, that's on you.

(beat)

I got a system here. And you got your part to play, boy. The both of ya.

(beat)

Shit, I thought for sure this'd help you listen--

(reaches for bullet pouch)

--but maybe you oughta stay scared--

CRACK! Elspeth smashes the butt of the rifle into Abner's head. He drops.

ELSPETH

Come, Benjamin!

They both dash for the door, but Abner grabs Elspeth and she trips, hitting the ground.

Benjamin stops.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

Leave!

The boy wiggles past the bed and through the door.

Elspeth and Abner writhe on the ground, the latter grabbing at Elspeth's clothes, hair, wrists, legs as she tries to get back onto her feet.

She rips the headdress off and scratches his face.

He elbows her in the nose with a CRUNCH.

Abner overpowers and straddles Elspeth, pinning her down.

ABNER

What'd I ever do wrong! Ain't this what we're here for?!

OUTSIDE

Benjamin moving even faster than before, ducking through framed buildings and then cutting across the open field.

Headed straight for the river.

EMPTY TRAIN STATION

Abner snatches the rifle from Elspeth's grip.

She expires red mist with each huff and puff, still fighting against Abner's weight.

On Abner's face, a dawning comprehension.

He gets off of Elspeth and snatches up his bullet pouch and pulls the bed aside and leaves.

ELSPETH
Don't hurt him!

RIVER

Benjamin hesitates at the water, but then he dives in, clothes and all, and starts to swim toward the bank on the other side, a hundred feet away.

ABNER
sprinting in the same direction.

BENJAMIN
restricted and weighed down by his clothes.

ELSPETH
Twenty yards behind Abner.

BENJAMIN
makes it to the other side, drags himself ashore, crawls to the gnarled elm tree and digs.

ABNER
closes in.

BENJAMIN
hits the keg and strains to get it upright.

ABNER
sees Benjamin with the keg.

ABNER
No!

BENJAMIN

pulls the horse tethers off the keg and throws the lid off.
Less than half empty inside.

He reaches in and grabs two handfuls of gold and hurls it
into the river.

ABNER

reaches the river bank. Takes a bullet from his pouch.

BENJAMIN

flings another bunch of gold nuggets. They disperse in the
air and PLUNK! into the water.

ELSPETH

hesitates, almost pained as she watches the ripples on the
surface wash away with the river's steady flow.

ABNER

aims his rifle, quivering with desperation.

ELSPETH

Benjamin, stop!

The boy halts.

ABNER

(screaming, unhinged)
Leave it alone! Leave it alone and
swim back over this side!

Benjamin doesn't move.

Abner aims the rifle at Elspeth.

ABNER (CONT'D)

(to Benjamin)
God damn you, boy, do what I'm
sayin!

It works. Benjamin wades into the river and begins swimming
back.

And over his SPLASHES, there is a

RUMBLING. Rhythmic, distant. A GALLOP.

Abner turns in the direction of the sound.

TWO RIDERS

in the distance. Horses along the bank, on Abner and
Elspeth's side of the river.

Approaching fast.

Two young Native American men -- friendly PAWNEE, though the concern on Abner's face as they approach suggests that he doesn't know this.

BENJAMIN

reaches their side of the river. Elspeth hurries to him, helps the exhausted boy onto his feet.

THE PAWNEE MEN

slow their horses and dismount a few yards away from

ABNER

as he raises his rifle at them.

The two men move forward, arms held in the air pacifically.

ABNER (CONT'D)

Whatchall want?

They speak in their native language, though we'll get subtitles.

FIRST PAWNEE

A group of Cheyenne is not far from here.

Abner obviously doesn't understand.

FIRST PAWNEE (CONT'D)

They're dangerous. How many other men do you have here to protect this place?

ABNER

You after my gold too?

The Pawnee men exchange confused looks.

FIRST PAWNEE

We came to warn you.

He points Northwest across the river.

FIRST PAWNEE (CONT'D)

The Cheyenne may come this way.
(pointing, emphatic)
Cheyenne.

ABNER

You Cheyenne? Come for the keg?
Yeah, I know what you're here for.

The second Pawnee man notices the blood on Abner's suit and the scratch across his face, the blood all over Elspeth, the soaking wet boy.

He nudges his friend and brings these things to his attention with a few surreptitious nods of the head.

ABNER
sees them see it all.

SECOND PAWNEE
We must leave. Goodbye.

They nod politely and back away toward their horses.

ABNER
Whoa, whoa. Now, I can't have you
goin back to your buddies and
tellin em 'bout that keg.

They continue backing away.

ABNER (CONT'D)
Hey!

He lifts his gun.

The Pawnee men run to their horses.

BLAM!

Abner shoots First Pawnee dead.

THE HORSES
startle and take off.

SECOND PAWNEE
chases after his horse while

ABNER
reloads his rifle. He gets the bullet in and the blast cap
in place just as

SECOND PAWNEE
jumps onto his horse and sets off at a gallop.

ABNER
aims.....BLAM!

THE HORSE
takes the bullet and falters, topples over, catapulting its
rider to the ground.

But the man stumbles back onto his feet and limps away as fast as he can.

ABNER
readies another shot.

BLAM!

Misses. Too far.

He throws his rifle to the ground and gives chase.

ELSPETH
grabs Benjamin's hand.

ELSPETH
Come with me!

BENJAMIN
(pulling away)
But I have to--

ELSPETH
Leave the gold be! Leave it be!
Ye can't save your pa! I promise
you! Ye can't save him!

Benjamin hesitates.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)
Benjamin!

He relents. Elspeth takes his hand again, and they run.

CATTLE PEN

Abner closing the gap to the fleeing man, getting closer and closer until they reach the

FOOTPRINT OF THE ELLIS HOME

and Abner tackles him to the ground.

They grapple, entangled in each other's limbs. Hands and feet fighting for purchase.

Abner pulls the mallet from his belt loop and swings, but the man catches his wrist. He wrests the mallet from Abner's grasp and SMASHES it into Abner's collar bone.

Abner falls back. His opponent brings the mallet up, but Abner pulls the rail spike from his pocket and pelts it at the man's head and he stumbles backward.

Abner crawls back over him and the men get into another lock. By degrees becoming smeared in each other's blood.

Abner finds the rail spike and hammers the man's wrist and hand with it and pulls the mallet from his weakened grip.

Pawnee, pinned down by Abner, raises both arms and begins strangling his assailant.

Abner hammers Pawnee's hands, but he doesn't relent.

Abner sets the spike tip on Pawnee's forehead and raises the mallet and

CLANG!

Pawnee goes slack.

Abner falls to the side, wheezing.

Behind him Elspeth's "HOME" flag billows and FLAPS in a mild breeze.

MAIN STREET

As Elspeth and Benjamin, hand in hand, run away -- from the gold, from Ellis, from Abner.

AERIAL SHOT

of Abner supine in the dirt, recovering, still clutching the mallet.

The Pawnee man, spike through his head.

Blood in the soil.

All within the twine border of the Ellis home.

FRONT OF TRACK

Elspeth and Benjamin, still holding hands as they trudge along the dusty railbed, a stone's throw from where a group of men pour ballast and lay rail ties in position.

One of the front-most men notices them approaching. Then another looks up. Soon the whole group halts and watches.

Jack and Dan (the Irish brothers in their fur-trimmed jackets) order the men back to work, but then they too notice Elspeth.

Jack runs to meet her.

JACK
Holy shit, lady, are ye alright?

ELSPETH
My husband. The town back there...

JACK
You're Mrs. Ellis?

ELSPETH
He's danger--
(beat)
What'd you say?

JACK
Dangerous?

ELSPETH
How'd ye know my name?

JACK
Well, hell, everyone and his auntie knows about the Ellis family buyin up all that land yonder. They say it'll be a big city when all's said and done.

And Elspeth, for one fleeting, surprising instant, rollicks in this unexpected moment of celebrity.

JACK (CONT'D)
Mrs. Ellis, ye got blood on yer...
Well, on a lot o' ye.

Elspeth gazes at the rail gang still slaving away behind Jack.

JACK (CONT'D)
(beat, re: blood)
Is that the mister's doin?

She looks away, nods.

A look of aggressive disgust takes over Jack.

JACK (CONT'D)
And he's up there alone?

She nods again.

Jack walks back to Dan.

Elsbeth and Benjamin watch as the men talk amongst themselves. Then Jack returns with Dan.

DAN

Mrs. Ellis, me brother and me,
we're gonna go see about yer
husband. You'll be safe here. But
until we sort this out, keep to
yerself. And if anyone asks, it
was Injuns did that to ye.

BENJAMIN

Are you gonna put my pa in jail?

JACK

Or somethin.

BENJAMIN

It's the gold that made him turn
bad.

DAN

(beat)
The gold?

JACK

(beat)
The gold?

BENJAMIN

I tried to throw it in the river
but there was too much of it and Ma
told me to leave /when the Injuns--

DAN

(over, to Elspeth)
The gold's there with him?

ELSPETH

It is.

The brothers share a look, and that's all we need to see to know that the objective just changed.

MINUTES LATER

Elsbeth and Benjamin in FG watching Jack and Dan, on horseback, speed away toward Ellis.

CAMPFIRE

Elsbeth cooks a potato over the flame. Benjamin nearby, lying on his stomach, propped up on his elbows.

DOZENS OF CAMPFIRES AROUND THEM

Each one with curious men sneaking glances at the mother and her son.

ELSPETH

cuts off a hunk of potato and blows on it and hands it to Benjamin.

BENJAMIN

What if they don't come back?

ELSPETH

We're doin nothing else until I know your father's not out there anymore.

BENJAMIN

But what if they don't come back?

Off Elspeth's uncertainty,

FRONT OF TRACK

Morning again, the rail gang laying track some distance behind Elspeth who stares off down the bare grade in the direction of Ellis.

Benjamin comes up behind her.

She looks back at him, worried but resolute.

BEHIND THE EMPTY TRAIN STATION

Elsbeth and Benjamin descend the slope from the grade to the edge of the unfinished town of Ellis.

Elsbeth stops. Peeks through a window into the train station.

ELSPETH

Wait here. Hide yourself, and don't ye move one bit.

Benjamin backtracks around the corner and crouches, head peeking out to keep and eye on Elspeth.

ELSPETH (CONT'D)

If anything scares ye, run like all
fuckin hell until you reach the
train, d'ye understand meh?

Benjamin nods.

He watches Elspeth step out onto

MAIN STREET

She glances all around,

HER EYES
darting about nonstop.

Her pace is molasses.

A breeze causes the half-built stores, hotels, and saloons on
either side of her to CREAK and GROAN occasionally, each
sound yanking her wide eyes in that direction.

She finally nears the end of the street and from here a FAINT
CRUNCH can be heard. Rhythmic. Every few seconds.

Elspeth rounds the corner of the last building and before she
can see what's causing the noise, she nearly stumbles over a

DEAD BODY
Chest bloody. Bullet holes. Gun still gripped in hand. Fur-
trimmed jacket. It's Dan.

UP AHEAD
A few dozen yards away is Jack. Dead too. And just beyond
him

ABNER
On his knees and digging a hole, one hand clutching a shovel
and the other held over his stomach. Even from this distance
it's clear that he is drenched in blood, even more so than
before.

KRSSHT! He scoops the shovel in the hole.

ELSPETH
pries the revolver from the dead man's hand.

She approaches. Carefully.

ABNER
oblivious to her presence. He digs, heaving the shovel with
one shaky hand.

Closer now, Elspeth notices that this is the same hole the mustang rests in, just outside the footprint of the Ellis home.

THE HORSE'S CORPSE
upside down and partially exhumed now.

ABNER
drops the shovel and staggers onto his feet.

Shambling, his one arm still pressed against his stomach, over to the keg a few yards away.

He grips the keg with his free hand, then stretches out his other hand, wincing with pain.

He drags the keg, grimacing and GRUNTING, clearly very weak and badly injured.

His legs nearly give out, but he regains his balance. Keeps on dragging the keg.

But then he stops. Suddenly aware. He turns slowly to face Elspeth.

Frightened, she aims the gun at Abner.

He barely seems to recognize her, his wounds rendering him docile and myopic.

They stare at one another for a beat, Abner's LABORED BREATHING the only sound.

And then he turns back to the keg and continues dragging it toward the mustang's grave.

At the edge of the hole, Abner stumbles and collapses backward into the grave.

THE KEG
tips over, its lid popping off, some of the gold inside spilling out into the soil.

A few nuggets dance over the edge of the hole, landing on Abner's chest.

Elspeth comes closer, gun still outstretched at Abner.

ABNER
finally, truly notices Elspeth.

ABNER
Elsie...

ELSPETH
watches, pitying but wary.

ABNER (CONT'D)
We deserve this. We deserve this
city.

There is blood in his half-grin.

ELSPETH'S EYES
watching Abner exhale his last wheezing breath.

ABNER
dead on his mustang.

Elsbeth's gaze drifts back to

THE GOLD
That ostentiferous treasure. And even now it shimmers and
transfixes. Beckons.

The anemic MOOOO of the newborn calf steals Elspeth's
attention.

She looks up and sees

THE CATTLE
back in their enclosure -- the heifer and her offspring,
staring at the dead bull.

And then Elspeth glances down again. At the gold.

SALT FLATS, UTAH

A vast, cracked, gleaming landscape. Horizon an unbroken
horizontal, impossibly far.

We can just make out a horse-drawn wagon -- a speck against
the landscape -- moving left. Thin trail of dust in its
wake.

COVERED WAGON

Elsbeth driving through the empty wilderness, Benjamin at her
side.

Two horses pulling.

BENJAMIN
Ma?

ELSPETH

Yes.

BENJAMIN

What's in California?

ELSPETH

(long beat)

More.

BENJAMIN

More what?

But Elspeth is distracted. On her face spreads a simmering disquietude we've seen before.

And then something more erupts to the surface: confusion, worry. A dour epiphany.

She looks over her shoulder into the wagon where their belongings are packed up.

She eases the horses to a stop. Gets off and scans the land behind them.

Benjamin watches her, bemused.

Elspeth throws him a concerned look.

Benjamin tenses.

He slides to the far end of the seat and peers past the side of the wagon.

Nothing.

He looks at Elspeth and shakes his head.

She lets out a sigh of relief. Climbs back onto the wagon and sets the horses in motion.

HOLD for a while. (Don't be afraid to let the audience marinate here.)

And suddenly Elspeth stiffens. No confusion, no paranoia. She knows there's something there.

ANGLE FROM INSIDE WAGON

As Elspeth spins to look over her shoulder into the wagon -- staring directly into CAMERA.

HOLD.

And then

CUT TO BLACK.

END.