

THE FIRST SNOW OF SUMMER

By

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Characters:

TESS ANDERSON: Oldest Daughter, late-50s.

MARNIE ANDERSON: Middle Daughter, mid-50s.

PEG ANDERSON: Youngest Daughter, mid-40s.

CLARK ANDERSON: Second-Oldest Brother, mid- 50s.

CATHERINE ANDERSON: Wife of Clark, late 40s.

ALECIA DAVENPORT: A Neighbor, mid-50s.

Place:

A Home In The Mountains Of Southwest Colorado.

Time:

Summer.

SETTING: The exterior of a slightly run-down house in the woods of southwestern Colorado. We see a deck that leads to the back door, some deck chairs, a table, all have been through more seasons than they were intended to.

AT RISE: MARNIE (mid-50s) stands facing out to us, staring off into the distance. She's in jeans, T-shirt, sneakers.

A moment or two go by. She watches.

Then TESS (mid-50s) walks out of the house in jeans, flannel shirt and work boots. She stands beside Marnie.

They watch the horizon in silence for a few moments.

TESS

It's getting closer, isn't it.

MARNIE

Yeah, but I don't think it'll get us.

TESS

But you've got everything packed.

MARNIE

Sure.

TESS

If they make the call you've got like half an hour or something.

MARNIE

They won't make the call.

TESS

But if they do.

MARNIE

(Looking at Tess for the first time)

You want something to drink?

TESS

I'd kill for a beer.

MARNIE

Sorry. No alcohol.

TESS

Another dream deferred.

MARNIE

We have pop and soda water and milk and lemonade-

TESS

I'm good.

MARNIE

I guess you shouldn't be drinking anyway. I mean not alcohol. You have a long drive ahead of you.

TESS

Yeah, but it's a long drive with them. I'm gonna need somethin'.

MARNIE

You just need something to make the trip go faster. If they still made Jolt Cola I'd go with that-

TESS

Pff. Jolt Cola.

MARNIE

Ahead of its time.

TESS

The Red Bull of our generation. Whatever happened-

MARNIE

Got you through finals.

TESS

Mountain Dew got me through finals.

MARNIE

I stand corrected.

TESS

Even after chugging all night, I still carried two bottles in my backpack to chug during class-

MARNIE

I always admired your bladder if not your wisdom-

TESS

I could've been so much more graceful if Dad had just given me the money for amphetamines.

MARNIE

He probably thought there was a good parenting lesson in there somewhere.

TESS

I still almost failed 'cause the teachers couldn't read my handwriting.

MARNIE

Looked like a seismograph?

TESS

I forgot to put spaces between the words.

(Marnie grins)

But on the plus side, I did recite the entirety of "The Raven" in under 60 seconds.

MARNIE

Mr. Gibson still talked about that by the time I had his class.

TESS

"NevermoreNevermoreNevermoreNevermore!!"

MARNIE

Just another legend I could never live up to.

TESS

I'm sure you added ten years to Dad's life by not living up to me.

Pause.

MARNIE

Would you believe me if I told you he misses you?

TESS

No.

MARNIE

Fair.

TESS

But I don't think it's just me. I think whatever he's missing these days the world can't give him.

MARNIE

Fair.

TESS

You don't have to agree with everything I say. You can push back.

MARNIE

You're right.

You're gonna have to forgive me, I'm fighting a real strong urge to hug you right now.

TESS

And I'm fighting a real strong urge to punch you in the eye.
So neither of us is getting what they want today.

Pause.

PEG (mid-40s), unseen, quietly comes from the forest around the far corner of the deck. She's in a blouse, jacket, and jeans, reverently carrying an old tape recorder. She begins gently rocking forward and back in place, watching Tess and Marnie.

Tess and Marnie watch each other, not seeing Peg.

MARNIE

(Smiling)

You somehow keep just... not changing.

TESS

I do have a strict beauty regimen of coating my face nightly with pureed Twinkies. The preservatives.

MARNIE

You know if I saw you more often I wouldn't be able to tell if you actually weren't changing, or if I just wasn't noticing it 'cause of familiarity.

TESS

Yeah, but then I'd have to come home.

MARNIE

At least you're still calling it home.

Tess slightly winces - she's been caught.

MARNIE

Or we could even just video call like we did in the pandemic.

TESS

Because that was a truly good time.

MARNIE

I liked it.

TESS

You might as well have faxed a still photo of you, your wi-fi's so bad out here.

MARNIE

I liked trying to figure out what people were talking about from every fifth word. I told myself the most amazing things about-

TESS

(Sees Peg)

There she is! There's my Peggy!

Tess goes for a hug. Peg steps away from her, not looking at her, begins tapping her own chest with her fingertips quickly, unconsciously.

TESS

Really? No hug?

Peg stares at the ground, tapping, rocking...

MARNIE

Peggy, say hello, c'mon.

TESS

She doesn't have to if she doesn't want to.

MARNIE

Give her a minute, she'll be talking your ear off.

TESS

(To Peg)

Were you out roaming the woods?!

MARNIE

She knows she's gotta stay within sight of the house, don't you, kiddo.

TESS

I'm surprised you let her out with all the-
(Gestures to the horizon)

MARNIE

Everyone needs a break now and then.

TESS

I can just imagine the three of you in winter-

MARNIE

It's cozy.

TESS

Like the Donner Party was cozy.

MARNIE

You say "cannibalism", I say "cozy".

TESS

(To Peg)

How you doin', kiddo, you look great.
(Peg looks at her. Manages a nod)

You out watching birds?

(Peg nods, Tess turns to Marnie)

Are there still birds?

MARNIE

Most of 'em took off.

TESS

See, they got sense.

MARNIE

...there was a weird thing the other night.

TESS

Yeah?

MARNIE

A couple nights ago.

TESS

Do tell.

MARNIE

I was asleep in bed, and something woke me up.

TESS

...like...

MARNIE

Like I heard the wind blowing outside. And I thought, oh, I left the window open, I should close it. And I opened my eyes and there was Peggy, standing right beside me in her pajamas, staring at me.

And that wakes me right up, I'm like "What's wrong?"

And she just keeps staring at me.

TESS

Okay...

MARNIE

Then I hear the sound again, right outside my window. The wind. But not wind, but... rushing. Something coming right at the house. I sat up and Peggy's staring, and she's scared, and I take her hand... and then we felt it. We both felt it didn't we, Peg? Like something moving through the trees outside, through the bushes, over the ground, so fast, coming closer and closer... like something running. Or someone.

And it hit the side of the house, there was this sound of cracking and clawing, coming up over the deck, up the side of the house-

TESS

Whoa.

MARNIE

In the walls and ceiling, up and over the house, around the sides, we were surrounded by this skittering, but it felt like one creature, one thing with all these limbs, in the walls, it was so loud...

And then it was past us.

Whatever it was, whatever they were - it was off into the woods on the other side. We sat there in the dark a long, long time. Not moving.

Pause.

TESS

Probably the wind hitting the house-

MARNIE

It wasn't-

TESS

You know, the pressure changes, sudden wind gusts-

MARNIE

(Pointing to a lower wall)

The next morning we found claw marks - there are claw marks on the house-

Those? TESS

That's not wind. MARNIE

That's the Chavez's dog. Remember when they spent the night and their dog kept scratching to get in all night? Those have been there like 20 years. TESS

I think I'd remember seeing that kind of- MARNIE

I'm telling you it was wind. I'm not saying you shouldn't get out of here, I'm just saying the woods are not sending armies of angry woodchucks in the night. TESS

Peggy, you want a pop? I don't know why she's not talking, she just freezes up sometimes- MARNIE

I'm not saying you didn't hear anything- TESS

I'll get you a pop. (To Peg) MARNIE

I'm just saying you- TESS

Marnie's gone.

Fine. TESS

Tess and Peg watch each other a moment.

Soooo... you still got your tape recorder? TESS
(Peg points inside the house)
Or Dad's tape recorder, right. Whatcha listening to these days?

*Peggy carefully pushes play.
Tracy Chapman's "Baby Can I Hold You".*

Is that, ah, who is that, Tracy Chapman? TESS
(Peg smiles)
Still on your 80s kick, huh?

*Peg carefully pulls another cassette out of her pocket,
with reverence.*

Tess casually reaches to take it, but Peg pulls it back. Sets it gently on the deck between them.

TESS

(Reading the cover)

Okay. George Michael? He's good.

Peg pulls another tape out and sets it on the deck. Then another and another as Tess reads the covers. It feels like a rite.

TESS

Lionel Richie, okay.

The Cure, now you're talking - you ever play those tapes I gave you? From the 90s, there was some good-

PEG

(Quietly, looking at Tess)

The original name for the band "The Cure" was "Easy Cure", but they dropped the word "Easy" when they began to leave their punk rock roots in 1978.

TESS

...Right. I'd forgotten that.

PEG

"The Easy Cure" wasn't actually their first name either, they started out as "Obelisk" in 1973, and then they became "Malice" in 1976, and then "Easy Cure" in 1977, and then "The Cure" in 1978, but everyone knows them as "The Cure".

TESS

That's so cool. So, Peggy, I need to know-

PEG

Their first single to chart was "Boys Don't Cry" in 1979, which made it to #22 in New Zealand, but didn't even chart in the UK which is weird because they're a UK band, but-

TESS

Slow down for a minute, just a minute-

PEG

An interesting fact about The Cure is that their song title "Boys Don't Cry" was used as the name of a movie in 1999, and their song title "Just Like Heaven" was used as a movie title in 2005, and at least four episodes of the TV series "One Tree Hill" used The Cure song titles as titles, which is a fact very few bands can claim-

TESS

(Over her)

Peggy. Peggy. I need you to stop. I need you to stop for one second? Peggy? Peggy.

Peg stops, looking at Tess.

TESS

How's Marnie doing?

PEG

She's doing great, she's A-OK in every way.

TESS

Is she telling you a lot of scary stories like the wind thing?

PEG

Another interesting fact about The Cure is that when they played in Argentina, there were 110,000 people trying to get into a space that only held 60,000 people, and there was a riot and a man was killed and the band was moved underground and could still smell things burning and hear sirens and yelling-

TESS

Okay, okay: Is Marnie treating you okay?

(Peg pauses)

'Cause I can do something, I can.

PEG

Another interesting fact about "The Cure" is-

TESS

No, no, listen: Is this still a good place for you? You don't have to stay-

*Marnie comes out with a can of Coke.
Tracy Chapman is still singing.*

MARNIE

Tracy Chapman has gotten us through many a dark night of the soul.

PEG

An interesting fact about Tracy Chapman is that since age six she wanted to be a veterinarian, she wanted to take care of hurt animals, but she also owned a ukulele which her friend stole from her and she moved on the mouth organ and clarinet.

TESS

Wow.

MARNIE

You see, I told you she'd warm up.

PEG

(Enjoying herself)

When Tracy Chapman was eleven, she bought her first guitar for \$20.

MARNIE

Our days are filled with footnotes about other people's lives.

PEG

Another interesting fact about Tracy Chapman-

MARNIE

Peg, honey, can you turn the music off. Or put on your headphones?
Tess and I need to talk.

*Peg carefully turns off the player.
Tess steps away, needing space.*

*Peg will drink from the can, watching Tess and Marnie
closely through the following.*

TESS

(To Peg)

You've gotta broaden your horizons anyway, kid. I'm sure Dad's got some '70s and '60s tapes stashed around.

MARNIE

"The last time music was any good".

TESS

-he said right before he yelled at some kids to get off his lawn.

MARNIE

If he'd had a lawn.

TESS

The only thing I think of when I hear this music is Dad coming home after work and slamming the door to his room and cranking up the 70s hits.

MARNIE

He needed to decompress.

TESS

Like for twenty minutes on the dot. Then he'd come out for dinner. Why was he so angry?

MARNIE

He wasn't always angry.

TESS

You did live in this house, didn't you?

MARNIE

I think dealing with all those people everyday would bring out the rage in anyone.

TESS

We were just lucky he didn't work in the Ace Hardware - can you imagine him with access to a chainsaw or nail gun?

PEG

An interesting fact about Daryl Hall and John Oates is their first top ten single was in 1977, but their biggest hit, which was Daddy's favorite was-

*A low moan of agony from the house. A man's voice.
Tess and Marnie laugh in spite of themselves.*

MARNIE

Right. On. Cue.

TESS

I suspect that will also be the cue for Clark and Cathy to beat a hasty retreat.

Another moan from within.

MARNIE

I was impressed that the first thing Clark wanted to do was see Daddy. Went right up. And they've been in there a while.

TESS

A minute for every year away - it works out.

MARNIE

No, please, don't.

TESS

But who's counting?

And out the back door quickly steps CLARK (late 50s) in fashionable summer gear, hale and hearty. Behind him comes CATHERINE (late 40s), his wife, also sharp, still sizing up her surroundings.

Peg starts rocking slightly again, tapping her chest with her fingertips.

CLARK

Well, I for one think he looks fantastic!

TESS

(Laughs)

Fantastic?

MARNIE

Are you sure you were in the right room? Daddy's is at the end of the hall.

CLARK

I mean for his state, given his state and his age and his... concerns, he looks fantastic. You've done a really fantastic job with him, Marnie.

MARNIE

It does him so much good to see you-

CLARK

I'm serious. Catherine and I were both saying it, weren't we, kitten? You're working miracles.

MARNIE

A nurse comes by three times a week, she-

CLARK

But you're the anchor, you're the glue. You always have been, we were both saying you are the, the nougat at the center of this candy bar.

MARNIE

That's a new one.

CATHERINE

He did start moaning right when we left. Are you sure there's not-

MARNIE

That's his language now. His language with himself. None of us on the outside speak it.

CLARK

It is, uh, it is unnerving.

MARNIE

It's really not that bad.

TESS

If you could get him to do it on cue we could rent him out to haunted houses.

CLARK

That's good, that's great, you gotta laugh, you know, you just gotta.

CATHERINE

But there's nothing we should do? Pain meds?

MARNIE

Nothing makes a difference.

CATHERINE

I remember with my mom, sometimes changing her position seemed-

MARNIE

We've been at it a while, Catherine.

CATHERINE

Okay. Of course.

MARNIE

I tell myself the moaning is what he needs to do right now, so we let him and just... keep loving him. Don't we, Peggy?

CLARK

Peggy! My god! There you are! Look at you! Look at you!

He goes for a hug, Peg backs away, still tapping her chest, moving her tape recorder away from Clark.

CLARK

No worries, no worries. Peggy, this is my wife Catherine - you remember Catherine?

CATHERINE

Hi, Peg, it's good to see you.

CLARK

Oh, she looks great, she looks fantastic, oh Peg, you look fantastic. You still got your tape player, got that gleam in your eye, fantastic.

Peg is rocking herself gently, unable to speak.

TESS

We were jamming out to some Tracy Chapman before you came out.

CLARK

Awesome. This place has always been filled with- Remember Dad rocking out-
(Singing to Carole King)
 "I feel the earth... move..." You remember that? Him dancing around the living room with us to that, lifting us up-

TESS

I must've had band practice that day.

CLARK

Not in high school, when we were little. Peggy, did he - by the time you came along he was probably too old. I'm sorry you missed that. But you got his tapes, right?

MARNIE

She's got our tapes.

CLARK

(To Peg)

So you can do your own dancing now! Right?

He awkwardly does a few more dance moves.

TESS

(To Marnie)

Are you absolutely sure you have no beer in the house?

MARNIE

Peg, honey, come on, say hello to Catherine and Clark - they came all the way-

CATHERINE

Really, it's okay.

(Peg still can't speak, just watching, slightly rocking...)

MARNIE

(To Clark and Catherine)

Well, I'm just so glad you could make it. I think it does mean something to him - to see all of us, hear our voices around him.

CLARK

The least we could do. And the most. I mean, you know.

MARNIE

Of course. You've got lives.

CLARK

We do. I'm just sorry the boys couldn't be here. We told 'em Uncle Rich is only getting married once, it's a chance to see the whole family, but-

MARNIE

They've got lives.

CLARK

And I honestly thought - I'm so sorry, Marnie, I truly thought we were gonna get in in time to spend the night last night, really get in a good visit-

MARNIE

I know. Stupid smoke.

CLARK

Stupid smoke.

CATHERINE

We couldn't get out of that Denver airport to save our lives-

CLARK

Air traffic controllers were complete wusses, so scared of getting sued-

CATHERINE

Well, scared we might die.

CLARK

It wasn't that bad.

CATHERINE

You couldn't see the tarmac.

CLARK

It was like fog, like San Francisco fog.

CATHERINE

Except fog - fog's... cotton-y, you know. Like somehow mysterious, and this was like, like grit, like every speck had sharp edges, you know, like a wall of tiny diamonds.

MARNIE

That's poetic.

CATHERINE

(To Clark)

It was like Beijing. Remember? The smog of Beijing in winter.

CLARK

Exactly. Like Beijing in winter, same thing.

Beat.

MARNIE

Peggy and I watched the Chinese Olympics. We really liked that.

CLARK

That was, that was great.

CATHERINE

Such a spectacle.

CLARK

Such a spectacle. So great.

TESS

And I watched all those Godzilla movies as a kid.

CATHERINE

...Did you?

TESS

There was a lot of smoke in those.

CLARK

But that would have been Japan.

TESS

Was it?

CATHERINE

(To Clark)

She knows it was Japan, honey.

TESS

It was hard to tell. There was all that smoke. The houses always looked incredibly flimsy too. When they'd get stepped on.

CLARK

Sure, sure, yeah.

CATHERINE

But the point was that we wanted to see you all, to fly in yesterday, have Tess drive us here, spend the night, some quality time before heading out today, not this hello/goodbye stuff-

MARNIE

We'll take what we can get. Let me just get the sandwiches-

CATHERINE

I can help.

MARNIE

No need-

CLARK

(To Tess)

We should probably allow some extra time to drive down though, right?

TESS

Why, you in a hurry to leave?

CLARK

Of course not, I-

TESS

As long as we're out of here in the next hour or so we should make it easy.

MARNIE

(To Tess)

You don't have to leave right away. It's not gonna take that long to drive to Santa Fe.

TESS

You never know. I like to allow time.

MARNIE

But if you leave now you're gonna get there so-

TESS

I like to allow time. I don't want to feel rushed.

Tess and Marnie watch each other.

MARNIE

It's just... really nice having you here.

CLARK

I just can't believe Richard's finally tying the knot, you know? After all this time!

MARNIE

I know, right?

CLARK

I was sure Richie was gonna die a bachelor!

TESS

He still could. The wedding's not 'til four.

CLARK

Right? No, I was, after all these years, I figured I was gonna be the only Anderson lucky enough to find someone who could stand to marry one of us!

(Catherine gently nudges him. Tess and Marnie don't react)

I mean somebody, you know, that I wanted to spend my life with. A particular person who, you know-

MARNIE

No, absolutely. I was shocked when I got the invitation.

TESS

Me too. Though not because he was getting married, but because he actually sent me an invitation.

CLARK

Right? After all of his "Boundaries! I need-"

CLARK AND MARNIE

"-healthy boundaries!"

CLARK

Right? Like I guess that was code for "I'm gonna go live alone in the desert and jerk off and hope some divorcee takes a shine to me-"

CATHERINE

Clark.

Pause. Clark catches himself.

CLARK

But they were lovely invitations.

MARNIE

They were.

CATHERINE

They were.

CLARK

Really lovely.

TESS

I liked the font.

They all stand nodding a moment.

CLARK

(To Marnie)

I'm surprised you couldn't get a nurse or someone to stay with Dad-

MARNIE

No-

CLARK

So you and Peg could come.

MARNIE

I don't-

CLARK

Break out of his orbit for one day-

MARNIE

I don't like being on the road that long.

Just to see- CLARK

Clark. It's fine.
But we do expect a lot of photos though. MARNIE

Absolutely. CATHERINE

And a slice of cake. MARNIE

...oh, that, ah- CLARK

Kidding. MARNIE

No, we're gonna just fly straight back east from the reception. CLARK

I hope you get in a few dances. MARNIE

But Tess could bring you back a piece of cake, I suppose- CLARK

No I couldn't. TESS

Since you're driving back up anyway- CLARK

Nope. TESS

Okay.
Right. CLARK

It was a joke anyway, Clark. I'm just grateful you'll drive my present down. I should go get it before I forget. MARNIE
(Starts out, casually calls back)
-but I did think - this is just an idea - I did think we can convince Richard and Darlene to come up here next Christmas. You know how beautiful the house is in the snowfall - and maybe you two and the boys and Tess - all of us could come back together for the holidays, like it used to be. Peggy and me can really do the place up...

Yeah, sure, maybe. CLARK

CATHERINE

We haven't worked out our holiday plans-

MARNIE

That's why I wanted to drop that in. Catherine and Darlene have never had a winter here-

(To Catherine)

It is so... magical. You'd love it. The snow just sparkles over the ground and in the branches, holding all the sound, it's so silent outside, and a fresh Christmas tree all lit up in the corner of the living room, hot cider, a fire in the fireplace, the icicles hanging off the eaves catching the light from the house... there's just nothing like it. Your boys would love it. Peggy and Daddy could see everyone. It would be... just... I just wanted to drop that in.

CLARK

Absolutely, we should think about that.

MARNIE

Think about it. Seriously.

CLARK

Yeah, let's think about it.

MARNIE

I'm getting lemonade. Lemonade and pop to celebrate you being here right now-

CATHERINE

Are you sure I can't help?

MARNIE

(Heading in)

Not at all. I've got sandwiches and a surprise dessert-

She's gone.

Peg hesitates, feels incredibly awkward... and darts after Marnie indoors.

The others watch her go.

CLARK

So, what, she's quit talking now?

TESS

She talks to me. Maybe it's just you.

CLARK

Great. And have you talked to Marnie?

TESS

About.

Clark gestures to the horizon.

Oh. Uhhh... not really. TESS

I mean, does she have a plan? CLARK

Don't know. TESS

She's got to have a plan. Closing your eyes and ears is not a plan. CLARK

Well, it kind of is, actually. Not necessarily effective, but- TESS

I mean, if it was just her, that's her business, we'd still be, you know- CLARK

Oh sure. TESS

But she's got two whole other people depending on her. There's, there's moral... you know. CLARK

I do. She might be going a little- ennt. TESS
(gestures "downhill")

What do you mean? CLARK

She says she's hearing animals in the walls at night. TESS

Like another raccoon? CLARK

Like ghost animals. Outside the house. Up the walls. TESS

That's not good. CLARK

Not usually, no. TESS

She's under so much stress. Taking care of everyone- CATHERINE

I'm sure she'd shoot down the idea, but if someone needed to take care of Peggy... TESS
 I could do that.

Could you? CATHERINE

What's that supposed to mean? TESS

I mean more like "would you?" I just didn't- CATHERINE

Frankly that's not gonna help, you're still in the path of that.
(*Gestures to horizon*) CLARK

I'm a hundred miles away. That's not coming anywhere near my house. TESS

Maybe this one isn't. But the next one? Or the next one? And the drought that goes on and on and on? This whole place is a tinderbox, we're just lucky - as a species - that it sustained us as long as it did. CLARK

Well, last time I checked New York was in pretty serious threat of going underwater in coming years. TESS

It absolutely is. CLARK

That's why we're moving. CATHERINE

Marnie opens the door and ushers Peg onto the deck, Peg awkwardly holding a pitcher of lemonade, her tape player still strung over her shoulder. Through the following she'll keep watching everyone, especially Catherine.

You're moving? MARNIE

Ooo, that's news! TESS

Not yet! CLARK

We're looking. CATHERINE

Where? MARNIE

Inland. CLARK

Like New Jersey?
TESS

We're just looking.
CATHERINE

Wow. After all you did to get to New York.
MARNIE

Well, things change.
CLARK

What do you mean "all he did"?
CATHERINE

The scientists, some of them, are saying the upper Midwest is gonna be the hot spot.
CLARK

Well, the non-hot spot.
CATHERINE

The less hot hot spot.
CLARK

Like the rust belt?
MARNIE

Exactly.
CLARK

Just that with the wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, heat waves, that's gonna be the area least torn apart every year.
CATHERINE

We're all gonna have to live in Cleveland?
TESS

Wouldn't that be hilarious, after everyone took off in the '70s, that everyone goes back?
MARNIE

Bet they got plenty of room.
TESS

Is that what you're doing, Clark, buying a fixer-upper in Toledo?
MARNIE

Well, obviously we still need to be able to get to New York, our clients are in the city-
CATHERINE

But if they move...
MARNIE

CLARK

That's the trick, right, to find just the crest of the wave, not jump ship too early but not wait 'til all the good property is gone-

CATHERINE

See where the population trend models are forecasting-

MARNIE

You don't want to get caught out.

CLARK

Exactly.

CATHERINE

So many of our friends are doing it, checking prices, livability-

CLARK

It just makes sense. You two should be doing it.

MARNIE

Well, we got the old homestead here. We're inland. You can always move back here.

Pause.

CATHERINE

Well... that... sort of defeats the purpose, doesn't it.

MARNIE

Why.

CLARK

The southwest is going down this century too.

MARNIE

No we're not. A few fires and it's the end of the world? People have been here forever.

CATHERINE

Absolutely.

CLARK

Nobody likes to hear it. Everyone wants to throw rocks at Cassandra, right, but you gotta look at the facts, Marnie, at the trends-

TESS

What facts? I thought you guys didn't even believe in global warming.

CATHERINE

Of course we do.

CLARK

We totally do.

CATHERINE

We totally believe in science, and science says there's no proof it's man-made.

TESS

Ohhhh...

MARNIE

No no no, let's not-

CATHERINE

I mean, it's just about playing the odds, right, and to totally destroy the whole global economy on the off-chance that it might slow climate change-

TESS

(Nodding yes way too eagerly)

Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh.

CLARK

But the thing is, regardless of cause, it's happening and it's always happened. Big picture: people have been moving in and out of places forever. I was reading this thing-

CATHERINE

-he reads so much-

CLARK

Millions - millions of people from Russia moved into the Arctic Circle - voluntarily - for mining, and they all left when the mines went dry. So whole cities are standing empty. Same in France, Italy, Africa, China, I mean look at the Incans, the Mayans, Angkor - the capitol of the whole Khmer Empire in Cambodia a thousand years ago - bigger than current New York City! Huge! Today: ruins and vines and monkeys!

TESS

I like monkeys.

CLARK

Or- OR! You ever heard of Cahokia?

MARNIE

Can't say as I have.

CLARK

Cahokia. It was the largest city in all of North America.

MARNIE

Where?

CLARK

Just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis! The epicenter of commerce and art and civilization, the Manhattan of its time - and by 1200 it was gone. And today you don't even know it existed.

MARNIE

Wow.

CLARK

So my point is, who's to say in 800 years if anyone will even care or even know that there used to be a place called Los Angeles, or Miami, or Phoenix. People move. It's what we do.

MARNIE

You're right. You're absolutely right. But I keep thinking in 1200 of one last little guy sitting in Cahokia watching the last family pack up and disappear over the horizon, and he's like, "Finally! Some alone time!"

TESS

Is that gonna be you and Peggy? The last women in Cahokia?

CLARK

Well. Except. If there's fire. If a literal fire or drought makes it impossible to survive here.

MARNIE

I'm sure you're right. But today... I have lemonade. Who wants some? Peg?

But Peg, still holding the lemonade pitcher, is staring out - not at the horizon but at something in the forest, watching something in the middle distance intently. Marnie doesn't notice.

MARNIE

(Pouring)

Peggy and Daddy and I have faith in all those brave young firemen and women out there working to protect us-

CLARK

You want to talk about the future - there's a growth industry. I used to, I'd be asked to go to job fairs, give talks for the company, I used to tell the kids: You want a guaranteed job? Got into data processing or residential care. Nowadays I tell 'em: Two careers of the future: Firefighting and shoring up shorelines.

MARNIE

See, there's always a bright side!

CLARK

I'm an optimist!

MARNIE

Me too! Have some lemonade!

He takes a cup, as does Catherine.

CLARK

We gotta be light on our feet, think like our ancient ancestors, not get too attached to any of the old ways.

MARNIE

What about old people?

CLARK

Well. I mean. I don't want to sound heartless-

TESS

Nothing good ever follows that phrase.

CLARK

But I mean.
How much longer is he gonna be with us?

MARNIE

The docs gave him three months a year ago.

CATHERINE

Wow.

MARNIE

We're a hardy people. And this is a hardy house. I'm sure it's easy to forget that when you've moved so far away-

CLARK

That's not fair-

MARNIE

I understand why you went, but I think it's a risk you run. It's why I'm still here. It's easier to remember who we are here.

CLARK

It's not fair to-

MARNIE

I'm agreeing with your arguments! I just think something happens when you're not here - when one is not here - that could make one talk about leaving Daddy and everything else in a wildfire-

Peg is still watching the woods, now breathing fast, scared, unable to move...

CATHERINE

Nobody is-

CLARK

That's not fair.

TESS

You're surprisingly stuck on the fairness thing, Mr. Capitalist-I-Own-A-Yacht.

CATHERINE

We don't own a yacht-

CLARK

We've rented yachts, for parties, for Craig's birthday-

CATHERINE

And he's not saying "Leave your father behind"-

Marnie has noticed Peg, who grabs for her arm still staring into the woods-

MARNIE

Peg, honey, what is it, what is-

Peg points frantically, genuinely frightened-

PEG

Nnnnnnnn-

TESS

(Moving to Peg)

What is it, kiddo?

MARNIE

Use your words, use your words-

CATHERINE

Does she see something?

CLARK

Is there something out there?

MARNIE

Peg, honey, it's okay, there's nothing there-

Peg is calming slightly, still staring...

PEG

Nn. Nn. Nn.

CLARK

I don't see anything.

CATHERINE

She must have seen something.

CLARK

(To Catherine)

Do you see anything?

TESS

(To Marnie)

This is what comes from you telling her horror stories.

MARNIE

I don't tell-

TESS

(Pulling Peg aside)

It's okay, buddy, there's nothing there, you're fine, we're fine.

Catherine keeps watching the woods...

CLARK

She probably saw an animal, maybe a coyote or-

MARNIE

(Leading Peg to the door)

Come on, come on, put down the lemonade-

(Peg does)

-let's go get you a sandwich, you must be starving-

TESS

Let me-

MARNIE

We're fine.

TESS

Clearly you're-

MARNIE

We're fine. Please.

CLARK

(Calling after her)

There's nothing out there, Peggy, it's fine!

And Marnie and Peg are gone again.

Pause.

Tess stares after Marnie and Peg. Catherine keeps scanning the woods, not seeing anything. Though maybe she senses something...

CLARK

(To Tess)

But you see my point, right?

TESS

What.

CLARK

About...

TESS

I don't really want to live in Pittsburgh, no.

CLARK

But you've moved. You've moved a lot.

TESS

Doesn't make me a Cahokian.

CLARK

But wherever you go, you're gonna have a job, we're always gonna need teachers-

TESS

Debatable.

CLARK

I mean even out in- oh, where-

TESS

(Making a slight salute)

Del Norte, 8th grade Language Arts, Head Coach Volleyball, Assistant Lunch Aid
Wednesdays and Fridays.

CLARK

(To Catherine who continues scanning the woods)

Daddy always said she'd be a teacher-

TESS

Well, that's-

CLARK

-just so future kids would treat her like she treated all her own teachers.

TESS

Dad always did have my best interests at heart.

CLARK

No, it's great, it's great. You must really feel like you have direct connection to the future.

TESS

I do. I really do. And I can tell you, from that direct connection, that day-to-day meeting of the minds: We are all doomed.

Clark laughs, Catherine glances back at them.

CATHERINE

Don't say that!

TESS

No, I mean it. You try reading any one of their essays - "The Diary of Anne Frank' was a very moving novel that make me finally understand the importance of a well-stocked attic.". "I ultimately did not like the book 'To Kill A Mockingbird' because it had zero instructions for how to kill any bird, not just a mockingbird."

CATHERINE

There are always going to be-

TESS

You ever read any H.P. Lovecraft?

CLARK

You're not teaching that??

TESS

No, but his whole idea that there are certain sights, certain thoughts, that once you've experienced them you will be forever trapped in a pit of writhing eye-gouging madness - that's teaching 8th grade English.

CLARK

It's a far cry from our day.

TESS

What day? Do you have any accurate impressions of your childhood?

CLARK

We were deeper thinkers than that. Our teachers made us think deeper.

TESS

Okay, One: If you actually looked at what you and your buddies were writing in 8th grade, I think you'd find that same amount of ass-hattage. I said we're doomed, not more doomed. We've been doomed for a long time. We're just testing kids more now so we see what flavor our doom is gonna come in.

CLARK

But you-

TESS

And Two: Speaking for the teachers of said ass-hats - we are not slacking off, we are pushing the kids as much as time and curricula will let us-

CLARK

But you've got so much more bullshit to deal with-

TESS

True.

CLARK

-gender expression, "emotional safety", racial... cautiousness or whatever you want to call it - general (I'm sorry, but) "wokeness".

TESS

Ookay.

CLARK

Right? How can you even find time-

TESS

(To Clark)

When did it happen, man? What was the exact turning point?

What. CLARK

Tess gestures to Catherine.

What? CATHERINE

Tess shrugs: "If you don't see it..."

I didn't even say anything- CATHERINE

I know! You're so good, when he's talking I don't even see your lips move! TESS

I resent that. CLARK

We were a pretty screwed up family, okay? - guilty-your-honor - but we were a nice bastion of screwed-up liberals- TESS
(To Clark)
 -you were a nice card-carrying member of our nice liberal clan - until she signed on.

Catherine has had nothing to do with- CLARK

I'm not blaming her! She can't help it! You can't help it! You live together, you sleep together, one of you is arch conservative, the other's gonna catch it. Like herpes. TESS

I'm not an arch conservative- CATHERINE

My wife does not have herpes- CLARK
(Simultaneous)

The whole gender thing, you call people what they want to be called, how hard is that? TESS

-I'm not arch conservative- CATHERINE

I'm sorry, but language is supposed to make things clear, it's supposed to facilitate the expression of ideas! If there's a group of people and I ask you "Who's going to the store?" and you say "They are" - language and the brain being what they are, I immediately have a picture in my head of two or more people going to the store. But maybe you meant just one person.
 (MORE) CLARK

CLARK (cont'd)

Now it takes time to figure out what should be a simple answer - we're no longer creating the same images in our minds using the same words - it's one more snipping away at the fabric of the world, one more haste to unravel us as a people all in the name of some kid's desire to feel special!

Pause.

Tess lets out a long breath through her lips.

TESS

You know, public school teachers are not well-paid.

CLARK

I do know that.

TESS

But I wish I was, for one reason: Because then I could call an Uber and I could pay whatever extra wildfire surcharge they'd charge to drive you down to the fucking wedding in fucking Santa Fe so I wouldn't have to sit in a fucking car with you for four fucking hours!

She stalks off.

CLARK

(Calling off after her)

I hope you don't speak that way in front of your students!

They watch her go.

CLARK

You'll notice she didn't actually respond to the issue.

They continue watching her increasingly in the distance.

CLARK

And she's talking about taking Peggy - can you imagine?

Catherine puts a hand on Clark's arm, he instinctively pulls away.

Pause.

They continue to stare after Tess.

CATHERINE

That was pretty harsh.

CLARK

She was or I was?

CATHERINE

Kind of both.

CLARK

Those were my ideas. We share them, you and me, we both have common sense, but those were my own ideas.

CATHERINE

I know that.

CLARK

It didn't used to be like this. We'd have our arguments, but we could stay in the same room and be civil. They've changed. The stress of Daddy and probably Peggy.

(He glances back to the house. A reflex)

Though I don't know what Tess' excuse is. She's just mad all the time. She better watch out or she's gonna become a bitter old woman.

Catherine sits.

CATHERINE

Is there something in the woods, you think?

CLARK

Nothing Tess can't handle.

CATHERINE

I meant what Peggy saw.

CLARK

(Looking to the horizon)

Maybe she sensed something about the fire. It looks like its changed, the smoke's changing color- I think it's getting darker.

CATHERINE

My favorite part of coming out here was the trees.

CLARK

(Watching the horizon)

You mean kindling.

Kidding.

CATHERINE

That first time you brought me out here, remember? You were all nervous, introducing me to everyone - I'm not sure you've ever been cuter..

(She pauses for a response. He keeps watching the horizon, frowning)

But the whole time I was thinking - I never told you this, but I was thinking: "I gotta get out of here."

CLARK

(Eyes on the horizon, calculating)

Huh.

CATHERINE

Not because of your father or sisters or the neighbors or whoever - I just so, so wanted to get outside and be left alone with the trees. But I didn't want to say anything, because how weird would that have been.

CLARK

*(Moving around, looking up the road where
Tess went)*

The smoke's definitely getting darker- Tess wouldn't just leave us here, would she?

CATHERINE

So that night. Our very first night here. You were asleep-

(Clark turns to watch her. She notes this)

I crept downstairs - those, excuse me, fucking creaky stairs - and I came outside in my pajamas and there was this sliver of moon, just enough to see not to bang into the cars or woodpile, and I went far out there... and stood with the trees.

And. To show you what your wife is made of: I was barefoot. On the carpet of pine needles and pine cones and pine rocks and whatever. And I loved it. I loved the earth letting me know with every step that I was in its world, that it had a whole other agenda and timeframe than me, and I could hang out, but it was not going to make anything convenient or comfortable.

And I said, "Okay."

And I stood there listening to some bird somewhere and feeling the souls of my feet and the moon on my face and I breathed in the trees and I don't know how long I was out there but I then thought: Do they have wolves out here? Would I hear a mountain lion if it came up behind me? I'm communing with the universe, but to some animal I'm like a lit-up 24-hour diner... but I didn't care. The trees told me "If it happens it happens. Is there a better place to die than amid perfection?"

And I kept standing.

And I thought "I want to spend the rest of my life with the kind of man that these trees raised." And I came back inside and smelled my skin and it smelled like trees, and I smelled my hair and it smelled like trees and I climbed into bed with you and wrapped my tree arms around you and kissed your neck and you kept right on sleeping.

And it was perfect.

CLARK

...

CATHERINE

So I can see why Marnie doesn't want to leave.

CLARK

Well, yeah, if she ever had that kind of experience, but knowing her-

CATHERINE

She had something. I promise you: You weren't there, but she had something.

CLARK

But, see, what you did, why you're so awesome is you took the forest and put it inside you. You can live in Brooklyn and still have the trees. That's what Marnie doesn't-

*Marnie steps out of the house with a wrapped present.
Catherine makes Clark aware of her.
Marnie smiles at them.*

MARNIE

Here's my present for Richard. If you'd give him and Darlene a hug for me too. Tell them I love them and wish them a long and wonderful life.

CLARK

Absolutely. Listen, I think the smoke's changing, shouldn't we-

MARNIE

(Puts the present on the table)

We're fine. Peg's calmed down. She's in her room. Huey Lewis And The News are keeping her company.

CATHERINE

I'm gonna go walk around.

CLARK

Seriously? Did you not just-

CATHERINE

I just want to see the trees one more time. Before we go.

CLARK

Maybe I'd better-

CATHERINE

I'll be fine. I'll be back before you know it.

She kisses Clark on the cheek and leaves.

Beat. Clark watches her go. Looks back to the horizon.

MARNIE

Where's Tess?

CLARK

We had a dialogue.

MARNIE

Ohhh dear.

CLARK

She still acts like a two-year-old.

MARNIE

She's having a hard time, I think.

CLARK

Harder than the first fifty years?

MARNIE

I think she's really lonely. And I don't think she's got what it takes to be lonely. She needs family. And clearly I'm not the family she needs.

(MORE)

MARNIE (cont'd)

But I think if you and Catherine were here more often, if we could all reconnect and rebuild what we used to have - she used to have genuine fun, you know? We all did.

CLARK

But we were kids.

MARNIE

So? Adults don't have fun? Don't tell me you don't feel that pull as you get older, the... "blood calling to blood" if I can be so dramatic. Your people. You need to be with your people, it's how we're built. Especially when we're young and when we're old.

Peggy needs to see all of us in the flesh. She misses you. Daddy misses you, I miss you. And... we're not gonna be here forever. If you want the people who know you the best, the longest, now is the time to be with them.

CLARK

I do miss you guys.

MARNIE

I know you do. It shows. In your eyes. And we need you.

CLARK

I know you do. It shows. Everywhere. Listen, I know you're getting by - Dad's check, Peggy's check-

MARNIE

Richard sends money.

CLARK

Of course he does.

MARNIE

And I'm still raking in the big bucks on Etsy.

CLARK

Ohh, I saw the back room.

MARNIE

My "artisan workshop", please.

CLARK

There were all these pieces of...
(*He doesn't know*)

MARNIE

They're little dolls made of pine sticks and pinecones, I dress 'em in little frontier outfits. Like hats and aprons and-

CLARK

Yeah, I saw all the body parts and faces and clothes. It looked like Omaha Beach on D-Day.

MARNIE

See, you were seeing it backwards: It was not the end of life, but the beginning; the primordial building blocks for dozens and dozens of brave little pioneers about to venture into the world.

CLARK

So you still have your God complex.

MARNIE

I have an Etsy complex.

CLARK

There's no difference.

MARNIE

Do you know who the biggest buyer of Genuine Colorado Pine Frontier Families is? Hong Kong.

CLARK

Really.

MARNIE

I cannot explain this.

CLARK

They must have like a sexual fetish for the myth of the American West.

MARNIE

Or you could have said they have a connoisseur's eye for fine craftsmanship.

CLARK

That's what I meant.

MARNIE

Tess has a theory they're collecting them, breaking them apart and sharpening the sticks as weapons for the eventual uprising against the Chinese government.

CLARK

That is the most Tess explanation of doll collecting I can possibly imagine.

MARNIE

It is.

CLARK

So your whole business model is based on the vagaries of...

(gestures to horizon)

the landscape.

MARNIE

(Puts a hand on his arm)

Clark. It's going to be fine. We always are.

CLARK

Absolutely, of course. But, look, we don't have much time. Catherine and I have been talking- we've been blessed, really lucky, with our finances - and I know Richard throws money at you all the time to assuage his guilt-

MARNIE

Don't-

CLARK

But that's not what I want to do. That's, I'm sorry but I think that's a cop-out. So. I was gonna talk to the whole family, but maybe it's better to start with you. I am with you 100% on getting our family back closer together. And I am 100% serious that the southwest is not sustainable. We want you, Tess, Peggy, we can discuss Dad - to move out to wherever we end up, and we'll cover the costs. I'm not talking about living in the same house, or even the same block, but nearby. 'Cause if you and Peggy come, you know Tess will piss and moan but she'll come too, soon enough. 'Cause like you said, her and Peggy, and honestly you, Marnie - you need help. One of the biggest regrets of my life is leaving you here to take care of everything. I know Richard feels the same way - or I think he does, who knows what goes on in his brain - but I want to do better than him. I mean, I show up, right? I mean, okay, not as often as, as we'd like, but I'm here, you've met my wife in person, not just on a Zoom call. And I want to make up for when I'm not here. I want to take care of all of you.

MARNIE

...but this is our house.

CLARK

I know.

MARNIE

This is the house. Granddaddy's house, Daddy's house, our house.

CLARK

It is and I love it. It served us beautifully when we needed it to. But we're the family. Not the house.

MARNIE

So... you're not gonna think about coming back here.

CLARK

Honestly, I don't think there's gonna be a here to come back to pretty soon. That fire makes a wrong turn and this could go tonight.

Marnie stares into the distance... Clark glances back at the house. A reflex.

CLARK

We can look into how to transport someone like Dad, and I know Peggy might have trouble adjusting-

MARNIE

Long as she's got Michael Jackson and the Talking Heads she'll be fine.

CLARK

I don't think of her as a Talking Heads kind of gal.

MARNIE

She likes the staccato, I think.

CLARK

It's so great she has her tapes.
So what do you-

MARNIE

Remember when she was little and she'd just melt down, with the biting and flailing-

CLARK

It can't have been easy for her, being a little kid in a house bursting with teenage angst all the time. And no mother.

MARNIE

(Glances at him, then)

We play the hand we're dealt. I still have scars - seriously-
(Shows her arm)
-here and here, look.

CLARK

Wow.

MARNIE

Where Peggy bit me. I used to tell the kids in college it was a wolverine. I thought that'd give more caché than "my baby sister has a mean set of chompers".

CLARK

I gotta start using that one to explain my hernia scar.

MARNIE

I think that's just gonna raise more questions than answers.
(Still looking at her arm)

This was when Dad gave me some of the best advice he ever gave me. When she'd be just flinging her fists and feet around - he showed me how to hold her, how the more distance you gave her the more damage she could do-

CLARK

"Keep your friends close-"

MARNIE

"-but keep your flailers closer."
It worked.

CLARK

It worked. She's so lucky to have you.

MARNIE

And your little flailers? How's the next generation of Andersons holding up?

CLARK

Oh, the boys are great, they're fantastic.

MARNIE

I'm so glad.

CLARK

Craig is still working for ScotiaBank - he's the Assistant Media Supply Chain Business Analyst.

MARNIE

Say it again. Media...

CLARK

Media Supply Chain Business Analyst.

MARNIE

You could totally put those words in any order and they would be just as impressive.

CLARK

And Corey... is still finding himself.

MARNIE

Code for "He's the one that keeps us up at night worrying."

CLARK

No, just... I mean, we do kind of dread a 2 A.M. call with some girl's voice saying "Are you Corey's parents? 'Cause the security guard at the zoo told me to call you."

MARNIE

Oh my god! Has that happened?

Clark holds up two fingers.

MARNIE

No no no! Twice??

CLARK

The second time the security guard called us himself. Cory was trying make some statement about endangered species or something.

MARNIE

So you and Catherine raised two boys who are trying to change the world.

CLARK

"Raised" is the operative word. Past tense. They're out of our control.

MARNIE

I always imagined that was kind of the goal?

CLARK

I think Catherine doesn't know what to do with herself now. She's been... at sea a little lately.

MARNIE

(Patting his back)

She'll always have her third child to take care of.

CLARK

I'm not her third child.

MARNIE

I know, I'm joking.

CLARK

I don't find that funny.

MARNIE

I shouldn't have-

CLARK

I really don't find that funny.

Tess walks up with a half-drunk bottle of beer.

Silence.

She and Clark watch each other a few moments...

Marnie watches Tess.

MARNIE

Where'd you get the beer?

TESS

(Indicates with her head)

I always keep some in the car.

MARNIE

Then why'd you ask me for one?

TESS

The car is like my emergency back-up.

MARNIE

I see.

TESS

Why go to the ATM if someone's got a twenty to loan you, you know?

CLARK

Actually I could use one of those if you-

TESS

No.

CLARK

Really. We're gonna-

TESS

Nope.

MARNIE

How many have you had?

TESS

I've only been gone three minutes, how fast do you think I can drink?

MARNIE

I'm just asking.

TESS

Not enough where I can't safely drive Mr. and Mrs. President here to the wedding, but just enough so that I don't murder Mr. and Mrs. President during said delivery. If that's what you're worried about.

MARNIE

That's not what I'm worried about.

TESS

Okay, mom.

MARNIE

(Sharper than expected)

Don't.

*Dad moans from within the house.
Clark startles, then laughs.*

CLARK

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's awful. It's not funny that he's in pain, but it's just his timing - you'll be talking and then the house just makes this... sound, you know? It's like a laugh track that's out of sync with the jokes.

Pause as the sisters watch him.

TESS

(To Clark)

So where's your lovely spouse?

Sound of a truck approaching.

CLARK

She's out walking around the woods one last time.

MARNIE

One last time?

CLARK

I just meant "this last time", "this visit", she's, she loves the trees.

TESS

Well, let's hope whatever's out there loves her too.

*The truck is closer now.
Tess and Marnie look off toward it.*

You expecting somebody? CLARK

No. MARNIE

Oh, man, is it a ranger truck? Are they coming to evacuate-

It's not a ranger truck. MARNIE

I told you the smoke's changing, the fire's changing-

*The truck stops.
Pause.
They watch.*

... oh! MARNIE

Oh. Shit. TESS

*And on walks ALECIA (50s), jeans and nice blouse,
slightly more put together than the situation requires,
moving with more energy than the moment requires*

Hey, guys. ALECIA

Alecia, honey, hey, how are you doing? I didn't recognize your truck. MARNIE

It's pretty new - or new to us - Mom and I got it this spring. ALECIA
(Crouching, looking back under her truck)

It's a beauty. CLARK

Hello, stranger. ALECIA
(Looks at him)

Hello back! You look fantastic! CLARK

You still look dapper as ever. Welcome back. ALECIA

*She grabs him in a hug.
He flinches at the touch but hugs back, lightly.*

CLARK
Thanks, wow, how, ah, how are you?

ALECIA
I'm good! I'm busy with Mom and my uncle.

CLARK
(Points)
Same place, just over- ?

MARNIE
Still our nearest neighbor.

ALECIA
A brisk 15 minute walk up the hill-

ALECIA AND MARNIE
-a 2 minute fall down the hill.

CLARK
Wow, that's so great, that's so awesome. And your mom, she's doing okay?

ALECIA
She still asks after you.

CLARK
Why would...

ALECIA
She still thinks you were the one that got away. That broke my little heart.

CLARK
Ah.
Ah.

ALECIA
I've been trying to find a polite way to tell her she's full of shit.

CLARK
Okay. Okay!

ALECIA
She still has the bookstore, but she's fixing to retire this fall. Or so she says.

CLARK
Would you take over?

ALECIA
I already am, mostly. She's just there to let people know it's the same old Last Chapter Book Store-

CLARK
Does it still have the, uh, that wooden bear at the door-

ALECIA
Emmett the Bear.

CLARK
Emmett the Bear!

ALECIA
He's still reading a book, yep. This week he's holding "Fahrenheit 451" in honor of...
She gestures to the horizon.

CLARK
That's funny, that's great.

ALECIA
Not great for sales. Not many tourists or foot traffic when the news is full of imminent doomsday.

MARNIE
I think maybe I'd like to be reading a book at doomsday.

ALECIA
Store's so quiet I could even leave Emmett in charge for a couple of hours.

MARNIE
Are you all leaving?

ALECIA
Haven't decided. You?

MARNIE
Same. It's hard. My dad and Peggy.

ALECIA
I bet. I bet. We got the go bag. You know.

MARNIE
Us too.

CLARK
(To Marnie)
Seriously? Where is it?

MARNIE
Well, I don't keep it right by the front door.

CLARK
What's in it?

MARNIE
I have a go bag. Just calm down. Enjoy our neighbor's visit.

ALECIA

I ran into Marnie last week in town and she mentioned you all were coming in last night.

CLARK

Well, not 'til just now. We got delayed.

ALECIA

I just wanted to swing by and say hello.

(Musses Clark's hair)

Mess your carefully coiffed head one more time-

CLARK

(Backs off)

Hey! Hey!

Beat.

ALECIA

Seriously?

Clark hesitates a moment... something seems to click, release a bit. He grins and messes up his own hair further, looking more like a puppy than we've seen him.

ALECIA

There you go.

MARNIE

And, you see who else is here - lurking - Tess, you remember Alecia.

TESS

I do. I do remember Alecia.

ALECIA

How are you, Zaza?

TESS

(Grins)

Wow.

ALECIA

Nobody around to call you that these days?

TESS

I haven't heard that in... a lot of years.

MARNIE

You know what, I am gonna get those sandwiches together - Clark, will you come give me a hand?

CLARK

Why don't we all go in, I want to catch up with Lecia-

MARNIE
You can do that in a minute. Come inside.

CLARK
Um... okay?

He kind of shrugs and follows Marnie inside.

*Alecia watches Tess who is checking a post on the deck.
A few moments go by.*

TESS
(Pointing to the house)
Those scratches on the house, they've been here forever, right?

ALECIA
Which ones?

TESS
Those. Over there.

ALECIA
I don't remember.

TESS
'Cause Marnie thinks there's some demon animals trying to get in at night.

ALECIA
Well. There's a lot of weird shit going on.

TESS
Yeah?

ALECIA
People find their car doors standing open at night. Screen doors ripped. One guy said his garage smells like blood, but there's no sign of anything.

TESS
Oh, I do miss this place.

ALECIA
Do you?

TESS
No.

ALECIA
When was the last time you were here - a few years ago?

TESS
I don't know. I lose track.

ALECIA

You're in... Del Norte, is that what Marnie said?

TESS

Whoa. Marnie sure seems eager to talk about me.

ALECIA

Well, I ask. About the whole family. It's one of those ways that we humans communicate.

TESS

Sure. Yeah. Del Norte for two years now. Was in Alamosa for a while. Glad to hear your mom's doing good.

ALECIA

Yeah.

TESS

And the bookstore, it's good you guys are keeping it going.

ALECIA

You got a bookstore out there in Del Norte?

TESS

Not as such, no. But there's a- one of those Little Free Libraries at the end of my road. But mostly that seems to be the dropbox for the old guy on the corner to put all his old computer programming books. Which is awesome, 'cause a lot of times I find myself wondering how to use a 1990 Turbo C++ compiler. And there's a book!

ALECIA

It's amazing how the universe works.

TESS

And some of the local kids use it as drug drop-off spot. I found an eighth in a copy of "Good Night, Moon" last week.

ALECIA

At least it's appropriate reading.

TESS

And I'm pretty sure at least two meadow mice are making it a little No-Tell Motel.

ALECIA

Oh.

TESS

Sometimes I walk by and I hear some pretty explicit squeaking.

(Alecia grins)

I got a pretty good stash of beer in my car. You want one?

ALECIA

No. Thank you.

TESS

That probably sounds a little weird - like, "I keep beer in my car!" But its not like I drive around like an ice cream truck for winos, like playing little tinkly cocktail lounge music-

(Cheering)

"The liquor truck! It's the liquor truck! Mom, can I have a quarter?"

ALECIA

I think I know those kids.

TESS

But I just, ah- you're sure you don't want one. I'm on my way.

ALECIA

I quit drinking a while back.

TESS

Oh.
...Oh!
...Oh.

ALECIA

It's not that big a deal. Or, it's a big deal actually, for me, but I don't need it to be for you - you should go ahead and get-

TESS

No, no, no. We'll let the Liquormobile roll on by today.
So can I ask, what, ah...?

ALECIA

Um, no, it's okay, I was just, ah, I was waking up too often not remembering how I'd gone to sleep.
And that stopped being funny after a while.

TESS

That's cool. That's great, good for you, seriously.

ALECIA

Which was hard, honestly, considering, like, how much of who I was was woven into that, you know? That was, like- our whole defining trait, you know. Jenny and you and me.

TESS

We had some good times.

ALECIA

Did we though?

TESS

I remember laughing a lot.

ALECIA

Yeah.

TESS

And you can't judge our whole- I mean, it was horrible, but you can't judge a whole time period by Jenny's door thing.

ALECIA

When I think back that's always the first thing that comes to mind.

TESS

Well, yeah, it was a little vivid. Broken glass and blood everywhere and then her arm with the...

(gestures up and down her arm)

It was scary as fuck but she survived. We all survived.

ALECIA

We did. Thank god.

TESS

Thank god. So. Youthful indiscretion, live and learn, it was a long long time ago, you're doing great now, though you are in an industry particularly susceptible to the vagaries of forest fires-

ALECIA

And you're not.

TESS

No, my kids, for all their massive deficiencies, my 8th graders can run like hell. And are fully capable of shoving us old people to the ground to act as firewalls while they run.

They'll be fine when the flames roll in.

Unlike, dare I say it... Mr. Melville, Mr. Poe, Mr. Dostoevsky-

ALECIA

Tess.

Tess.

(Tess pauses)

I came by 'cause Marnie said you'd be here.

TESS

Did she?

Why, did she... tell you to come by?

ALECIA

No.

TESS

Bring your whole "I've stopped drinking" thing-

ALECIA

No! God, no. You brought up the drinking thing.

TESS

She's just, she can't-

I just wanted to see you.

ALECIA

Beat.
Alecia watches Tess. Tess won't make eye contact.
Then...

TESS
(Half-hearted, not sure what else to do)
 Well... Ta-Da! Not much to see.

ALECIA
 Are you dating anybody?

TESS
(A short laugh)
 Yeah, I made an online profile: Flailing bitter middle-school teacher in Del Norte, Colorado, moonlights as drunk-ass chauffeur to the rich and famous, enjoys quiet evenings at home watching crime shows and ranking ways of being murdered. I did not get as many hits as I expected.

ALECIA
 I'm not seeing anyone either.

TESS
 If you want me to help write up your profile, I have a flair.

ALECIA
 You always did.

Tess breathes out.
They watch each other.

ALECIA
 Part of, one of the things that's been hard has been... that... I'm not sure how I feel about my history. I don't mean just like, "Was I a good person or a bad person" (although that's part of it), but, ah, on some fundamental level am I building this current me on a solid foundation of actual facts or am I mistaken - or lying to myself - about what I think I did and felt and said and was. You know?

TESS
 Maybe?

ALECIA
 So I think- I tell myself that there were certain forks in the road, that I made crucial decisions, even if I didn't know they were crucial at the time, that have shaped who I am now and how I'm living my life.

TESS
 So far so good. A little cliched, but followable.
(Alecia watches her)
 Sorry. I'm sorry.

ALECIA

And one of the things that I think was real, that I think was one of the forks... was about who we were to each other.

About how we felt.

Whether we could say it or not.

(Tess watches her)

And decisions were made - or not made - and life flowed from that and we are where we are today. But I just wonder: if what I think was happening was happening. Between us.

(Tess watches her)

Or was I imagining things. Because that's entirely possible. Or am I telling myself stories now and laying them on past events that had no such stories.

So I needed to see you- I needed to see you - take this- what might be last chance - and run a check on my stories.

Pause. They watch each other...

The pause keeps going...

Tess can't open her mouth for fear of what might come out... but she nods.

A very small small quick nod: Yes.

Alecia watches her...

Then Catherine comes around the outside of the house, from the woods, trembling.

CATHERINE

Hey- I'm sorry, I just- um-

Tess and Alecia startle.

TESS

Whoa, are you okay?

CATHERINE

No. I mean, I'm okay. I think I'm okay....

ALECIA

Do you want to sit down?

CATHERINE

No! Thank you!

(Sees Alecia for the first time)

Hi, I'm Catherine Anderson, I'm Clark's wife, I was just-

ALECIA

We met.

CATHERINE

Oh.

ALECIA

A long time ago.

TESS

Sit down, sit, sit.

CATHERINE

(Not sitting)

I was just, I was standing with the trees, one of the things I love about being here is the trees.

TESS

Sure.

CATHERINE

(Not sitting)

I was out there, I know this sounds stupid, but I was, was - I was not hugging the tree, but I was smelling it, I was holding the tree and smelling it.

(A quick glance between Tess and Alecia)

I wanted to... in case I never got to again, I wanted to set the smell in my memory. And my eyes were closed. I was feeling the squishiness of the pine needles under my feet, and I was holding the tree... and I felt this flake.

Like a breath on my hand.

And before I could react, I felt it again. And my eyes snapped open and there were two spots on my hand-

(Holds out the back of her hand)

Like flakes. And I first thought, "It can't be snowing in summer, why is it snowing-" - but the flakes didn't melt. And I looked closer... and it was ash. Two pieces of the most delicate gray butterfly wings, just barely resting on my skin.

But there wasn't any other ash falling. Just these two wisps that found my hand.

And I smelled them. I don't know why. I thought, like... my hands are resting on this tree with life pulsing through it, but the remains of its dead body are already collecting on my hands... and I know what it smells like living, what does it smell like dead, I needed to know, I needed to-

(gestures helplessly)

So I smelled it and... there's no smell. Not like smoke or cinders or... anything.

It was the absence of smell.

And then- this makes no sense, I felt the absence come up behind me, like a... lack of breathing... standing right behind me. And.

And I just got so... scared... and so sad, and I, I ran.

ALECIA

It's okay, you're okay now.

CATHERINE

But, look, the ashes didn't come off.

She holds out the back of her hand once more.

Tess gives Alecia another quick glance.

ALECIA

Well, there's no other ash around here. We're still-

TESS

But this is how it starts. Stupid delusional Marnie and her stupid staying here-

CATHERINE

This was something else! The ash is just its fingerprints.
And it chose to touch me.

ALECIA

It's probably not a consolation, but if you were standing in the middle of a whole forest that had burned down, there'd definitely be a smell. Smoke has a smell.

CATHERINE

I know that.

ALECIA

...I'm sorry you got freaked out.

TESS

Yeah.

*Catherine watches them... they so clearly do not get it.
She turns away. Looks at the ash on her hand... and rubs it off. Keeps rubbing harder and harder.
Tess and Alecia glance at each other.
Then Catherine stops.
Collects herself.
Turns to go inside, re-composing herself with every step.*

She pauses. Looks back at Tess.

CATHERINE

I'm not sorry. For Clark. Whatever wholesome liberal Eden he came out of, he was lost when I found him. He was sinking. All I did was give him a hand up to solid ground. He may not need me now, but I do what I'm called to do. I'm never going to apologize for that.

*She turns, almost running into Peg coming out of the house.
Peg has the tape recorder on a strap over her shoulder like a purse.*

Catherine hesitates - Peg stares at her.

PEG

I'm sorry about your mom.

CATHERINE

What.

PEG

You said your mom was sick like our daddy. I'm sorry she's sick. I hope she gets better.

Beat. Catherine stares at her...

CATHERINE

Excuse me.

*She goes inside.
Peg watches her go.
Pause.*

ALECIA

Peggy.
Do you mind going back inside for a second? Your sister and I need to talk about something.

TESS

We need to talk about how there's ash falling now-
(To Peg)

How your sister-
(gestures into the house)
-that one, needs to snap out of it.

Tess walks for the house. Peg hesitates...

ALECIA

Peggy.
You remember when I used to come over here? When you were little?

PEG

I sure do.

Tess stops by the door.

ALECIA

I'd come over to hang with your sister-
(Points to Tess)
-that one - and you'd be hanging out with your birds. Remember?

PEG

I sure do.

ALECIA

You were, what, five? And you had like ten birds - canaries and parakeets and...

PEG

I had two parakeets and three lovebirds and two canaries and one finch.

ALECIA

Right?
And you had this idea - this was all you - you set up that little tent in the middle of the living room floor, and you'd climb in and take all your birds with you and you'd close up the door and just... sit in there.
In this small perfect world of music and gliding wings.

PEG

The canaries especially liked Journey, and Scooter especially liked Air Supply.

ALECIA

And Tess and I would sit together on the couch outside your tent in the afternoon sun. Just sitting there watching you sitting there in utter bliss.

Peg is beaming, rocking gently, starts tapping her chest with her finger tips...

ALECIA

(To Tess)

That is a very, very clear memory I hold onto.

Peg is holding herself, in still joy.

PEG

One interesting fact about Journey is that they'd been recording since 1975, but it wasn't until 1981 that they had their first Top Ten hit with "Don't Stop Believing".

Marnie and Clark step out of the house with a plate of sandwiches.

MARNIE

So what did we miss?

PEG

You missed us talking about Journey and Air Supply and my soft birdhouse and-

Peg sees Clark and goes instantly silent again, still gently rocking...

TESS

You missed us talking about why you still have no viable plan to get Dad and Peggy out of here if that fire is shifting.

Peg moves over to Marnie.

MARNIE

It's not shifting.

TESS

We've got Alecia's truck, we could haul Dad out now.

ALECIA

Do you need my truck?

TESS

She's gonna need something. Unless Clark and Cathy and their buddies can all just pray the fire away.

CLARK

You just can't stop, can you?

TESS

What I can't stop is the ash that's started falling and your wife freaking out and Marnie standing here handing out sandwiches and I think it's gonna take some kind of miracle either out there-

(Toward the horizon)

-or right here to save everybody, and as I understand it you and your ilk are big on the whole prayer thing... so... I hope you're on it!

CLARK

What do you mean "Catherine's freaking out", where is she?

ALECIA

She got a little overwhelmed in the woods. She's inside.

Clark moves quickly inside.

MARNIE

Was she okay?

TESS

(Pouring lemonade)

She'll probably be better if we all pray for her.

MARNIE

Stop it.

TESS

I'm just- I get tired of the certainty, you know? Remember when he didn't know anything and was okay with that? He'd just smile and shrug?

ALECIA

(Gesturing for Tess to pour her a glass)

What happened to that version?

TESS

Well, he met her and learned how to make money and now he comes in here with all the answers, all the-

(Makes fuddy-duddy huffing sounds)

-opinions, here to save us all, while his own wife wets herself because of a tree.

MARNIE

He's trying.

TESS

He certainly is.

ALECIA

And prayer's not gonna hurt.

TESS

No, but again, it's the fucking certainty-

MARNIE

(Gestures to Peg)

Do you mind-

TESS

I'm sorry, Peggy, but- I mean, even if prayer works sometimes, maybe, it's so sporadic it's like winning the lottery! Lotteries are not an effective structure to build your economy on, and prayer and miracles are not an effective structure to build your society on - it's rickety! He's rickety! He's got all these grand plans on how to live our lives and he's rickety as hell! And I should know, 'cause I'm rickety as hell!

MARNIE

(Quietly)

I think miracles happen.

ALECIA

What?

MARNIE

I do think miracles happen. I think one may be going to happen today.

ALECIA

Well... that'd be nice.

MARNIE

I don't think it will be nice. I think it will be upsetting and brain-shocking and totally out of left field. That's what makes it a miracle.

PEG

(Singing quietly, happily, to the song of Mike and the Mechanics)

"All I need is a miracle. All I needed is youuu."

MARNIE

(Grins)

That's right.

PEG

(Singing happily)

"All I need is a miracle. All I needed is youuu."

TESS

Yeah, I'm sorry, Marn, but I think the miracle bank has been plumb dried up for a few millennia now. What we need is a plan.

PEG

(Singing)

"All I need is a miracle-"

MARNIE

(Holds up two fingers)

Peggy.

We're done now.

Peg goes quiet.

MARNIE

(To Tess)

I was thinking about that though, the miracle bank. I read an article last week-

TESS

UGH! See, this is why I don't come around, 'cause I know you're starved for adult conversation and I'm gonna get hit full in the face with it-

MARNIE

No, but just listen: There was a Sultan in India in the 1700s - true story - he got pissed off at a holy man who the Sultan thought was faking being a Muslim. So the Sultan cut off the holy man's head. But! Then the head... started reciting all of the six main Islamic prayers to prove he was a Muslim all along!

ALECIA

Whoa.

MARNIE

And it's not just a story, multiple people witnessed this and wrote about it independently. Apparently a decapitated head was genuinely speaking! And! This being the internet, that only led me to more stories about talking heads - not the band - there are 120 known references - from multiple sources - to English and Celtic people - St. Justus, St. Denis of Paris, Genes de la Jara in Spain - they all kept talking after being decapitated.

TESS

You memorized all those names?

MARNIE

Because it's so fascinating! Because it means either: Things like that never happened and people just thought they were seeing it, and we just never think that now, OR people back then felt more comfortable lying about it - over and over and over again - more than people do now, OR it actually happened back then and it's not happening now.

And I'm not sure which of those things to believe.

TESS

So you truly think it's possible there were masses of heads laying around berating their beheaders.

MARNIE

Not masses - but if it was happening why did it stop?

ALECIA

Or are there talking heads now that we're not hearing about?

MARNIE

Exactly. We think miracles and magic are like, the belly button lint of ancient gullible people- but what if they weren't? What if the logic-defying is still possible?

ALECIA

(A glance to Tess)

I think it is. I've seen people do things I never thought they could do.

TESS

(To Marnie)

Is that what you're waiting on? You think Daddy's gonna finally have some kind of magic epiphany?

Clark and Catherine come out of the house.

Once again Peg retreats a little, especially watching Catherine.

ALECIA

(To Catherine)

Hey, are you okay?

CATHERINE

I'm fine. Completely fine.

CLARK

She just got light-headed. It happens sometimes.

MARNIE

Well, sit down. Have some water.

CATHERINE

I'm fine.

TESS

Speaking of light-headed, Marnie was just distracting us with the fact that she thinks ancient decapitated heads may have a message for us.

CLARK

What... "Avoid the French Revolution"?

MARNIE

I didn't say they did talk, I said there are so many reports of it happening in the past, I just wondered about now.

CLARK

But you also believe in UFOs, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster-

ALECIA

Do you?

MARNIE

I don't necessarily believe in them.

CLARK

Oh yes you do!

TESS

(To Alecia)

How did you not know this?

MARNIE

It's just, when someone asks me to believe something, I run it through a quick filter: what does it mean if they're wrong? And something like Bigfoot or Yeti or Nessie - if it's all B.S. I don't lose anything. But: If they do exist, the world is a more interesting place. So until proven otherwise, I'll opt for the more interesting world.

TESS

I think the space between your ears is already plenty interesting.

ALECIA

No, I get that, I do. It's part of why I believe in reincarnation.

MARNIE

Excellent!

TESS

Oh, Jesus.

ALECIA

(A little embarrassed)

That's why I give to charities.

TESS

Wait, what?

ALECIA

I figure when I come back, just looking at the numbers, I'll probably be reborn in some really desperate place - a lot poorer or sicker than I am now, so I figure if I can give something now to make those places better, maybe when I get there it'll be easier, or there'll be less people in dire straits so my odds of being one of them go down.

Tess laughs.

CLARK

I have never thought of that before!

ALECIA

I mean, it's not the only reason, but I do think about it every time I'm choosing who to donate to.

TESS

Every charity in the world is missing such a marketing opportunity: "Chances are this is gonna be you sitting here starving with malaria, so fork over now while you got the chance or future-you is gonna be SOOOO sorry!"

CLARK

It's like afterlife insurance!

MARNIE

I get it, Alecia, I do - I was reading, when I was looking up the beheading sultan, I was reading about people - again, ancient people - in China and Africa who believed so strongly in reincarnation that they would kill themselves, promising to come back in twenty years to finish off an enemy when they least expected it.

TESS

Man, I hope that one's not true, 'cause there's gotta be a billion animals out there dying as we speak and if they figure out a way to come back for us... we are in deep shit.

ALECIA

Maybe they have. Maybe we are.

MARNIE

(A warning)

Okay, okay, Peggy's here, okay?

TESS

You brought it up.

CATHERINE

I don't think we have to worry about animals coming back - or any of us. I think if everyone's dying we should just be worried about getting into heaven.

TESS

Ohhhh... let's go back to the talking severed heads.

CATHERINE

We've been told - we have been promised - that we'll all meet again there and all suffering will cease. That our souls will go there now, and our bodies will follow at the end of the world. I'm looking forward to seeing my mom and dad.

MARNIE

I think that's a beautiful thought.

TESS

Do you go along with that, Clark? You all in on the "See you in Heaven End Of The World" train? 'Cause that's not how you were raised.

CLARK

(Looks at Catherine, takes her hand)

I am. I've come to believe that that's the truth. And to your point earlier, I believe in the power of prayer.

MARNIE

I, for one, am delighted to have such a variety in our family.

ALECIA

(Toasting)

To a smorgasbord!

TESS

To incoherence!

They toast. Peg, watching Alecia, does too.

TESS

(To Catherine and Clark)

So tell me, faithful ones: Is praying going to make the sea levels go back down?
And that fire go out?

MARNIE

Tess, please-

CLARK

Well, obviously-

TESS

`Cause I'm pretty sure there were people praying like hell to keep the fires away from their homes up in Estes Park and Grand Lake and Louisville and Superior, and we all know how well that turned out.

CATHERINE

I think... as hard as it is to hear it at the time... I think sometimes God doesn't give us what we want because he has something better planned for us.

TESS

`Cause he's all-loving.

CATHERINE

I think horrible, horrible things happen. But in the big picture, bigger than we can see-

TESS

And I think in the big picture, we are hard-wired-
(Pointedly to Catherine and Clark)
-through evolution-

CATHERINE

(Raising her hand)

I believe in evolution.

CLARK

I believe God created the fish that turned into lizards that turned into mammals.

TESS

Well... good! There's a point of agreement!

Alecia dutifully claps. Peg claps following Alecia.

TESS

I think we are hard-wired - I think the cave people who fit into a bigger group survived more sabertooth tiger attacks and had more babies and it got built into us that joining a team is a good good thing, whether it's a... band or sports team, or political party, or a religion- I think it feels good to be part of something bigger and we made up God to give us something to talk about.

CATHERINE

(To Tess)

I'm with you almost 100%-

TESS

Whoa!

CATHERINE

I think we're born to be part of something bigger - but that's because we already were. We started out as part of God, which is part of everything, and came into these little bodies and feel so, so alone, but we also know - just know in our hearts - that we are meant to be part of something bigger. So we find a sports team or political party-

CLARK

Or pickleball group-

TESS

-or religion-

CATHERINE

-or religion - but it won't be until we die and get reunited with God that we'll finally, truly feel that sense of belonging that we know is the natural order.

MARNIE

I love that!

TESS

I can say...

(Really holding Catherine's eye contact)

I really hope that's true.

I would love that to be true.

I doubt it. I really really doubt it.

But it would be...

CATHERINE

Lovely?

TESS

(Meaning it)

Lovely.

Pause. They share a moment.

Then a LOUD CRUNCH from under the deck

They all jump, yelling, Peg screams and grabs Marnie, almost crying

MARNIE AND CLARK

Oh my god!

TESS

What was that!

They all scramble off the deck, yelling.

Pause.

They stand gaping at the deck... gasping...

Nothing happens.

Nothing's moving.

CATHERINE

Is it collapsing?

ALECIA

I think I heard a rustling - back behind there-

CLARK

Like an animal?

ALECIA

I don't know, like something moving after the crunch.

TESS

Probably what you brought up under your truck-

MARNIE

Do we need to get Daddy out, we should get Daddy-

TESS

Whatever it is seems to have stopped.

CLARK

Maybe it's a sinkhole? Like the deck is sinking?

CATHERINE

It looks fine.

TESS

Get on up there, Clark, check it out.

CLARK

Screw you.

MARNIE

(To Peg)

It's okay, Peg, we're fine. We're fine.

Alecia is peering around the back of the deck

CATHERINE

(To Alecia)

Do you see anything?

ALECIA

Not really.

CATHERINE

If this was Florida I'd suspect an alligator.

TESS

Well, maybe, climate change, they gotta go somewhere-

MARNIE

But the house is okay, right?

CLARK

What kind of animal makes that sound?

TESS

I think Clark should crawl under the deck and check.

CLARK

Did I mention "Screw you"?

Alecia has her phone out, using it as a flashlight to scan under the deck...

ALECIA

Let me just look...

TESS

(A little giddy)

This is the part where the undead clown jumps out from under there, right?

CATHERINE

Undead clown? What do you fill your mind with?

TESS

Oh, that was the niciest image I could come up with.

MARNIE

(Holding the increasingly scared Peg)

It's okay, Peggy, we're okay.

CLARK

(To Alecia)

What do you see?

ALECIA

I don't... see... anything. Spider webs...

TESS

(To Catherine)

Climate change, right? Spiders, they're gonna grow in the heat-

CATHERINE

Stop.

TESS

Maybe it is a spider - this big-
(Gestures pillow-sized)

CATHERINE

Stop.

TESS

-that's already crawled out and into my car and is waiting under the front seat for us-

CATHERINE

(Lightly slapping Tess' arm)

Stop!!

MARNIE

I'm more worried if something's come loose and the deck could collapse...

Clark is now checking poles and looking underneath as well with his phone light.

MARNIE

As long as it's not the house - sounds like Daddy slept through it-

CATHERINE

It sounded pretty clearly under the deck.

ALECIA

It looks like maybe something went out behind here, like through the dirt here, maybe.

Tess goes to look.

CATHERINE

But like a... what? A woodchuck?

TESS

Too big for a woodchuck.

CLARK

Whatever it was, I think it's gone.

TESS

We still have Daddy's rifle, right?

MARNIE

We're not getting Daddy's rifle.

TESS

I mean, this is exactly why the NRA says you should be armed to the teeth.

ALECIA

Only a good guy with a gun can stop a giant woodchuck with a gun.

Exactly. TESS
(Grins)

We're not getting Daddy's gun. MARNIE

What's creepy is that whatever it was was just... down there... this whole time, we were standing up here talking and it was just waiting down there... CATHERINE

Clark steps up onto the deck.

Careful, Clark! MARNIE

He walks around. They hold their breath.

Seems fine. CLARK

He jumps lightly on the deck.

CSSSHHHHHHHH! TESS
(Imitating a collapsing deck)

Very funny. MARNIE

I think it was Tess finally acknowledging maybe there's a God and He decided to give her a sign she was on the right path. CLARK

By terrifying us? ALECIA

And He said, "Lo, let the Giant Woodchuck come forth and spread the Good News." TESS

Marnie steps up on the deck, relieved and happy.

Here, everyone, eat, eat, drink - I'm so glad nothing got broken. MARNIE
 Come on, Peggy.

Catherine helps Peg up onto the deck. Peg nods to her, perhaps holds her hand a little longer than necessary.

After you. ALECIA
(To Tess)

After you. TESS

After you. ALECIA

TESS
(Stepping onto the deck)
 You just want me to die in a horrible deck accident, don't you.

ALECIA
 I'm testing the power of prayer.

MARNIE
 Here - sandwiches, everyone, I made special sandwiches-

CLARK
 What's special about 'em?

MARNIE
 You'll see.

TESS
 Annnnd we're back in the horror movie.

Peg eats her sandwich happily

MARNIE
(To Peg)
 They're good, aren't they?

PEG
 They're A-OK in every way.

Clark takes a bite.

CLARK
 Whoa-ho! That's a trip down memory lane!

MARNIE
 Right?

Tess takes a bite, Alecia is about to.

ALECIA
 Why, what-

TESS
 Peanut butter and mayonnaise!

ALECIA AND CATHERINE
 Oh!

They both drop their sandwiches.

Whoa! TESS

You okay? MARNIE

I'm allergic to peanuts. ALECIA

Oh my god! MARNIE

Oh no! CLARK

Since when? TESS

A few years now. I don't know where it came from- ALECIA

I'm so sorry, I'll make something else- MARNIE

Do you, like, swell up? TESS

No, just get a rash, but it's getting worse - I'm scared that at some point it could get that bad. ALECIA

I didn't know, I can- MARNIE

TESS
(To Marnie)
 The woman comes all the way out here - at your request - and you try to kill her?

MARNIE
(To Catherine)
 Are you allergic to peanuts too, Catherine?

CATHERINE
 No. I just thought peanut butter and mayonnaise was disgusting.
 No offense.

Peg puts her partly-eaten sandwich back down on the plate.

MARNIE
 I thought it'd be a fun treat - all those picnics-

ALECIA
 Don't worry about me, Marnie, you guys should absolutely eat 'em.

CLARK

(To Catherine)

What's special - every other kid on Earth was eating peanut butter and jelly, and our dad made us peanut butter and mayonnaise-

MARNIE

(Holds up sandwich as a toast to the house)

Thank you, Daddy.

ALECIA

For those picnics!

TESS

Oh man.

MARNIE

I loooved those so much!

CLARK

I'm just shocked they let us wander off alone into the woods all day with our little sandwiches and Kool-Aid - they just assumed we'd find our way back.

TESS

Or they hoped we wouldn't.

CLARK

I wouldn't let Craig or Corey go to the corner store without someone.

TESS

Like the nanny.

CLARK

We did have a nanny, don't start with me about the nanny.

TESS

(Singing)

"We're movin' on uuup!"

MARNIE

It's different times, that's for sure.

CLARK

It was on those picnics - our little solo forest adventures - that's where I learned about sex.

MARNIE

Oh god.

CLARK

It's true!

TESS

Welp, I guess we should be hitting the road-

CLARK

(To Marnie)

You remember! Alecia, you were there, right?

ALECIA

I think I recall.

CLARK

It was magical!

(To Catherine)

Kitten, kitten, did I ever tell you this story-

TESS

No, no, you want her to stay married to you-

CLARK

(To Catherine)

You'll understand this, it's about getting overwhelmed in the woods-

ALECIA

That's one word for it.

CATHERINE

I'm game.

CLARK

We used to, all of us kids, and Alecia and her brother, we'd go on these adventures by ourselves in the woods-

ALECIA

No grown-ups.

CLARK

This was before Peggy was born.

TESS

(Quietly to Peg)

This was an okay one to miss.

CLARK

I must have been like, nine?

MARNIE

I think I'd just started Kindergarten, so yeah.

CLARK

So we were all in the woods, Richard too, he was the oldest, the leader-

TESS

Self-appointed leader.

CLARK

-I suppose-

TESS

Later on I believe the term "dictator" was thrown around a lot.

CLARK

Okay-

TESS

-accent on the "dick" part.

CLARK

Okay, so we were in the woods, and it was a beautiful day, like golden sunlight, like a painting. And we were in a clearing - you remember that clearing?

MARNIE

It was magical.

ALECIA

For whatever reason no trees in this little area, actual grass growing-

MARNIE

-this little open magical spot surrounded by forest-

CLARK

And we were eating out peanut butter and mayo sandwiches. And talking about... who knows what.

ALECIA

Deep philosophical kid thoughts.

CLARK

And then... there was this deer.

MARNIE

Magical.

CLARK

Marnie saw it first - the littlest one of us all, of course-

ALECIA

It was like a unicorn sighting - you had to be totally innocent to see it.

TESS

That was when Marn started thinking she was magical special.

MARNIE

Weird things do happen to me-

CLARK

But she pointed, Marnie did. Not saying a word, just silently pointed. And we all looked... and there was this... magnificent deer. Like the perfect deer. The archetypal deer. Perfect coat, almost translucent gold in the sunlight-

Peg begins lightly rocking and tapping her chest, increasingly excited...

ALECIA

And her eyes-

CLARK

The deepest, warmest, wisest eyes I've ever seen - animal or human-

MARNIE

And she was looking right at us.

ALECIA

Standing perfectly still about twenty feet away at the edge of the clearing... just... watching us.

CLARK

Totally taking us in. Like seeing into our souls, it felt like.

MARNIE

It was pretty mystical.

CLARK

And nobody was speaking, I don't know if we were even breathing. It was like we had somehow slipped through this fold in the world and were touching some universal truth. And it was touching us.
And the deer watched us...
And we watched her...
Then CRASH!

Peg rocks and taps faster, more excited...

ALECIA

Out of the woods-

CLARK

-Right beside her, this huge elk smashes through the bushes, out of nowhere!

ALECIA

-like an explosion-

CLARK

-and before the doe can even move, he's on top of her, this giant ten-point buck, this forest god, just humping her like its the end of the world!

ALECIA

It was so loud!

CLARK

He was! She was barking, like making these shouting barks, and he was just bellowing, like a huge bull seal - just-
(Roaring deeply)
WROAAHH! WROOAAHH! WROOAAHHH!

Peg is really rocking and tapping now, almost giddy-

ALECIA

It was echoing-

CLARK

They were screaming - then we started screaming-
(imitating the low buck and high-pitched children)

WROOAAHH EEEEEEE WROOAAHH EEEE!!

ALECIA

-and the doe breaks free-

CLARK

She's panicked, crashes off into the trees, the buck still WROOAAHing, but he crashes off into the trees...

ALECIA

And we all shut up.

CLARK

And just sat there.

MARNIE

And just sat there.

CLARK

Like... "What. The Fuck. Was that??"

Pause.

Marnie puts an arm around Peg to slow her down, which Peg gradually does through the following...

CATHERINE

Whoa.

CLARK

And, and Richard, he recovers first, and he says, "Oh, that's just how they make deer babies."

ALECIA

And the rest of us are like, "WHAT."

CLARK

And he's like, "People do the same thing."

ALECIA

And we're like, "WHAT???"

CLARK

He says, "Oh yeah, yeah, I've heard Mom and Dad make those sounds lots of times."

TESS

And we were like, "Those sounds??"

MARNIE

Like "We've lived in the same house our entire lives and I have never heard anything like that in my life."

TESS

I think that day did more to decrease the chances of teenage pregnancy among our group than any abstinence class.

ALECIA

They ought to do that, bring 5th graders out into the woods and watch deer mating. There would be no premarital sex.

TESS

Possibly no post-marital sex either.

MARNIE

I actually asked Daddy about it.

TESS

You did?

MARNIE

I asked if that's where babies came from. If maybe Mom was washing dishes and he just jumped out of the closet and landed on her and started going "WROAHH WROAHH WROARHH" and then I popped out.

CLARK

And what did he say?

MARNIE

He went into his room, closed the door, and put on Jethro Tull.

CLARK

(To Catherine)

So that's how we learned about the birds and the bees.

ALECIA

Or the does and the bucks.

CATHERINE

And that's what you think of when you eat peanut butter and mayo sandwiches?

CLARK

Well, I don't eat 'em that often.

(Sees Marnie glowing with happiness)

Look at you, beaming.

MARNIE

This is what I meant, we're the only people on Earth who know that story, know how to tell it-

ALECIA

And a hundred more-

MARNIE

A thousand more.

(Holding Clark's hand)

Come home.

You're gonna come home.

(Clark laughs)

Why are you laughing?

CLARK

(Laughing)

Marnie. Come on. No! It's because those memories are so good I can't come back! I love who we were! I do! And I don't want to see that house and that forest and those people I love going to hell. I want to lock those memories in a box where we can open 'em again and again, without them getting layered over in ash and shit and smoke.

MARNIE

They are not-

CLARK

Marnie, the good memories here are done. If we're gonna have any in the future it's gonna be somewhere else.

MARNIE

Because you're so happy where you are.

CLARK

Look. I am sorry that this is all you've got, Marnie. But you chose this, you put yourself here. The rest of us want to live.

MARNIE

Oh, bullshit.

CLARK

I am the anti-bullshit in this family!

A moan from inside the house.

Peg begins rocking and tapping her chest more furtively again-

CLARK

Fantastic, now we've woken him up.

MARNIE

We?

CLARK

You're flying off the handle, getting emotional-

TESS

Ohhhhh man-

CATHERINE

Should we check on him-

CLARK

(To Marnie)

You wonder what he's moaning about, I'd be moaning too-

MARNIE

You have no right to talk about him-

CLARK

Because he's doing so well under your care.

TESS

(To Clark)

I think it's time for you to shut up.

CLARK

Oh, okay, right, twenty minutes ago you were plotting to get Peg out of here and now you're all pro-Marnie-

MARNIE

(To Tess)

You what?

TESS

I just think we need to see if Peg's actually doing okay here-

MARNIE

Oh, like you care-

TESS

I care!

MARNIE

When? Every couple of years?

CLARK

Marnie, there's a reason-

MARNIE

And you too! You say you want to do better than Richard, then do better than Richard, be here! If this place calls you back, let it call you back! I don't blame Catherine - or not entirely blame Catherine - you call me an anchor, she's an anchor-

CATHERINE

I'm an-

MARNIE

(To Clark)

You were ready to come back when you met her, you were ready to throw in the towel-

CLARK

She saved me, she absolutely did-

MARNIE

But saved you for what?
This is your home, not out there, that's just where you work- that's where your kids are flailing as much as Peggy ever did-

CLARK

Don't you dare-

MARNIE

(Hits his chest)

-This is where you live-
(Points to the ground)

-here. Here!
Here.

CATHERINE

I have never made Clark-

TESS

No, he's fully capable of making shithead decisions on his own.

CLARK

You guys!! There is no here here! This is all going away!
(To Marnie)

Sell the place while you still can, get out of here and bring Peg and Tess with you!

TESS

Why is Tess going?

CLARK

Marnie wants us all to be together and I think that's a great idea-

TESS

Did someone ask Tess about this?

CLARK

No, because sometimes you do more damage to this family than Peggy ever did.

ALECIA

Whoa!

MARNIE

How dare you-

CLARK

No, no, I'm through with the tiptoeing around, trying to say the right things - when did saying the right words get more important than doing things to help each other?? When did we all start being afraid of the truth? We're not gonna get anywhere that way! The truth is I love Peggy, and I am still willing to say, out loud, that our mother would still be alive today if it weren't for her!

Pause.

A bomb of silence has just gone off.

Peg continues rocking and tapping...

...Clark.

CATHERINE

That's not...
Peggy, that is not-

MARNIE

Wow.

ALECIA

Marnie goes to Peg, will keep a light touch on her, trying to keep her calm, though Peg keeps rocking and tapping...

CLARK

I'm sorry. I am sorry for speaking the truth, but I think we're running out of time to not to speak the truth, and I am not sorry for literally trying to save Peggy's goddam life right now-

(To Marnie and Tess)

-and yours and yours, and if I'm using the "wrong words" or speaking the "wrong truth", I'm sorry, but I am doing my damndest-

TESS

You're just a fucking idiot is what you are, the same fucking idiot you always were except now your head's so far up your ass you can't even hear what you're saying.

ALECIA

Zaza, don't-

TESS

Why? Is that your deal too? You came here to "save" me too?

ALECIA

I came here 'cause you get to a point in your life when you can't lie about how fast the windows are closing, if they aren't shut already.

MARNIE

She came because I asked her, because I thought-

TESS

There we go, there we go!

*Another moan from inside.
Peg rocks more....*

MARNIE

I thought-

TESS

-that I needed saving but you don't?

MARNIE

I think no such thing-

TESS

(To Marnie)

Fuck you no such thing - just because Daddy's gone doesn't make you the only grown-up around here-

MARNIE

I never-

CLARK

That's right, for once Tess is right - I'm just gonna say it, it's another truth and I'm gonna say it: When Daddy was the center of things, everything was cool, we were in orbit, it was cool, but since Marnie's taken over... what, Richard won't even show his face, I don't want to show my face but I do anyway because I'm a fucking grown-up, Peggy's turning into a mute, Tess is turning into a harpy, Marnie, you're hearing, what, animal voices now-

MARNIE

Animal voices??

CLARK

Tess says you think animals are visiting you in your sleep or something-

TESS

I never-

CLARK

-What is missing, I'm sorry to be the one to say it, what is missing is a strong male figure to hold this place together.

TESS

Goddammit!

MARNIE

"A strong male figure"?

CATHERINE

Clark, honey-

TESS

No, no, no, he's right, us goofy little ladies, how are we gonna manage? What we need is a big old buck to come charging out of the woods and shove his dick in-

CATHERINE

I am not-

TESS

I think we all need a little rapist deer in our lives, don't we?

Peg is rocking violently, her fingers twitching, flying over her tape player, trying to calm herself - Marnie holds her but is being drawn into the fight-

ALECIA

(To Tess)

Zaza, just take a step back-

TESS

No, you take a step back! You show up here thinking I ever gave more than two shits about you? Wondering all these years if, ooo, maybe there was some magic spark - there isn't! There was nothing except two drunk girls-

(To Clark)

-running away from the male-dominated shitshows of their homes-

MARNIE

Tess, stop it!

TESS

Why? Are you my mother? You want them-

(Gestures to Clark and Catherine)

-to be my mommy and daddy and get me back on God's path, because you clearly can't? I am gonna take Peggy away from you 'cause who knows what's going to happen to her locked up in this shithouse-

Marnie lets go of Peg, slaps Tess- Tess shoves her back-

TESS

NO!

Clark tries to get between them-

CLARK

You see? You see??

Tess is really going for Marnie, Alecia tries to grab her-

CATHERINE

Stop it! Stop it Stop it-

And Peggy is SCREAMING, madly ripping the tape out of her cassette, flinging it as she screams-

PEG

STOPITSTOPITSTOPITSTOPITSTOPITSTOPITSTOPIT

Marnie stumbles to her, Clark and Alecia hold Tess-

MARNIE

Peggy! Peggy! Peggy baby baby-

Marnie grabs for the cassette - Peg HITS Marnie, not meaning to, flailing - Marnie falls back as Catherine runs to Peg-

CATHERINE

-it's okay it's okay it's okay-

And Catherine instinctively hugs Peg tight, tight, tight

Peg is crying, Catherine rocking her... rocking her...

CATHERINE

-it's okay. It's okay.

It's okay. It's okay-

Peg is gasping, rocking... starts to get her breath back...

The others just stare...

Marnie looks up at Tess who can only glare, trembling...

TESS

(Pulling free of Clark and Alecia)

Everyone... who is going to Santa Fe... get in my car now, or I am leaving without you.

We are going, and we are not saying one goddam word the entire four hours.

She stalks out.

CLARK

Wait!

He charges off after her.

Marnie moves over to hold Peg. Catherine reluctantly lets go...

MARNIE

(To Catherine)

Thank you.

CATHERINE

I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have-

MARNIE

(Pointedly)

I said thank you.

(To Peg)

Sweetheart, hold the tape player. Feel the tape player. Feel the tape player..

Peg clutches the player, her finger moving over it, ritualistically...

Clark runs back on.

CLARK

She means it, she's going in two minutes-

CATHERINE

You're gonna seriously get in a car with her?

CLARK

She'll calm down. And all our stuff is in there. She'll calm down.

MARNIE

Then you better go.

CLARK

Well, I didn't- You. You know. Should I go say goodbye to Daddy?

MARNIE

That's up to you.

He hesitates... looks at Catherine

CATHERINE

Yes, Clark, yes you should go say goodbye to your dying father.

He hesitates... nods... goes inside.

Marnie helps Peg get out another cassette from her pockets.

MARNIE

Here. We're going to put in another one, it's okay, we'll see if we can fix that one. Let's get in another song, okay?

Peg collects herself slowly through the following. She takes another tape reverently out of her pocket and prepares to play it.

MARNIE

(To Alecia)

Your truck's blocking Tess' car.

ALECIA

I know.

MARNIE

You can keep her here.

Alecia watches the car and truck in the distance...

Then she fishes in her bag for something. Finds an envelope and pen, quickly writes something on the envelope... scratches it out and writes something else. Holds it out to Marnie and Catherine.

ALECIA

I'm moving my truck. Will one of you give this to Tess when she's calmed down?

I don't... um...
CATHERINE

MARNIE
(Takes the paper)
I will. I'll make sure she gets it.

ALECIA
Thank you.
(To Marnie)
...I hope... everything goes okay for you.

MARNIE
Thank you.
I'm sure it will.

ALECIA
Maybe you got your miracle. It just only lasted about five minutes.

Marnie nods, tears welling up.

Alecia nods and leaves.

Clark comes out of the house.

CLARK
He's sleeping. I didn't want to wake him.

MARNIE
He can be a little cranky when you first rouse him up.

Clark hesitates beside Marnie...

CLARK
The good times - I remember a lot of the good times with him.

MARNIE
I know.

CLARK
It just seemed like... like it would build up, you know? Like a geyser underground, calm calm calm, and then he'd have to go break something, or start a bar fight, or... chop down a tree. Or something.

Marnie nods, watching him.

CLARK
You're doing a great job with him. Really. A great job.

He hesitates a moment longer... wanting to say more... nods again.

CLARK
(To Catherine)
 Come on, kitten.

CATHERINE
 ...I'm not going.

CLARK
 What.

CATHERINE
 I'm... not going to the wedding. I'm gonna...
(To Marnie)
 -I think I need to stay here? For a while?

MARNIE
 ...okay.

CATHERINE
 I don't need to go to Santa Fe. I need to be here.

MARNIE
 Okay.

CATHERINE
(To Clark as he approaches her)
 Please.
 I need to see what happens.

CLARK
 What happens is nothing is gonna happen, you can't make-

CATHERINE
 I'm not here to make anything happen. I'm here to see what happens.

CLARK
 You're not making any sense.

CATHERINE
 I know. You better go before she leaves without you.

CLARK
 But you're coming home.

CATHERINE
 Just go.

MARNIE
(Holds out the envelope)
 And give this to Tess when she calms down. It's a message from Alecia.

CLARK
(Still reeling, skims the envelope)
 Is this true?

I don't know. I hope so.

MARNIE

Tess' car horn HOOOOONNNNKKS loudly.

Go. Get the message to Tess.

CATHERINE

She stands and kisses Clark's cheek. He opens his mouth... has nothing to say... She gently pushes him. He turns and walks off toward the car.

Peg has quietly gotten another tape in the player. She waits and watches Marnie for what to do next.

Marnie keeps holding her gently as the sound of the car and truck pull out, driving away.

Catherine slowly sits beside Marnie and Peg. She looks at Marnie, lost.

All is quiet.

Marnie continues sitting, looks at Catherine.

Peg touches Marnie's shoulder. Marnie suddenly remembers something, glances over at the wrapped present still on the table.

Oh. They forgot the present.

MARNIE

She lets out a quiet laugh. Catherine smiles.

Peg holds up the tape player, as an offering...

Yeah. Go ahead.

MARNIE

Peg pushes play. The Cure's "Pictures Of You" plays.

Marnie half-grins.

Catherine watches them.

Yeah. That's a good choice, sweetheart.
(Looks at her. Touches her face)

That's a good choice.

*Peg breathes, looks at ease.
Like the world is right once more.
Marnie kisses her head, holding her lightly.*

*The three sit listening, looking up at the horizon as the
music flows around them.*

*We see the faint glow of the distant fire on their
faces...*

Lights dim...

And dim...

And dim...