

Boundary

A play in two acts

Setting

Time: Fall 1972

Place: Joe Warren's cabin at the confluence of the Tatonduk and Yukon rivers, 20 miles north of Eagle, Alaska

Characters

JESSIE WARREN - A pleasingly disheveled woman, 19. Dresses practically for the woods: hair bound back, overalls, flannel shirts, boots.

JOE WARREN - Jessie's dad, grizzled, in his mid-40's. Wears ratty short-sleeve shirt over long-sleeve long underwear top, Carhartts tucked into socks, and mukluks. Clothes are dirty and patched, in some places with duct tape.

TRAVIS NICHOLS - A scruffy, scraggly 19-year-old man. Just a cut above hippie, though he has short hair and practical outdoor clothes. Wears a hat.

SCOTTY TITUS - An Alaska Native, 52. Dressed in clean, practical outdoor gear.

WRAITH - Dressed all in black, but in a casual, non-'stagey' way. She represents three different people to the three major characters and costume accents and changes in her demeanor reflect this.

RADIO ANNOUNCER - female.

BLM MAN

ACT I

SCENE 1

(September 1972: Indian summer at Joe Warren's log cabin. The cabin faces stage right at an angle and has an 'invisible' side wall. Walls are logs chinked with moss. Windows are small. A caribou skin covers the door. The roof is flattened gas cans. Inside are a narrow table, kitchen and woodstove. Everything is wood-hewn and well-worn.

Outside is a porch with three chairs and a table with radio. A rifle leans on the wall. Beyond is a yard cluttered with firewood, a broken dogsled, sprung traps, blue tarps, and logs for sitting.

We hear a RAVEN CALL and the rhythmic THWACK of splitting wood. Cheesy theme music plays, underlain by faint radio static.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Trading Post Trapline Chatter is a program that involves you. From time to time you might have a personal message to send to a friend or a loved one in the villages or surrounding area. Well you can do just that over KJAK at 12:30 and 6:30 pm every day. This first message goes out to Mom and Dad at Nation Creek, from Annie in Anchorage. It's a boy, six pounds three ounces. We named him Joseph, dad, after you.

Next up is a message to Jim in McGrath from Cheryl in Colorado: Happy birthday, Jim. Looking forward to seeing you next year.

This next message is for Edward Dayton in Koyukuk [COY-uh-kuck] - please contact the draft board in Anchorage immediately. 'Immediately' is all in capitals, Edward, so you better do what you're told.

Our final message: There will be a public hearing on proposed lands settlement legislation in the Fort Yukon Community Center tomorrow night at 7 pm. Topics on the agenda include the potential condemnation of trespass properties in the Yukon and Charley River drainages.

Be sure to listen again at 6:30 pm for your Trapline Chatter, brought to you by the Atlantic Richfield Company-

(Lights have slowly gone up on JOE and SCOTTY on porch, sitting and drinking whiskey. JOE turns off the radio.)

JOE
Trespass properties.

(SCOTTY takes a drink. A distant WHIRR. JOE cocks his ear.)

JOE (cont.)
You hear something?

SCOTTY
Just Jessie splitting wood.

(The WHIRR gets louder; it's a helicopter. JOE looks around and points stage right.)

JOE
Up there.

SCOTTY
Oh yeah. Think it's the feds?

(JOE grabs the rifle and points it toward the noise.)

SCOTTY (cont.)
What the hell, Joe? It's the Bureau of Land Management, not the Viet Cong.

JOE
You want I should sit here and take it, Scotty?

SCOTTY

Take it from a Native, Joe - sitting and taking it has proven to be a lousy political strategy. But so is randomly shooting at stuff.

(JOE stares, then FIRES twice. SCOTTY flinches in surprise.)

SCOTTY

Joe!

(The WHIRR fades. The wood chopping stops. JOE stares a moment and sits.)

JOE

Bet that scared 'em.

SCOTTY

Bet that scared me.

(JESSIE enters from behind the cabin, holding an axe.)

JESSIE

What are you shooting at?

JOE

Just that grizzly.

JESSIE

Again! Didja get him?

JOE

Naw, but I put the fear of Joe into him.

JESSIE

Okay. (She motions offstage.) Just watch my back.

JOE

Always.

(JESSIE walks back offstage and the THWACKS resume.)

SCOTTY
(disbelieving laugh)
Just that grizzly.

JOE
Just that grizzly.

SCOTTY
You keep on trying to wing choppers, she's gonna
figure the truth pretty quick.

JOE
Don't want her to worry about it. And anyway we ain't
going anywhere.

SCOTTY
You sound just like Dusty.

JOE
Still can't believe it.

SCOTTY
(exhales)
Can you imagine it? Comes back to his cabin to find
some bullshit BLM-

JOE
(spits)
Buncha Leftist Morons-

SCOTTY
-notice tacked on his door. Guy didn't even have the
balls to hand it to him in person.

JOE
When did Dusty build his place?

SCOTTY
Fifty-eight.

JOE
Fourteen years of living out here, not bothering a
soul. Oughta just leave him alone. Dusty's cabin is
small and - biodegradeable.

SCOTTY
So's Dusty.

JOE

So what'd Dusty do?

SCOTTY

He tore up the paper and pissed on it.

JOE

(chuckles)

Sounds about right.

(THWACKING stops. JESSIE enters with an armload of split wood. She drops it onto the pile and exits. More THWACKING.)

SCOTTY

She cut all that wood?

JOE

Yeah. That's why we teach our kids in the first place, right? So someday they can do the work for us.

SCOTTY

Sure you don't need any more help?

JOE

You offering?

SCOTTY

(shakes head)

Just always seems like a lot for two people.

JOE

Ain't no one much left to pitch in.

(JESSIE returns with another pile of wood.)

JOE (cont.)

(To JESSIE) Hey Jessie, that wood's half-rotted. It won't light for nothing. Where'd it come from?

JESSIE

From the old burn. It just needs a little drying out.

JOE

It's been rotting for a decade. Ain't nothing good ever gonna come out of that burn. You know that much as anyone.

JESSIE

But I thought-

JOE

So kindly escort it back to that wretched bog from whence it came.

JESSIE

(sighs)

All right, daddy.

(JESSIE exits with wood.)

JOE

(shakes head.)

Sometimes that girl.

SCOTTY

Logs looked okay to me.

JOE

Well, why don't you just load them into your little skiff with your little engine and take them upriver to your little town. Oh wait, your little apartment has a little oil heater.

SCOTTY

I like Eagle, Joe. Beats taking on Alaska on your own.

JOE

Not me. I ascribe to Western Philosophy. You know what that is, Scotty?

SCOTTY

(he's heard this line before)

No, Joe. Why don't you tell me.

JOE

Just because they're selling it doesn't mean I have to buy it. You know the best thing about this place?

SCOTTY
(he's heard this before too)
The quiet.

JOE
It's the quiet. I can hear myself think.

SCOTTY
(motions to the sky)
Plus that way you can hear 'em comin' for you. (He stands up.) Okay, gotta get moving.

JOE
Say hi to your boiler for me, city-boy.

SCOTTY
Screw you too. See you next week.

JOE
With my usual order!

SCOTTY
(exiting)
Jack Daniels to the rescue.

(SCOTTY exits stage right. JESSIE enters and stacks more wood. She looks at JOE quizzically.)

JOE
What?

(JESSIE points at a hole in his pants.)

JESSIE
Pants.

JOE
Hmh. Farm report?

(JESSIE grabs duct tape.)

JESSIE
Potatoes are up. And the kale. (Counting on hand.)
Tomatoes, peppers and cukes in the greenhouse all

coming along. But that greenhouse ain't looking too sturdy. About near fell on my head.

JOE

I'll take a look. How's them asparagus?

(JESSIE patches the hole in JOE's pants. She examines his clothes for more tears.)

JESSIE

Wilted little things. I don't think they're meant for this ground.

JOE

Or you're doing it wrong.

(She puts a piece of duct tape on his shoulder and he winces. She squeezes his arm and he howls.)

JESSIE

You okay?

JOE

I'm sore. I'm old. Don't think I'm up for getting a moose this fall.

JESSIE

You said that last year and we got two.

JOE

(shaking head)

Don't think I'm up for it.

(He motions for JESSIE to hand him the tape.)

JESSIE

Then I'll go alone.

JOE

You gonna drag a 500-pound carcass up the riverbank by yourself?

(JOE patches a hole on JESSIE's back.)

JESSIE

Got a better idea?

JOE

So what's for dinner? I could really go for some asparagus.

(JESSIE glares and exits. Sound of a RAVEN. WRAITH enters, dressed as JOE's wife. Lights focus on JOE and WRAITH.)

JOE

Remember the first time we saw this cabin? When you and I ate with old Norman?

WRAITH

I remember it as well as you do.

JOE

Those moose steaks, and mashed potatoes, and asparagus. Remember? All out of this ground.

WRAITH

Sure about all that?

JOE

(thinking)

The asparagus. We picked it up in Eagle on the way in.

WRAITH

The potatoes too.

JOE

Well, nonetheless. No green thumb on that girl. Don't know how she'll get by after I'm gone.

WRAITH

How do you know she'll be here after you're gone?

JOE

She's got no thoughts of leaving. Way too attached to this place.

WRAITH

Will she have a choice?

JOE

Don't you worry about that. I have scratched my life into this dirt. No brownshirt Nazi's going to drop out of the sky and bang his manifesto onto my door. There's too much history here. You. Me. Jessie. Norman, even.

WRAITH

And Cecelia.

JOE

Yeah. This place is soaked in too goddamn much blood. I'll take it to the ground 'fore I let the BLM get their hands on it.

WRAITH

Really?

JOE

Running away was your solution. (JOE stands up and grabs the rifle.) Not mine. If some goddamn fed decides to come (points offstage right) tramping through that brush -

(DOGS BARK. BRUSH RUSTLES offstage right. WRAITH quietly exits. Lights back up. JOE aims the rifle and waits. TRAVIS enters. He's bedraggled and carries a big rucksack. JOE cocks the gun. TRAVIS sees JOE and freezes.)

TRAVIS

Holy shit!

(TRAVIS raises his arms.)

JOE

Can I help you with something?

TRAVIS

Jesus! I just - I -

JOE

State your business! Are you here to post some papers on my door?

TRAVIS

Am I what!?

JOE

Are you a duly appointed representative of the federal government?

TRAVIS

Do I look like a fed, man?

JOE

Hmm.

(JOE looks him over. TRAVIS fidgets a lot.)

JOE (cont.)

What's wrong with you?

TRAVIS

(gestures with head)

Mosquitoes are really enjoying this.

JOE

Yep.

(JOE relaxes gun. TRAVIS slaps like crazy and continues to do so during the ensuing exchange.)

TRAVIS

Thank you.

JOE

Who are you then?

TRAVIS

I'm not - anybody. I'm here because I want to talk to you.

JOE

You're talking.

TRAVIS

I'm stuck out here, mister. Sir.

JOE

Joe Warren.

TRAVIS

Travis Nichols.

JOE

I don't care. (Pause.) This is a singularly unfortunate spot in which to be stuck.

TRAVIS

I am aware of that, yes.

JOE

How does one maroon himself twenty miles downriver from the nearest whiff of what can be loosely called civilization?

TRAVIS

Martin and I canoed out from Eagle. We were planning to line the boat up the Nation River. We had heard there might be an abandoned cabin or two there we could set up camp in.

JOE

Martin?

TRAVIS

I picked up this cat thumbing outside of Dawson Creek. It turns out we both had the same idea. To come up here, to see if we could make it off the land. You know, to stop lording it over the earth.

JOE

I knew it.

TRAVIS

What?

JOE

You're a hippie.

TRAVIS

This is public land and I'm a member of the public.

JOE

Well put. Duck!

(JOE raises the gun. TRAVIS ducks. JOE tracks something with rifle, doesn't fire. He puts the gun back down.)

JOE(cont.)

Missed him. Rabbit.

TRAVIS

(a bit shaken)

So. It turned out Martin's a few arrows short of a quiver. We had a fight last night over something stupid, and when I woke up he was gone. Took the canoe and most of our food and gear.

JOE

Worst thing someone can do is cut out when you need them.

TRAVIS

I hear you.

JOE

I was on the river all morning. Didn't see anyone pass.

TRAVIS

He snuck out in the dark.

JOE

(suspicious)

Not much dark this time of year.

TRAVIS

Just enough, I guess. So I found some trails, figured they might lead to a cabin.

JOE

You have a gun on you?

TRAVIS

Not as of this morning. Why?

JOE

Those are bear trails. Now what is it you want?

TRAVIS

Well, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not starve to death.

JOE

Don't worry. We look out for each other out here. It's the only way to beat this place.

TRAVIS

Thank you. Sir. (tentative) Also, there's something else. They talk about you in Eagle. Say you've lived in the country a long time.

JOE

Longer than you been breathing.

TRAVIS

I'm hoping you can help me.

JOE

Help you what?

TRAVIS

I want to be an Alaskan.

JOE

(pause; he's heard this before)

Great.

TRAVIS

I need to know how to trap. To build a proper cabin and to plant. I've got lots of easy living to scour off and don't know that I can do it alone.

JOE

Son, my diapering days are over. I don't have time to teach remedial outdoorsmanship to every longhair who wades out of the Yukon.

(TRAVIS takes his hat off.)

TRAVIS

I ain't a longhair. Besides - it's the only way we can beat this place, right?

JOE

Who'd you say told you about me?

TRAVIS

It was an Indian by the name of Scotty. Nice guy.

JOE

Huh. And did Scotty also tell you about this cabin?
About the man who built it?

(Squirrel CHIRPS. Dog BARKS.)

TRAVIS

No sir.

JOE

Norman Henry lived here alone for almost thirty years.
Knew these woods as well as any man could. This place
was his supermarket.

TRAVIS

So what happened to him?

JOE

Same thing happens to everyone, son. He died. He was
heading home from the trapline when a moose spooked
his dogs. Drove into a rut and threw him across a
tree. Cracked a couple of ribs, broke his leg, his arm
too. He got himself home, but he couldn't leave and
there sure wasn't anyone checking up on him.

TRAVIS

So then what.

JOE

Food in the cabin ran out. He had more in his cache
but he couldn't get to it.

TRAVIS

Why not?

JOE

Cache was built on ten-foot poles. Try getting up that
with a broken arm and leg. He pulled out his axe and
couldn't swing it to chop it down. So he burned it.

Put a torch to two of the legs. Guess he was hoping it would fall on its side. But the whole thing lit up.

TRAVIS

Is that where that big burn came from? The one down by the river?

JOE

What? No, different fire, son. Keep focused, goddamit.

TRAVIS

Sorry. So Norman, he starved to death?

JOE

He had his own ideas about how he was gonna go. He limped to this one spot on the river and passed out. And the overflow took him over. When someone finally came by, he was a foot deep in ice. Like a sarcophagus.

TRAVIS

Wow.

JOE

Point is, this country won't just kill you, it'll bury you to boot. (Dog BARKS again. JOE and TRAVIS both briefly look.) What was your name again? Moonbeam?

TRAVIS

Travis.

JOE

Well, Moonbeam, it's hard work being this indigent. What say you turn tail back to Eagle. Get a little rental. Buy your food at the grocery. They got a nice library there - you could get a couple books on trapping, buy some winter clothes, get a new gun, explore the woods around town.

TRAVIS

No thanks. I'd rather be in the woods. I can hear myself think out here, you know?

JOE

Huh.

(JESSIE enters with an armload of vegetables. She notices TRAVIS with a start, then walks into the cabin and places the vegetables on the table. She watches TRAVIS and JOE curiously.)

TRAVIS

Look, I can help you out. I've been working summers as a carpenter since high school. (gestures offstage right) And your greenhouse is about to fall on its ass.

JOE

I was getting around to that.

TRAVIS

It ain't really a one-man job.

JOE

(strokes chin)

Hmm. You got references?

TRAVIS

What? Uh -

JOE

Was a joke, son. (Pause.) Okay. Here's the terms and conditions: You do whatever I say.

TRAVIS

Okay.

JOE

Whatever I say.

TRAVIS

Sure.

JOE

And I reserve the right to kick you out as soon as you start to piss me off.

TRAVIS

Seems fair.

JOE

There's an old shed out back you can sleep in. It's got some holes in it, so expect to catch hell from the skeeters. But that can be your second project. If I haven't drop-kicked your pinko hide into the Yukon by then.

TRAVIS

And you'll teach me what you know?

(JESSIE finally approaches.)

JOE

I told you, I'm a very busy man. (to JESSIE) Jessie, this is Travis. (To TRAVIS) Travis, Jessie.

JESSIE

Welcome to the homestead.

TRAVIS

Thanks.

JOE

Travis is here to learn how to be a real Alaskan.

JESSIE

Is that so.

JOE

Yeah. (Pause.) So how about you get to teaching him.

(TRAVIS and JESSIE's heads snap to JOE.)

TRAVIS and JESSIE

What?

(TRAVIS and JESSIE turn to look at each other. Blackout.)

SCENE 2

(A week later. Stray leaves dot the ground. TRAVIS pulls nails out of a plank; there is a pile of planks beside him. JESSIE oils a small trap. A bucket is behind her. JOE is inside, cleaning a rifle and drinking whiskey.)

TRAVIS

Can you show me how to set one of those?

JESSIE

I'm busy.

TRAVIS

You're busy testing out traps, so you can't show me how to test out traps.

JESSIE

(sighs)

First you cut down a tree. Then you drive in a nail on top of the stump and hook the trap on it. Go ahead.

(TRAVIS drives nail into stump, hooks trap.)

JESSIE

Then you take a thin branch, right, and you fix it so it dangles the bait about a foot above the trap. The martens will climb the stump to go after the bait. The ermines, they'll climb the pole. But the same thing happens either way. (She makes a motion like a trap snapping shut.)

TRAVIS

Which one's a marten and which one's an ermine again?

JESSIE

(exasperated)

Really? Hold on.

(JESSIE rustles behind the cabin. She brings out an ermine and a marten pelt and throws them both at TRAVIS, who examines them.)

JESSIE

Marten. Ermine.

(TRAVIS returns to pulling nails,
JESSIE to oiling trap.)

TRAVIS

This comes easy to you, doesn't it?

JESSIE

I guess.

TRAVIS

You're lucky.

JESSIE

(shrugs)

I guess.

TRAVIS

This is like. It's like learning a foreign language.

JESSIE

What do you mean?

TRAVIS

Have you heard of The Godfather?

JESSIE

I don't really understand that question.

TRAVIS

Do you know what happened this summer in Munich?

JESSIE

No. You know how to field-dress a moose?

TRAVIS

Exactly my point. This all takes a whole different part of my brain. Like, look at these furs. Lots of my friends would never even wear these, much less catch them. They think it's inhumane.

JESSIE

So is living in a box and watching another box.

TRAVIS

You sound like your dad.

JESSIE

So what happened in Munich?

TRAVIS

Oh. The Olympics. Some terrorists broke in and slaughtered the athletes from Israel.

JESSIE

That's horrible.

(JESSIE sets one of the traps.)

TRAVIS

Yes, it was. Sorry I brought it up.

JESSIE

You're not making me yearn for Minneapolis.

TRAVIS

Hibbing. I grew up in Hibbing. I'm from Minneapolis like you're from Anchorage.

JESSIE

Don't even joke about that.

TRAVIS

(smiles)

Your nose wrinkles when you get annoyed.

JESSIE

What?

TRAVIS

Right here. (points to bridge of his nose.) It's kinda cute.

(JESSIE springs the trap with a stick.)

JESSIE

(annoyed)

What are you here for?

TRAVIS

To learn.

JESSIE

And to work.

TRAVIS

Right.

(He resumes pulling nails. Pause.)

TRAVIS (cont.)

I can do both at once.

JESSIE

(resigned)

Your marten (picks up marten fur) hides out in valleys to about thirty below. Colder than that they move uphill where it's warmer.

TRAVIS

Have you ever trapped at colder than thirty below?

JESSIE

Every winter since I was nine. We've got a bunch of tiny cabins along the line. They keep you nice and warm at night.

TRAVIS

Since you were *nine*?

JESSIE

Someone had to help out dad and there wasn't anyone else.

TRAVIS

What about your mom?

JESSIE

There wasn't anyone else.

TRAVIS

Did you ever not make it to a cabin?

JESSIE

Sure. It happens.

TRAVIS

So what do you do?

JESSIE

Make a fire. Stomp your feet. Jumping jacks. Stick cold hands in your armpits, or twirl them around like this for a minute or two. Pools the blood.

(She swings her arms in concentric circles. TRAVIS does the same.)

TRAVIS

But where do you bunk out?

JESSIE

Shovel out a hole in the snow and line it with spruce boughs. Then crawl in your bag and get real friendly with the dogs. (She smiles.) Or you build a lean-to out of branches and make a roof out of whatever you can - bark, more snow.

TRAVIS

Then you can sleep?

JESSIE

Mostly you just shiver. If you get too cold, do some push-ups. And flex your fingers and toes every few minutes, make sure you can still feel 'em. (shakes her head.) You sure you want to winter out here?

TRAVIS

I made it this far, didn't I?

JESSIE

Everyone says that. It don't mean they last past November.

TRAVIS

I got nothing much I want to go back to. But thanks for the vote of confidence.

(Pause.)

JESSIE

None of us may be here for long. BLM's been kicking people out.

TRAVIS

Really?

JESSIE

Can't abide by us (eye-roll) squatters anymore.

TRAVIS

So that's why your dad-. Huh. I just figured he pointed guns at everybody.

JESSIE

He just gets a little trigger-happy sometimes.

TRAVIS

When he's been drinking?

JESSIE

Sometimes.

TRAVIS

So has anyone from the BLM come yet?

JESSIE

Not yet. Daddy thinks I don't know anything about it.

TRAVIS

I guess it's hard to keep secrets around here.

JESSIE

He tries. And anyway I don't have time to worry about it. There's wood to cut and traps to oil and moose to hunt and berries to pick and a dogsled to fix.

TRAVIS

There's a dogsled to fix?

JESSIE

You wanted to pitch in, you're pitching in.

TRAVIS

Sure. Meantime, can you do the berries again.

(She takes a handful of berries out of the bucket and displays them one by one.)

TRAVIS

Blackberry. Edible.

JESSIE

Right.

(She shows him another one.)

TRAVIS

Hmm. Blueberry?

JESSIE

Juniper.

(She shows him another one.)

TRAVIS

Um. High-bush cranberry. Edible.

JESSIE

(exasperated)

Baneberry. The one poisonous berry in this whole state. Nice job.

TRAVIS

Well, one for three. I'm batting three-thirty-three. That'd be great if I were on the Twins.

JESSIE

On the who?

(JOE comes down off the porch. He appears tipsy.)

JOE

They stand on a lawn and people watch them catch balls for money. Ain't that right?

TRAVIS

Pretty much.

JOE

(to JESSIE)

That ain't a blackberry. It's a bearberry. Maybe you need to spend more time picking berries and less time explaining 'em to Nature Boy.

JESSIE

It's a blackberry. Look at the leaves.

JOE

Bullshit. No wait, yeah.

TRAVIS

Nature boy?

JOE

(ignoring him)

Me and a moose, we're gonna go have some words.

JESSIE

What?

JOE

'Stime, isn't it? Somebody gotta bring home the bacon.

TRAVIS

Can I come with you?

JOE

Ha. Moose-hunter from Minneapolis. Great idea.

JESSIE

(to JOE) Daddy, stop. You're not ready to go anywhere.

(to TRAVIS) He's not usually like this.

JOE

(to JESSIE)

Come on, go get my gear together.

TRAVIS

(aside to JESSIE)

So what do you do with him?

JESSIE

Do? You just let him run out of steam.

TRAVIS

That could take a while.

JESSIE

Got a better idea?

TRAVIS

We could sit him down. Make him some coffee.

JESSIE

(Pause. To JOE)

I don't suppose you kept the stove burning?

JOE

I don't suppose I did.

JESSIE

(to TRAVIS)

Keep an eye on him. I'll be a few minutes.

(JESSIE enters cabin and starts to fire up the stove. JOE suddenly seems a bit more sober.)

JOE

Well that got rid of her.

TRAVIS

What?

JOE

So how's wilderness 101 going?

TRAVIS

Tough. Food and shelter - doesn't get much simpler than that, right? But it's like learning to walk.

JOE

I used to be an educated man, you know. It took me years to really learn how to be a proper bum.

TRAVIS

Jessie, she's a good teacher.

JOE

You like her. Don't you?

TRAVIS

What?

JOE

I bet you're in love with her already. That woodsy thing drives the boys wild.

TRAVIS

Boys?

JOE

You think you're the first person to show up here cap in hand?

TRAVIS

Well, no, I-

JOE

They come through all the time. Why do you think I didn't want to teach you myself?

TRAVIS

I figured that you were-

JOE

Because I'm sick of playing schoolmarm to a bunch of goddamn armchair philosophers who've worked out this whole personal wilderness aesthetic but don't know a birch from a willow. You know a birch from a willow?

TRAVIS

I'm not a-

JOE

Why are you here? What are you trying to prove?

TRAVIS

You ever been to Hibbing?

JOE

Never heard of it.

TRAVIS

It's in the Mesabi Range. Right next to the world's largest open-pit iron mine. It looks like the Grand Canyon out there, except it's filled with bulldozers and dark red mud. Like bleeding.

JOE

Huh.

TRAVIS

One year, the company found a new seam. And it led right under the center of town. So they cleared it out. Just bought out the owners, one by one, and knocked over their homes. Some folks didn't want to leave. Including my parents. They fought it. But after a couple months there were a few less houses, then a few less, and then it was just them on an empty street and the front-end loaders closer every day. They sold out and left. But they never really got over it. Like they left a piece of themselves behind.

JOE

Man's got a right to his own plot of ground.

TRAVIS

It felt like, no one should have that kind of authority. I wanted to be in a place where no one could get pushed around like that.

JOE

The world is a bullfight, son. It looks fair, but really you're surrounded and outnumbered.

TRAVIS

Unless you're the matador.

JOE

Someone's gotta be the bull. Otherwise there's no fight. (pause) So that's why you're here?

TRAVIS

My older brother had this map of Alaska up on the wall when we were kids. We'd follow the rivers and cross mountain ranges in our heads. We got hooked on the idea of the place.

JOE

Why isn't your brother here then?

TRAVIS

Craig's in the middle of something else. So I came alone.

JOE

Alone?

TRAVIS

Yeah.

JOE

Except for that Martin guy.

TRAVIS

Right.

JOE

Where was Martin from again?

TRAVIS

Wisconsin, I think. I never learned that much about him. I just ran into him in Montana and we hit it off.

JOE

I thought you met on the Alaska Highway.

TRAVIS

It was a long trip. Kinda runs together.

JOE

(suspicious)

You feeding me a story, son?

TRAVIS

We hippies ain't big on lies. All that bad karma.

JOE

You a Buddhist or something?

TRAVIS

Naw. Suppose you two ain't got much room for religion.

JOE

I believe in Western philosophy. You know what that is?

TRAVIS

Enlighten me.

JOE

"Live every day so that you can look every damn man in the eye and tell him to go to hell."

TRAVIS

Not very neighborly of you.

JOE

If I wanted to be around people I'd be around people.

JOE

Is that why - is that why it's just you and Jessie?
Seems like a hard life for only the two of you.

(The WRAITH appears upstage, still
dressed as JOE's wife.)

JOE

That is no concern of yours.

TRAVIS

But what happened to Jessie's-

JOE

(looking at WRAITH)

What happened is that three can very swiftly become a
crowd. How's the greenhouse coming?

TRAVIS

I'm about finished salvaging wood and nails. Shouldn't
take more than a week to get it shored up. Then I was
going to put that old wood stove into the shed. Make
it livable year-round.

JOE

What for? Planning on staying a while?

TRAVIS

You tell me.

JOE

We'll see.

(He walks past WRAITH.)

JOE

We'll see.

(TRAVIS and WRAITH stare after him
as he enters cabin. Blackout.)

Scene 3

(Dark stage. Cheesy theme music plays, underlain by faint radio static.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

This message goes out to Diane in Fort Yukon from Gail: If you want to go to Fairbanks this afternoon take the Wien Air flight. Please bring my sewing machine.

(Lights up. JESSIE sits in the yard doing washing with a washboard and bucket. A clothesline with clothes stretches across the porch. WRAITH sits across from JESSIE, dressed as Cecelia, JESSIE's sister.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER(cont.)

To Nelson Demoski in Nulato [new-LAHT-oh]: Thank you for your donation to our pledge drive. We will get a tote bag to you as soon as we find a plane going to Nulato.

To Milton Charlie's relatives from the hospital: please disregard all previous information, his condition has improved.

WRAITH

Milton. Wasn't that your name when we used to play Roadhouse?

JESSIE

Yeah. I don't know where I got it from. It's a queer name, isn't it.

WRAITH

I was Jim. You remember? I'd sit behind the kitchen table and you'd hand me cardboard and we'd pretend it was real money. I don't think we'd ever even seen a real dollar bill. (She laughs.)

JESSIE

I wasn't always Milton. I was different people a lot. Eric and Aaron and Bill.

WRAITH

Why was it always men?

JESSIE

(mock male voice)

Jim's Roadhouse ain't no place for a woman!

(JESSIE hangs clothes on line.)

WRAITH

You remember when we were playing roadhouse and that moose showed up?

JESSIE

Which one?

WRAITH

That dumb bull that got himself tangled in the clothesline. He just stood there watching us with two pairs of mom's bloomers hanging off his antlers.

(She grabs a piece of clothing, puts it on her face, and runs around as though blinded. JESSIE laughs. She takes it off.)

JESSIE

That was mid-summer, right. I must have been eight or nine then and you were - seven?

WRAITH

I'm so glad you remember that.

JESSIE

How could I forget my sister?

WRAITH

Could be someone else might come along.

JESSIE

Are you talking about Travis?

WRAITH

Yes.

JESSIE
(dismissive)

Don't.

(JESSIE turns up the radio.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER
...if you want to use the rifle, the shells are in the
kitchen in one of the drawers.

To Joe Warren on the Tatonduk [tuh-TAWN-dook]: (JESSIE
perks up) Scotty is headed out to your cabin Tuesday
and will be there by two p.m.

JESSIE
(laughs and turns off radio)
Like Daddy owns a clock.

(TRAVIS enters stage right
carrying a yoke with two jugs of
water hung from it. He nods at
JESSIE and exits stage left.)

JESSIE
He won't last much longer.

WRAITH
What makes you say that?

JESSIE
If the country doesn't scare him off then daddy will.
I'm sure he's already given him the Norman story.

WRAITH
(imitates JOE)
"This country won't just kill you, it'll bury you to
boot."

(They laugh.)

WRAITH(cont.)
Do you think maybe daddy's being too hard on him?

JESSIE
Doesn't matter. He can't even tell a blueberry from a
juniper. How's daddy put it? 'Thoughts in the clouds
and heads up their asses.'

WRAITH

Sometimes you take after daddy too much.

JESSIE

Besides he's got nothing for me. Nothing I can use.

WRAITH

What makes you so sure about that?

(TRAVIS reenters with empty jugs.
He smiles at JESSIE. WRAITH
withdraws, but stays on stage.)

TRAVIS

Want to wash mine next?

JESSIE

Oh. Sure.

TRAVIS

I was kidding. I can do my own.

JESSIE

Oh. Thanks for hauling the water.

TRAVIS

No problem. I used to do stuff like this all the time
in Hibbing.

JESSIE

Really.

TRAVIS

My old man built houses. He used to drag my brother
and I along, and when we got bored he'd give us work
to do. He had us shouldering sacks of cement before we
were teenagers. To hell with child labor laws, right?

JESSIE

Maybe your brother should have come up here with you.
It sounds like he would have made a better partner
than that Martin person.

TRAVIS

Actually, Craig was the one who always talked about
Alaska. He was more excited about it than I was.

JESSIE

Then why isn't he here?

TRAVIS

He got drafted.

JESSIE

Oh. (pause.) Daddy and Scotty talk about Vietnam a lot. Daddy calls it a war of imperialist aggression.

TRAVIS

Sometimes your dad can be a smart guy.

JESSIE

Will your brother join you here someday?

TRAVIS

He wants to, yeah. Sometimes it almost feels like that's why I'm here. Like I'm clearing a path for him.

JESSIE

Good. You won't make it out here on your own.

TRAVIS

Don't sugar-coat it or nothing.

JESSIE

Don't take it personal.

TRAVIS

Okay, your turn.

JESSIE

To what?

TRAVIS

To tell me about your sister. Cecelia. That's her name, right?

(JESSIE shoots a surprised glance at WRAITH.)

JESSIE

What? How did you know-?

(TRAVIS puts down the buckets.)

TRAVIS

Hold on. I'll show you.

(TRAVIS runs into the cabin, grabs a black-and-white photo and shows JESSIE.)

TRAVIS

She's your sister, right? (He flips it over.) Your names are all written on the back. (He hands it to her.) I was reading one of your dad's old National Geographics and it fell out. (Pause.) It was stuck between Zanzibar and Ecuador. Just kind of fell out, there on the floor-

JESSIE

Yes. Yes, she's my sister.

TRAVIS

So where is she?

(JESSIE looks helplessly at WRAITH.)

WRAITH

Well, tell him.

TRAVIS

Jessie?

JESSIE

She went away. Mom took her away.

WRAITH

Jessie.

TRAVIS

What happened?

JESSIE

Mom didn't think it was safe here anymore.

(WRAITH turns her back.)

TRAVIS

Safe? Of course it's not safe. Hell, according to your father the reaper's hiding behind every birch tree.

JESSIE

Daddy hasn't always been like that. Not mom neither. She just got scared after.

TRAVIS

After what?

(Pause.)

JESSIE

You notice an old burn upriver from here?

TRAVIS

Yeah.

JESSIE

Cece and I were out playing. It was July, and the mosquitoes were real bad, so we snuck some matches and we started a smudge.

TRAVIS

A smudge?

JESSIE

You make a real smoky fire with wet wood. It keeps the skeeters away. She and I built one, and then we forgot about it.

TRAVIS

Wasn't anyone watching you?

JESSIE

Mom was checking on our fish traps. Dad was in the cabin. His friend Dusty had stopped by.

TRAVIS

Drinking?

JESSIE

We always broke out the whiskey for company.

TRAVIS

Seems pretty irresponsible.

JESSIE

We were old enough. I built the smudge too close to some dry alder, I guess, and it caught. It was like it exploded. One minute there was nothing, and then it was coming at us from all directions.

TRAVIS

What did you do?

JESSIE

What did I do?

(WRAITH turns and looks at JESSIE, who avoids eye contact.)

JESSIE

I yelled for Cece to run for the river and I took off running. Cece followed me.

(WRAITH turns away again and exits, fuming.)

TRAVIS

Did you make it to the river?

JESSIE

We were going through these awful tussocks. It's all uneven. Cece twisted her ankle on something and she was limping and crying.

TRAVIS

So what happened?

JESSIE

(pause)

There was a little bluff and we both leapt over it into the river. There was a sweeper below us, a downed tree. We grabbed it and pulled ourselves onto a sandbar. Some rain came up an hour later and the whole thing was beaten down.

TRAVIS

Wow. Sounds like your lucky day, huh?

JESSIE

Mom found us. Sitting on the sandbar, shivering and crying.

TRAVIS

And that's when your mom split? After that?

JESSIE

Yes. With Cece.

TRAVIS

But not you?

JESSIE

I wouldn't let her.

TRAVIS

You decided to stay with Joe instead?

JESSIE

I was scared. I was scared of the fire but I was more scared to leave. I stayed because I belong here. Because I know here.

TRAVIS

That's exactly why I *left* Hibbing. Haven't you ever wanted to see the rest of the world?

JESSIE

I have left. I've been to Eagle, to Fairbanks, to Anchorage. As soon as I get there I want to go home. Nothing feels right. Everything is dirty and crowded. You can't get anywhere or do anything without depending on someone else. I would hide in my hotel room and listen to Trapline Chatter on the radio. It was like a lullaby. I just - I wanted to look in every direction and not see any other people.

(JOE enters. He picks up an armful of empty plates and bowls from the cabin and exits stage right, giving JESSIE and TRAVIS a nod.)

TRAVIS

What's he...?

(We hear DOGS BARKING.)

JESSIE

Getting some help with the dishes. (Pause.) He'll wash them with water afterwards. Usually.

TRAVIS

Can I ask. What's that thing he drinks every morning?

JESSIE

A teaspoon of dirt and one of urine. He says it keeps him healthy and close to the land.

TRAVIS

You realize most people couldn't last a week out here.

JESSIE

(shrugs)

Who says *I* can? I can't catch a moose. I can't cook worth a damn. And I'll never be as smart as my sister.

TRAVIS

Just because your father says something doesn't make it true.

JESSIE

Ain't seen anyone prove him wrong yet.

TRAVIS

Does he give anybody a chance to?

JESSIE

What good is all this anyway? Eat, sleep, hunt, trap. Subsist. What does this place matter to anyone?

TRAVIS

It matters to me. It matters to lots of people.

JESSIE

Like who?

TRAVIS

Well, Joe says there have been dozens through here.

JESSIE

Daddy tends to exaggerate.

TRAVIS

Does he?

(JOE returns with clean plates. He walks toward the cabin.)

JESSIE

Most people daddy runs off inside of a week.

TRAVIS

Why hasn't he done that to me?

(JOE overhears. He walks into the cabin and closes the door, but then sits at the window and conspicuously listens.)

JESSIE

Could be you're more useful than most.

TRAVIS

Do you think so?

JESSIE

(shrugs)

You're still here.

TRAVIS

Do you at least understand what I'm doing here?

JESSIE

Sounds like you're trying to take on the world alone.

TRAVIS

Alone is temporary.

JESSIE

Waiting on your brother?

TRAVIS

Or on someone who knows what they're doing. Like you.

JESSIE

Like me.

TRAVIS

Yeah.

JESSIE

(laughs)

You're kidding.

TRAVIS

You said it yourself. I can't cut it on my own.

JESSIE

And what do I get out of the deal?

TRAVIS

My irrepressible charm. (He smiles, she doesn't.) And a chance to not be your father's daughter for the rest of your life.

JESSIE

Except he also can't make it without me.

TRAVIS

You make it sound like a prison. Or a - a trap.

JESSIE

That's not it. You're here by choice, aren't you?

TRAVIS

I need to be. I need to learn.

JESSIE

You don't *need* to. You could always go back to Minneapolis.

TRAVIS

Hibbing. And some things you don't go back to.

JESSIE

Are you running from something?

(TRAVIS stands and picks up yoke.)

TRAVIS

I'd like to think I'm running toward something.

JESSIE

That's not much of an answer.

(TRAVIS starts to walk off.)

TRAVIS

Well, it's the truth. Isn't that enough?

(TRAVIS exits stage right. JESSIE
looks after him, then at WRAITH.
Blackout.)

SCENE 4

(The next day. Light snow on the ground. JOE and SCOTTY drink on the porch.)

SCOTTY

Dusty cleared out.

JOE

You're kidding.

SCOTTY

Packed up his cabin and left.

JOE

Damn.

SCOTTY

Apparently pissing on an eviction notice does not in fact void it.

JOE

Where'd he go?

SCOTTY

Eagle. But he may clear out by winter. Has a son down in Oregon, I think.

JOE

How's he taking it?

SCOTTY

Doesn't know what to do with himself. Walks around town with this stare like they cut off his leg or something.

JOE

They did worse than that.

SCOTTY

They've got everyone scared. People are putting moss on stumps after they cut down trees, so you can't see the cuts from the helicopters.

JOE

That's a good idea.

SCOTTY

Beats trying to shoot 'em down.

(JOE grunts. DOG barks.)

SCOTTY

Things are changing, Joe. They got that oil pipeline coming and all of a sudden this state ain't big enough anymore.

JOE

Oh yeah? Is that why my place is getting so damn crowded?

SCOTTY

Hey, he seemed like a good kid. And you're always complaining how it's getting too hard for you and Jessie. He working out?

JOE

He knows how to use a hammer and nails. That's about it, far as I can tell.

SCOTTY

Where is he now?

JOE

(snorts)

I sent him after a moose.

SCOTTY

You gave him your gun?

JOE

Worst thing he can do is to shoot himself, I guess. Or waste some ammo. I suppose that'd be bad too.

SCOTTY

You're hard on folks, you know.

JOE

You think so?

SCOTTY

You talk about how this land is so great, but you scare off anyone who might agree with you.

JOE

If they really want to be here, I won't scare them off.

SCOTTY

How come you didn't go hunting with him?

JOE

I showed him where to go, left him to figure the rest out. What better way to teach him?

SCOTTY

Coulda sent Jessie too.

JOE

She's half the reason I sent him out. He's a distraction.

SCOTTY

You mean they're, you know...? (vague gesture suggesting copulation)

JOE

Not under my nose they're not. But he's getting ideas.

SCOTTY

So what's wrong with that?

JOE

It's fall.

(SCOTTY cinches his jacket.)

SCOTTY

So I noticed.

JOE

Too much work to be done. Store the vegetables for winter. Blanch the kale. Can those berries. Cut wood. Prep food for the dogs.

SCOTTY

Gonna teach Travis to work the sled, too?

JOE

Don't want him around here that long.

SCOTTY

Don't go looking a gift horse in the mouth now.

JOE

Something about him ain't right.

SCOTTY

You mean the scruffy hippie thing?

JOE

No, it's the opposite. Like, he doesn't mind hunting. Most nature boys come up here get apoplectic when they kill a mosquito.

SCOTTY

Well, that's good, right?

JOE

Maybe. When you saw him in Eagle, was he with someone? Longhair by the name of Martin?

SCOTTY

Didn't see anyone.

JOE

He told me he had another guy with him.

SCOTTY

Think he was lying?

JOE

Yeah. I looked him in the eye and didn't like what I saw.

SCOTTY

What'd you see?

JOE

Shame. I saw shame.

SCOTTY

Hm.

JOE

Can you do some digging for me? Hold on.

(JOE goes into the cabin and looks for a pen and paper.)

JOE

Never a pen anywhere.

(He returns to the porch with a can of evaporated milk, a pocket knife and a bullet.)

JOE (cont.)

Next time you're at the post office, go ask John Borg whether he ever saw that Martin guy.

(He cuts off the label with a pocketknife and puts it on the table. He presses the bullet to the back of the label to write.)

JOE

And call the courthouse down in Hibbing. That's in Minnesota. See if there's a Travis Nichols from there, and if they have anything on him.

(He hands the note to SCOTTY.)

SCOTTY

You think he's on the lam?

JOE

Good place to run, isn't it? If you find out anything, let me know on Trapline Chatter. Just be discreet about it.

SCOTTY

Right. 'Going out to J.W. on the T. River from S.T. in E. - The sparrow flies at midnight.'

JOE

(chuckles)

I just want to know if I can trust this guy.

(SCOTTY stands.)

SCOTTY

I need to head out - Dusty asked me to pick up some more of his stuff. He's afraid BLM is gearing up to torch the place.

JOE

Torch it?

SCOTTY

Or level it. Or open a gift shop. Hell, I don't know. Wanna come help me shove off?

JOE

You know there's nothing I like more than helping you shove off.

(They exit. Squirrel CHIRPS.
WRAITH appears from behind the cabin, dressed like TRAVIS' brother. TRAVIS enters stage left, carrying a rifle and lugging a sled with a bundle wrapped in a blue tarp.)

TRAVIS

I got one! (Pause.) Hey, dig this! (Pause.) Wait'll you see the rest of him! (Looks around.) Anybody here?

WRAITH

Wow, man. That's beautiful.

(TRAVIS notices WRAITH.)

TRAVIS

Found the perfect spot. Down by the slough there's this big game trail with a thick stand of willows next to it, so I crawled in. Great cover. Completely invisible. And I just waited there for hours.

WRAITH

I know what that's like. Motionless. Pitch dark. Can't see anything but the end of your cigarette.

TRAVIS

No sound but your own breathing. And then there's a noise in the distance.

WRAITH

A soft footfall.

TRAVIS

A branch breaking.

WRAITH

You tense up. But you breathe. Calm yourself down. You level your sight, cock back the hammer, slip your finger onto the trigger, and keep your scope steady.

(TRAVIS imitates the action with the hunting rifle, aiming it over the audience.)

TRAVIS

You hold for the right moment. When the blur disappears and suddenly it's right there in the scope, in focus. Like it's waiting for you. And you fire.

WRAITH

And you fire.

TRAVIS

(lowering rifle)

I hit him twice. Right in the heart. Moose made it twenty feet then keeled over.

WRAITH

Won't lie to you, bro. Didn't think you had it in you.

TRAVIS

I guess I'm coming around.

WRAITH

Better late than never.

(Faint WHIRR of helicopter, growing louder.)

TRAVIS

Wish you coulda been there.

WRAITH

I know you do.

TRAVIS

You hear something?

(TRAVIS tracks the phantom
helicopter as it descends.)

WRAITH

Sounds like maybe Nam's finally coming to you.

TRAVIS

Shit. Oh, shit.

(WRAITH exits. WHIRR stops. BLM
MAN enters holding an envelope and
TRAVIS turns toward him, swinging
the gun - still at the ready - in
his general direction. BLM MAN
freezes. TRAVIS puts on a brave
face and keeps the gun where it
is. Long pause.)

TRAVIS

Can I help you with something?

(Blackout. End of Act I.)

ACT II

SCENE 1

(A few days later. There is a little more snow on the ground. JOE paces angrily in the yard, reading and re-reading the BLM letter. The WRAITH sits.)

JOE

I don't believe it.

WRAITH

You knew this was coming.

JOE

The audacity. The gall.

WRAITH

Do you remember when we first moved in here?

JOE

(reading)

'Your cabin is illegally located on Bureau of Land Management land. Your presence here is inconsistent with the necessary and appropriate use of the land.'

(JOE and WRAITH face mostly in different directions during the ensuing 'exchange.')

WRAITH

Norman had died and everyone in Eagle said we should just take it. They said we deserved it.

JOE

'Necessary and appropriate!' Two decades of my life! How about that for necessary and appropriate!

WRAITH

And we did deserve it. We worked hard. We fixed it up. We cleared up his trash, built the greenhouse. We made this plot more productive and pleasant than it had ever been.

JOE

That damn fed wouldn't even serve this to my face.

WRAITH

But I didn't ever think this would be permanent. You didn't, either. At least, I didn't think you did.

JOE

Just swooped in from the sky like an avenging angel. Like he owned the place.

WRAITH

Just a couple of years, we figured. Then we had the girls, and we thought, just until high school. Then we'd move to Fairbanks or Anchorage so they could be around their peers.

JOE

Didn't even get to see the whites of his eyes.

WRAITH

But we just got used to here. To the life. It gets so it feels like it's the only thing you know how to do.

JOE

I don't even think this was legal service. Don't they have to physically hand me the letter? Aren't I the landowner?

WRAITH

And now maybe you've gotten too used to it. Like a privilege has turned into a right.

(JOE and WRAITH face one another.)

JOE

What was that?

WRAITH

I said, are you the landowner?

JOE

I'm the longtime occupant. That must mean something in a court of law. Plus I'm a taxpayer.

WRAITH

You are?

JOE

I was.

WRAITH

Do you really believe you can fight this?

JOE

A man lands his chopper in your back slough, strolls into your yard and befouls your front door with this (shakes letter), you deserve to confront him. Instead he meets Travis. And what does Travis do? He gives him a goddamn snack!

WRAITH

You catch more flies with honey.

JOE

This isn't a fly. It's a ptarmigan. Timid, stupid, and useless. And what right did Travis have to do anything?

WRAITH

He killed a bull big enough to feed you most of the winter.

JOE

That boy and I need to have some words. If he thinks that-

(DOGS BARKING and RUSTLING offstage. TRAVIS enters stage left pulling another sled with a blue-tarp-wrapped bundle. An impressive set of antlers juts out of it.)

TRAVIS

Good timing on this snow, huh? It's making it a hell of a lot easier to lug this guy back to the cabin.

(He slaps JOE on the back. JOE shrinks away.)

TRAVIS(cont.)

So you gonna show me how to filet this big fella?

JOE

You're awful cocky all of a sudden.

TRAVIS

I am?

JOE

One lucky shot and now you're Davy Crockett.

TRAVIS

Did I do something wrong?

(JOE shakes the paper.)

JOE

I live here peaceably for two decades. Then you turn up and lo and behold, a federal agent swoops down in your wake.

TRAVIS

What are you suggesting?

JOE

And then you welcome the man into my home. And offer him my food! The fruit of my labor!

TRAVIS

Didn't anyone ever tell you you catch more flies with honey?

JOE

We're not trying to catch anything.

TRAVIS

What was I supposed to do?

JOE

Well, apparently you're pretty good with that rifle. How about a little warning shot across the bow?

TRAVIS

Open fire? At a federal agent?

JOE

Might have put the fear of God into him.

TRAVIS

This was not the BLM standing in your yard. It wasn't 'The Man.' It was a man. Some poor schlep who's probably been in Alaska for a month.

JOE

Like you.

TRAVIS

I suppose you would have let off a round at the guy? There would have been another chopper here in two hours, with half-a-dozen state troopers on board.

(JESSIE enters stage left, pulling another laden sled.)

JOE

Maybe I *would* have shot at him. Maybe I shoulda taken one at you, too. Goddamn carpetbagger.

TRAVIS

Jesus, man. I think you need to let it go.

JOE

There's already been too much taken from me. *Man*. This land is all that I have left.

TRAVIS

And whose fault is that?

JOE

What's that supposed to mean?

TRAVIS

It means everything around here seems to fall on everyone's shoulders but yours. Like that burn.

JOE

What?

JESSIE

(to TRAVIS)

No, Travis. Just shut up.

TRAVIS

Your daughters were out torching the woods on your watch. And now your wife and child are gone. Whose fault is that?

JESSIE

Stop it!

JOE

You sunofabitch-

(JOE tries to tackle TRAVIS. TRAVIS deflects it deftly and tries to grab JOE, as does JESSIE, but he wriggles away. He takes another swing at TRAVIS, but TRAVIS swings back and gets a good gut shot in. JOE goes down. He gets up slowly and looks at TRAVIS.)

JOE(cont.)

I want you off this property.

(JOE gamely enters the cabin and slams the door. TRAVIS looks at JESSIE expectantly.)

JESSIE

Yaah! You men and your pissing contests.

TRAVIS

I'm sorry. I didn't think he'd-

JESSIE

I know daddy has a temper, but what do you expect when you rile him up like that. Are you all right?

(She inspects his face for cuts and bruises. Their eyes meet. A tender moment.)

TRAVIS

I'm fine.

JESSIE

I'll talk to him. You don't have to go.

TRAVIS

It's okay. I'm starting to feel like I walked into something ugly here. It's time to cut out.

JESSIE

You can't do that.

TRAVIS

Why not? You won't let me?

JESSIE

Have you seen the river lately? It's a shifting mass of pack ice. It's too late to float and too early to walk. You're staying for a while whether you like it or not.

TRAVIS

And how do we swing that?

JESSIE

I'll go talk to daddy after he's cooled down. How'd you set him off like that?

TRAVIS

I think it's because I didn't shoot the BLM guy.

JESSIE

What?

TRAVIS

But he didn't really get going until I mentioned the fire.

(A raven CALLS. WRAITH appears, dressed as Cecelia, and walks toward JESSIE.)

JESSIE (cont.)

You shouldn't have brought that up.

TRAVIS

Is there something I don't know here?

WRAITH

(prompting)

Yes. There is. (pause. stronger.) Yes. There is.

JESSIE

Yes. There is. I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you but I -
talking about it is too much like going through it
again.

TRAVIS

Please.

WRAITH

Please.

(Pause. TRAVIS looks directly at
WRAITH, then back at JESSIE.)

TRAVIS

Cece. She didn't make it.

JESSIE

(quiet)

No.

TRAVIS

I'm sorry. If I'd known I never would've...

JESSIE

She went back for me. (pause.) She took off running
and I just froze. So she came back and grabbed me. My
little sister. The one I was supposed to be looking
out for. But then she tripped and she was limping and
I dove for the river and- and-

(She breaks off, tearing up.
TRAVIS hugs her. She lets him,
then pulls away after a moment.)

TRAVIS

My god.

JESSIE

The fire ran all the way to the shore.

TRAVIS

I'm so sorry.

JESSIE

Mom found me a couple hours later on the sandbar. And later on it was her that found Cece. She just couldn't take it. She hopped a ride with the first person that came by heading up to Eagle.

TRAVIS

She just left you behind?

JESSIE

The morning she left she came into the yard. And she came over and hugged me and stroked my hair. She was crying. And she pulled me to arm's length and just looked at me. She didn't say a word, but she didn't need to. I could tell. She was trying to figure out what I wanted.

TRAVIS

What did you do?

JESSIE

I started to cry, too. And I ran off into the woods. She didn't follow me. When I came back she was gone.

TRAVIS

Just like that.

JESSIE

All she had was the clothes on her back. We never heard from her again.

TRAVIS

Do you ever wonder where she is?

JESSIE

Of course. But not like daddy does. I think he's still waiting for her to come back.

TRAVIS

What do you mean?

JESSIE

It's like time just stopped for him when he lost Mom and Cecelia. Like, the way he won't just buy a snowmobile or a better radio. Part of him is still back there.

TRAVIS

You know none of it was your fault.

JESSIE

What?

TRAVIS

The fire. Your mom leaving.

JESSIE

What right do you have to assign blame? Of course it was my fault.

TRAVIS

Your father was supposed to be watching you!

JESSIE

You still don't understand. You're full of all this talk about responsibility. About putting your fate in your own hands. Well that's what I'm doing. It's what I've been doing my whole life.

TRAVIS

You were nine!

JESSIE

Nine on the Tatonduk is not the same as nine in Minnesota! I was gathering berries with mom when I was three. I was skinning marten at six. That smudge I made that started the fire? I had been lighting those all summer. That was just the one that got away from me. Not from my dad or from Cece. From me.

(TRAVIS shakes his head. He pulls the sled behind the cabin and begins to unpack it.)

TRAVIS

I think the BLM is doing you both a favor.

JESSIE

What do you mean?

TRAVIS

This place is a yoke around your neck. You'd be better off to start over.

(JESSIE begins to unpack sled.)

JESSIE

You mean, with you.

TRAVIS

Just stating a fact.

JESSIE

Here's another fact. You're gonna find Daddy cocooned in overflow like Norman before he lets the BLM get this cabin.

TRAVIS

And you're not willing to leave him here.

JESSIE

I owe him too much to abandon him to himself.

TRAVIS

You're even more stubborn than he is.

JESSIE

You think this is a hard country to come into? It's even harder to leave. It's like I'll turn around and there will be a flaming sword over the Yukon, and I'll have lost something I can't ever get back.

(Pulling sleds, they begin to exit.)

TRAVIS

Jessie. You need to think. You need to think about whether this place is still worth the fight.

JESSIE

(shakes head)

Sometimes I think that's the worst thing about this country.

TRAVIS

What?

JESSIE

I can hear myself think.

(They exit stage left. Blackout.)

SCENE 2

(JOE and WRAITH, dressed as his wife, sit in cabin with radio.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

To Amelia in Circle from Henry: Sell you my stereo for 350 dollars. It cost 800. It's got an eight-track, cassette, microphones, earphones, and anyone else who wants to buy it, the box number is one ninety-six.

To Joe Warren from Scotty in Eagle: Martin never showed. And Sam wants Travis to go see Charlie.

(JOE turns down the volume.)

JOE

Who?

WRAITH

I don't understand.

JOE

(slowly)

Sam is after Travis to go see Charlie. (Pause. Slaps table.) I knew it. I knew he was on the run from something. *Sam* wants him to go see *Charlie*.

WRAITH

Okay.

JOE

Uncle Sam.

WRAITH

Oh. (pause.) Oh. So why didn't he just go to Canada?

JOE

Maybe he figured this was close enough.

WRAITH

Maybe.

JOE

I think he figured wrong.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 3

(Snow covers the ground. TRAVIS holds a knife and stares confusedly at part of the moose carcass under a blue tarp. WRAITH, dressed as Craig, watches him.)

TRAVIS

You figure I got to skin it?

WRAITH

You asking me?

TRAVIS

You always knew how to do this kind of thing.

WRAITH

Then yeah. Unless you got a better idea.

TRAVIS

I dunno, maybe it keeps better with the fur on.

WRAITH

(shakes head)

Maybe you should have stayed in 'Nam. Over there we don't have to do anything after the shooting part.

TRAVIS

The thought had crossed my mind.

WRAITH

But you're here. One day you're ready to ship out. Then I get a postcard from somewhere in the Yukon.

TRAVIS

Whitehorse.

WRAITH

And that's all I get.

TRAVIS

I didn't want you to find out where I was. I was afraid you'd tell the old man.

WRAITH

Or the draft board?

TRAVIS

I've tried to do right by you. I have.

WRAITH

I could be dead. Lying in a rice paddy with half my head blown off.

TRAVIS

I know.

WRAITH

You think you're a coward for running away.

TRAVIS

We had the same obligation. You owned up to it. I couldn't.

WRAITH

That makes one of us wrong.

TRAVIS

You know, it took me a week to get into Canada. I was just going to go due north and cross up at International Falls. But I stopped on the south side of the bridge. I watched the cars pass by and the river flow and I couldn't do it. It was like a magnet was pulling me in the other direction. So I started driving west instead. I made it most of the way across Montana before I finally crossed.

WRAITH

But you kept going.

TRAVIS

I just drove. Through Alberta and British Columbia. I would pull off the highway and drive through these little towns. I tried to imagine myself living there, finding a job, starting over - maybe until after the war, maybe forever. But something wouldn't click in my head. I kept pulling back onto the highway, gassing up again, and before I knew it, there was another border. And for the first time since I left home, things felt right. So I crossed it, and I kept going until I ran out of road.

WRAITH

Then you got in a canoe.

TRAVIS

And I hid it in the woods and scammed my way into this place.

WRAITH

Was it worth it?

TRAVIS

Isn't this what we always talked about? Isn't this the dream? No draft board or teachers or drill sergeants. Nobody to give us orders.

(JOE enters cabin, then porch.)

WRAITH

I don't know about that, bro.

(WRAITH exits.)

JOE

I told you to clear the hell out of here.

TRAVIS

I'll cut out to Eagle soon as the river's froze up.

JOE

You're gonna need to run a little farther than that.

TRAVIS

What do you mean?

JOE

I mean, why aren't you in Canada, boy? Because I hear they'll take anybody.

(TRAVIS looks at JOE calmly.)

JOE(cont.)

So did you stand in the middle of campus and burn your draft card with the rest of the hippies? Huh?

TRAVIS

So what do I do with this hindquarter? Skin on or off?

JOE

Did you hear me, boy? The jig is up.

TRAVIS

Do you really want them to arrest me and ship me off to die halfway across the world? For nothing? Is that what you want?

JOE

It's your civic duty.

TRAVIS

Look at yourself. Look around. You've rejected the whole idea of civics. This is your realm, and you're king.

JOE

You ran away from your responsibility. I can't abide by that. And this is still my country.

TRAVIS

Yeah? And how many of your traplines out there run into Canada?

JOE

Just what are you getting at?

TRAVIS

How many?

JOE

One or two, I suppose. I lose track of the border.

TRAVIS

The boundary is a 20-foot wide cleared swath. You told me that yourself.

JOE

So what?

TRAVIS

So how do the rules apply? Over there (he gestures offstage left) is a country that welcomes deserters. Here is the country that produces them. But when it comes to who eats who, there's no line at all. It's all just the country.

JOE

You got a problem with the constitution, boy?

TRAVIS

Not in principle, no. But it sure sounds like you do.

JOE

I love the constitution. I just interpret it differently than others.

TRAVIS

Like the BLM? Seems like we both have our beef with the feds.

JOE

Don't compare yourself to me.

TRAVIS

And what would you do if the draft board called your name? Did you serve in the war?

JOE

I got kicked out of the Marines. Too many fistfights with my superiors.

TRAVIS

Problem with authority. Never would have guessed.

(JOE picks up rifle.)

JOE

I'm tired of this toy soldier crap. I've already told you to leave.

TRAVIS

I'll leave when the river's passable. I'll be out of your damn hair and you can get back to spouting self-righteousness to the birches.

JOE

I wouldn't hold your breath on the Yukon if I were you.

TRAVIS

What do you mean?

JOE

The troopers know about you. Probably the MP's too. Scotty told them.

TRAVIS

What?

JOE

I expect there'll be another chopper here real soon. With a pair of handcuffs just for you.

TRAVIS

You're full of shit.

JOE

Sure you want to test that theory? (He points offstage left.) The border is about ten miles that way. You'll have to cross the river but I suspect it's frozen enough for one man on foot.

TRAVIS

Everything is a battle to you, isn't it. Everyone's a friend or an enemy.

JOE

I'm offering you the door. It's more than you deserve.

TRAVIS

You know what. Great. I need to get out of here. I can feel it sucking me in. I've even started talking to myself.

JOE

You never should have passed by Canada the first time.

TRAVIS

(rueful)

I thought the U.S.A. was worth another shot. Guess I was wrong.

(TRAVIS exits stage left. WRAITH appears stage right, dressed like JOE's wife. She points at the rifle, still in his hand. It starts to snow.)

WRAITH

What are you doing?

JOE

I'm standing up for my country.

WRAITH

You hate the military. You've hated them for years. Ever since the Air Force dropped those flares by the Charley River. They burned, what, twenty thousand acres?

JOE

Forty. But the constitution compels us to provide for the common defense.

WRAITH

Do you even *know* what you believe in?

JOE

I believe that I'm right.

WRAITH

You know what I believe? I believe you have finally forfeited our daughter's trust. I believe you just pushed away someone capable of helping Jessie in a way you never can.

JOE

This is no hotel. It's not a safehouse. It's my home.

WRAITH

And you just ended your last chance of extending the life of this place longer than your own. Because you can't live without Jessie-

JOE

Be quiet.

WRAITH

-and after this what makes you think she'll be able to live with you.

(JESSIE enters stage right. WRAITH retreats.)

JESSIE

Where is he? Is he inside?

JOE

He's gone. He left.

JESSIE

What?

JOE

The troopers are after him. Some kind of assault charge. I think he may have done something to that Martin guy.

JESSIE

No more lies, daddy. Where is he?

JOE

I told you, he took off for the border. Troopers are after him. He's supposed to be in Vietnam. I will not aid and abet a wanted criminal on these premises.

JESSIE

Why not? Are you afraid the government is going to come after you? It's a little late to worry about that.

JOE

You know about that?

JESSIE

There are no secrets around here, daddy.

JOE

I don't want them to have any more excuses to get on my case. One fed is as bad as another.

JESSIE

Daddy. It's too late. That paper on our door. There's nothing we can do about it.

JOE

What? Do you want us to leave?

JESSIE

(indecisive)

I just. I...

JOE

I should have known. It's the same way you've always been. The way it was with you and your sister.

JESSIE

What?

JOE

You could never stand that she was younger than you but she was already better at everything. Now don't get angry, it's just the way it is.

JESSIE

Daddy, please.

JOE

But I remember watching your mother trying to teach you. Every right answer Cecelia gave you would contradict. You would bother her and distract her. And you wouldn't teach her anything. You couldn't just be a big sister.

WRAITH

Joe.

JESSIE

(near tears)

That was ten years ago.

JOE

But you never got a chance to outgrow it. Because you let your family down and your sister paid the price for it.

JESSIE

Please just stop.

JOE

And now you're doing it to me. Threatening to run off and leave me here on my own. When you're the only person I have left and that's no one's fault but yours.

JESSIE

(growing angry)

I wasn't going anywhere.

JOE

Don't tell me he didn't try to steal you away from here.

JESSIE

Sure. He did. But I said no. I know. I know I'm the only person you have left. But I don't want to be blamed for it anymore.

JOE

And who else is there?

JESSIE

Where were you? Where were you when your children were out burning down the woods?

JOE

I was working in the cabin.

JESSIE

You were blind drunk with Dusty. Again.

JOE

This is a hard life, Jessie. When a guest comes I need to let off some steam.

JESSIE

And now you've been letting off steam for a decade straight. We barely have enough to eat half the time and yet that skiff always seems to ride low on the way back from Eagle with all that whiskey on board. You know why mom left, don't you?

JOE

(looking at WRAITH)

She left because she found Cecelia's body and she couldn't handle it-

JESSIE

She left because she was starting to run this place by herself! Because you had all this big talk about living a self-sufficient lifestyle but you were always happy to hand off the self-sufficient part when there was a bottle handy. You were rolling downhill and she saw the bottom coming. And you wouldn't let her leave. And now you won't let me.

JOE

I have never held you here.

JESSIE

No, you've just sabotaged every chance of me leaving. What was wrong with Travis?

JOE

You didn't even like him.

JESSIE

I never said that! He had more to him than anyone else who's ever come this way. And it scared you.

JOE

That's not true.

JESSIE

So you found an excuse to run him off. And not just to run him off, but to kill him.

JOE

I sent him away before the troopers came for him. I was doing him a favor.

JESSIE

You sent him alone across twenty miles of godforsaken swamp and trackless forest on the verge of a snowstorm. It's ten below out there and it's getting dark. I bet he doesn't even have any food. And I bet the troopers aren't after him either.

JOE

They may be. Scotty wasn't clear.

JESSIE

Jesus.

(JESSIE throws on layers. She puts items in a rucksack.)

JESSIE

You know what? I'm glad they're going to take this place away from us. Maybe someday they'll make it into a little museum, and people will come in tourboats and poke their heads inside this door and learn about you,

and about what this life was like, and they'll go back to their homes and hug their families and turn on their televisions and thank god for everything in their lives. That'll be our legacy, daddy. What not to do.

(She heads to the door.)

JOE

What are you doing?

JESSIE

I'm going after Travis.

JOE

You can't go out there. The weather's getting worse.

JESSIE

Which is exactly why I have to go. Goodbye, daddy.

(JESSIE exits stage left.)

WRAITH

Joe-

JOE

Please. Don't say a word. Please.

(JOE hangs his head. Blackout.)

SCENE 4

(The cabin is blacked out and dim lights suggest moonlight. TRAVIS, insufficiently dressed for the cold, wanders through spruce trees and blowing white. He carries a rucksack and holds a flashlight. He is lost, confused and freezing. He sings pitifully and almost inaudibly to himself, the first verse or two of Bob Dylan's 'Girl of the North Country.'

He blows on his hands. He stamps his feet. He swiftly rotates his arms to get blood in them. He grunts and makes pained noises. Finally he sits on the ground in dejection, holding his knees. WRAITH enters, dressed as Craig.)

WRAITH

On the run again?

TRAVIS

Everyone thinks I came up here to run away.

WRAITH

You did.

TRAVIS

At first. Somewhere along the way it changed. It felt more like I was being pulled forward. Like I had cleared the moon and was getting sucked into the sun.

WRAITH

That doesn't seem like a good analogy right now, bro.

TRAVIS

I thought if I went north I was following your lead. Living the life you wanted.

WRAITH

Oh, so this. Getting run off. Dying in the cold. This is all my fault.

TRAVIS

I didn't say that-

WRAITH

But it's what you've been thinking. Hell, this is a week off in Bangkok, compared to some of the shit I've waded through.

TRAVIS

I was afraid. I saw the news on TV and heard about the guys from high school who didn't make it back and I was afraid.

WRAITH

No you weren't. Maybe you thought you were. You know that sensation clawing at the back of your skull right now? A dull throb? You feel that?

TRAVIS

Yeah.

WRAITH

That's afraid. Not 'dad caught me driving his car drunk' afraid, or even 'The MP's are after me' afraid. This is 'I'm going to die and it's going to be tonight' afraid. I have felt that every day for the past year.

TRAVIS

I know. I know you have. I'm sorry.

WRAITH

Don't be. But don't blame yourself either. You didn't put me in 'Nam any more than I sent you down the Yukon. That was all you.

TRAVIS

Then what am I supposed to do?

WRAITH

Seems like you've got a start on some sort of a life up here. Maybe you ought to stick with it.

TRAVIS

First I have to make it through the night.

WRAITH

There is only one way you could disappoint me. And that is if I get a letter from dad saying that my kid brother got himself killed, for no reason, in the middle of nowhere. When I'm the one getting shot at! Just don't let that happen to yourself, all right?

TRAVIS

Okay.

WRAITH

Good. Good.

(WRAITH starts to exit.)

TRAVIS

Hey. Will you come up here? When you're done?

WRAITH

I think the north is losing some of its appeal. On the other hand, I would love to be somewhere cold right about now.

TRAVIS

Trade you.

WRAITH

(chuckles and makes peace sign)

Peace out, bro.

(WRAITH exits. TRAVIS stands up gingerly, urging life into his frozen limbs, frantically shaking and swinging them around. He goes offstage and returns with an armful of branches. He tries to stand some of them up in a wall formation. It becomes clear that he's building a shelter. Blackout.)

SCENE 5

(The same scene, but with a crude but sturdy snow shelter. TRAVIS huddles in it, curled in a fetal position, shivering. JESSIE's voice comes from offstage right, growing stronger.)

JESSIE

Travis! Where the heck are you? Travis! *Travis!*

(TRAVIS perks up.)

TRAVIS

(weakly)

Jessie! Over here!

(JESSIE enters, carrying a rucksack and flashlight.)

JESSIE

Travis! Oh thank god.

(She grabs him and pulls him close to her, and begins rubbing his arms and legs. She is elated to see him but covers it up.)

JESSIE(cont.)

Why didn't you make a fire?

TRAVIS

My lighter froze up. Can I at least get a little credit for the architecture?

(JESSIE backs off for a second and examines his handiwork.)

JESSIE

Oh yeah. Nice job. Get up. Walk around.

(TRAVIS does so.)

TRAVIS

What are you doing here?

JESSIE

Saving your ass. Here.

(She hands him a sleeping bag. He starts to sit.)

JESSIE (cont.)

No! Keep walking.

He stand and drapes it over himself, pacing. She walks offstage and reenters with some wood. She clears a circle and begins to build a fire.)

TRAVIS

How'd you find me?

JESSIE

Still a few footprints out there. It took some doing, though. You've been gone for almost seven hours.

TRAVIS

You mean it's not even midnight?

JESSIE

Nope.

TRAVIS

Drag. I don't think I was gonna make it.

JESSIE

You never had a chance.

TRAVIS

Don't you think I've got it in me? It's only ten miles to the border.

JESSIE

Yeah. And from there it's at least another ten miles to the first warm place you could spend the night. The border isn't a hotel. Did you think of that part?

TRAVIS

I wasn't thinking of much of anything. I just needed to clear out.

(JESSIE lights the fire.)

JESSIE

I understand.

TRAVIS

Do you?

JESSIE

Yeah. I do. (Pause.) So, you know how you said you wanted to be a real Alaskan?

TRAVIS

Yeah.

JESSIE

Congratulations. I think you qualify.

TRAVIS

Thanks. Except maybe now I'm headed to Canada.

JESSIE

Maybe? Are you or aren't you?

TRAVIS

That depends.

JESSIE

On what?

TRAVIS

Whether or not you're coming with me.

JESSIE

How about you don't get ahead of yourself. Did you hear me before? You've got a lot of miles to go.

TRAVIS

How far is it to Eagle?

JESSIE

Eight miles, maybe. But aren't you afraid the troopers will be waiting for you there?

TRAVIS

Oh. Joe told you.

JESSIE

Yeah.

TRAVIS

They can arrest me. I'm ready for it.

JESSIE

Really?

TRAVIS

Yeah.

JESSIE

You know, you're not what I expected.

TRAVIS

How's that?

JESSIE

Folks that come through here, they just want to start over from scratch. But you never had a scratch to start from. There was always something back there, gaining on you.

TRAVIS

Maybe you can't ever really start over.

JESSIE

You may be right about that. (She pokes the fire.) I can't leave daddy. Not now. It would kill him.

TRAVIS

You're not responsible for the man he is. You're not responsible for what's happened to him.

JESSIE

Maybe. But I'm responsible for what *happens* to him. And that I can still change.

TRAVIS

Will you at least stick with me to Eagle?

JESSIE

I won't let you go it alone.

TRAVIS

I don't know how I can ever thank you.

JESSIE

Just keep on going. That's all you need to do. You warm yet?

TRAVIS

Getting there.

(JESSIE pulls a second sleeping bag from her pack, drapes it over herself.)

JESSIE

Then come down here and get cozy with me. But don't get any ideas.

TRAVIS

Oh, it's way too late for that.

(They sit comfortably next to each other and arrange the bags over themselves. WRAITH, dressed as Cecelia, comes onstage and looks at JESSIE. JESSIE looks back, unafraid and unconcerned, then turns her attention back to the fire. WRAITH smiles and exits. Blackout.)

Scene 6

(A couple of weeks later. JOE sits inside the cabin with SCOTTY. They drink whiskey.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

This first message is from Lee Johnson of Fish and Game to Carl Peter: I would like to charter your Super Cub on Saturday. You can find me at the Eagle trooper's place.

To Christina Luke at Old Minto from Howard Smoke in Fairbanks: See you in six days at my father's when you get to town. Don't forget my hat on the wall.

To Joe Warren on the Tatonduk from Jessie in Eagle: Travis and I are okay. I will come home when I'm ready.

(JOE turns the volume down.)

JOE

In Eagle?

SCOTTY

Yeah.

JOE

You planning to mention that to me?

SCOTTY

I didn't know.

JOE

Scotty.

SCOTTY

Jessie asked me not to.

JOE

What else did she tell you?

SCOTTY

That she'll be home when she's ready.

JOE

What's that mean?

SCOTTY

It means she don't know.

JOE

Was she with *him*?

SCOTTY

Yeah.

JOE

How - how did she look?

SCOTTY

A little lost. But happy.

JOE

More lost or more happy?

SCOTTY

(shakes head)

What're you gonna do, Joe?

(Pause.)

JOE

What do you think I should do?

SCOTTY

Really?

JOE

Yeah.

SCOTTY

Joe Warren? Asking for advice? I feel like I should take your temperature or something. (No response.) Okay. You should leave.

JOE

Leave? Just like that?

SCOTTY

Don't be so damn dramatic about it, Joe. It's just a house.

JOE

That's bullshit and you know it. This ain't handing in my keys and getting my deposit back.

SCOTTY

I walked away from like four thousand years on this land, Joe. You can walk away from twenty.

(JOE takes a drink. SCOTTY stands.)

SCOTTY

I got a potlatch in town to get to.

JOE

Who for?

SCOTTY

It's for Dusty. He's leaving tomorrow. Do you want to come?

JOE

Oh. No, I need to stay here.

SCOTTY

There'll always be a place for you in Eagle, Joe. It ain't the wilderness, but you can see it from there. Don't even need to squint.

JOE

Hmh.

SCOTTY

You gonna be okay?

(JOE offers his hand to SCOTTY, who shakes it.)

JOE

Yeah. See you around.

SCOTTY

Next week?

JOE

(pause)

Sure.

(SCOTTY exits stage right, Sound of DOGS BARKING offstage. Pause. Suddenly JOE starts BARKING as well. Then he HOWLS like a wolf. This goes on for some time. WRAITH enters and confronts him.)

WRAITH

Joe. Joe! (He quiets.) You gonna be okay?

JOE

Dunno.

WRAITH

She's coming back, you know.

JOE

I know.

WRAITH

But she shouldn't.

JOE

I know. But that's not up to me.

WRAITH

Of course it is. You just don't give her a place to come back to.

JOE

What?

WRAITH

You finish what Norman started.

(WRAITH walks over to stove, grabs a box of matches, plunks them down on the table in front of JOE.)

WRAITH(cont.)

Cut the cord.

JOE

You're joking.

WRAITH

Joe. You came here - we came here - because we loved the cabin, and the land, and this river. We loved the freedom and the wonder and the opportunity, all of it. We loved the life. But you've lived the life! You've proven yourself. You've won.

JOE

Not according to the BLM. In five years they'll be selling postcards here. There'll be a yellow line on the floor so people can walk through without stepping on each other.

WRAITH

Then don't let that happen. Leave it all behind, Joe. The same way I left you.

JOE

You make it sound so easy.

WRAITH

It's not.

JOE

I don't know.

(JOE grabs a rucksack and fills it with food, tools, mementoes.)

JOE(cont.)

All these years. Raising Jessie on my own. Trying to do what I thought you would want me to do. You know I've just been waiting. Waiting for you to come back.

WRAITH

I know.

JOE

But you didn't. You're still out there.

WRAITH

So come find me.

(He tosses the rucksack outside and dresses in heavy outdoor gear. He takes a swig of whiskey, then upends his half-empty whiskey

bottle and dumps it all over the floor.)

JOE

A waste. What a waste.

WRAITH

Are you talking about the whiskey or the last twenty years?

JOE

Whiskey.

WRAITH

Good.

(JOE takes matches and walks to porch. WRAITH stays inside. Stage lights dim and Joe looks up.)

JOE

It's clouding up over the moon. Getting darker.

WRAITH

Good. That means it's going to warm up for you.

(The stage is now almost completely dark.)

JOE

I ascribe to something called Western Philosophy. You know what that is?

WRAITH

Get 'em before they get you?

JOE

It's a little late for that, don't you think.

WRAITH

I think you need to go figure that out for yourself.

(Joe lights a match. The WRAITH's face is illuminated. JOE backs away from the door and tosses the match inside. Blackout. End of Play.)