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# Stumbler (A Screenplay)

Mark Green

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*Stumbler* (A Screenplay)

A Capstone

Presented To

The Academic Faculty

By

Mark Green

In Partial Fulfillment

Of The Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in American Studies

Kennesaw State University

July 2018

*I come through this life a stumbler, friends. I expect to die that way. – Townes Van Zandt*

In dedication to my family, friends past and present, teachers, and anyone who has stumbled.

Love one another.

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## Part I: Literature Review

Country music thrives on strained relationships, but those strained relationships extend beyond song lyrics. Country music projects an image of purity and deeply rooted authenticity, but the underside of the business has been fraught with issues of class, race, gender, and general misfortune since its beginning. The aim of this literature review is to survey several scholarly sources related to country music and to find reasonable connections or disagreements within them in order to construct a potential framework for a discourse. Some of the authors here view country music as if it were on an island, artistically and socially separate from its sister genres. Some of the authors, however, see it as more fluid. This separation is not only present in scholarship on country music, but within its fan base as well. For all of its associations with the working class and the everyman, country music invokes a level of snobbery – the perception of ownership - among some of its base. Whether that snobbery is merited is debatable. Another question considered in this literature review is to what extent the views of country music listeners affect the genre, and to what extent the genre reinforces the views of its listeners. Stereotypes of the genre tend to become stereotypes of the listening base, and vice versa. To what extent those generalizations are valid, hurtful, or both, is the focus of much of the scholarship presented here.

In “Confucius and Country Music” (2003), Crispin Sartwell proposes that country music is part of a pastoral and rustic tradition that dates back at least to the life of Confucius. He suggests that country music has an innate connection to Confucius<sup>1</sup>. Country music is a traditional type of art, meaning that it tends to recycle itself more than other art forms or musical genres. Traditional societies aren’t just less prone to change; they possess a cyclical structure, which reinforces nostalgic views of history. They often have oral traditions that are repeated for

as long as the society exists. There is less of an inclination to shift cultural norms, even if technology or other outside influences force change.

The traditional society is in opposition to the historical society, which moves linearly and progressively<sup>2</sup>. The preeminent American ideal is individualism, which urges citizens to push toward the fruition of moral and economic progress, proclaiming the power of the individual over the collective. Country music is a hybrid of traditional and rural societies, emphasizing on one end the conservative morals of its patrons, and on the other the business mentality of its promoters. The genre of country music clings to itself; the business side is much more apt to undergo change because it is situated in a neoliberal, individualist economy. Country music is a product of American society – which is considered historical – but it embodies a traditional method of thinking. Much of the moral architecture in country music lyrics, if not the musical norms themselves, has remained consistent throughout country music’s lifespan. That moral architecture involves traditional conservative norms, including the preservation of the nuclear family and a working-class ethic.

Sartwell contends that some Western thinkers take issue with Confucius’s traditional approach, in that it isn’t receptive to dissent. He states that “a work of art is authentic by virtue of its connection with the tradition”<sup>3</sup>. He suggests that, instead of a fault, intra-genre plagiarism is a tradition in country music, and it provides continuity between one era and another<sup>4</sup>. Further, plagiarism is a source of authenticity for the artist. While folk artists might borrow freely from any source they deem valuable, country artists are expected to borrow from each other. In this way, country music is perceived to be in a self-imposed loop.

Of course, country music artists have always freely borrowed from other genres because, like any form of art, country music wasn't born in a vacuum, and it didn't evolve in one. Sartwell's view of traditionalist and historical societies is essentialist and generalizing, and it appears that Sartwell is more interested in using country music as an object in an academic exercise than answering difficult questions about its existence.

In *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (2004) ethnomusicologist Aaron A. Fox spends several years in Lockhart, Texas, to get a sense of the culture there, musical and otherwise. He differentiates his thesis from other similar works: "I describe the central place of country music in the *culture* of a class-based community – with 'culture' understood as an active and hegemonic (or power-inflected) process of organizing communal experience and social relations"<sup>5</sup>. He doesn't place country music strictly within the bounds of commerce and business, but as a negotiated ritual that acts as a fundamental part of society.

The primary theoretical vehicle for Fox is the concept of "talk," which is a negotiated form of speech that stands at the intersection of cultural exchange in a given region<sup>6</sup>. In this case, talk blends with the phrasing of country music lyrics and creates a medium whereby individuals can rehearse their cultural norms. Country music, more than most musical forms, is conservative in its approach, and its adherents use it in order to reinforce their traditions. Fox makes a distinction between the self and the person, elucidating on his view that the self is a construction<sup>7</sup>. This construction is essential to talk because it bonds the lingual to the essence of being.

Fox considers Lockhart a "shallow rural" town, meaning that it lies at the border of the Austin metro area, somewhere between rural and suburban. He considers rural life in this sense

to be a practice or a habit, not an accident<sup>8</sup>. Those who live in Lockhart tend to live there on purpose, not because they were lodged there from birth. It is through this setting that Fox comes to understand the negotiated form of communication of the citizens of Lockhart, which extends across linguistic and musical boundaries.

Similarly to Sartwell, Fox is focused on class and the distinction between urban and rural societies, and music is central to his work. Unlike Sartwell, however, he thrusts himself into his project, and his personal and professional life evolved because of it. Alternately, unlike later sources in this review, Fox is not strictly concerned with unraveling the existential realities of country music, although that is an inevitable consequence of his venture. Sartwell is concerned with a top-down vision of traditional and historical societies, which implies a universalist notion. Fox relies primarily on social constructivist concepts, which are the opposite of universalism: The people build their own identities and their own society, rather than those being handed down to them as a result of cosmic panhandling.

Continuing with the theme of rural America, Hal S. Barron's essay, "Rural America on the Silent Screen" (2006), describes the evolution of depictions of rural life in silent cinema. Barron does not cover music in this essay, but he offers an analysis of rural America from the outside, whereas country music is an internal product. The evolution of Hollywood's depiction of rural America coincided with a massive population shift from rural areas to cities at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Older conservative Americans fought to protect traditional values as the American population moved to the cities<sup>9</sup>. As a result, films during the era became increasingly mocking toward rural Americans<sup>10</sup>. This shift reflected a change in tone in Hollywood, but it also showed that Hollywood had developed a new comfort zone as its

audience became increasingly urban and distanced itself from traditional rural values. Hollywood became aware that its audience was in a flux between two social epochs.

By the advent of sound in cinema, the rural melodrama had begun to fade into obscurity altogether<sup>11</sup>. This mirrors a common path for other genres, particularly that of the western, where genres turn from melodrama to satire, and then finally collapse as commercial and artistic vehicles. Thus, while Hollywood is only portraying rural life as it sees it (or perceives it to be), that portrayal runs along a tangible thread between the realities of the population shift and the ephemeral nature of art. American society was still emerging from the Victorian era, and Hollywood's treatment of rural America reflected that transition. Most rural films during the period were historical dramas instead of films set in the (then) present day<sup>12</sup>. Thus, viewers would watch underneath some kind of blanket of nostalgia, rather than with an eye toward current events.

Barron centralizes the term "rural," which typifies Hollywood's own placeless depiction of rural America, as is literally the case in many films not set in any particular area or ostensible period of time. Thus, what emerges is a regionless America that is cleanly divided between urban and rural. The post-WWII era mitigated those distinctions somewhat, especially with the advent of the interstate highway system and the suburbs that emerged from it, but the broad representations of rural America in popular culture seem to remain.

In terms of film representations of country music itself, not representations particularly concerned with making statements on rural life, Richard Shusterman's essay, "Moving Truth: Affect and Authenticity in Country Musicals," looks at the supposition that intellectuals are resistant to being fans of country music. Instead of looking at country music directly, he opts to

look at “country musicals” (his own term), which, he says, are separate from the “singing cowboy” films of the early and middle 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>13</sup>. He asserts that country music, with its traditional/conservative nature and older audience, is innately less prone to have the same multi-cultural effects as other musical genres, such as rap and salsa<sup>14</sup>. Alternatively, modern country music allows middle-class whites to possess an authentic identity within the white culture itself.

Shusterman applies his thesis primarily through an examination of the film *Pure Country* (Christopher Cain, 1992), starring George Strait. As the title of the film suggests, the film emphasizes moral and political purity as virtues. In real life, Strait is a leader of the neotraditionalist movement in country music, espousing new country music with its traditional rural roots. In a sense, the movement, and Strait in particular, act in defiance of the (sub)urban cowboy movement, as Strait was an authentic cowboy who grew up on a ranch<sup>15</sup>.

Shusterman then points out that country music has never been racially, geographically, or commercially pure. The notion of “purity” is a myth that was brought about and inflated by music promoters after the fact. Like other myths, it has taken on a false sense of truth late in its life<sup>16</sup>. He cites William James as a source to explain why country music fans readily buy into the purity myths when they should know better. Shusterman explains that country music, impure as it is, can claim purity because it is relatively purer than other forms of pop music. He also connects the rampant sentimentality in country music to a tradition of Southern piety, which exercises emotion over judgment. Intellectuals, he says, find the sentimentality of country music “mawkish, unconvincing, commercialized kitsch”<sup>17</sup>. Shusterman concludes that country music, despite its tendency toward pathos, isn’t ignorant of reality; rather, it clings to ideals that look beyond cold and unfeeling judgment<sup>18</sup>. His interpretation of intellectuals seems to be based on a

stereotype. He assumes that they are detached academics who are unable (or unwilling) to have a stake in their subject matter.

In terms of real-life representations of country music singers, in “The Significance of ‘Hillbilly’ in Early Country Music, 1924-1945,” Anthony Harkins describes the commercial rise and fall of the term “hillbilly.” The term initially had a local usage, evolved into an intentional branding effort by the mid-30s, and then finally was shrugged off as it became a derogatory term after World War II. As noted in some of the other texts, country music was heavily regional in its inception, and then it became more of a national product after World War II. The regional usage of hillbilly was seen as commercially positive, and it was embraced both by performers and promoters. The more diverse national audience saw it as a mocking term, however, as it was connected with the vision of the lazy, uneducated redneck. The term brought down the entire genre by giving it the appearance of baseness and simplicity.

The term, as Harkins describes it, is not a simple linguistic device: “Clearly, it was a semantically malleable collection of interlacing images, attitudes, and meanings that served as a negotiated space between contending concepts of urban, rural, modern and traditional, past and present”<sup>19</sup>. Thus, the term moves across time and space; and between artistic, commercial, and social importance. It was, and remains, an important link between regional America and the now ubiquitous national product of country music.

Where Harkins describes the relationship between class and country music figuratively and in light of the commercial movements of the day, Kristine McCusker’s essay, “Funeral Music and the Transformation of Southern Musical and Religious Cultures, 1935-1945” focuses, as the title indicates, on Southern funeral music during the Great Depression era. Her thesis is

that funeral music during that time period (and today) is used as a means of emoting class status for Southerners<sup>20</sup>. Upper-class Southerners would play classical music at funerals, performed in increasing frequency by professional musicians, and those of the lower classes would play more traditional gospel and folk standards familiar to them. The increase of wealth during and after World War II contributed to larger churches with more resources, so these churches could afford to hire professional musicians from out of town. These musicians played classical music and professionally arranged hymns at funerals. While this article doesn't relate directly to country music, it does reflect again the distinct class divisions present in the South. While some families were keen to show off their status with high status music, those of the lower classes took a sense of pride in maintaining their musical tastes and showing them off.

McCusker is also the editor of *Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (2004), which includes her own essay, "Bury Me Beneath the Willow: Linda Parker and Definitions of Tradition on the National Barn Dance, 1932-1935." Here, she focuses on the career and premature death of Jeanne Muenich, who was better known by her stage name of Linda Parker. Parker, McCusker describes, was a different identity than Muenich, constructed especially for the National Barn Dance radio program. The juxtaposition of the two identities creates problems when viewed through the lens of traditional country music scholarship<sup>21</sup>. The National Barn Dance program was presented for middle-class audiences, not just the working poor, which goes against the common perception that country music audiences are uniformly rural and lower class. While the program might have served rural audiences, it was broadcast around the entire country, and thus its listenership was diverse by default. Parker's identity was constructed by her manager, John Lair, which, McCusker notes, was for commercial purposes: "The point was, after all, to entice the listener to stay tuned for the sponsors' ads, not to make them turn the radio

off<sup>22</sup>. Lair sought to combine elements of both Northern and Southern culture in Parker's identity in order to appeal to the widest audience<sup>23</sup>. Parker's dual embodiment of the sentimental mother figure and the Southern belle gave her wide appeal. Listeners so bought into the musical and identity performance that they were legitimately saddened at her (Parker's) death<sup>24</sup>.

McCusker's analysis undermines the notion that country music listeners have concrete, isolated traditions. Instead, their traditions, as they understand them, can be easily inflected with tropes from other regions and cultures. The loop isn't quite as secure as the listener would believe it to be.

In *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (2002), Bill C. Malone describes how country music exists under apparent contradictions<sup>25</sup>. Country music attempts to be a platform for realism while it functions under the Southern code of nostalgia and mythologized loss. Country music, though it has branched out into the urban world, still has roots in the South, and these roots construct an identity and culture for the music that grows from them.

The concept of home is an important cornerstone of country music<sup>26</sup>. Home is constructed nostalgically as a place that has passed away from reality. He goes on to describe the literal household as one with bifurcated gender roles. Prior to the advent of labor-saving devices in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, women in the rural South assumed their place was in the home, and that the outdoors was the domain of men<sup>27</sup>. The perspective on rural music changed around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to accommodate a recycled sense of nostalgia. Women became disposable subjects of music lyrics because they were often "jilted, deserted, scorned, and sometimes murdered" in the post-ballad era<sup>28</sup>.

While country music has evolved (both for artistic and commercial reasons), it has still remained true to its origins<sup>29</sup>. The music has spread around the world and taken on form and instrumentation inspired by pop music, but the commercialization of country music – which has been ongoing since the time of Jimmie Rodgers – is now globalized. Country music turns back to its roots in cycles, but the sound has necessarily changed in order to accommodate its now much larger audience.

Modern country artists write lyrics fashioned after their middle-class upbringings, and, Malone says, they often come to country music after growing up listening to rock and mainstream pop music<sup>30</sup>. Modern country musicians interpret their world through different colors than their predecessors, but their origin points are similar. These new artists are more suburban than rural, due in large part to the growth of suburbia in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The growth of the interstate highway system affected the South in a profound way, covering over much of the rural South with new metro areas. Thus, these new urban cowboys are not a cause of change in the South, but a symptom of a change that has been ongoing since the commercial advent of country music.

Much of Malone's thesis centers on the shifting paradigms in country music since its inception. The perception that country music has moved away from its roots has been constant, and, rather than an outcry in the artistic wilderness, it seems to be part of the fabric of the genre. While other musical genres might look forward, country music tends to look back, acknowledging the cast that it was forged from. Like the historical South, country music longs for days gone by, and it is wrapped up in nostalgia that, while not always founded on fact, is always sincere.

*In the Country of Country* (1997), by Nicholas Dawidoff, is a less academic text than most of the texts in this literature review. He looks closely at the lives of several historically successful country music performers. Through these portraits, Dawidoff constructs a collective image of country music life from the artist's perspective. Dawidoff explains the rise of "hot country," which "attracted great clumps of suddenly intrigued crossover customers who hadn't been exposed to country before and were charmed by all the quaint lines about boots, hound dogs, and achy-breaky hearts"<sup>31</sup>. Country stars in this era were carefully produced, marketed, and controlled by the system. Dawidoff's attitude toward this brand of country music is grossly negative<sup>32</sup>. Thus, the book as a whole appears to be a celebration of the older style of country music.

Dawidoff states that "It wasn't so much that the music was Southern that made it so important to people. The point was more that country took into account an audience who thought of life as a struggle"<sup>33</sup>. Dawidoff, in contrast to Shusterman, believes that country music *is* about feeling and sincerity, and that country music performers were able to convey their hard lives through their music. Shusterman indicated that such sincerity was part of the purity myth, whereas Dawidoff defends tradition head-on and scorns the new country music scene.

In "Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music" (1997), Jocelyn Neal outlines the structural components of country music and how they relate to culture. Neal discusses the use of form in country music to tell stories through song. Unlike other country music scholars, Neal acknowledges that the musical and lyrical forms, not merely the lyrics themselves, have the particular effect of leading the listener to an emotional conclusion. She sees the music as integral to the text. The form and function of each of them overlap and combine into continuity.

Neal sees the time-shift paradigm as an important change in the form of country music songwriting: “In its most familiar deployment, a Time-Shift narrative is interwoven with one of the central tropes in country music, namely the celebration of the human life cycle from birth through death and, finally, spiritual redemption”<sup>34</sup>. The time-shift narrative evolves with each section of a song, moving the listener to a different period of time with each shift<sup>35</sup>. A father figure (or God) is usually invoked during this narrative as a means of leading the subject of the song, as well as the listener, through the specific periods of time.

Neal describes the circular composition strategy, exemplified by Tim McGraw’s song, “Don’t Take the Girl,” as a method for taking the listener through a figurative “circle of life,” while at the same time circling back on the song itself. Country music is rife with references to birth, coming of age, death, and the afterlife, and the songs of McGraw and others typify that expectation (if not experience) in both form and fashion<sup>36</sup>. Further, Neal says that “one person’s lifetime gives way to the next generation through new birth, a cycle that is mirrored in the literal structure of the song, which ends by becoming its own beginning”<sup>37</sup>. Neal’s essay asserts that the form and function of country music, especially new country, are inseparable.

Neal’s approach goes further than the other scholars in this review because she is the only one that gets down into the art itself. The other scholars analyze the lyrical texts for meaning, or try to find a reverse-signification for the music from investigating the lives of the performers, but the song form for Neal is the vehicle through which meaning in country music is purveyed.

In “The Emergence of the Country Music Business: 1945-1955” (1995), Don Cusic outlines the path of the country music business in the years during and following World War II. Country music was heavily centered in the Grand Ole Opry before World War II, and the Opry

held tyrannical control over its performers<sup>38</sup>. The Opry, to some degree, kept country music a regional art form by forcing its biggest performers to be in Nashville every Saturday night. At the same time, it was a nationally broadcast show that helped promote country music, even if it kept the music from evolving artistically.

Of note is Fred Rose, to whom Cusic gives credit for the commercialization of country music after World War II<sup>39</sup>. The Rose-Acuff Publishing Company was responsible for the spread of country music on the radio outside of the usual Opry performances. This, coupled with increased attention during World War II, was a major contributor to the success of country music after the war ended. The centralization of country music in Nashville also made it a major hub of popular culture in the United States. According to Cusic, much of country music's resonance is from its publishing presence, founded in large part by Rose. Unlike some of the other essays in this literature review, this essay deals heavily with the economic side of the country music business, as well as the major figures during the period that brought it into prominence. It does not rely heavily on analysis of the country music fans or the regions from which they emerged.

In "Atomic Music: Country Conservatism and Folk Discontent" (1996), Robert G. Weiner makes the connection between country, folk, and the new reality of the atomic bomb after World War II. The bomb itself became a commercial entity, portrayed throughout popular culture and used as a marketing symbol in advertising. Country and folk, and their respective audiences, each had a distinct reaction to this occurrence. Country music took on a patriotic and jingoistic approach, while folk responded critically. He claims that country music affirms the culture from which it is produced, and that makes it a conservative art form<sup>40</sup>. He differentiates folk and country music by asserting that the latter is a commercial art form, and the former isn't. This economic differentiation seems to be true to some extent, especially given that folk music

gains much less airtime on the radio, but granting Sartwell's contentions that country music is traditional and unabashedly plagiaristic, Weiner's evaluation should be taken with reservation.

Both country and folk musicians wrote songs about the bomb, even though their interpretations were wildly different<sup>41</sup>. The bomb itself was a symbol of ethno-nationalist sentiment. The conservative tone in country music lyrics was applied to the bomb during the Cold War<sup>42</sup>. The bomb was also associated with religious imagery. Its purpose wasn't to end the world, but it was an instrument of God that kept rogue US enemies in check.

Cusic and Weiner both look at the World War II era, which is a specific and important time for country music. As indicated by McClusker, the growth of the economy during the period allowed for the emergence of pop culture. Music in the South became part of that broader culture nationwide, and what was previously a ritual pastime lost its sanctification and became part of the new leisure.

In "Queering Country Music Autobiography: Chely Wright's 'Like Me' and the Performance of Authenticity" (2015), Tara M. Tuttle looks at the rarely acknowledged question of queerness in country music. Tuttle says that "To be a 'real' country singer, one must fit a template"<sup>43</sup>. As Chely Wright became the first openly gay country artist, she decidedly broke from that template, yet her own perspective still favors the heteronormative country music tradition, which Tuttle acknowledges as perhaps the most lasting and important aspect of the authentic country star<sup>44</sup>.

Tuttle states that "to pass is not merely to proceed undetected but to adhere to the parameters of socially constructed definitions of identity to such a degree that one conveys, sometimes accurately, sometimes not, a match of self to social construction"<sup>45</sup>. Wright's choice

to pass as a country star during the 1990s puts her in the position of thwarting established tradition, but Wright's sexuality is itself an indicator of the constructed nature, and, indeed, the fragility of identity. Tuttle concludes that Wright's career might never return to its former glory because of her coming out, but her public admission is the first of its kind, and she provides a pathway for others to follow.

Maxine Grossman, crossing the heavy religious presence in the South and in Southern music with country music's blindness toward the LGBTQ community, describes, in "Jesus, Mama, and the Constraints of Salvific Love in Country Music" (2002), the relationship between Christian salvation and country music. She describes how certain themes – such as patriotism and sincerity – are routine components of country music, but that newer social and moral paradigms have entered the genre covertly, and remain hidden under the guise of an art form resistant to change<sup>46</sup>. Grossman goes on to show that country music reacts to changes in societal norms, but these reactions are subtle. Classic country music lyrics, for example, reinforce familial norms<sup>47</sup>, and Grossman makes the case that, through pronoun alteration, gay and lesbian people have adapted country music lyrics to themselves. She also attributes this adaptation to the increasing urbanization of country music during the 1990s, led by figures such as Garth Brooks and Shania Twain. While many modern country songs have intentionally ambiguous lyrics in order to appeal to the largest audience, including the LGBTQ community, the artists who perform those songs, such as Brooks, stand firmly "tolerant" of but otherwise apathetic to their non-heterosexual audience<sup>48</sup>. This echoes the treatment of Wright, and it reinforces any suspicion of the uneasiness of country music to come to an acceptance of modern gender norms.

In *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (2016), Charles Hughes looks at the intersection of race music and country music during the early and middle

20<sup>th</sup> Century. Referencing the work of Sam Phillips, Hughes describes a “southern sound” that blends country and R&B, but cannot be strictly defined by either genre. Hughes describes Nashville (country) and Memphis (rock n’ roll) as being pitted against each other, both of them vying for audience supremacy. Hughes highlights the troubled relationships between white promoters and businessmen who primarily saw African-American performers as a means of financial gain<sup>49</sup>. Hughes’ contribution, although narrowly focused on a specific time and place, is to examine the diverse and complex relationship between white and black performers, promoters, and the various musical styles they brought together.

In “Country Music and the Souls of White Folk” (2009), Erich Nunn looks at how racialized musical forms encode cultural norms of whiteness and blackness. The genres he discusses (particularly blues and country) themselves aren’t racial, but because they have been performed largely on racial lines, the inference naturally follows that the musical motivations are also racial. For example, he states that Jimmie Rodgers, who professed to be Irish, took on the multi-ethnic traditions of his native Mississippi to the extent that his whiteness could be considered a construct<sup>50</sup>. Blues and country take contributions from both black people and white performers, but those contributions are later hidden under arbitrary racial coding. Nunn’s investigation of race is highly theoretical, obviously playing on the work of Du Bois, while Hughes’ work is historical. Where Nunn is concerned with whiteness and blackness as social constructs, Hughes sees those constructs holistically. Hughes is more concerned with the outcome of the music mixture than its origins.

The sources in this literature review are disparate, but they show that the nostalgic traditions of country music are not fixed. The current (and past) perceptions of country music being pure, fixed, and threaded on a line to pre-history are fictitious constructions meant to serve

the cognitive and emotional needs of listeners. Country fans derive comfort in believing that their genre of preference is more stable and rooted than others. Those beliefs are troubling for non-fans, who see them as barriers. Those barriers also contribute to the outside belief that country music is low-brow and without profundity. Ultimately, however, these sources show that intellectuals are paying attention to a genre, and its listeners, which have both been long misunderstood and largely underserved by scholarship.

#### Notes

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41. Ibid, 218

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43. Tuttle, Tara M. "Queering Country Music Autobiography: Chely Wright's "Like Me" and the Performance of Authenticity" *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (SPRING 2015), pp. 67
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### Reflection

It has been a journey. In the fourteen months since completing the literature review, this project has charted its own course. Fourteen months sounds like an eternity, and it was. This reflection comes after a long, ongoing personal struggle. *Stumbler* is a dark story, and I didn't pull that darkness out of thin air. In spite of myself, I had to learn to write a screenplay, which, as the script indicates, is also an ongoing process. I've also had to draw a clear line between scholarship and creative work, and that has taken some consideration. I first felt that scholarship and creative writing told different kinds of truths, but, while the means are unique, the ends really are the same. Instead of limiting the project, the script opened it up, and it has allowed me

to connect the dots, as it were, from a very narrow literature review to a more thorough consideration of country music, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and creative writing. To get from beginning to end – creation to apocalypse – we must retrace our steps.

Not everything in the literature review went into the script: that was the nature of this process as I moved from the narrow to the broad. However, many of the themes did survive, and I was conscious of them while writing the script. Among them are strained relationships, cinema’s depiction of rural America, the concept of “talk,” and the purity myth of country music (and rural life). It’s also fair to say that the script is speaking to these themes apart from the musical aspect. John, the main character, dreams at night of becoming a musician, and then he tries to follow out that dream. That dream, and the musical aspect that accompanies it, are an aside to the actual conflict. For this reason, I consider this script an anti-musical. To make sense of that term, and to make a long story longer, I roughly compare John’s dream to the MacGuffin, a term brought into consciousness by Alfred Hitchcock. The MacGuffin is the object or vision that the main characters pursue, but which is beside the point of the story:

So the “Macguffin” is the term we use to cover all that sort of thing: to steal plans or documents, or discover a secret, it doesn’t matter what it is. And the logicians are wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a Macguffin, since it’s beside the point. The only thing that really matters is that in the picture the plans, documents, or secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters. To me, the narrator, they’re of no importance whatever.<sup>1</sup>

So, while John isn’t a spy, his dream is the catharsis for his journey: it is the thing that gets him going, not the endgame. John is not going to become a star or any kind of musical performer at all. Like the music, the script is mimetic: it dramatizes the underlying tensions and conflicts of the individuals involved.

Coming back to the themes of the literature review, country music is about more than the music itself; in fact, looking back on the influence of the traditional society on country music, the music is peripheral to the text; this is where the effect of “talk” comes in. As I referenced in the review, talk is the rhetorical device where people in a traditional society reinforce each other’s values. We may think of this in terms of two evangelicals discussing the Bible who have no intention whatsoever of changing their beliefs once the conversation is over. The discourse is used to reinforce beliefs and values, not challenge them. I have involved the concept of talk in my script, largely with the characters of Jessie and Donald, an old couple on a porch who I patterned after the gravediggers in *Hamlet*.

The opening of my literature review wasn’t forgotten: all of the relationships in the story are strained. As country music references poverty, hardship, alcoholism, and failing marriages, *Stumbler* is bed with the dark. Even characters that are not hostile to each other – such as Bunny and Red – are not particularly friendly. Love is scarce in Sandhill, but trust is a higher virtue than love, and it keeps the people together, despite their resistance.

As for Hollywood’s depiction of rural America, referenced above in Barron’s essay, I tried to pattern the town of Sandhill after my own upbringing in a small town. Sandhill is almost cartoonish in its decay, so I am not acting in defense of rural America, but I am not writing about a foreign land, either. I have lived in the belly of the whale, as it were, and I have tried to repaint it, bone to bone and flesh to flesh. The repetition of the traditional society is real, both morally and materially. As beliefs are recycled, so are the economic and physical conditions. Heaven remains the endgame, and the physical procession to glory is not the primary concern. As gospel hymns (black and white) often trend toward leaving the material world in favor of the celestial, we can look back to the misery of pre-FDR rural America to find such sentiments rooted in

reality. As we look around today, those sentiments remain, perhaps as vestigial structures of a past cultural life.

While the literature review still holds a connection with the script, there was a year between the completion of one and the other, so this is an opportunity to more clearly define the trajectory of the project and how the project fits into cultural and American Studies. The music of Townes Van Zandt inspired the script and the main character. It is hard to speak definitively about what genre Van Zandt's music falls into, but outlaw country is probably the most useful category. I contend that outlaw country is a derivative of the counterculture movement, which itself followed the emergence of cultural studies after World War II. Broader definitions of outlaw country might include any country artist who doesn't make the mainstream – ranging in styles from soft acoustic to death metal to rap. However, I'm not as concerned with a strict definition as I am in stabilizing the difference between outlaw country and mainstream country. I also contend that country music as a whole, including outlaw country, is different from folk music, at least the music in the mold of the protestors: Guthrie, Dylan, Seeger, Odetta, Van Ronk, and Baez. To get to that point, we should define a few terms.

First, the advent of ethnomusicology allowed folklorists to record and preserve the music that led to the music revivals of the 1950s and 1960s. It is difficult to define ethnomusicology in strict terms, but roughly speaking, it concerns the music within given cultures.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnomusicology as a field emerged after the invention of the phonograph, which allowed musicologists to go to isolated cultures and record music as it was performed, not as it was written.<sup>3</sup> While musicology is concerned with the analysis of written music, ethnomusicology situates music within a cultural context. The former is more scientific, and the latter fits more comfortably in the humanities. I am not an ethnomusicologist, and that is not the work that I am

doing, but the advent of ethnomusicology was a forerunner to the emergence of cultural studies, of which this project is a part.

The most important ethnomusicologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was Alan Lomax, of the greater Lomax Family. Alan Lomax was largely responsible for the popularization of folk and blues music after World War II, bringing both genres from farms, fields, and prisons to the forefront of the American music tradition. Lomax was deeply interested in the music of the American South, and African-American music in particular.<sup>5</sup> Of his prodigious recordings, writings, and films, of note are his haunting recordings of prisoners at Parchman Farm, Mississippi State Penitentiary. His biographer, John Szwed, says that these recordings were “as close as twentieth-century people were going to come to the sound of slavery.”<sup>6</sup> While Lomax was also part of a massive project to collect primitive music from all six inhabited continents<sup>7</sup>, his contribution to American music, recording it in the raw and goading it into the national discourse, is his legacy.

Even with Lomax’s work, the major music revivals didn’t occur in force until after World War II. After World War II, there was a hardening of patriotism in American society. American Studies was born out of that nationalistic political climate.<sup>8</sup> Initially fostered by monoethnic texts such as Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, American Studies, along with most of the American left, gradually moved into a position of dissensus against blind patriotism. This resistance is the foundation for the counterculture that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, which gave a platform for protest singers to lead the music revivals into worldwide prominence. I should note that the music revivals were not a single event – they shouldn’t be confused with music festivals. The revivals are a generalization for an indefinite process that took several decades. The blues revival, for instance, began with the recordings of blues musicians in the

1920s and 1930s, many of whom, such as Leadbelly and Mississippi John Hurt, were re-recorded after World War II. However, the “revival” also includes the incorporation and centralization of blues in popular music.

As for country music after the war, it of course embraced nationalism and took on the side of conservatism. The “Atomic Music” essay in the literature review highlights the divergent paths taken by country and folk. The conservative and repetitious nature of country music was institutionalized, and country music was consolidated in Nashville by the 1960s, leading to the “Nashville Sound.”<sup>9</sup> Some performers, such as Buck Owens, pushed back against the Nashville Sound, which had shed the rawness of earlier honky-tonk performers in favor of smoother, more consistent, and more profitable sounds. The most notable resister, however, was Willie Nelson, a singer-songwriter who achieved moderate success under the Nashville Sound in the 1960s, but rebranded himself as an “outlaw” during the 1970s and helped to make Austin, Texas the center of the outlaw movement.<sup>10</sup> Unlike most outlaw country performers, Nelson achieved and maintained dramatic stardom; this is due largely to his ability to perform polished arrangements of hundreds of songs in multiple genres, ranging from jazz standards to gospel hymns to mainstream country. In other words, Nelson branded himself as an outlaw, but his resistance to the system is primarily limited to his image.

The circle of musicians from which Townes Van Zandt emerged included Guy Clark, Blaze Foley, John Prine, Lucinda Williams, Lyle Lovett, Steve Earle, Rex Bell, Mickey White, and Rodney Crowell. The notability of the members of the circle ranges from Grammy Awards to obscurity, but most have achieved more success through songwriting than through performing. In the context of my creative vision, these are the minstrels who, to paraphrase Van Zandt

himself, sang for the sake of the song. Many of them embodied the life of the counterculture, dispensing chances of more success in order to live the lives of gypsies.

Van Zandt suffered from bipolar disorder, which was compounded by heavy drug and alcohol use.<sup>11</sup> Many of his songs, while deeply poetic, involve dark, oppressive lyrics that were far out of the mainstream of popular music. One example is from his macabre ballad of homelessness, “Marie”:

*Marie didn't wake up this morning,  
She didn't even try.  
She just rolled over and went to Heaven,  
My little boy safe inside.  
I laid them in the sun where somebody'd find them,  
Caught a Chesapeake on the fly.  
Marie will know I'm headed South  
So's to meet me by and by.*

Van Zandt never achieved mainstream success as a performer, largely due to the nature of his music and lyrics, but also because wealth and fame weren't his primary interests. He wrote about themes such as dying young, depression, drug use, and lost love – all of which he faced repeatedly throughout his adult life. As the above lyrics indicate, he had a dark vision of life. He saw his demise as inevitable, and his songs usually embraced his destiny instead of challenging it.

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### Synopsis

When told that he is terminally ill after a life of alcoholism and drug use, John Foley has bizarre, recurring dreams involving Curtis, an old black man whom he has never met, who tells John to come back to his hometown in Sandhill to play music. Even though he has no musical training, John takes the dreams seriously and makes plans to leave, even digging out an old guitar that he cannot play. Maria, John's wife, scolds him for bringing up the possibility of leaving. She is a stern and serious person, but she takes care of John at a great emotional cost, and she struggles to keep herself together. As John's physical health fluctuates, his mental state is also unpredictable.

After one particularly bad night of coughing and vomiting, Maria embraces John, and he assures her that he won't leave. The next morning, she waits on him as he packs his truck and leaves. His sudden turn jars her. Somewhere down the road, John crashes his truck. A boy named

Steven passes by and offers to help him, but John, in terrible condition, gives him twenty dollars and a gas can and sends him away to get gas for the truck. When Steven returns with a policeman, John's truck is gone.

While John continues to have unusual interactions on his way to Sandhill, Maria prepares to follow after him. After an unhelpful meeting with Matthew, the keeper of her church, Maria breaks into a box of John's pills and tries to kill herself. She wakes up the next morning to the ringing of a call from John asking for money. He coldly shuns her when she informs him of her suicide attempt. Still sick from the pills, but determined to save John, she soon leaves in pursuit of him.

Sandhill is a run-down rural town, dying of rust and depopulation. When John finally arrives, he goes into a dollar store, passes out, and wakes up on an emergency room bed. Doctor Bridges forwardly and unironically reminds John that he is sick, and that he should go home. John leaves the hospital, but not Sandhill.

Mr. Davis owns the doughnut factory in Sandhill. It is the primary economic engine of the town, and the dry, unappetizing doughnuts crop up throughout the story. Red, who has recently found his calling as a hitman, falsely interviews for a job with Mr. Davis. Sometime later, Mr. Davis is gunned down by two of Red's goons while shopping for fish at a pet store. Bunny, the sheriff of Sandhill, doesn't show any concern at the crime scene. Throughout the sequence of events in Sandhill, an old couple named Donald and Jessie comment on the story from their front porch. Despite their backwardness, they seem to know more about what is going on than all of the citizens of Sandhill together.

John meets a little girl named Minnie in a ruined park featuring statues of the twelve gods of Olympus. Ruth, Minnie's mother, is a prostitute. Like most of the people he meets on the way, Ruth doesn't remember John. She talks down to him and leads Minnie away.

John meets up with Harold, the owner of the bar in town. Harold is one of the few people who remembers John, and he is surprised when John informs him that John wants to play music. Reluctantly, Harold gives in.

Thereafter, Red and Bunny sit together in Bunny's house. Amid their strange conversation, it becomes apparent that they are working together. Bunny informs Red that she wants John killed because John killed her dog twenty years ago. She also reveals why John left town: a false rumor about inappropriate contact with one of his female students.

When John plays his turn at the bar – poorly as expected – Maria walks into the bar to watch him. The only other woman in the bar is Ruth. John notices Maria, drops his set, and goes to her car with her. He agrees to go home if he can finish his set, which she obliges. Red's goons park their cars and run into the bar carrying guns. From Maria's perspective, it's not clear what happens inside the bar. John walks out and falls on his face.

John is in the hospital, alive but in serious condition. Doctor Bridges and his nurses joke about John's condition. Maria is harassed on the highway by a black sedan. It appears that the sedan causes an accident.

The final scene shows the main characters encircled around a grave. Minnie stands between Maria and John, crying. The grave is for her mother, Ruth, who was the lone casualty of the shooting. As the small crowd disperses from the graveside, John sees the real Curtis sitting against the hood of Maria's car. Curtis tells John that he did, in fact, ask him to come back to

Sandhill so he could teach John to play the guitar. Curtis is John's old friend, and John had forgotten about the phone call. Bunny and Red walk up to John, Maria, Minnie, and Curtis. They tell John that Minnie isn't wanted in Sandhill, and Red pulls a gun on John after John tries to hit him. When Bunny makes a racial slur toward Curtis, Curtis pulls a shotgun out of his coat and shoots Red and Bunny dead. The final scenes are a solemn montage of Jessie's passing, Matthew's simplicity, and the doleful exterior of the doughnut factory.

### **Meta-Analysis**

Admittedly, it's hard to analyze my own story, but hopefully this meta-analysis (which is as far from the scientific definition as possible) will clear up some of the unintended confusion that this story will surely produce.

### **Act I**

Act I goes from the beginning of the script through the time that John leaves Maria. I tried to set a parallel structure between Maria and John as they move through the story and ultimately back to each other. Maria and John have competing desires that I tried to weigh equally. However, John's exit at this point (on page 23) makes him the central character. It is his dreams that force the action.

Maria's Native American ethnicity comes up repeatedly as several characters refer to her as a Mexican. The ignorance of the cast on her race is casual – while offensive to Maria, it is not quite an ethnic slur. Nonetheless, it lends to their backwardness, and insidiously speaks to their views on other ethnic groups.

My intention was to make every character in the story unstable in some way. Maria, who is a financially stable nursing home administrator, takes on the role of John's caretaker. She is stoic and proud in front of John and the rest of the cast, but on the inside she burns. John himself is not as quiet about his instability. His obsession with his dreams, his recurring alcoholism and drug use, and his lack of respect toward Maria are all products of his mental and physical decline. She endures because she understands his shortcomings, but also because she can't make it on her own. Despite their jabs at each other and John's blatant disrespect, they love each other. Though, as I tried to paint the entire story, their love is deeper than the bloodstain on its surface. Its roots betray its outward appearance.

John's turn at the end of the act is sudden and deliberate. It's not clear whether he forgets his vow from the night before to stay with Maria, or if he was just lying to her. Maria's melancholy reaction to his departure anticipates her upcoming suicide attempt. John's exit is quick and sudden, and might not fit his physical condition, but I allow for some fluctuation of the severity of his illness for the sake of pushing the story forward. Also, his sudden improvement matches the sudden movement in the story – to the end of the act – so his condition is represented mimetically.

## **Act II**

Act II moves between John's departure and Bunny's request for Red to kill John. Bunny's revelation about John is the beginning of the Act III, as the characters and their intentions are aligned for the final sequence. During Act II, John and Maria's journey to Sandhill is paralleled. John's struggles are between him and a town that doesn't want him. Maria struggles with the effects of her suicide attempt.

Maria's suicide attempt is a foil to her stoic character. Except for this moment in the story, she barely flinches. So, if I could only give her one dark moment to show her inner turmoil, it had to be something heavy, like passing out with wet pill residue on her face. As much as she has to deal with the attempt the rest of the story, it is used as a revelation to the audience. Maria's turmoil is not news to her.

The only characters in Act I were Maria and John, but as Act II bursts into Sandhill, the rest of the cast comes on board quickly. Among them are Bunny, Red, Minnie, Ruth, Harold, and Donald and Jessie.

Bunny is counter to her name: she is mean, corrupt, and powerful. As with the other characters, her character is more ironic than nuanced. She is openly a monster, and she laughs about it. She also speaks to the conservative commitment to law enforcement. She has been in power for over twenty years because the citizens choose her ruthlessness despite her corruption.

Red would be more defined in a longer (120 page) script, but here he serves as an amateur (though successful) hitman with a mysterious past. His character is rather flat, like Bunny, but I think that flat characters have their place. In fact, character development doesn't always make for a better story. People who have personality flaws in real life tend to keep them, so I emphasize the flaws in my characters throughout the story.

Minnie's name is taken from Minerva, the Roman equivalent of Athena. Her first appearance comes while standing under a statue of Athena, so I hope that suggestion was obvious enough. She is wise for an eight-year-old girl, but she is caught up in troubled times. The decaying statues of Greek gods in the park are roughly representative of the cast, so their purpose is deliberate, but I'll leave direct pairings to interpretation.

My favorite scenes in the story are the two that involve Minnie. Of all the violence and darkness in Sandhill, Minnie is the only one who is innocent. I didn't create a sage character, but Minnie is close. She represents wisdom and righteousness in a place where both are peddled fraudulently. When she tells John that "Everyone has to die sometime," she understands death in a fundamental way that the rest of the cast has forgotten. While the rest of the cast is in a state of chaos, she calmly faces eternity as it encloses around the town.

Donald and Jessie are the chorus. They have a limited role in the actual movement of the story, but they seem to know everything that goes on in Sandhill, mysteriously so. They portray the self-powered gossip that winds through small towns. They are my hillbilly rendition of the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. They add mystery to the story; it is not clear how they get their knowledge, but the setting makes it feasible for them to know as much as they do.

Harold acts as John's caretaker in Sandhill. He gives John a chance to live out his night dreams in Act III, but the tepid nature of the bar and the entire scenario is intended to be ironic to John's purpose: John is essentially just doing an open mic performance to a few drunken men. Musicals generally offer the music as a kind of saving grace, but John's music doesn't save anyone.

John moves as a vagabond throughout most of Act II. He is comfortable in a state of transience. As I said, it was difficult to maintain the focus on his illness and still allow him to move as freely as I wanted. But as he tells Maria, Sandhill has given him back part of his life.

### **ACT III**

The crisis comes in Act III when the Goons raid the bar. I intended the action in this scene to be hidden from view to A) get Maria's perspective and B) to hide the fact that Ruth is

the one killed and the way in which that occurs. Ruth has only one other scene, and her only lines are insults toward John, so she was a natural fit to substitute for John in death. Given the dark nature of the story, killing John was an option, but he is terminally ill anyway, so it would serve no dramatic purpose.

The sequence of John in the hospital surrounded by incompetent and uncaring staff and Maria being chased down on the highway are meant to create tension in the final scene. We can see that John and Maria are alive because they stand the circle, but we don't know who the funeral is for until Justin makes the announcement. Ruth receives a faux ceremony, which doesn't negatively affect anyone except Minnie. However, placing this burden on a little girl – even if her mother was a prostitute – creates a contrast to the rest of the scene. Minnie is also going home with John and Maria. I don't suggest that John will survive his sickness, but Minnie holds the love that Maria needs and that John can't provide.

The emergence of a real Curtis at the end legitimizes John's journey and his unstable mental health. John was right all along, but he didn't know why himself. He chased down a distortion, and it found him in its final form. I suppose Curtis could be construed as part of a dream or a vision, but he is perfectly real in this scene, and he indeed shoots Bunny and Red dead with a shotgun. This scene is not meant to offer a resolution except that the villains are dead. The protagonists are not saved; that sense of uncertainty lingers on in the final montage.

## **Part II: *Stumbler***

Stumbler

Written by

Mark Green

FADE IN.

INT. A BATHROOM - DAY

The bathroom is small, old, and tidy.

JOHN (50), his face full of pockmarks and scars, stares into his bathroom mirror with shaving cream on his face. His black hair reaches nearly to his shoulders.

He stares into his reflection blankly, holding a straight-razor at his waist.

A bottle of unopened rum sits on the edge of the sink.

Attempting to shave with a shaky hand, John cuts his throat, feels around for the blood, notices it in the mirror, and then starts to moan in pain.

MARIA (45), his wife, Native American, well-groomed and well-dressed, knocks on the door.

MARIA

Are you ok?

JOHN

Fine.

John attempts to put the razor on the sink and open the mirror, but he knocks the bottle of rum off in the process. It SHATTERS on the bathroom floor.

Maria opens the unlocked door and sees John sitting with his head in his hands in the middle of the glass, blood, and rum.

She takes a towel from a rack, wipes the shaving cream off of John's face, and uses the other end of the towel to soak up the blood.

MARIA

Go on. I'll take care of you in a minute.

John doesn't move.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Go on.

She pulls John up by the arm, and he reluctantly leaves and walks toward the kitchen, stumbling along with the towel held tightly to his neck. Maria cleans up the mess.

INT. JOHN AND MARIA'S KITCHEN - DAY

John sits at the kitchen table with a large bandage under his chin. Maria sets down a plate of eggs and gravy in front of him.

A calendar behind him is turned to October 2018.

MARIA  
That enough gravy?

John eats.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
That enough gravy? I've got more in  
the pot.

JOHN  
(With his mouth full)  
It's fine.

MARIA  
You've got to stop using that  
straight-razor. You're going to cut  
your head off.

John winces and grabs at his wound before speaking.

JOHN  
It's all I've ever used. All my  
daddy used.

MARIA  
Your daddy is dead. He isn't  
watching you from beyond the grave.

John reaches for a slice of bread from a loaf.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
That bread is old. It's probably  
stale.

John pulls a piece of bread out with a small blue spot on  
it.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
John

John eats.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
Don't eat that.

Maria reaches for the remaining bread in his hand, but he shoves it into his mouth.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
You're going to get sick.

JOHN  
Look at me and tell me I'm going to die from eating stale bread.

MARIA  
Have some sense.

JOHN  
I run out of that a while ago.

Maria grabs John's plate from under his hands and takes it to the sink. He grabs at it, but she pulls it away.

JOHN (CONT'D)  
I'm going home to Sandhill.

MARIA  
What for?

JOHN  
To become a musician.

MARIA  
John. I've always been honest with you. You can't sing anymore. What's got into you?

JOHN  
I had a dream about it. There was an old black man sitting on a throne with a guitar beside him. He said his name was Curtis. I haven't ever seen him before, I don't think. But he seems familiar.

MARIA  
No shit you haven't seen him before. He's not real.

JOHN  
How do you define what's real?

MARIA  
I don't know. I don't think about those things. But the black man on a throne in your dream isn't real.

JOHN

I'm not passing judgment on it. I might have seen him somewhere. But anyway, he told me to pick up my guitar and go home. He told me to go play. Said I had music in my heart.

MARIA

And you believed him?

JOHN

You know it is when you have one of those dreams. You wake up and you can't tell whether it's real or not. I used to have dreams about ugly girls in school and fall in love with them when I woke up. I couldn't get them out of my head.

MARIA

I know what you mean, but it's a dream. It's not real. It's not worth your thoughts.

JOHN

He's right though. I never lived out my dream - the real-life one. Besides, we can't live on my disability check and your job at the nursing home forever.

MARIA

Yes, we can. I'm the administrator. We've got money. You running off is going to cause more problems than it's going to help.

JOHN

I wanted to play country music since I was a little kid.

MARIA

This window is closed, and I hate to tell you, but it was never really open to begin with. Shut this down. I don't want to hear any more about it.

JOHN

I'm going ahead.

MARIA  
Go back to bed.

JOHN  
I can't sleep with this thing on my  
neck.

Maria checks his bandage.

MARIA  
It's tight and clean. I can't do it  
any better.

John tugs at it, and Maria stops him.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
Leave it alone before you bleed to  
death.

JOHN  
What's that to you?

MARIA  
Don't start that.

INT. A SHED - DAY

John fumbles through a shed turning over old clothes and junk, some of it falling down on top of him. After some searching, he sees a guitar sitting in the back. He struggles to reach it.

EXT. JOHN'S AND MARIA'S FRONT PORCH - DAY

John sits on the porch, trying to string his guitar. Maria watches him through the screen door.

John pulls at the strings on both ends of the guitar, trying to manipulate them off of the guitar by force. He jerks at one of the strings until it breaks and flies into his face. He leans back and covers his eye. Maria attends to him.

MARIA  
Let me see.

She pulls his hand away.

JOHN  
It's alright.

Maria grabs John by the face and checks his eye again. She pulls at his eyelids and looks into his cornea, then lets go of his face.

MARIA

Put that damn guitar away. You don't even know what you're doing.

JOHN

It needs new strings.

MARIA

Have you got new strings?

JOHN

I think there are some in the shed somewhere. But I got to get these off first so the neck can rest.

MARIA

I don't think that's exactly how it works. But I know that you don't just pull them off with your hands. You're going to blind yourself.

Maria inspects the pegs at the end of the guitar neck. She twists a peg one way until a string chirps, then twists it back the other way until the string goes completely slack.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Go get me a pair of pliers.

JOHN

Just let me do it. It's my guitar. I've got to learn.

John goes into the house and returns with a pair of needle-nose pliers.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Are these good enough?

MARIA

Yea. They'll do.

Maria pulls at the pin holding down the slack string, but it's set deep, and it won't move.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Have you or anyone else ever changed these strings before?

JOHN

Not that I know of.

Sweat drips down Maria's forehead, and she wipes it before it reaches her eyes. With a twist of the peg and a forceful pull, she jerks the pin out of the hole and pulls the string out behind it.

MARIA

There. Did you see how I did that?  
Don't twist the tuning peg the  
wrong way, or the string will  
break. It has to go slack before  
you can pull it out. You hear?

John sits looking the other way with a cigarette in his mouth.

MARIA (CONT'D)

You hear?

John turns around and looks at the guitar.

JOHN

Yea. I got it.

John takes the guitar and the pliers into his lap, inspects both ends of the guitar, and turns the pegs to make the strings slack.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Reckon it don't matter if I get  
them all slack first or not.

MARIA

No. I don't think so. You need to  
get out of this heat. Go inside  
where it's cool.

Maria goes back inside.

John SINGS along with one chord, struggling to sing the melody at the chord changes.

JOHN

*I'll be gone tomorrow  
Unless my plans break down.  
If I stay, so will sorrow;  
So don't bow your head  
When morning comes around.*

EXT. PORCH - DAY

John is sweating profusely, and his hands shake. He sets down the guitar on the porch next to a dusty, unopened pack of strings and the pins, which roll around freely.

John lights a cigarette, puts in his mouth, and walks out toward the field in front of the house.

Beyond the house is a field of sand and rocks: ruined farmland. The treeline goes all around the field in an even circle, but at a distance of a mile from the house.

EXT. FIELD - CONTINUOUS

John walks into the distance, slowly going out of sight of the house, smoking his cigarette as he goes. He comes across a dead rattlesnake.

The rattlesnake is rolled over on its back with its tongue out, dead, but of no obvious cause. John pokes at it with his boot. It flinches, and John jumps back.

John walks toward the treeline. The house is barely visible in the background. The treeline is fronted by thick brush and briars. John has trouble finding a way in, and walks around the circle, finding an opening.

INT. WOODS - DAY

John walks into the woods, briars tearing at his shirt as he goes. He comes to a stream and sits down on a rock. As he goes for another cigarette, he starts to shake and convulse. He vomits and passes out.

INT. JOHN AND MARIA'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

John wakes up on his couch. Maria sits in a chair across from him.

MARIA

How are you going to make that long trip if you can't walk a mile to the woods?

John motions for something to drink.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I'm not giving you any liquor.

JOHN

Water.

Maria goes to the kitchen. John reaches underneath the couch for a bottle of whiskey, but finds none.

Maria speaks from the kitchen.

MARIA

Don't go looking for it. It's gone.

She comes back with a glass of water. Tasting it, he gets nauseous and tries to put it down. His hands shake, and Maria saves the glass from tipping over as it reaches the floor.

She sits down across from him.

JOHN

I had another dream.

Maria sighs.

MARIA

It don't mean anything - but go ahead.

JOHN

Well - I was standing at the end of a long hallway, and there was my guitar on a pedestal in front of me. There was a light shining down on it.

MARIA

How did you know it was yours?

JOHN

I know my own guitar.

MARIA

Oh. Go ahead.

JOHN

So I reached out to grab it, and I put the strap around my shoulder -

MARIA

It doesn't have a strap.

JOHN

Don't matter. I put the strap around my shoulder, and the guitar melted in my hands.

MARIA  
Was Curtis there?

JOHN  
You believe in him now?

MARIA  
No. But it's just a dream.

JOHN  
No. He wasn't there. Maybe he had  
somewhere else to be. Maybe he was  
occupying somebody else's mind  
today.

MARIA  
I'm sure he's a busy man, John.

JOHN  
You're not taking me seriously.

MARIA  
I'm happy to listen to your  
stories. I know they mean a lot to  
you.

INT. A ROOM - DAY

Maria goes into a room at the back of the house. An old upright piano sits against the wall.

The walls are full of pictures of John with friends and family.

Maria sits down at the piano and holds her hands passively on the keys. Finally, she HITS THE KEYS and SINGS. Her playing is basic, but she has a clear and pleasant voice.

MARIA  
*I will look into the sky  
And listen for the sound  
Of your wings dripping down,  
Of your soul falling down  
To the cold, cold ground.  
Icarus, you flew too high,  
And I can't catch you now.*

*So I wait for your voice in the air.  
To Surround - and take me to despair -  
Until we meet again.*

John continues to sleep in the other room.

EXT. OUTSIDE A MEDICAL BUILDING - DAY

Maria and John arrive in a pickup truck. As they stop, John opens the door and tries to get out. Maria hurries around to help him. He stumbles forward with her assistance, and then waves her away, gaining control of himself.

JOHN  
I know what he's going to tell me.

MARIA  
How do you figure?

JOHN  
It's the same every time. I'm  
dying. There's no more good news. I  
don't trust that damn chink doctor  
no way

MARIA  
Well, you have to get checked out  
anyway. You never know what he will  
say. He's as good as anybody else.  
Better, probably. You know Asians  
are smarter. You can't criticize  
them for that.

JOHN  
Expect so.

INT. A DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Maria sits in a chair, and John sits on the edge of the bed in the office.

John pulls a cigarette out of his pocket, and Maria leaps up from her chair.

MARIA  
God damn it! Put that away!

John angrily tosses the cigarette into the trash bin on the other side of the room.

JOHN

Don't see what the problem is at this point.

MARIA

The problem is that you can't smoke in a god damn doctor's office. They'll kick us out of here.

JOHN

My point exactly.

DOCTOR CHANG enters the room. He is a short, fat Chinese man in his early 30s.

DOCTOR CHANG

Hi, John.

JOHN

Hey.

DOCTOR CHANG

What can I do for you today?

JOHN

Well, you told me I was dying the last time I come in here. Maybe you could tell me I'm alright this time.

DOCTOR CHANG

(To Maria) Are you his wife? I didn't see you last time.

MARIA

Yes. He insisted on coming alone. I didn't know how bad it was, of course. He didn't tell me everything - just that he was dying.

Doctor Change pokes around on John's midsection, and John recoils.

DOCTOR CHANG

Well, it's more complicated than that, but yes.

(MORE)

DOCTOR CHANG (CONT'D)

The emphysema and cirrhosis can be managed for now, but John took some cognitive tests when he was here, and his mental condition is that of a much older man. This could be due to his previous drug and alcohol addiction-

MARIA

There's no previous. He's still addicted.

John throws his hand up at Maria.

DOCTOR CHANG

He told me he had been clean for five years. Well - anyway - it could be due to drugs and alcohol, or it could be early-onset dementia, or one could have caused the other. It's hard to tell without further tests, but that part is irreversible. His heart is also weak - I suspect from cocaine and tobacco use -

JOHN

Cocaine for sure.

DOCTOR CHANG

That's probably the worst of it. Any strenuous activity could kill him on the spot.

(To John) If you get clean today and settle down, there's no timetable. You could live for years this way. That's if you drop everything right now, including tobacco.

JOHN

I haven't smoked in weeks.

DOCTOR CHANG

The smell on your clothes says otherwise. If you don't turn everything around, I expect one of these issues to take you within six months, probably sooner. Sorry to put it that way. That's just real life.

JOHN  
No, no. I understand.

DOCTOR CHANG  
(To Maria) Does he have someone to  
take care of him?

MARIA  
I do. I'm a registered nurse. I run  
the Everlasting Arms assisted-  
living facility out behind the  
Piggly Wiggly. They told me to take  
all the time I need to take care of  
him.

DOCTOR CHANG  
He's going to need help  
indefinitely. You may want to  
consider a nurse so that you can  
get back to work. It's a lot to  
take on.

MARIA  
I've made a life taking care of  
people in worse shape than him, but  
I'll think about it.

INT. JOHN AND MARIA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Maria watches a film in Spanish. John lies asleep on the  
couch. He wakes when a gun goes off in the film.

JOHN  
What time is it?

MARIA  
We have a clock.

John struggles to get up, and Maria helps him sit straight.

JOHN  
There ain't no clock in here.

Maria points behind him. It is midnight.

MARIA  
Go back to sleep.

JOHN  
Talk to me a while.

Maria looks pensively back at the film on television, reaches  
for the remote, and shuts it off.

MARIA  
What do you want to talk about?

JOHN  
I don't know.

John gradually gets up and walks to the kitchen. He digs through the refrigerator. Finding nothing to his liking, he sits down at the table.

INT. JOHN AND MARIA'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

John sits at the table. The table is empty except for a tall glass with two inches of water in it. John picks up the glass, smells the water, and drinks it.

Maria sits down at the table with him.

MARIA  
That glass has been sitting there for three days.

JOHN  
Whose water was it three days ago?

MARIA  
Yours.

JOHN  
Well, then fair enough. Just reclaiming what was mine to begin with.

Maria puts the glass in the sink and turns to John.

MARIA  
Are you alright with dying?

JOHN  
That's some kind of question. Are you?

MARIA  
I'm not dying.

JOHN  
I didn't know you were an exception to the rule. But, yeah. I'm alright with it. As long as I can get to Sandhill first.

MARIA

You've got to let that go. It doesn't even make any sense.

A cat meows at the door. John gets up to check.

JOHN

Oh hell.

MARIA

What is it?

JOHN

The sumbitch has rabies!

MARIA

No. Scott? No. He doesn't have rabies. He just wants in.

John leaves the kitchen and returns with a double-barreled shotgun.

MARIA (CONT'D)

John!

Maria grabs the barrel of the shotgun and tries to wrestle it away.

JOHN

You want it too?

MARIA

Don't shoot that cat.

Maria stands in the doorway between John and the cat. John points the barrel of the shotgun over her shoulder and FIRES as the cat scurries away. Maria falls down at the sound.

The cat, unscathed, scurries up the only tree in the yard, a willow. John steps over Maria, goes to the tree, points the gun into the darkness above, and fires one shot.

EXT. THE FRONT YARD - DAY

Maria walks at sunrise, following a blood trail that leads into a brush pile. She kicks at the pile, and it shakes from within.

The cat emerges with a dead pheasant in its mouth, limping severely on its back leg, but otherwise unharmed from the gunshot.

MARIA

Scott!

The cat drops the pheasant and looks up at Maria. It foams at the mouth. She steps back, and it lurches for her as much as it can, then falls flat. A GUNSHOT rings out and blows the cat into the brush.

John stands behind Maria with the smoking gun in his hands. He wears a baseball cap.

JOHN

I tried to tell you. I ain't crazy.  
I bet he's killed every one of the  
chickens. Just look yonder.

MARIA

We don't own any chickens, and you  
just about blew my god damned foot  
off.

John sets his gun upright on the ground, takes his hat off, and scratches his forehead.

JOHN

Huh. Well, I'll be damned.

Maria walks up to John.

MARIA

Give me that damn gun and get back  
in the house.

Maria snatches the gun out of John's hands. She opens the breach, pulls out the shell in the other barrel, and puts it in her pocket.

John follows Maria as she walks back toward the house. He speaks to her from behind.

JOHN

I saved you from getting bit. There  
wasn't any saving that cat. You  
would have took it in and spent  
money trying to help it. I did you  
a favor.

Maria doesn't turn around.

MARIA

You ain't doing anybody a favor  
firing a shotgun at their feet. Get  
back inside before you have a heart  
attack in this heat.

INT. THE LIVING ROOM - DAY

John sits next to Maria on the couch. She watches television, and he holds a leather-bound book in his lap.

JOHN  
I'm going to need money for gas.

MARIA  
For what?

JOHN  
Sandhill.

MARIA  
You ain't going nowhere. Just read  
your book.

JOHN  
Done read it twice.

Maria picks the book up and inspects it. There isn't any writing on the cover or the binding.

MARIA  
What is it?

JOHN  
Aristotle.

MARIA  
Which one?

JOHN  
There wasn't but one Aristotle,  
unless you're talking about that  
one that married Jackie Kennedy. If  
you are, it ain't him.

MARIA  
I meant which book.

JOHN  
It's the collected works.

MARIA  
Is there a section in there that  
says how stupid it is to make a  
three hundred mile drive while in  
hospice care because you had a  
weird dream?

JOHN  
I ain't in hospice.

MARIA

You want me to call them?

JOHN

Just hush. You should have seen that dream. He was sitting on a throne, and fire crackled all from behind him. It was like he was controlling it. He wore one of those hats like Frank Sinatra wore -

MARIA

A fedora.

JOHN

Yeah. That's it. Well, he had on a fedora and dark sunglasses. He was real in charge, you know? He had guitars on both sides of him, and they were controlling the fire, too. I could feel it.

MARIA

This isn't the same dream you were describing before.

JOHN

I've had it more than once. They all kind of run together.

MARIA

You thought about seeing a psychiatrist?

JOHN

Not for a weird dream. Can you help me tune my guitar?

MARIA

You get the strings straightened out?

JOHN

I think so. Sounds bad right now.

MARIA

It'll get better.

INT. PIANO ROOM - DAY

John sits at the end of the piano bench, next to Maria, with the guitar in his lap. He holds a piece of paper in his hand.

JOHN  
Last one. E.

Maria hits the middle E on the piano.

John turns the corresponding peg in the wrong direction. Maria quickly grabs his hand and turns it in the other direction.

JOHN (CONT'D)  
It's hard to tell which way to turn them.

As the string comes into range of tune, Maria hits the piano key, and John hits the string until they vibrate together. He strums the guitar and smiles at hearing it in tune.

JOHN (CONT'D)  
That wasn't so hard.

MARIA  
Yeah. Only took half an hour.

JOHN  
I'll get better. Let's play a song.

MARIA  
You don't even know any chords.

JOHN  
That don't matter. I'll pick the notes.

MARIA  
You don't know the notes either.

JOHN  
You play and I'll sing, then.

MARIA  
Did that man tell you that you could sing, too?

JOHN  
He didn't tell me that I couldn't. Do you know any Cherokee songs?

MARIA  
That stuff is mostly just a bunch people banging on drums and screaming. I don't know how to play that on the piano. You know any music except country and folk?

JOHN  
Gospel music.

MARIA  
You don't believe in God.

JOHN  
I used to.

Maria PLAYS an arrangement of a gospel hymn. John joins in.  
They SING.

INT. JOHN AND MARIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

John and Maria lie next to each other in bed. Maria looks up at the ceiling. John sleeps.

John awakens and erupts into a fit of coughing, falling from the bed, and stumbling toward the bathroom.

INT. A BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

John leans over the toilet and coughs up phlegm and blood. He coughs violently until he vomits, then falls back on the floor, gasping for breath. Vomit and blood lie on and around the toilet.

Maria enters with an inhaler. She shakes it and puts it on his mouth. He refuses it.

MARIA  
Open your mouth.

Maria punches him in the side. As he opens his mouth in response, she sticks the inhaler in and presses the button stiffly three times.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
You need your Oxygen.

JOHN  
I'm.

Beat.

JOHN (CONT'D)  
I'm alright. Go back to bed.

Maria leaves while John stares up at the ceiling. She returns with a pack of cigarettes and throws them on his chest.

MARIA

Smoke them while you can, or eat them. I don't care.

John blindly reaches for the pack of cigarettes and hands them back to Maria.

JOHN

I'm done. I swear.

She reaches in her pocket and pulls out a small plastic bag containing white powder and throws it at him.

MARIA

This too.

JOHN

That ain't what's making me cough.

MARIA

And the liquor stashed under the porch.

John sits up. Maria braces him.

JOHN

You've got to let me enjoy something. I am terminal, you know.

MARIA

I'll kill you myself before the drugs and alcohol if you keep on.

JOHN

I'll do better. I promise.

MARIA

And drop the dream talk. You're going to see a counselor.

John nods.

JOHN

Okay.

She hugs him, ignoring the blood and vomit on her nightgown. She cries. John is stoic.

EXT. OUTSIDE JOHN AND MARIA'S HOUSE - DAY

John stumbles out of the house toward his truck, parked beneath the willow, carrying a gym bag with him and throwing it in the back of the truck. He puts his guitar in the front seat.

John's chin is now covered by a large adhesive bandage.

Maria watches through the screen door. John leaves the truck and reenters the house.

INT. HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

MARIA

You're not going to make it far out there.

JOHN

I need more of those band-aids.

MARIA

That's the last one. I was going to town to get some today. I still can, if you'll wait.

JOHN

I'll just have to make due. I'm going to need some money.

MARIA

I'm not giving you any money. Sooner you run out, sooner you'll be back.

JOHN

Don't do me this way.

MARIA

You're one to talk.

JOHN

You don't even believe me, do you? You think it's all a joke?

MARIA

Yes, John. It's all a joke. I can't begin to take you seriously. You're a dying man setting off on a long trip because you had a weird dream. But if your mind is set on going, I can't stop the body from following.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

I never tied you down, and I won't start now. Do you have any plans of coming back?

JOHN

Maybe when things are better.

John kisses Maria and walks out the door. She walks away, toward the back of the house.

A spider descends in front of the kitchen window. It plays with its web, then drops out of sight.

INT/EXT JOHN'S TRUCK - DAY

John attempts to start the truck. First failing, he gets angry, then he starts the truck without difficulty. It begins to rain, and the truck only has one windshield wiper.

The single wiper moves back and forth, but doesn't do much to keep the rain off the windshield. John focuses through the haze and drives away.

John drives on a country road at a high rate of speed, his hands shaking on the steering wheel. The truck kicks up rocks and mud as it swerves from one side of the road to the other.

The truck catches a bare strip on the side of the road and swerves into the open grass, then crashes into a shallow trough in a field.

John is unconscious. His head lies on the steering wheel. His forehead is bloody and bruised.

EXT. THE ACCIDENT SCENE - NIGHT

STEVEN (8), a skinny, ragged boy, walks up next to John's truck. It is just past dusk. John's head is still resting on the steering wheel. His guitar is in the passenger-side floorboard, cracked into several pieces.

STEVEN

Mister? Are you dead?

John remains unconscious.

STEVEN (CONT'D)

If you're dead, I'm gonna go find the police.

Steven reaches into the truck and shakes John.

STEVEN (CONT'D)

Wake up!

Steven gets worried. John awakens, then falls over into the seat next to him.

STEVEN (CONT'D)

Hey. Ain't you married to that Mexican woman?

John struggles to speak.

JOHN

She's Cherokee.

STEVEN

I reckon them's all the same. Hell man. I thought you was dead.

JOHN

I wish I was.

STEVEN

We gotta get you to a hospital.

John remains lying down, but notices the blood on his forehead.

JOHN

How's my truck?

STEVEN

It's fine, I guess, but you're a mess. The front is dented up a little bit. It's mostly stuck in this hole.

JOHN

Help me get it out.

STEVEN

I can't do that. I'm just a kid. Don't reckon nobody could pull that thing out.

John wrangles himself back up behind the steering wheel and tries to start the truck, but it's out of gas. He pushes open the door, falls out the truck, and stumbles toward the tailgate.

He rummages through the back of the truck - filled with tools and junk - until he finds two plastic gas cans. He sets his hand on the first one, and then chooses the other. He hands the can to Steven and gives him twenty dollars.

JOHN

Go to a store and put five dollars of gas in this. You can keep the rest of the money.

STEVEN

I ain't never pumped gas before.

John flinches, and the wound on his forehead opens again. Blood streams down his face.

JOHN

It ain't hard. Ask somebody if you can't figure it out yourself.

STEVEN

You ought to clean your forehead up. You're bleeding.

JOHN

I know it. Go on.

Steven takes off his shirt, rips it up, and helps John tie it around John's head.

Steven picks up the gas can and starts down the road.

STEVEN

It's a couple miles. It's going to take me a while.

JOHN

I ain't in a hurry. Don't tell anybody that I'm here.

EXT. A RURAL CONVENIENT STORE - NIGHT

Steven walks up to the front door with the gas can in hand, not wearing a shirt. Kyle (20), the clerk, is closing the door as Steven approaches.

Kyle is very tall, and thin.

STEVEN

I need some gas.

KYLE

We're closed. Why ain't you got a shirt on? It's cold out here. What do you need gas for, boy?

STEVEN

I just need some gas.

KYLE

Who are you getting gas for?

STEVEN

I just need some. I tried the pump, but it says I have to pay first.

KYLE

You can't be getting gas for yourself. Hell, it says on the pump that you got to be sixteen to pump gas. You got a go-kart or something? Why can't it wait until tomorrow?

STEVEN

Well, if you want to know, it's for my daddy. He's going to get his dialysis in the morning, and there's no gas in the car.

KYLE

I know your daddy. He left town before you were born. Ain't seen him since.

STEVEN

Oh well, he come back, and his kidneys are all messed up. That's what he told mama.

KYLE

Wait here.

Kyle goes back in to the store and picks up the phone. Steven goes over to a gas pump and punches the buttons, but it doesn't do anything.

He notices Kyle talking on the phone, and sets the gas can down and walks away from the store. He doesn't get far down the road before he is met by a policeman, Doug (30).

DOUG

What are you doing out here? Get in.

Steven reluctantly gets in front seat of the police car.

DOUG (CONT'D)

What's going on, boy?

Steven doesn't respond.

DOUG (CONT'D)  
Can't you talk?

STEVEN  
I wasn't supposed to tell.

DOUG  
How about I take you to jail?

Steven tugs on the passenger side door, but it's locked.

STEVEN  
You can't take me to jail if I  
ain't done nothing.

DOUG  
You better start explaining, boy.

EXT. THE ACCIDENT SCENE - NIGHT

Doug tells Steven to stay in the car, and gets out. He finds an imprint in the grass and shines on it with his flashlight. John and the truck are gone. The shattered guitar sits in the grass.

Doug turns back to Steven, who is sitting in the car quietly.

DOUG  
Did you see what he looked like?

STEVEN  
He's that rough-looking man that's  
married to that Mexican woman.

DOUG  
John? I think she's an Indian.  
Pretty good little piece to be  
messing around with him.

STEVEN  
I can't remember.

DOUG  
How you reckon he got this truck  
out of here by himself? Was there  
somebody with him?

STEVEN  
Just him. I guess he had somewhere  
to be. You going to get him?

DOUG  
No need, I reckon.

STEVEN

Can you take me home?

DOUG

I ain't a taxi service.

STEVEN

Well let me out of here then.

Doug unlocks the door from the outside. Steven gets out, glares at Doug, and walks up the road.

Doug shines his light on the grass again, then turns the flashlight off, throwing the field into darkness.

INT. JOHN'S TRUCK - NIGHT

John drives at a high rate of speed down the interstate. The interior light is on as he rummages through a small pile of cassette tapes in the passenger seat, holding his other hand on the wheel.

Steven's shirt, blood-soaked, is still wrapped around his head. The bandage is gone from under his chin; a small wound remains.

An empty gas canister sits in the passenger-side floorboard.

John puts in the cassette. Obscure country music PLAYS for a few seconds, and then the tape gets caught in the player. Distortion BLARES through the speakers.

JOHN

Goddamn thing.

John beats his fist against the radio. The cassette goes silent, and the radio spits it out.

John pulls the cassette out, and it is followed by a stream of tape still stuck in the player.

John looks up and sees that he is driving almost on the left shoulder of the road. An oncoming car swerves to the right to avoid the truck. John yanks at the tape, and it gets tangled in his right arm.

John puts the cassette down, slows down the truck, and moves back onto the right side of the road.

John pulls onto the right shoulder and stops. He is pale and shaking. He tries to carefully untangle the tape from his arm, but it is too twisted.

He reaches in the console between the seats and pulls out a handful of pills and swallows them dry. He turns off the interior light.

EXT. THE ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The taillights of the car grow dim in the distance, and then the car stops in the middle of the road, turns around, and accelerates toward the truck.

A sports car stops a hundred feet behind the truck. A SHORT MAN, less than five feet tall, gets out with a pistol in his hand. He walks toward the truck carefully, aiming the pistol at the back window.

INT. TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

John reaches behind the seat, with the tape still twisted around his arm, and pulls out his shotgun. Noticing the Short Man walking toward him, he again tries to carefully untangle the tape from his arm.

John readies the shotgun in his hands.

The Short Man walks up to the window with the pistol pointed down. His head barely comes above the window.

SHORT MAN

You got a problem man?

JOHN

No. Have you?

SHORT MAN

Yeah. You just about killed me.

JOHN

Who did?

SHORT MAN

You did! I just said it.

JOHN

Sorry. I can't -

SHORT MAN

What are you on, man?

JOHN

I just got distracted. I'm not trying to hurt anyone. I promise.

John's pills kick in. His hands stop shaking, his eyes grow wide, and he grips the shotgun tightly.

John raises the shotgun above the window and points it in the Short Man's face.

SHORT MAN  
Jesus Christ.

JOHN  
Who?

SHORT MAN  
I'm alright, man. I'm good. You're  
free to go.

The Short Man backs away.

EXT. ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The Short Man walks backward to his car. John gets out of the truck and points the shotgun at him as he goes.

The Short Man gets in his car and speeds away.

John checks the breech of the gun. It is empty.

JOHN  
Damn bitch.

John goes into a coughing fit on the side of the road. He stumbles toward the truck, gets in, and falls asleep on his pile of cassette tapes.

EXT. A HUMANE SOCIETY BUILDING - DAY

John pulls up to the building. He sees PAUL (50) through a chain-link fence, carrying a black garbage bag to a shed beside the building.

JOHN  
Hey. You remember me?

PAUL  
Uh. I can't say I do.

Paul goes inside the building and returns momentarily without the garbage bag. He leans up against the fence, facing John.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I don't remember seeing you around here. You got some business with me?

JOHN

Not especially. We went to high school together. John Foley. Remember now?

PAUL

Not in the least. You want something?

JOHN

Well - I'm going home to Sandhill, and they've rerouted all the highways. I'm kind of lost.

Paul scratches his head and thinks for a minute.

PAUL

Well, John - or Mr. Foley -

JOHN

John.

PAUL

John. This road right out here is twenty-one. They merged it with twenty about five years ago. They said the traffic died out and they didn't need both highways.

JOHN

Well that don't make a lot of sense.

PAUL

This kind of country ain't long for the world. How you been, John?

JOHN

I thought you didn't know me?

PAUL

I expect I know you well enough to talk to you. It's getting on about lunch time. We got some sandwiches and such inside. You want one?

JOHN

I appreciate that, but I've got to be going on. I've got to get to Sandhill today.

PAUL

Where you been since you left?

JOHN

Been at Robinsville with my wife for the last twenty years.

PAUL

You pulling out on her?

JOHN

In a matter of speaking. She didn't do nothing wrong. I've got something to take care of back home.

PAUL

I heard that. Well, back to your point: Sandhill is about eighty miles straight-on down that road right there. Twenty-one. You'll see the sign.

JOHN

What town am I in now?

PAUL

I reckon you ain't. This is just a stretch of highway. I live on Frog Mountain. It's about twelve miles back that way, down nineteen a little bit and off a side-road.

JOHN

I know where that is. I used to hunt for snakes there when I was little.

PAUL

Eighty miles from home?

JOHN

Best as I can remember.

There is an awkward and extended silence between them.

PAUL

Well - I guess I'll be getting on to lunch. There's a lot to do around here. The worst part of the day is over, though.

Paul looks pensively toward the shed.

JOHN

A man's got to make a living somehow.

PAUL

That's strictly the truth.

John waves, walks back to his truck, and gets inside. He sticks his head out the window and calls for Paul as Paul is walking away.

JOHN

Which way did you say it was?

Paul points to the east.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Got it.

As Paul looks on, standing next to the back door of the building, John struggles to start his truck. Just as Paul takes a step toward the truck, John starts the truck and rushes away.

INT. JOHN'S TRUCK - DAY

John speeds down a desolate highway. He goes some distance without passing another car, then he sees a car stalled on the side of the road.

EXT. THE SIDE OF THE ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The car is old and beat-up, and its owner, HORACE (65), stands next to it, looking on in frustration. Horace's wife, BRENDA (65), sits in the car with her arms crossed.

John parks his truck on the other side of the road, exits, and starts across the empty highway.

JOHN

Got car trouble?

John walks closer, carefully identifying the man.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Horace?

Horace is covered in grease, and he is aggravated.

HORACE

Yes sir? How do you know me?

JOHN

I used to work for you at the chicken plant when I got out of school.

HORACE

I've had a thousand people work for me. I don't remember all of them. You look like some kind drug addict.

BRENDA

(To John) His mind isn't right. Just go on. We'll manage.

HORACE

I wouldn't have you touch my car anyway.

BRENDA

Just let him be. Go.

Horace rushes John, showing dexterity for a man his age, but John steps aside and gets back into the truck.

HORACE

You leave my wife alone.

John gasps for air and grasps for his keys.

JOHN

I don't even know your wife! I ain't been here in twenty years!

HORACE

Get on. I guess you're headed to Sandhill. You won't find it the way you left it.

JOHN

Hopefully it's not full of people like you.

HORACE

There are a thousand of us.

John drives away.

BRENDA

He was going to help us. How do you think we're going to get home? I got to have my insulin directly.

HORACE

We ain't taking no help from him. Somebody will pass by.

BRENDA

Ain't nobody passed by in over thirty minutes except him.

INT. A CHURCH - DAY

Morning light streams in through the windows. The church is simple and unadorned. A cross draped by a scarlet shawl hangs on the wall behind the pulpit. The light from the window misses the cross.

Maria sits on the front pew, looking toward the altar. She is dressed formally and wears all black. Her demeanor is stoic.

A RUSTLING sound is heard outside. The light in the window flits. Maria clears her throat. The door behind her opens. Light floods the chapel.

MATTHEW, the church keeper, emerges from the door. He is an old, bent man dressed in dirty work clothes. He holds a shovel in one hand. He walks up the aisle and sits down next to Maria.

MATTHEW

Sister Maria.

MARIA

Matthew.

MATTHEW

How are you?

MARIA

John left.

MATTHEW

Where did he go?

MARIA

Sandhill.

MATTHEW  
What's there?

MARIA  
You wouldn't believe it.

MATTHEW  
I've seen a lot in my time. Go ahead.

MARIA  
He's losing his mind, and he wants to be a musician.

MATTHEW  
He can sing alright. I've heard him at church. Are you going after him?

MARIA  
He hasn't been to church in ten years. His voice has changed a little. He doesn't know anything about music. It's just something he's got in his head, and I can't stop him. I don't know if I'm going or not. It's his damn mind. I never understood it.

The shovel is balanced on the pew next to Matthew. It falls to the floor, giving Matthew and Maria a shudder. The remaining dirt on the end of the shovel trickles onto the carpet around their feet.

MATTHEW  
Don't swear in the Lord's house. The Lord will make a way.

MARIA  
Make a way for what?

MATTHEW  
To bring him back.

MARIA  
I don't think God has much use for him.

MATTHEW  
God has a plan for everybody. Why are you sitting here, anyway? You didn't come here to see me.

MARIA

I came to meet the preacher. He said that he would meet me here to talk. I've been here an hour.

MATTHEW

You know how he is. He's got all kinds of things to do. Maybe it was meant for you to just sit here and spend an hour with the Lord.

MARIA

I think an hour is enough.

MATTHEW

Well, Mar, put it in the Lord's hands. He'll take care of you. Glory to his name!

MARIA

Take care, Matthew.

Matthew nods and walks toward the door, dragging the shovel along the carpet, unaware of the dirt trail behind him. Maria sits back on the front pew and stares ahead. Matthew shuts the door, and the light is blocked again.

Maria stands and moves in front of the window and flips her hand through the motes of dust dancing in the light. They move for a moment, then they settle. She stares out the window.

INT. MARIA AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Maria sits on the edge of the bed, looking out the window. The wind blows through the trees, bending the willow as it catches the light from the yard light outside.

She holds her and John's wedding picture in her hands. The phone rings. She turns to look at it, but does not answer.

She walks to the dresser and rifles through the drawers until she finds a small box with a padlock on it. She picks it up, examines it, takes it to the bed.

She sits down on the bed with the box, pulling and jerking the padlock to bend the latch on the box. She gives up, leaves the room and returns with a hammer.

She pounds the box and the padlock violently, but neither are affected.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maria rummages through the drawer under the sink, noticing the glass CRUNCHING under her feet, until she finds a bobby pin.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maria picks at the lock until she grows frustrated. Finally, she jams the pin into the lock with one certain thrust, and the lock springs open.

The box is full of drugs: packets of marijuana, packets of cocaine, medicine bottles with the labels ripped off, and loose pills of different shapes and sizes.

She opens several of the bottles. She finds one that takes her interest, and throws the rest back in the box and shuts the lid.

She locks the box again and carefully replaces it into its position in the dresser drawer.

She sits back down on the bed with the lone bottle and dumps thirty pills onto the bed.

She stares at the pills for a moment, scoops them up into her hands, and tries to swallow them dry. She swallows some of the pills, but gags on the rest and spits out the moist pills back onto the bed.

MARIA

Might as well do this right.

Maria scoops up the wet pills and walks to kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

As she reaches for a cup, she falls. She struggles to get back up and reach the cup to the faucet, but she drops the cup and leaves the water running.

Lying on the floor, barely conscious, she grasps for the pills, but they lie on the floor in a goopy heap, and her hand sifts through them as if they were made of mud.

She paints them across her face and falls unconscious.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Maria opens her eyes in a pool of vomit and pills.

The phone on the kitchen table rings, and she crawls across the floor to answer it. John is on the other end.

MARIA

Hello?

JOHN

Are you alright?

MARIA

No. Are you coming home?

JOHN

No. I just called to tell you I was ok. I'm in Sandhill. Well, almost. I'm in Spontane. I'm feeling a lot better. Maybe it's the air here. I'm about to check into a motel, but I don't have the money to stay here long. A few days. I need you to wire some.

Maria tries to speak, but gags.

MARIA

I don't. I can't.

JOHN

What?

MARIA

I can't send you any money.

JOHN

Just work with me.

MARIA

I need you to come home. I'm not doing well. I tried to kill myself.

JOHN

How?

MARIA

Your pills.

JOHN

I'll think about it, but I need some money for now. I've got to find my way out here. Don't do nothing stupid. Just wire it to the Western Union in Spontane. There's only one. Send about a thousand.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

I busted my guitar, and I'll need a new one.

MARIA

God damn you.

John hangs up the phone. Maria throws it across the room and lies back down on the floor.

INT. A MOTEL OFFICE - DAY

John walks into a motel office, the shirt still wrapped around his head, and his clothes disheveled.

He waves away the smell of incense burning on the counter. No one stands at the counter, but a sleepy Arabic man, AHMED, emerges when John rings the bell.

JOHN

I need a room.

AHMED

You got money?

JOHN

A little. How much you need?

AHMED

The boiler room starts at fifty-dollars a night.

JOHN

The what?

AHMED

It's a room in the basement with a cot and no windows. It's always over a hundred degrees down there. Looks like that's all you can afford.

JOHN

Don't sell me short, rag. I'm worth more than I look.

AHMED

Regular rooms start at eighty-dollars a night.

JOHN

Sounds good.

INT. A MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

John sits on the side of a twin bed. An empty vodka bottle sits beside the bed. He drunkenly SINGS an Irish folk song.

JOHN

*I've been a wild rover for many a  
year.  
And I've spent all my money on  
whiskey and beer.  
And now I'm returning with gold in  
great store.  
And I never will play the wild  
rover no more.*

Someone knocks on the door. John is annoyed. He cautiously answers the door. AHMED stands at the door in his bath robe.

AHMED

I'm sorry.

JOHN

For what?

AHMED

The room is eighty dollars, and I gave you back thirty dollars out of the hundred you gave me.

JOHN

So?

AHMED

I need ten dollars back.

John is further annoyed, but reaches in his pocket and gives Ahmed the money.

AHMED (CONT'D)

Have a good night, sir.

INT. A MOTEL OFFICE - DAY

John stands in front of a desk. He digs through his pocket and pulls out a handful of small bills. As the money comes out of his pocket, the bag of marijuana falls to the floor.

As he tries to pick it up, Ahmed comes around the corner behind the desk. John straightens and leaves the pouch on the ground.

AHMED

Sorry. We do not have anything cheaper. You'll have to pay the \$80 for today if you want to stay here.

JOHN

I ain't got it.

AHMED

Sorry sir.

JOHN

Do you smoke?

AHMED

Sir?

JOHN

Do you smoke?

AHMED

Smoke?

JOHN

Pot.

AHMED

Yes. But you don't have enough to keep the room.

JOHN

How much is enough?

Ahmed reaches below the counter and SLAMS a kilo of marijuana on the counter.

AHMED

You don't have enough.

John walks out of the motel.

INT. MARIA'S FRONT YARD - DAY

Maria, groggy, stumbles out to her car and puts a suitcase in the trunk. She gets in and drives away. LEONARD, the mailman, stands at her mailbox as she passes.

LEONARD

Hi!

MARIA

Not today, Leonard.

LEONARD

I was just saying hello. You want your mail? Looks pretty important.

MARIA

No. I don't know if I'm coming back.

LEONARD

Should I forward everything somewhere else?

MARIA

Don't bother.

LEONARD

You look real nice, Marie.

MARIA

My name - thank you - Leonard.

Maria drives away.

INT. A DINER - DAY

Maria sits pensively in a corner booth. She is very tired. She looks over a breakfast menu. LISA (24), a waitress, comes to take her order.

LISA

How are you today?

MARIA

I don't know. How are you?

LISA

Honey, let me tell you. I've been all over this country looking for the right thing, and I ain't never found it. It's just going in circles, you know what I mean?

MARIA

No. Not really. Are you talking about men?

Lisa sits down at the booth, in front of Maria.

LISA

Men, but everybody, mostly. Just trying to get right, and I can't. Lisa can't get right. What's your name?

MARIA

Maria.

LISA

That's an awful pretty name.

MARIA

Thank you.

LISA

Like I was saying, just round and round. Life don't ever seem to make any sense.

MARIA

No, it sure doesn't.

LISA

Did you want something to eat?

MARIA

To eat?

LISA

To eat.

Lisa stands up and readies her note pad.

MARIA

I'll have a cinnamon roll and a cup of coffee.

LISA

We don't have cinammon rolls, sug.

Maria points to the menu.

MARIA

It says it right here.

Lisa bends down and looks at the menu.

LISA

Sure does. You are right. But we don't have any made is what I meant. They're just Pillsbury rolls. You could make them at home.

MARIA

I'm far from home. That's not an option. I can wait if you'll bake some.

LISA

Would you like something else?

MARIA

You can't bake a cinnamon roll?

LISA

I'm not the cook, sugar. He generally puts out the rolls when he takes a notion. I don't mess with him. We do have doughnuts, but they're a little dry. They come from that factory up in Sandhill. Everybody up there just loves them, but they're as dry as the dust.

MARIA

I'm not in Sandhill?

LISA

No, sug. It's on up the road a while.

MARIA

Where am I?

LISA

Just regular unincorporated.

MARIA

Sounds like a nice place to live. I'll have two eggs and a cup of coffee.

LISA

We don't have any coffee made.

MARIA

Can you make some?

LISA

Of course. It'll be just a minute.

Before Lisa leaves, Maria points to her nametag.

MARIA

Are you?

Lisa looks around, confused.

LISA  
I don't know what you're talking  
about, but no, sugar, I'm not.  
We'll just go with that.

Maria's fatigue is apparent. Her words are slurred, and her  
movement is uncoordinated.

LISA (CONT'D)  
You ain't making no sense. Boy, you  
need that coffee rough.

MARIA  
Yeah. Bring it black.

LISA  
How black do you want it? Some  
people like it black all the way -  
you know - ground real dark. Like  
the color of a black crayon. Some  
people like it brownish-black. Like  
a brownish-black crayon, I guess.

Lisa laughs.

MARIA  
Just - any kind of black that you  
have. Surprise me.

LISA  
You are my kind of customer, sug.

Lisa brings Maria eggs and coffee and leaves the ticket on  
the table without saying anything.

JUSTIN (45), the chef, comes to Maria's table and stands  
stoically over her. He is a very tall and large man.

MARIA  
Sir?

He stands over her.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
Yes? Hello? What do you want?

JUSTIN  
Do you like your food?

MARIA

It's alright. It's just eggs and coffee, so I guess it's hard to mess up.

JUSTIN

Not as hard as you think. I came by because I saw you was being rough with my waitress.

MARIA

She didn't seem to have a problem with me at all. Did she tell you that I was being rough?

JUSTIN

We try to treat everybody real good here.

MARIA

I'm glad of that.

Maria nervously reaches for her purse.

JUSTIN

Real good.

Justin wipes his hands on his greasy apron.

MARIA

Okay.

Maria pulls a five dollar bill out of her pocket and leaves it on the table. She starts to get up to leave.

JUSTIN

You're gonna have to pay for your meal.

MARIA

I did. Right there. There's a dollar's worth of tip there.

JUSTIN

You gonna have to pay for it up front.

MARIA

What difference does it make?

Justin rubs his dirty apron again and scratches himself.

JUSTIN

We like tips to be put in a jar so our waitresses can divide them up even.

MARIA

It's a dollar. I don't care. Just take the money and divide it yourself.

JUSTIN

I see what Lisa was talking about. You must be from way on out.

Maria forces her way up and past Justin, who continues standing in the same place. He stares at her as she walks out the door.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

Don't come back here if you can't do right!

MARIA

Don't worry.

Lisa walks into the dining area.

JUSTIN

She ain't right.

LISA

No. She ain't up to no good. She's on something. She's real strange.

INT. THE ROAD TO SANDHILL - DAY

John crosses the city limit sign for Sandhill. The wound on his head remains, but it is uncovered.

JOHN

About goddamn time.

Sandhill is a run-down town in the shape of a circle. It slopes up gently, and in the center of town is a grim-looking doughnut factory which billows black smoke from its chimney.

Rusty trailers and shotgun houses line both sides of the road, leading up to a main street of minor businesses of no economic significance.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Home sweet home.

John parks his truck out back of a dollar store on main street, gets out, and looks around. John is pale, and he walks gingerly around the building and goes into the store.

He enters the store and clutches a shelf of chocolate bars to brace himself from falling.

RODNEY (40) the clerk, sees John falling and rushes over to help him.

RODNEY  
Are you all right?

JOHN  
No. I think - I think.

John gasps for breath.

RODNEY  
Well, I guess I should call 911.

JOHN  
Don't. I can't right now. Just get me some water. You got any of them inhalers here?

RODNEY  
No, I reckon you'll have to go to the drug store for that. You should keep one on you. My grandpa is like that. I try to tell him. Have you got the asthma?

JOHN  
No. I ain't got asthma. Just let me lay down somewhere. I'll be alright.

RODNEY  
I can't let you lay here in the floor.

JOHN  
Help me back to my truck then.

Rodney looks around.

RODNEY  
I'm going to call 911. Just hold on.

As Rodney heads toward the phone, John makes his way out the door and to his truck. The tires on the truck have been removed, and it sits on blocks.

JOHN  
Goddamn bastards.

John grips the door of the truck, and passes out.

INT. A HOSPITAL TRIAGE ROOM - DAY

John wakes up in an emergency room bed, alone. DOCTOR BRIDGES (73) walks in holding a clipboard. He is a stern old man.

DOCTOR BRIDGES  
Looks like you're real sick.

JOHN  
I noticed.

DOCTOR BRIDGES  
We couldn't identify you or any next of kin, so we didn't know what to do. It's a good thing you didn't die.

JOHN  
I'd have preferred it, just nearly.

DOCTOR BRIDGES  
Now, don't talk that way. We've given you some medicine to stabilize your breathing. Do you have anywhere to stay? Are you homeless?

JOHN  
No. I ain't homeless. I live here in Sandhill. Well, kind of. I've been off visiting somewhere else. I'm back now.

DOCTOR BRIDGES  
Wife kicked you out?

JOHN  
No.

DOCTOR BRIDGES  
Do you have any insurance?

JOHN  
I've got something, but my wife keeps the card. I don't know nothing about it, myself.

DOCTOR BRIDGES  
How do we get a hold of her?

JOHN  
You don't.

DOCTOR BRIDGES  
We've done what we can for you here. You're free to change back into your clothes and head out. I'd advise you to go home and patch things up - for the sake of your health, if nothing else. We did wash your clothes for you.

Doctor Bridges reaches for a bag containing John's clothes and hands them to John.

JOHN  
I appreciate that.

DOCTOR BRIDGES  
Don't stay around too long.

JOHN  
I hear you.

INT. AN OFFICE WAITING ROOM - DAY

RED (45) sits on a couch waiting for a job interview. He has long red hair and a long red beard. He is dressed in an ill-fitting suit and worn-out dress shoes.

Red tugs at his sleeves to keep them from draping over his hands, but they fall back down each at each attempt. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out from his coat pocket, and shoves them back in when JANET (38), a secretary, comes out to greet him.

JANET  
Are you Red?

RED  
Yes Ma'am.

JANET  
Mr. Davis is ready to see you.

Red gets up from the couch, tugging at his suit as he walks toward the office.

INT. AN OFFICE - DAY

The office is decorated with obscure sports memorabilia and old pictures of people working on a line making doughnuts. The desk is strewn with papers and files of uncertain origin. A dry doughnut sits on a napkin.

Mr. Davis (45) sits down at his desk, clears a space for his hands to rest, and welcomes Red into the office.

MR. DAVIS

What can we do for you today?

RED

I'm here to apply for the job.

MR. DAVIS

The maintenance supervisor?

RED

Yes sir. Did you know I was coming?

MR. DAVIS

Yes, of course. We're very busy today. It's hard to keep up with the goings on around here. We're just about too big for our britches.

RED

I reckon that's true for just about everybody.

Mr. Davis squints his eyes.

MR. DAVIS

What qualifications do you bring to the job, Red?

RED

I worked maintenance on helicopters in the Marines, and I was head of maintenance in a carpet factory for seventeen years.

MR. DAVIS

Is that so?

RED

Yessir.

MR. DAVIS

I was a Marine, too.

RED  
Semper Fi.

MR. DAVIS  
Did you serve overseas?

RED  
No. Mostly stayed at home.

MR. DAVIS  
Ever been to Elmendorf?

RED  
Been by there.

MR. DAVIS  
That's a long way from here.

RED  
It's a pretty good drive.

Mr. Davis sits back in his chair and taps his head.

MR. DAVIS  
They give you the drug test yet?

RED  
Nah. They didn't say nothing about  
it. Reckon I'll have to get hired  
first.

MR. DAVIS  
Did you read the application?

RED  
Front to back.

MR. DAVIS  
Well, you're supposed to go to a  
lab and get the drug test yourself,  
and then bring an official copy of  
the report with you.

RED  
Must have missed that.

MR. DAVIS  
And Elmendorf is an Air Force base  
in Alaska.

RED  
Maybe.

MR. DAVIS

You got any proof about working  
maintenance in that carpet factory?  
What was the brand of carpet they  
make there?

RED

Sir?

MR. DAVIS

What's the name of the company?

RED

Oh. Teacup. Teacup Carpet.

MR. DAVIS

What the hell?

RED

Oh, yes sir. I rose from the  
bottom. You can call them and ask

MR. DAVIS

Are you lying to me?

RED

No sir. Don't expect I am.

MR. DAVIS

I'm afraid we don't tolerate liars  
in this factory.

Mr. Davis pushes a button on his phone.

MR. DAVIS (CONT'D)

Janet!

JANET

Yes?

MR. DAVIS

Get this fool out of here.

RED

You probably should watch your  
mouth.

MR. DAVIS

Don't threaten me.

RED

I don't make threats. That's not my  
line of work.

(MORE)

RED (CONT'D)

I have spoken to your wife, though,  
and it looks like you might be in  
some trouble. You reckon?

MR. DAVIS

What?

Janet comes to the door and beckons for Red to leave.

MR. DAVIS (CONT'D)

Don't ever come near this facility  
again.

Red gives a salute and walks away.

EXT. A FRONT PORCH - DAY

DONALD (75) and JESSIE (75), his wife, sit on the porch.  
Donald is fat, wears overalls, and has a balding fade  
haircut. Jessie wears a worn dress and wears a perm in her  
hair.

Donald rocks in his chair aimlessly. Jessie shucks beans.

Behind their house, the doughnut factory stands ominously in  
the distance. Black smoke billows from it.

DONALD

Heard there's a stranger in town.

JESSIE

I know you heard. I told you.

DONALD

I don't remember a great deal,  
mama. Why did you say he was here?

JESSIE

Don't nobody know. Nobody has ever  
seen him before.

DONALD

I don't expect he'll be here too  
long. Strangers don't hang around  
here.

JESSIE

No they don't.

DONALD

Where did you hear about him?

JESSIE  
Down at the store.

DONALD  
You been flirting with that bag boy  
again? He don't want your old ass.

JESSIE  
I'll talk to whoever I want to. And  
no. Don't reckon I did. I saw  
Caroline down there. You know she  
likes to talk.

DONALD  
Lord I do. How long's he been here?

JESSIE  
Day or two. Caroline didn't know  
nothing about him neither. You know  
how she is. When she's got  
something to tell, she's just got  
to tell it.

DONALD  
Natural fact.

JESSIE  
Wonder what he's up to?

DONALD  
Don't reckon it matters. Matters  
that he's here and that's about the  
nature of it. Heard Leon's been  
running around with Caroline.

JESSIE  
How long?

DONALD  
Off and on.

JESSIE  
I hope they ain't shacking up. Lord  
help us in these end times.

DONALD  
Amen.

INT. A PET SHOP - DAY

Mr. Davis, confused, stands in the fish section and talks on  
the phone with his wife, CINDY (50). He is the only customer  
in the store. The SHOP OWNER is in a back room.

MR. DAVIS  
What kind of fish did he want?

CINDY  
He don't know what it's called. He just said it was blue and stripey.

MR. DAVIS  
They don't have that here.

CINDY  
Don't come back without it.

MR. DAVIS  
Have you spoken to a man named Red?

CINDY  
No. I'm talking to you.

Cindy hangs up the phone. Mr. Davis continues perusing the limited section of fish for sale.

MR. DAVIS  
Fucking whore.

Outside the store, a GOON opens Mr. Davis' gas tank and pours a bottle of water in it, doing it slowly so that Mr. Davis will notice. Mr. Davis sees him and hurries outside.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE PET SHOP - DAY

MR. DAVIS  
Whoa, whoa. What the hell are you doing?

Mr. Davis reaches for a concealed pistol at his waist, but he is shot through the lung before he draws.

The GOON throws the bottle at Mr. Davis as he lies choking on his own blood. Goon and GOON TWO jump in a black sedan parked beside the store and drive away. No one witnesses the shooting.

The Shop Owner runs out after the two goons drive away and finds Mr. Davis dead on the sidewalk. He is nauseated at first, then he digs through Mr. Davis's pockets and pulls money out of Mr. Davis's wallet. He calls 911.

The OPERATOR answers, chewing on a dry doughnut and trying to clear her throat.

OPERATOR

911

SHOP OWNER  
There's a man been shot here.

OPERATOR  
Is he ok?

SHOP OWNER  
No Ma'am. He's dead.

The operator goes into a coughing fit.

SHOP OWNER (CONT'D)  
Are you ok?

The operator tries to answer through her coughing.

OPERATOR  
Yessir. Just choking on a doughnut.  
Where are you calling from?

SHOP OWNER  
I own the pet shop. Somebody shot  
him when he went outside.

OPERATOR  
Do you know the man?

SHOP OWNER  
I think it's that man that owned  
the doughnut factory. Mr. Davis.

The operator gulps a soft drink to clear her throat.

OPERATOR  
That don't hurt my feelings none.

SHOP OWNER  
Mine neither, but somebody's got to  
get him off my sidewalk.

OPERATOR  
Our ambulances are out right now,  
but if you're sure he's dead, I  
guess it ain't no hurry.

SHOP OWNER  
Not too bad of a hurry. Ain't much  
for business, but get here when you  
can. Alright if I move him?

OPERATOR  
Better not. The police probably  
want to see him where he fell.

SHOP OWNER  
Alright if I put something over the  
top of him?

OPERATOR  
Might as well.

The operator starts eating her doughnut again.

OPERATOR (CONT'D)  
Take care.

SHOP OWNER  
You too.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE PET SHOP - DAY

BUNNY (60), the sheriff, pulls up to the shop by herself.  
Bunny is a rotund woman with a crew cut and a gravelly,  
smoker's voice.

BUNNY  
You kill him?

SHOP OWNER  
No. Two men came by and gunned him  
down. Must have been that Red,  
reckon?

BUNNY  
I don't know about none of it. This  
town has went to hell. How long has  
he been here?

SHOP OWNER  
A little while.

BUNNY  
Cool weather ain't hurt him none.  
He picked a good time to go.

SHOP OWNER  
That weather don't do much for  
those doughnuts, though.

They share a laugh.

Bunny takes a deep drag from her cigarette and billows a puff  
of smoke in the air, completely obscuring her face.

EXT. A RUINED CITY PARK - DAY

A set of cheaply-made concrete statues stands in a dodecagon in the middle of the park. The statues are of the Twelve Olympians of the Greek pantheon, plus Hades.

Each statue has a plaque beneath it bearing the name of the god represented.

MONTAGE

Obscure country music songs PLAY and switch erratically through radio STATIC during the montage.

A) Hades is in the center, within the dodecagon, rising out of the ground. He faces a space for Apollo at the top of the dodecagon.

B) The space for Apollo is empty except for two concrete feet standing on a concrete platform.

C) Dionysus is to the right of Apollo. Dionysus' arm lies next to his body, clutching a bundle of grapes.

D) Poseidon is to the right of Dionysus. His face is cracked and weathered, and his trident is missing its center point, leaving it in the shape of a U.

E) Hera is to the right of Poseidon. She has a determined scowl on her face, looking straight ahead, and she holds a pomegranate forward in an offering gesture.

F) Hephaestus is to the right of Hera. He holds his hammer high and looks straight down at an empty anvil.

G) Ares is to the right of Hephaestus. He is completely nude, and he is missing his hands and head.

H) Artemis stands at the bottom of the dodecagon, facing the back of Hades and the space for Apollo. She is in perfect condition. She looks on pensively.

I) Hermes stands next to Artemis. A rooster sits on his shoulder, and he points his caduceus skyward. He faces Poseidon.

J) Demeter stands next to Hermes. She stands under a weeping tree, and sap drips on her head and covers her face. She holds her hands to her side. She faces Dionysus.

K) Zeus stands next to Demeter. He holds a broken lightning bolt above his head in a threatening gesture. A piece of rebar sticks out of the bottom of the lightning bolt. He faces Hera.

L) Aphrodite stands next to Zeus. A dove sits on her shoulder, facing her head. She stares into the distance, not looking at any of the other statues, but her body faces Hephaestus.

M) Athena stands between Aphrodite and the space for Apollo. She has been spray-painted in various bright colors. She holds a spear toward Ares with an owl sitting on the tip with its wings outstretched.

The country music becomes overwhelmed with STATIC and shuts off suddenly.

EXT. PARK - CONTINUOUS

John sits on a bench in the circle of the Twelve Olympians.

MINNIE (8) walks by and looks at him. She stands underneath the statue of Athena, bearing a facial resemblance to her. She has short blonde hair, and she wears a dress appropriate for cold weather.

MINNIE

Hi. My name is Minnie.

John hesitates to speak. He starts to stand up, but Minnie sits next to him before he can get away.

MINNIE (CONT'D)

Are you from around here?

JOHN

I'm John. I used to be.

MINNIE

Do you know the lady in the statue?

JOHN

No. Do you?

MINNIE

That's Athena. She's the Goddess of Wisdom. My grandpa made her. Well, he didn't really make her, but he paid the money so someone else could make her. My grandpa is dead now.

JOHN

I'm sorry about your grandpa.

MINNIE

It's ok. Everyone has to go  
sometime.

JOHN

Who told you that?

MINNIE

My mama. Do you have a grandpa?

JOHN

No. He's gone, too. I never met  
him. What happened to that statue?

John points to the feet of Apollo.

MINNIE

I guess he flew away.

RUTH (36), Minnie's mother, comes by and grabs her by the  
arm. Ruth is dressed in a mini-skirt and nylon stockings.

MINNIE (CONT'D)

Hey!

RUTH

We don't talk to people like him.

MINNIE

But he's nice.

JOHN

Ruth? A little cold to be dressed  
like that, ain't it?

RUTH

I don't know you. Don't judge me.

JOHN

You don't remember me when I was  
here? John Foley.

RUTH

No. Not in the slightest. You're  
just some bum.

JOHN

Yeah. I guess I am.

Ruth glares at John and leads Minnie away.

John gets up and walks toward downtown, which is visible in  
the distance.

INT. A DRUG STORE - DAY

John walks into the store. The racks are filled with cheap toys and off-brand candy. The drug store is simple and small. The floor is an olive-colored linoleum from the 1950s.

John walks toward the pharmacy counter. The PHARMACY TECH, a teenage girl, steadies her hand on an emergency button underneath the counter. Her hand shakes next to the button, and she is visibly afraid of John.

PHARMACY TECH

Yes sir?

JOHN

Can I use your phone?

PHARMACY TECH

Sorry. It's for business purposes and emergencies.

JOHN

Well this is an emergency. I ain't got nowhere to live. I need to call a friend.

PHARMACY TECH

I'm sorry sir.

JOHN

What if I buy something?

PHARMACY TECH

It's for business use only.

Her hand wavers next to the button. As John walks up to the counter, she pushes it impulsively.

PHARMACY TECH (CONT'D)

Oh shit.

The Pharmacy Tech becomes anxious and upset, on the verge of crying.

JOHN

Are you ok?

PHARMACY TECH

Oh God.

## INT. THE PHARMACIST'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The Pharmacy Tech runs into the back office, where the PHARMACIST sits at his desk. The Pharmacist is an old, feeble man. He remains seated, unwilling to try to get up from his seat.

PHARMACY TECH

There's a man here who wants to use the phone.

PHARMACIST

Well, let him.

PHARMACY TECH

I can't!

PHARMACIST

Just give him the receiver.

PHARMACY TECH

No! I can't!

The Pharmacist tries to get up, but is unable.

PHARMACIST

Help me up.

PHARMACY TECH

Oh God!

PHARMACIST

I ain't dead. Just help me get up. You need to get on something before they send you to the nervous hospital. I might just pass you a few pills myself if you don't cut it out.

PHARMACY TECH

I pushed the button!

PHARMACIST

What button?

PHARMACY TECH

The emergency button! The cops are coming!

INT. THE DRUG STORE - SAME

John reaches over the counter and picks up the phone receiver. He dials a number. The number comes back as out of service.

JOHN  
God damn it, Harold.

INT. DRUG STORE - SAME

John hangs up the phone, looks around, and browses the shelves. He picks up a pack of cheese crackers, bandages, and a soft drink, and walks out of the drug store.

Sirens blare outside, then dissipate into the distance.

The Pharmacist slowly walks back toward the counter behind the Pharmacy Tech.

PHARMACY TECH  
This button!

She points nervously.

PHARMACIST  
Oh hell. We ain't had that hooked up in ten years. Sheriff Bunny got tired of fooling with it. She said it was out of their budget. Where was this man you was talking about?

The Pharmacy Tech looks around the store.

PHARMACY TECH  
I guess he left. Should we call the police ourselves?

PHARMACIST  
For what?

PHARMACY TECH  
Cause he was intimidating me.

PHARMACIST  
Oh hell. You kids and your liberal society mess. Get your ass back to that counter and sell some pills.

INT. HAROLD'S BAR - NIGHT

Harold's Bar is a dirty old honky tonk. Sawdust lines the floor. The lights are dim.

A VIOLIN PLAYER stands alone on a stage and PLAYS a sad violin solo. There are only a few men sitting at tables paying attention to him, and they are all visibly drunk. They boo.

He ends his solo and steps off the stage with his violin, apparently shaken at the response of the crowd.

MAN IN CROWD

Is this what we pay for open mic?

VIOLIN PLAYER

Fucking drunk.

MAN IN CROWD

Well maybe you need to talk to Wally to put your seeds in the ground, hoss.

The Man in Crowd gets up and starts to dance, then falls to the ground at once. He is dead. A small crowd forms around him. TOMMY (50), the floor manager, cuts in to check on him.

TOMMY

That sad shit killed him. Somebody call a doctor or a funeral home or something. Don't put my name on the arrangements. Get his dead ass off the floor.

A few of the men, including the Violin Player, carry the dead man into a back room and shut the door

TOMMY (CONT'D)

Goddamn it. Don't stick him in the break room.

VIOLIN PLAYER

Where did you want him?

TOMMY

Put him in the closet. I can't have people coming in here seeing a dead body, but I don't want his dead ass all over the break room either.

VIOLIN PLAYER

What difference does it make?  
Nobody else is coming in here  
tonight.

TOMMY

I guess you've never heard of what  
happens to people when they die.  
They let go of all kinds of germs  
and stuff, and their spirit goes  
every which way, and sometimes they  
cause a bunch of trouble later on.  
I don't want all that going on in  
the break room.

VIOLIN PLAYER

So you're worried about the break  
room being haunted? Feels like it  
would liven up the place a little.  
Maybe you could advertise it and  
bring the bar back.

TOMMY

The only thing haunted here is your  
cheap violin, and it needs to be  
excised.

VIOLIN PLAYER

Exorcised.

TOMMY

Same thing. Go home. I'll send you  
a check in a day or two.

A FOOL puts two quarters into the JUKEBOX. The jukebox picks  
up a CD and starts playing a country song, then the CD skips  
on the same line over and over.

JUKEBOX

*He's gone*  
*He's gone*  
*He's gone*  
*He's gone*

TOMMY

Turn that damn thing off!

FOOL (O.S.)

It won't turn off!

TOMMY

Unplug it!

The jukebox continues to skip, and Tommy comes over and rips the plug out of the wall.

INT. HAROLD'S OFFICE - NIGHT

John and HAROLD (70), the owner of the bar, sit across from each other at Harold's desk. A dry doughnut sits on a napkin on Harold's desk, crumbled into several pieces.

HAROLD

It's been a while. You don't look well.

JOHN

I know. I'm not well at all. Nobody else here remembers me.

HAROLD

You're hard to forget. I won't ask what's wrong. Hopefully you get it sorted out. You're the best worker I've ever had here. The place was taking off when you left. Can't say the same for it now. The whole damn town has gone to hell. Why did you come back?

JOHN

I come back to play.

Harold looks surprised.

HAROLD

Play what?

JOHN

Music.

HAROLD

What now?

JOHN

I come to play music. I brought a guitar, but it got broke on the way.

HAROLD

Wait. You - want to play music? You couldn't finger a chord to save your life when you were here.

A hearse pulls behind the office window and shuts off its lights. Two men get out and head for the front door with a stretcher.

JOHN

Looks like you've got some strange business going on here.

Harold leaves briefly and returns.

HAROLD

Hobo son of a bitch died cold as the ass end of hell. His heart must have stopped. Damn drugs. What were we talking about?

JOHN

I want to play music.

HAROLD

Alright. I believe you. Maybe that Mexican wife ran you off, but you were good to me, so I'll give you the doubt, no matter why you're really here. First off, though, you're dirty as a sick roach, and you're going to have to take a bath.

JOHN

She's Cherokee, and it's not her fault. I ain't had nowhere to stay. I ran out of money, and I'm just going from one place to another.

HAROLD

You can stay in the break room. I'd take you home, but my wife wouldn't go for it just yet. I'll get you some clothes. The boys will like to see you again.

JOHN

I've already seen them. They don't remember me.

HAROLD

I guess twenty years is a long time.

JOHN

It's a while.

HAROLD

How good are you with the guitar now?

JOHN

I got down two chords before it broke.

HAROLD

John, I know you're not a musician, but you're going to need to know at least three. You always could sing though. You were pretty good back in the day.

JOHN

Listen to me now.

HAROLD

Yeah. I can hear it. You didn't give up smoking, did you?

JOHN

I added to it.

HAROLD

Are you clean now?

JOHN

Off and on.

HAROLD

I can't let you do anything if you're bringing drugs in here. Bunny has a quota.

JOHN

She's still alive?

HAROLD

She's going to outlive all of us.

JOHN

I'll get clean. But I came to play. Do you have a guitar I can use?

HAROLD

I've got a house full of them. I don't know why you're dead set on this though. You made an awful long trip to do something you have no experience in.

(MORE)

HAROLD (CONT'D)

No less, there's nothing going on here, so you've got your night up there if you want it. If the boys run you off, though, you'll have to take their word. So, don't fool around with them.

JOHN

I'll do the best I can.

INT. MARIA'S CAR - DAY

As Maria drives into Sandhill, open plains give way to thick forest. She drives by the house where Donald and Jessie sit on the porch, and they follow her car with their eyes.

Donald carves a flute, and Jessie shucks beans.

EXT. A FRONT PORCH - DAY

DONALD

She's coming to get him.

JESSIE

Who's coming to get who?

DONALD

I reckon that's John's wife.

JESSIE

John?

DONALD

Stranger in town.

JESSIE

Oh. Done forgot. Maybe she'll get a hold of him and go on.

DONALD

Can't expect a whole heap.

JESSIE

How did you know his name?

DONALD

Word gets around.

JESSIE

Well, I ain't gossiping about nobody.

DONALD  
I ain't either. I'll tell it  
straight to somebody's face or not  
at all.

JESSIE  
Lord, I wish we was all that way.

DONALD  
Lord makes us each a little  
different.

JESSIE  
Good in all of us. Some catch on to  
the good and some don't.

DONALD  
Natural fact.

Donald yawns.

JESSIE  
You need to quit staying up at  
night and watching that late talk  
show mess.

DONALD  
Just mind yourself.

INT./EXT. MARIA'S CAR - DAY

Maria parks in a gravel lot behind the bank in town and goes  
to sleep in her front seat.

INT./EXT. MARIA'S CAR - DAY

A sheriff's deputy, WALLY (55) knocks on her window.

MARIA  
Hi

WALLY  
You got a driver's license?

MARIA  
What?

WALLY  
I need to see your license.

MARIA  
What for?

Wally grows agitated and braces his left hand on his pistol.

WALLY  
Because I asked for it. What are  
you on?

MARIA  
I'm not on anything.

WALLY  
Don't get smart.

Maria reaches into her purse and pulls out her driver's license. Wally looks at it and grunts.

WALLY (CONT'D)  
What are you doing here?

MARIA  
Where?

WALLY  
Here.

MARIA  
Sandhill?

WALLY  
You're in Sandhill, you betcha. I'm  
also asking why you're sleeping in  
your car.

MARIA  
I'd rather not say.

Wally takes the license back to his car and returns shortly thereafter.

WALLY  
Whatever business you got here,  
take care of it and move on, eh?

MARIA  
What's the deal with this town?

WALLY  
We don't like people upsetting  
things. Are you from Mexico?

MARIA  
I'm Cherokee. You want to see my  
tribal citizenship card?

WALLY

A what?

Maria grows angry.

MARIA

A Cherokee Indian. Native American.

WALLY

Oh. No, I don't need to see that card. You should have said so earlier.

He hands her back her license.

WALLY (CONT'D)

But you can't sleep in the bank parking lot.

MARIA

I thought this was a public lot?

WALLY

It is, but you can't sleep here.

MARIA

Why not?

WALLY

Loitering. And uh.

MARIA

And all these white people will think I'm a Mexican?

WALLY

Some people are backward. You know how it is.

MARIA

Yes. Yes, I do. Am I free to go?

WALLY

Oh, of course. I was never holding you.

Maria rolls up the window in Wally's face and drives away. He stands shaking his head.

INT. A DEPARTMENT STORE IN SANDHILL - DAY

Children and their weary mothers sort through a chaotic costume section in the department store. Costumes and Halloween trinkets line the floor. KEVIN (13) threatens his mother, RALPHIE (50). Ralphie is an obese woman in a faded flowery dress. She rides an electric cart.

KEVIN

I want to be Spider-Man

RALPHIE

You're too old for Halloween. This is for Jake.

KEVIN

To hell with Jake. Why couldn't I just stay home and play games?

RALPHIE

Because you ain't got no sense with them. You need to be out here in the fresh air.

KEVIN

You're just an old bitch.

Ralphie smacks Kevin hard in the face and grabs him by the arm. He jerks back initially, but she smacks him again, and he turns his head in silence.

OLIVIA (50) and FRAN (50), obese women riding electric carts and dressed in ragged clothes, spot Ralphie and Kevin and drive up to them.

OLIVIA

Hey. How y'all?

KEVIN

Not too good.

Ralphie jerks Kevin's arm again.

RALPHIE

He'd be alright if he'd just shut his god damned mouth.

FRAN

I don't know what they're doing to them down at that school. It just makes them wild.

RALPHIE

Hell, he don't go half the time!

OLIVIA  
Lord God. Bunny is gonna get you.

RALPHIE  
Bunny ain't shit.

OLIVIA  
Did you hear that Mr. Davis is  
screwing his secretary?

RALPHIE  
Mr. Davis is dead!

FRAN  
Dead?

RALPHIE  
Couple men shot him outside the pet  
store. Cold as a dead dog.

OLIVIA  
I'll be smacked. How come I didn't  
hear about it?

FRAN  
Me neither.

RALPHIE  
I guess we was too busy working for  
him to know that he had died. I  
just heard it through the  
grapevine, you know.

FRAN  
Does that mean we going to get a  
day off?

RALPHIE  
I doubt it. He was way on up there.  
He wouldn't know if we had missed a  
month. He puts that off on Sheila.  
He was just up there wolfing down  
those doughnuts.

OLIVIA  
Lord, these end times.

FRAN  
We're in em.

Kevin tries to jerk away from Ralphie's hand, but Ralphie holds on. Ralphie, Fran, and Olivia ease down the aisle while Ralphie holds on to Kevin's arm. The electric carts groan.

INT. BUNNY'S HOME - NIGHT

Bunny sits in a recliner, smoking an unfiltered cigarette. There are two ash trays on the end table next to her, and they overflow.

The walls are made of old wood-paneling. There are pictures of various families on the walls. Above one of the families hangs a deer head with large antlers; the eyes of the deer are missing.

Red sits across from her in hard plastic chair.

BUNNY

I'm having a hard time, Red.

RED

How you figure?

BUNNY

Just ain't feeling right. Sort of down.

RED

Depressed?

BUNNY

I don't suppose there's such a thing.

RED

I saw it on TV not long ago. It's real. They said you should take some kind of potion. I think it was cloverleaf and vinegar or something.

BUNNY

Them people don't know what they're talking about. They just want to sell you stuff.

RED

I reckon that's true. Why did you call me over here?

BUNNY

I want to make love to you.

RED  
I ain't cutting that deal.

They both laugh.

BUNNY  
I ain't either with your goat-man  
ass.

RED  
That's a blessing.

BUNNY  
No, Red -

She clears a cigarette and lights another.

BUNNY (CONT'D)  
No, Red. I've got a problem. I need  
you to do some work for me.

RED  
What's that?

BUNNY  
John's back in town.

RED  
Who?

BUNNY  
Foley.

RED  
Um.

BUNNY  
He used to work for Harold a long  
time ago. Then he taught school for  
a couple of years. Then he had a  
scrape with a teenage girl and left  
town.

RED  
What kind of scrape?

BUNNY  
You know.

RED  
No, Bunny, I really don't.

BUNNY

The truth is that he poisoned my dog, and then word got around about the girl. I don't even know if any of the girls said anything, really. Word just kind of bubbled up, and the parents were after him to get out of town.

RED

And?

BUNNY

He poisoned my dog!

RED

Twenty years ago, and you're still holding a grudge?

BUNNY

It's not a grudge. It's justice. Anyway, I want him out of town or dead. Nobody remembers him, so I don't have a plan to run him out, but you could do the killing.

RED

I'm not in that business, you know.

BUNNY

That's what I thought. I'll give you \$10,000.

RED

You have that kind of money?

BUNNY

The county does.

Bunny lights another cigarette with the one in her mouth. She holds one in each hand.

RED

If you can score it, he'll be in the dust by the end of the week.

BUNNY

Just don't screw up.

RED

I can't screw up something that I'm not even involved with.

BUNNY  
That's the word of the Lord.

They laugh.

EXT. THE DOUGHNUT FACTORY - DAY

Fran, Ralphie, and Olivia stand at a conveyor belt as dry doughnuts pass by.

FRAN  
It's amazing people actually eat these.

RALPHIE  
They wouldn't if they knew what was in them.

OLIVIA  
They're poor. They don't have a choice.

FRAN  
What does poor have to do with it?

RALPHIE  
You just let one slip by.

OLIVIA  
It really don't matter.

RALPHIE  
No. It really don't. It really, really don't. Y'all hurt over the deal with Mr. Davis?

FRAN  
About as much as the rest of town.

OLIVIA  
Not a heap.

RALPHIE  
Not a heap at all.

Doughnuts pass from the conveyor belt into a large metal vat. Flour and powdered sugar fly into the air profusely as the doughnuts fall into each other.

INT. THE BREAK ROOM OF THE BAR - DAY

John lies on a makeshift pallet. He struggles to tune his guitar. Failing to tune it properly, he lays it down.

He sits up, reaches in his pocket, and pulls out a flask. He drinks it dry.

INT. THE STAGE - NIGHT

John stands alone on the stage with his guitar. Band members behind him packing up. He SINGS without accompaniment.

JOHN

*We've got it twisted, the way that  
we've got it listed. The world  
doesn't make sense as long as it's  
on a list.*

The band members look at each other.

BAND MEMBER #1

Go home, John. You're drunk. Who told you to be up here anyway?

John continues to sing.

JOHN

*I've grown tired, and the world  
stands still before me.*

BAND MEMBER #2

Get out of here, man.

The two band members gently pull John off the stage. He collapses when he reaches the bottom of the stairs. The men pick him up and drag him out.

EXT. OUTSIDE HAROLD'S BAR - NIGHT

BAND MEMBER #1

What are we going to do with him?

BAND MEMBER #2

Leave him on the curb, I guess.

BAND MEMBER #1

That's no way to be.

BAND MEMBER #2

You wanna take him home?

BAND MEMBER #1  
He's unconscious. He probably  
overdosed on something.

BAND MEMBER #2  
You wanna take him *home*?

BAND MEMBER #1  
No, not really.

BAND MEMBER #2  
Then leave his ass. The diner  
closes at midnight.

BAND MEMBER #1  
Oh shit.

They prop John up by the door and carry their instruments to  
an old van. John falls over in front of the door with drool  
and vomit coming out of his mouth.

EXT. OUTSIDE HAROLD'S BAR - DAY

Harold comes in early and sees John lying in front of the  
door. He kicks him. John stirs.

HAROLD  
Get up.

JOHN  
Huh?

HAROLD  
You won't make it like this.

John holds both sides of his head.

JOHN  
I can't remember. It was probably  
nothing.

HAROLD  
God damn it, John.

JOHN  
Let me try again.

HAROLD  
Go home to your wife. You weren't  
serious about this.

JOHN  
I'll be alright. Just hang on.

HAROLD  
You need a ride home?

JOHN  
I'm here to stay, Harold. Just go  
on. I'll be back tonight.

Harold's demeanor goes from angry to sympathetic.

HAROLD  
Get back inside. Don't let anybody  
see you like this. Are you on  
medication?

JOHN  
Supposed to be. For my breathing  
and my liver.

HAROLD  
Write down what you take, and I'll  
see what I can do. For now, get  
back inside where it's cool.

INT. HAROLD'S BAR - NIGHT

John struggles through a song. His guitar breaks a string,  
and he continues playing with five strings. The small crowd  
is drunk, and it grows upset as he attempts to continue.

He can't finger his chords correctly, and he continues to  
sing badly.

MAN IN THE CROWD  
Get a life, man!

He continues singing.

Maria walks into the bar and sits in the back. The men in the  
bar turn around and look at her. The only other woman in the  
bar is Ruth, who sits at a far table by herself.

John notices Maria, stops his song, and starts another. He  
SINGS clearly.

JOHN  
*Her wild brown eyes  
Danced like the summer sun,  
And we roamed and sighed  
Until the day was done.  
And I held her until  
My arms were tired and weak,  
Until the moon peered down.*  
(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)  
*And filled my heart with grief.*

*Now I have gone home to sleep.  
 My love, close that heavy door,  
 And wait for me no more.  
 And wait for me no more.*

A patron, FRED, turns to his friend, WILLIE, at his table.

FRED  
 The fuck is that?

WILLIE  
 What?

FRED  
 Not what, dumbass. Who. The bitch  
 in the back. You didn't see her?  
 It's a Mexican!

Willie is visibly drunk, and hardly comprehends anything that Fred says to him.

FRED (CONT'D)  
 Willie! Fuck! WILLIE!

Willie bends his head down toward the table, ready to pass out.

John digs in his pocket and pulls out a pack of guitar strings. He sits down on a stool at the back of the stage to change the broken one.

FRED (CONT'D)  
 Willie, Goddamn it. Get up.

Fred looks nervously back at Maria, who doesn't pay any attention to him.

Harold comes out of his office and notices Maria as he passes by.

HAROLD  
 Maria?

MARIA  
 That's me.

HAROLD

You need to take him home. He's in bad shape. I'm not sure he knows where he is anymore.

MARIA

That's what I'm here for.

HAROLD

You think he'll go?

MARIA

It's hard to say.

John gets his guitar string fixed and starts another song, but he has forgotten to tune the new string. It is the Low-E string, and it makes a horrible, out-of-tune bass vibration.

The drunk men in the crowd cover their ears.

FRED

God damn it all.

John doesn't immediately register that the string is out of tune. After a few seconds, he catches on, and returns to the back of the stage to tune it.

The men in the crowd look back at Maria every few seconds. She gives one of them a smile, and he stands up. His name is BARNEY (65). He walks toward her.

MARIA

Don't.

BARNEY

What now?

John walks off the stage mid-song. He walks towards Maria's table.

FRED

Thank hell that's over.

Barney notices John and stands between him and Maria.

BARNEY

I saw her first.

Maria looks around Barney and motions to John to follow her. John nods.

John walks around Barney, and all the men in the bar look confused.

FRED  
The hell is this shit?

Barney physically tries to stop John from leaving, but he stumbles down drunkenly in the attempt.

Maria leads the way out of the bar, which has a pitch black tunnel leading to the door. She holds John by the arm.

MARIA  
Why don't they put lights in here?

JOHN  
It adds to the atmosphere, I guess.

Maria and John exit and get in Maria's car.

INT./EXT. MARIA'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

MARIA  
How's it been out here?

JOHN  
Nobody remembers me except for Harold.

MARIA  
You got your set. When are you coming home?

JOHN  
My dream -

MARIA  
Don't mention that again.

John nods in acceptance.

JOHN  
Let me finish this set and I'll pack up.

MARIA  
I brought your medicine. Don't take too long up there. I'll be waiting in the car. I don't want to go back in there. Tell Harold I said goodbye.

John goes back inside, and Maria closes her eyes to sleep.

Two black sedans drive in and park on each side of the door. Goon One and Goon Two jump out of the cars carrying guns.

Maria doesn't see them.

SHOUTS and GUNSHOTS ring out from the bar. Maria jolts her eyes open. Several drunk men brandishing pistols run screaming from the bar and jump into their cars.

The Two Goons run out, jump in their black sedans, and speed away.

John stumbles out of the bar and falls flat on the concrete.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY

Donald sits stoically with his hands in his lap. Jessie shucks beans.

DONALD  
I reckon she got him.

JESSIE  
Who got who?

DONALD  
Bunny.

JESSIE  
We ain't got no bunny rabbit.

DONALD  
The sheriff.

JESSIE  
Yeah. What about her?

DONALD  
She got John.

JESSIE  
Oh. For the dog.

DONALD  
She don't let up on a grudge.

JESSIE  
I'd be mad if someone touched my dog.

DONALD  
You ain't never had a dog.

JESSIE  
I might have had one before we was married. You don't know.

DONALD

We was cousins before we was married. You ain't never had a dog. That's a fact.

JESSIE

Don't go flipping through the family archives.

DONALD

You brought it up. Just get to shucking them beans.

Ext. A Front Porch - Night

Donald and Jessie sit on their porch as trick or treater's come asking for candy. Kevin comes up to them with a pillow case almost full of candy.

Donald reaches into the candy bucket beside him, but it's almost empty. He fumbles the candy around to find chocolate, but comes up with none.

DONALD (CONT'D)

Mama, you got any chocolate back there?

JESSIE

I got some chocolate covered cherries for my birthday.

DONALD

I don't know if this boy will be interested in such as that.

(To Kevin). You like chocolate covered cherries?

KEVIN

All I need is to fill my bag. Don't matter.

DONALD

Mama, go in there and get them cherries for the boy.

JESSIE

Lord help, Daddy. He can't have my cherries. I was just putting them away because the doctor was talking about my sugar.

Donald reaches into the bucket and pulls out a handful of assorted cheap candy - mints, suckers, and unidentifiable chewy candy - and hands it all to the boy. Realizing that this doesn't fill the pillow case, he empties the bucket.

After emptying the bucket, Donald waves at Kevin and goes back inside the house. Jessie follows. The boy stands on the step looking inside his pillow case.

Kevin reaches inside the pillow case, pulls out a handful of mints, and throws them back on the empty porch, some of them slamming against the windows. The porch light goes off.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Two nurses and Doctor Bridges stand next to John, who is heavily bandaged and barely conscious. None of the three looks particularly concerned. Each of them holds a clipboard.

DOCTOR BRIDGES

He's going to be here a while,  
looks like.

NURSE #1

I expect so.

NURSE #2

What was it they hit him with,  
reckon?

DOCTOR BRIDGES

They shot him. Didn't you read the  
report?

NURSE #2

That's what I meant. The kind of  
gun.

DOCTOR BRIDGES

Just a regular gun.

NURSE #2

Oh yeah. That makes sense.

NURSE #1

Think he'll live?

DOCTOR BRIDGES

That's not terrible much up to us.  
Thank the Lord.

NURSE #2

Amen.

All three of them laugh together. The Doctor casually holds a cherry cola in one hand, and a dry doughnut in the other. He drinks and eats playfully while looking at John.

INT. MARIA'S CAR - NIGHT

Maria drives along the highway in the darkness. A black sedan pulls behind Maria. Maria notices the lights and pulls over to let her pass. The black sedan swerves in front of Maria. A swirl of lights.

EXT. A GRAVEYARD - DAY

Harold, Donald, Jessie, Bunny, Red, Ahmed, Willie, Justin, Lisa, Maria, Minnie, and John stand in a circle around an open grave during a driving rain. A pine coffin is hoisted above the grave.

Minnie stands between John and Maria, hold their hands on each side. She cries.

John is well-dressed, with his hair trimmed, and he leans on a cane with his other hand.

RODNEY (40), the undertaker, stands outside of the circle, leaning on his shovel.

Justin stands with a Bible at his side.

All of them are soaked. The grave is muddy.

Harold looks on from the top of the circle while lightning flashes.

Donald leans on a cane.

DONALD

(To Jessie) How come you didn't bring an umbrella?

JESSIE

(To Donald) I don't control the weather.

Bunny stands next to Harold, eating a soaked doughnut.

BUNNY

(To Harold) You want some? I got another. Ain't even touched it.

HAROLD  
(To Bunny) I'm alright.

BUNNY  
Suit yourself.

Willie holds a beer can in his hand and sips intermittently. When he finds the can empty, he gets upset and throws it into the muddy mound of dirt next to the grave.

JUSTIN  
How does the city sit solitary that was full of people? The ways of Zion do mourn. Today, we commit the body of Miss Ruth Gunderson to the earth, and we commit her soul to the hands of God. May the gates of Heaven open to her, and close in the face of evil. Amen.

ALL  
Amen.

The crowd disperses.

JUSTIN  
Rodney.

Rodney nods, lowers Ruth into the grave, and fills in the mud furiously.

As John and Maria walk back to Maria's car with Minnie, CURTIS (80) stands leaning against the hood. He is a thin black man wearing a suit, a fedora, and dark sunglasses.

Maria stops in surprise.

CURTIS  
(To John) How come you didn't come see me?

JOHN  
Huh?

CURTIS  
I called you two months ago. I was going to teach you to play the guitar. We were going to catch up. Did you forget? I just heard you was up here.

JOHN  
I've been having dreams. I didn't know you were even real.

MARIA

Oh damn.

CURTIS

I'm as real as this rain. What's got into you?

Bunny and Red come and stand next to Maria, Minnie, and John. Curtis looks on.

BUNNY

You taking that bastard girl with you? You can have her.

RED

We sure ain't got any use for her in this town.

John reaches out to punch Red and falls into the mud. Red pulls a gun and points it at John.

RED (CONT'D)

Looks like you're caught for good this time. You got anything to tell him, Bun?

BUNNY

Mess with somebody else's dog.

She casts a glance at Curtis.

BUNNY (CONT'D)

We don't have use for coloreds in this town, either.

Curtis pulls a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun out of his suit and blasts Red and Bunny into the mud. Bunny dies right away, but Red jerks back up. Curtis fires the other barrel into his face.

CURTIS

Damn dog was messing in my yard. I killed it myself. You still want to play that guitar?

JOHN

No. Sometimes it's better for things to remain a mystery.

INT. DONALD'S AND JESSIE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Donald sits in his chair watching a rerun of a television western. Jessie sits in her recliner across from him, dead. Donald doesn't notice, and continues to watch television.

INT. THE CHURCH - DAY

Matthew sweeps dirt off the concrete on the back porch of the church. He stops, holds the broom under his chin, and admires the sunlight as it comes through the clouds. It starts to rain, and he goes back inside.

EXT. THE DOUGHNUT FACTORY PARKING LOT - DAY

Fran, Olivia, and Ralphie drive into the parking lot at the same time. Ralphie has to rock back and forth to get out of her car, but she eventually manages to do so, while Fran and Olivia wait on her.

RALPHIE

Well, go on.

The three women walk on toward the factory. Loose trash blows in the wind at their feet. Ralphie trails behind. They look back at her, and she waves them on. They all go inside and shut the door. The wind continues to blow.

END.