

# **IRONWOOD DARKE**

**By Jerold London**

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**You have to protect yourself from sadness. Sadness is very close to hate.**

**– Michael Ondaatje, The English Patient**

# **IRONWOOD DARKE**

## **TIME and PLACE**

**The present.**

**Northern British Columbia, Canada.**

**A forest has grown from upstage right to center stage.**

**As scenes regress in time, so does the forest recede upstage.**

**The forest is comprised of darkness – dark trees and underbrush with scrimms or screens interspersed (indirectly illuminated) upon which are affixed lifelike papier-mâché carcasses of still birds and animals.**

## **CHARACTERS**

**BYRON, twenty-two in Scenes 1 and 2, back to age twelve by Scene 7.**

**ALEXANDER, Byron's father.**

**MOTHER, Byron's mother.**

**OFFICER CAMERON, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.**

**OFFICER GRANT, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.**

**CLAIRE, eighteen.**

**DR. STEVENS, a country doctor.**

**MOLLY, female, drinking companion in Scenes 6 and 8.**

**BUCK, male, drinking companion in Scenes 6 and 8.**

**BILLY GOAT, male, drinking companion in Scene 8.**

**VOICE (from the audience), called Ed.**

**... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.**

SCENE 1

BYRON, covered in splashes of blood and agitated, is being questioned by two officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

**OFFICER CAMERON**

I'm Officer Cameron. This is Officer Grant.  
Just calm down, Son, and tell us what happened.

**BYRON**

Claws like hatchets it had.  
And teeth like knives, best I could see.  
It's Hellish dark in there and everything. And frightful.  
Eyes as red as Goddamn demons.  
As big as a bear.  
I cut the thing, I think.

**OFFICER CAMERON**

A bear, you say?

**BYRON**

No. As big as a grizzly, but not a bear. I don't know what it is.  
I'm telling you: It's a MONSTER.

**OFFICER GRANT**

In there?

**BYRON**

Yes, in *there*.

**Two men bring a body out of the forest on a stretcher, a sheet pulled over her head. Both feet, severed from the body, are noticeably being carried on top of the sheet.**

**OFFICER CAMERON**

It severed her feet?...  
Let me see the knife you cut the thing with.

**BYRON**

I .... It's lost in there.  
I dropped it when I ran.

**OFFICER GRANT**

You ran?

**BYRON**

I ran.

**OFFICER GRANT**

And left her in there, by herself?  
What's your name again?

**BYRON**

My name is Byron, and there wasn't much I could do was there?  
I told her to run. I told Claire to run.  
And *I* ran.  
And didn't look back, did I?

**OFFICER CAMERON**

You say her name was Claire?

**BYRON**

Claire? Yes, Claire.

**OFFICER CAMERON**

Who was she to you?

**BYRON**

Claire and I were thinking of getting married, maybe.  
If we could get the money to leave this place.  
But she wasn't so sure.

**OFFICER GRANT**

And you left her in there to die?  
What kind of man are you?  
How old are you?

**BYRON**

I'm not a Mountie, am I?  
Brave like you....  
I'm twenty-two.

**OFFICER CAMERON**

I should think we'll need an examination.  
A death like this.  
You will have to give us your clothes.

**BYRON**

My clothes?  
What will I wear?

**OFFICER GRANT**

There's a robe in the van, for animals like you.  
A lid for every pot.

**OFFICER GRANT escorts BYRON  
offstage, and then returns.**

**OFFICER CAMERON**

I think I've heard of this place before.  
Rumors, I guess.  
Just old wives' tales.  
People say to hold a piece of this forest in your hands,  
just the mere touch of a branch of it, is enough to suck out your living soul,  
unless it grants you a moratorium, I suppose, to carry out the dead.

**OFFICER GRANT**

It is peculiar.  
Only looking at it.  
How would you describe it?

**OFFICER CAMERON**

[*beat, looking*] Possibly mandrake and beetroot, tangled with spider-web trees.

**OFFICER GRANT**

Maybe in the light of the moon it might look that way.  
Maybe if the sun were the moon....  
And the smell?

**OFFICER CAMERON**

Medicinal.  
Metallic.  
Mysterious.  
Sinister. Right?

**OFFICER GRANT**

Sinister ... right.  
Spiders ... right.  
And the sound?

**OFFICER CAMERON**

The sound? What sound? There is no sound. It's deathly quiet.  
In fact, the blackness itself, with no animal sound in it, seems almost alive and  
ugly. None of those usual rustling noises in a woods that want to bite at you, or  
run from you.

**OFFICER GRANT**

Or cut your feet off.

**OFFICER CAMERON**

Her feet were severed, both of them, weren't they?

**OFFICER GRANT**

What animal does that?

**OFFICER CAMERON**

Only one that I can think of.  
One that's used to splitting blocks of wood with an axe.

**OFFICER GRANT**

Or a hatchet.

**OFFICER CAMERON**

However you look at it, this woods is a monstrosity.  
Like the mother that did that to her.  
It's obviously grown itself out at its own rate, without benefit of a clock.

**OFFICER GRANT**

And notice *how* it's built: Bulging in such strange ways.  
Rude and crude like a python that's just swallowed a lamb.

**OFFICER CAMERON**

Driven by some heinous urge known only to itself, I'd imagine,  
to kill any number of souls without conscience or remorse.

**OFFICER GRANT**

That's nonsense. Why are you talking like that?  
It's not alive. Not that way.  
And we've *got* to go in.  
To find the murder weapons.

**OFFICER CAMERON**

If we come out alive, that is.

**OFFICER GRANT**

There's a lid for every pot.

**They enter the forest.**

**Darkness.**



SCENE 2

A week earlier BYRON and CLAIRE are alone together, sitting on a hillside, looking out at the night.

**BYRON**

Look. Up there, Claire.

**CLAIRE**

You mean the stars?

**BYRON**

Everything.

The stars. The space stations in orbit.

All those lights between Earth and sky, and all that emptiness.

It makes me think of my uncle.

**CLAIRE**

*Your uncle?!*

**BYRON**

My lost uncle. The one who talks to me in the nighttime.

Uncle Misha.... His real name's Mikhail.

The Russian cosmonaut who was left up in space when the Soviet Union collapsed.

**CLAIRE**

Byron! You don't really mean he talks to you!

**BYRON**

Yes I do. We talk about lots of things. And loneliness.

About his dreams of a woman he loves in Canada.

And about my dreams to get out of this place.

**CLAIRE**

To where?!

**BYRON**

Anywhere with opportunity if I only had the money.

I'm twenty-two and still don't have the money.

**CLAIRE**

Why have you never told me this before?

**BYRON**

I never thought you'd be interested.

**CLAIRE**

Because you thought it would make me sad.

**BYRON**

Maybe.

**CLAIRE**

How is he your uncle?... And what else do you talk about?

**BYRON**

He's my soul mate, my soul uncle, and he tells me I should be on my knees, thanking God for the room I have down here.

For the land, and the trees, and the river, and the hockey matches. With him up there in a nutshell and nothing but nightmares.

**CLAIRE**

How awful.

**BYRON**

Yes, indeed, *how awful*.

**CLAIRE**

How awful, Byron?

**BYRON**

*Very* awful.

**CLAIRE**

Why? Because he's going to die alone some day?

**BYRON**

Because he thinks it's my mother he loves. Who's dead now, you know. And he killed his co-pilot.

**CLAIRE**

*What?!*

**BYRON**

He had to. His co-pilot was planning to blow up the station they were in. Blow the whole thing up!

**CLAIRE**

Why?

**BYRON**

Since their mission was complete and the Soviet Union was kaput.

**CLAIRE**

He must have been terribly depressed.

**BYRON**

Yes.... Who do you mean?

**CLAIRE**

The co-pilot.

**BYRON**

Why should *he* have been depressed more than my uncle?  
The love of *his life* hadn't died.

**CLAIRE**

It's how you look at things, I imagine.

**BYRON**

*I* look at it up there, in the sky, and don't know where he is, and *I* feel depressed.

**CLAIRE**

For *him*?

**BYRON**

For anyone floating in space in a space so small.

**CLAIRE**

That's how the co-pilot must have felt.

**BYRON**

Why are you going on about the co-pilot?  
He's dead.  
It's my uncle who's staring out a window into a lost universe.  
No patriotism left for a country that has abandoned him.  
No dreams left that are reachable.  
No hope but to float on, day after day.

**CLAIRE**

Not even the hope of having children.

**BYRON**

Do you think that's a good reason just to blow everything up?

**CLAIRE**

Do you want the truth? Or what?  
It sort of depends upon a person's mentality at the time.

**BYRON**

You make a good point, Claire.  
People who are tired of not getting their way eventually all turn sadistic.  
They *want* to ruin everything for everybody else.  
Take other people down with them. See the Earth ruined.  
But my uncle doesn't. He still loves my mother, and thinks about it.

**CLAIRE**

Why would your mother want to have anything to do with a Soviet cosmonaut?  
Did he ever think of that?

**BYRON**

He thinks of it.  
But I tell him there's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so.  
And he scoffs at me. In Russian.

**CLAIRE**

I scoff at you, too. In Canadian.

**BYRON**

What can I do? I can't rescue him.  
Maybe Putin can; but Putin's not listening to me.  
Nobody's listening to me anymore. They all think I'm a freak.

**CLAIRE**

Putin's not listening to anyone.

**BYRON**

Maybe he is to Stalin. Or Hitler.

**CLAIRE**

How do you talk to him?

**BYRON**

How do I talk to Putin?

**CLAIRE**

No. How do you talk to your uncle?

**BYRON**

In English, of course. I don't know Russian.  
My shortwave has a translator that converts Russian on contact.

**CLAIRE**

But he can't still be alive, can he?

**BYRON**

He's never told me he's dead.

**CLAIRE**

I mean, how do you know?

It might be some hoaxster transmitting from Siberia, for all you know.

**BYRON**

A Siberian hoaxster knows my mother's name?

**CLAIRE**

Does that make less sense than a forsaken Soviet cosmonaut knowing your mother's name?

**BYRON**

You think so?

**CLAIRE**

I doubt it.

**BYRON**

Why do you doubt it?

**CLAIRE**

Because my brain tells me so.

**BYRON**

You think you're so smart?

**CLAIRE**

I know things.

**BYRON**

You know things.... Like what, for example?

**CLAIRE**

[*beat*] Like ...

I'm pregnant, Byron.

**BYRON**

O for God's sake! And you think *that's* going to get us out of this place?  
Bringing another face into it?

**CLAIRE**

I didn't do it by myself.

**BYRON**

Now *that's* depressing.  
No matter how you look at it.  
Or think of it.  
In whatever language.

**CLAIRE**

It's *not* a language. It's a condition.

**BYRON**

I disagree. Pregnancy *is* a language. One of its own.

**CLAIRE**

That only *I* can speak, I suppose you mean.  
Let me tell you:  
If language is anything, it's our audial connection to reality.  
And I'm not making this up.  
Father's going to kill me.  
And you, too.

**BYRON**

Life changes in an instant.  
Have you noticed?

**CLAIRE**

Noticed what?

**BYRON**

How life can change in an instant.

**CLAIRE**

The instant I got pregnant, do you mean?

**BYRON**

Precisely.

**CLAIRE**

No, I didn't notice.  
I guess you didn't either.

**BYRON**

No. And neither did my uncle.

**CLAIRE**

I should hope not!

**BYRON**

He has enough to be depressed about.

**CLAIRE**

I get that.

**BYRON**

Like maybe dying up there by himself someday.  
And what's the point of that?  
What's the point in dying if nobody knows or cares?

**CLAIRE**

I wonder whether your mother would care, Byron.

**BYRON**

She was only seventeen when he went up in space.

**CLAIRE**

What year was that?

**BYRON**

1991.  
Ten years before I was born.

**CLAIRE**

Life changes in an instant.

**BYRON**

Certainly in ten years.

**CLAIRE**

Lucky you.

**BYRON**

Being born?

**CLAIRE**

Being born on the ground.

**BYRON**

Lucky us.

**CLAIRE**

He's been up there what? thirty-two years?  
Is that right?

**BYRON**

You're the numbers person.

**CLAIRE**

Unhappy him.

**BYRON**

Some folks are only happy because they choose to be happy.

**CLAIRE**

Some folks are only happy because they choose to believe the world is coming to an end.

**BYRON**

Not my Uncle Misha. His world is never coming to an end.

**CLAIRE**

How depressing!

**BYRON**

Depressing. And depression is such a depressing thing.

**CLAIRE**

So they say.

**BYRON**

Depressing.

**CLAIRE**

More than just that.

**BYRON**

Empty.

Barren.

Sleepless.

God forsaken.

**CLAIRE**

Makes a person want to cry just to think.

**BYRON**

Makes a person want to commit suicide.

Makes countries want to hate their neighbors.

**CLAIRE**

Makes some countries want to kill their neighbors.



**BYRON**

In the stars there are no wars, no Ukraines, and no pregnancies.

**CLAIRE**

No governments, and no senseless killings.

**BYRON**

How life changes in an instant.

**CLAIRE**

Some people believe dying is a simple and painless change.

**BYRON**

Dying is complicated. Uncle Misha wants to die in a forest.

**CLAIRE**

Like our forest?

**BYRON**

Some say the Russian composer Tchaikovsky committed suicide because of a forest like ours. In eastern Europe.

**CLAIRE**

Do they listen to Tchaikovsky in space?

**BYRON**

My uncle does.  
It helps him commune with himself.

**CLAIRE**

A communist communing with his common self.

**BYRON**

With angels, perhaps.

**CLAIRE**

Or God.

**BYRON**

Uncle Misha says he feels no closer to God than he ever did.  
He says the whole universe appears to be an infinite stream of random particles that go “ping” in the night.... And space junk.

**CLAIRE**

The universe is complicated.

**BYRON**

Pings in the night are complicated. Especially when you want something more out of life than what other people want you to have.

**CLAIRE**

The three greatest factors for suicide are depression ... living in a world that gives you so little freedom to be yourself ... and having a friend who did it.

**BYRON**

I don't think Uncle Misha's co-pilot counts.

**CLAIRE**

Why not?

**BYRON**

Because they weren't friends.  
And it wasn't strictly speaking a suicide.

**CLAIRE**

How could you be up in a space station over the Earth alone, and not be friends?

**BYRON**

Not you. You could be friends anywhere with anybody.

**CLAIRE**

Anybody?

**BYRON**

Are lovers friends?

**CLAIRE**

Good question. But it doesn't matter.  
They would have starved to death long before now. Both of them.

**BYRON**

Uncle Misha says they had enough rations to feed an army.  
And they make their own water.

**CLAIRE**

Whose army?

**BYRON**

Who knows? Putin's?

**CLAIRE**

An army to do what? Take over Earth after Judgment Day?

**BYRON**

After a nuclear war.

**CLAIRE**

That's what I said.

But that makes no sense.

What's an outlying space station going to do if there's nuclear war?

**BYRON**

Repopulate the planet.

**CLAIRE**

With men only?

And who's going to get them down?

**BYRON**

It doesn't make any sense, does it?

**CLAIRE**

None.

[*pause*] What in God's name could the Soviets have had in mind with that food?

What were they thinking?

What was their purpose?

**BYRON**

What's anybody's purpose?

**CLAIRE**

Not to hurt other people, I suppose.

**BYRON**

Not to have a child when you're planning on leaving town.

**CLAIRE**

Not to be an asshole about it.

**BYRON**

Not to get depressed.

Even if your friend *is* an asshole.

**CLAIRE**

Depends how you look at it.

**BYRON**

What do you mean?

**CLAIRE**

To some people depression comes natural.

**BYRON**

Be serious!  
What sort of people?

**CLAIRE**

Poets, writers, and playwrights, to name a few.

**BYRON**

O...kay.... Who else?

**CLAIRE**

Indigenous peoples, if you haven't heard.

**BYRON**

Who?

**CLAIRE**

Inuit, First Nations, and Mixed Blood.

**BYRON**

Oh, Indians. What about them?

**CLAIRE**

Don't you know?

**BYRON**

Know what?

**CLAIRE**

The depression we've caused them, taking their children away.

**BYRON**

Who the Hell "we" are you talking about?

**CLAIRE**

Our government.

At ages six and seven, our government virtually kidnapped youngsters from their families, to send them off to boarding schools where they wound up being forced to give up their native ways and their native language.

**BYRON**

You mean being educated to become better Canadian citizens.

**CLAIRE**

I mean:

It depends how you want to look at it.

Most people have brains enough to intuit that a person will become depressed for life if they are stripped of family, culture, and their native language.

Where are they supposed to go to find a future?

Or even find themselves, for that matter?

And in the bargain they were given numbers in place of names.

Like filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk. His number name was E 5 1 6 1 3.

**BYRON**

How could you possibly know that?

**CLAIRE**

My aunt told me; and the number happened to stick in my mind.

**BYRON**

Why?

Why do weird numbers like that stick in your brain?

**CLAIRE**

Because it's  $227^2$ , plus  $9^2$ , plus the square root of 9.

**BYRON**

You're kidding me.

**CLAIRE**

I am not!

You do the math and see for yourself.

**BYRON**

I don't mean those numbers don't add up the way you say.

I mean: You're kidding me that that's the reason you remember them.

**CLAIRE**

It may not be my only reason.

**BYRON**

What's the other one?

**CLAIRE**

2 2 7 5 1 6 1 3 was my first telephone number.

**BYRON**

And *that's* what makes you think of it?

**CLAIRE**

It makes me think of the Nazis.

**BYRON**

The Nazis?

**CLAIRE**

What they did in the concentration camps.

**BYRON**

Inuit make you think of prisoners in concentration camps?

**CLAIRE**

What was done to them.

**BYRON**

Given numbers for names?

**CLAIRE**

It's a cultural genocide.

**BYRON**

How do you know about all that?

**CLAIRE**

My aunt is an Inuk.

**BYRON**

Your aunt is no Inuk.

**CLAIRE**

My aunt is as much an Inuk as your uncle is a Soviet cosmonaut.

**BYRON**

You don't know a thing about her, I bet.

**CLAIRE**

You don't think so? Her name is Anna, and she was held in an Indian Residential School from 1970 until 1979, when she was sixteen. It was called St. Something or Other. West of Hudson Bay. Snatched from her parents at age seven. And she's had pneumonia once or twice a year every year since.

**BYRON**

Why have you never told me this before?

And what does pneumonia have to do with what happened to her?

**CLAIRE**

I didn't think you'd believe me, and I was pretty sure you wouldn't care.  
Every night while she was there they threw her into a cold shower.  
Every night. Sometimes after she'd been beaten or raped.  
Needles were stuck into her tongue if she ever spoke Inuit. Her hair was cut  
short; she was forced to dress in a uniform; and she caught pneumonia.

**BYRON**

I can't believe it.

**CLAIRE**

She wasn't the only one.

**BYRON**

How many, Miss Numbers?

**CLAIRE**

Estimated ....

**BYRON**

Estimated what, Claire?

**CLAIRE**

Over 150,000.

**BYRON**

*150,000??*

**CLAIRE**

Estimated

**BYRON**

How is that possible?

**CLAIRE**

She says thousands died in those schools.  
And thousands more committed suicide.

**BYRON**

She knows that?

**CLAIRE**

She saw the remains of other kids in the fields around the school.  
And one little girl died right beside her.  
They never even told her parents she was sick.

**BYRON**

God!! What turns men into such animals?

**CLAIRE**

Darkness.

And dark forests.

And the dark conviction that we are better than they are.

**BYRON**

I think you've said enough.

**CLAIRE**

An obsession to crown our God, king, and English as his native tongue.

**BYRON**

I hope you're wrong.

**CLAIRE**

Why else would we design a system specifically to destroy the Indian in the child?

**BYRON**

That kind of thinking boils my blood.

**CLAIRE**

It should.

**BYRON**

And makes me all the more want to get out of here.

**CLAIRE**

To do what?

**BYRON**

Save what's left of the Inuit, if I can.

**CLAIRE**

What do you think you can do?

You'll just make things worse for them, and die of the Arctic cold trying.

**BYRON**

Stuck out here with nothing more than a river, a bridge, a forest, and a pub?

What else can I do, but try to get away?

**CLAIRE**

It's not going to help any of them for us to invade the Arctic.

Any more than for us to try to get your uncle down from space.



**BYRON**

Then I'll get out of here to make my fortune,  
and use it, part of it, to help your aunt and the other Inuit.

**CLAIRE**

Money's not the answer.  
Inuit will have to heal themselves, or perish from the face of the Earth.  
It's sad, but it's the law:  
The endless battle of civilization.

**BYRON**

Civilization stinks.

**CLAIRE**

Tell me about it.

**BYRON**

Tell the Indians about it.

**CLAIRE**

Tell Uncle Misha about it.

**BYRON**

It's so Goddamn depressing.

**CLAIRE**

Inuit have a saying.  
My aunt translated it for me.  
Do you want to hear?

**BYRON**

Sure. Why not?

**CLAIRE**

Only sky lives both in dark and light.  
Only snow is fifty-two shades of white.  
Only spirits best guard our villages at night.  
Only names best save a person's worst fright.

**BYRON**

Names?

**CLAIRE**

Some men grow up to have maybe a dozen names. One Inuk had seventeen.  
But true wealth for them comes from the magic they have witnessed in their lives.

**BYRON**

Magic?

**CLAIRE**

Life is magic if you didn't know, like surviving dark, cold winters, and pregnancy.  
Nature bringing food for Inuit villagers to catch.  
The power of Inuit shamans to protect the children.  
But, unfortunately, some magic is the opposite,  
like killer winters, and killer whales, and dark and deadly forests.

**BYRON**

Magic. Crap! What they need is the world to leave their food supply alone.  
And what does it mean?  
Saying the Arctic sky can be in two places at the same time?

**CLAIRE**

I didn't say that.  
No one can be in two places at the same time.

**BYRON**

Uncle Misha can.

**CLAIRE**

But two places can be in one person at the same time.

**BYRON**

What does *that* mean?

**CLAIRE**

Life and death. Tenderness and violence. Clear air and shadows of spirits.

**BYRON**

Are you just repeating what she told you?  
Or do you understand what you're saying?

**CLAIRE**

I have a lot to learn.

**BYRON**

Me, too. And we're not learning much of it here, are we?  
That's why I need to get out.

**CLAIRE**

But doesn't it depress you, thinking of going away?  
It make *me* sad.

**BYRON**

After what *I've* been through?  
My mother, you know. Those Goddamn dogs.  
And that miserable forest.  
Before I leave here I'd like to cut down every tree in it.  
I should have, before it got so big.

**CLAIRE**

I'm sorry. You're right: The forest is an awful place for us all.  
But not reason enough for you to run away.

**BYRON**

Then let's do something about it. Let's at least cut something out of it.

**CLAIRE**

When?

**BYRON**

Next week.

**CLAIRE**

And you'll stay.

**BYRON**

We'll see.

**CLAIRE**

And then we won't be so depressed anymore?

**BYRON**

We'll see.

**CLAIRE**

Not so depressed by the cold and trees anymore?

**BYRON**

We'll see.

**CLAIRE**

Not so depressed by the mess our country has made of the Arctic, and the wild life there?

**BYRON**

The whole modern world is depressing.  
Globalization. Sputnik. Cryptocurrency. Speed.

**CLAIRE**

You must be right.  
Globalization must be what's squeezing native people and their languages out.

**BYRON**

It's like that stinking forest.  
But at least *our* language will never die out.  
And if English is good enough for me, it'll have to be good enough for the world.

**CLAIRE**

Tell that to your uncle Mikhail.

**BYRON**

What do you mean?

**CLAIRE**

English doesn't come close to expressing the native suffering of the Russian *or* the Inuit spirit.

**BYRON**

So be it.

**CLAIRE**

You don't care, do you?

**BYRON**

Not particularly.  
It was my mother I cared about.

**CLAIRE**

You don't care if your language can't tell you the feelings deep in another's soul?

**BYRON**

What money will feelings ever make me?

**CLAIRE**

Money didn't always mean so much to you.

**BYRON**

The world wasn't always so shit-faced, either.

**CLAIRE**

It's not Armageddon, you know. And money's not God.

**BYRON**

What else is there? in the end? To measure the success of your life?

**CLAIRE**

Ask your uncle.

**BYRON**

Clearly the Soviet Union was no measuring rod.

**CLAIRE**

No, nor Nazi Germany.

**BYRON**

Nor Stalin.

**CLAIRE**

Nor Hitler.

**BYRON**

Then what?

**CLAIRE**

Heart.

**BYRON**

Heart?

**CLAIRE**

Heart and soul.

**BYRON**

What are you prattling on about?

**CLAIRE**

The meaning of your life  
in the end  
is what your heart and soul tell you it is.  
Not what some banker, or stockbroker, or insurance salesman says.

**BYRON**

The meaning of my life was the life Mother made for us and our family.  
And now that's gone.  
What's left is leaving here and making my success out there.  
And what do the hearts and souls of Inuit have to tell me about that?

**CLAIRE**

To give you a warning: They have among the highest suicide rates in the world.  
Why? Because Inuit are depressed. More than I imagine you've ever imagined.

**BYRON**

Why is that, do you think?

**CLAIRE**

Because they did *not* want to leave their villages and family.  
But others forced them to.

**BYRON**

Are you telling me if I leave here, I'll commit suicide?

**CLAIRE**

You're still grieving, aren't you? That's not a good sign.  
You need more time to mourn.

**BYRON**

What? with you?

**CLAIRE**

With a woman who loves you more than anyone.

**BYRON**

My mother's dead.  
*Remember?*  
And my life's never been the same.

**CLAIRE**

How could I forget?

**BYRON**

And *how* she died?

**CLAIRE**

No, I haven't forgot that either.

**BYRON**

Then what? What do you think staying here proves?

**CLAIRE**

A life, with a wife and family.

**BYRON**

You better stop that.  
That way of thinking.  
I'm not staying to have a family.  
Not now, at least.

**CLAIRE**

You say mean words; but I don't think you really mean them.  
They're so uncaring.

**BYRON**

What are they? If they don't mean what I say?

**CLAIRE**

Words should be a connection to reality. Not a cover for it.

**BYRON**

So you've said.

**CLAIRE**

So why can't you see it?

**BYRON**

Because your reality and mine are different.

**CLAIRE**

My reality is what is good for people.  
And what makes people feel happy, and not depressed.  
My reality is what Doc Stevens was to us.

**BYRON**

My reality is what gets people ahead.

**CLAIRE**

Money, you mean.

**BYRON**

Money's a way.

**CLAIRE**

And how does money make people feel happy?

**BYRON**

Simple. It's better than not having money.  
Better than emptiness.  
And it's the easiest way to measure who's been successful in life.  
Who's had a superior life. Who's had a full life.

**CLAIRE**

The mantra of Western thought. I've heard it all before.  
Superiority and fullness sprouting only from wealth.

**BYRON**

*My mantra*, if you want to call it that, is success.

**CLAIRE**

And happiness?

**BYRON**

Not here, that's for sure. Not now.

**CLAIRE**

[*pause*] Look, let's not quarrel over this.  
Life's too short.

**BYRON**

**Standing.**

Okay. Enough of this.

**CLAIRE**

**Standing.**

Enough.

**BYRON**

First, into the forest.  
I wasn't afraid of Second Commandments the day we killed the dogs.  
And I'm not afraid of them now.  
After that, freedom.

**CLAIRE**

Into the woods.  
Then we'll see what will be.  
Okay?

**BYRON**

Okay.

**They kiss, and exit.**



### SCENE 3

Two years earlier. Two wooden boxes, **downstage center**. BYRON (now age twenty) enters, carrying a battle axe in one hand, and stands upon one of the boxes, facing the audience, addressing townspeople. The second box is vacant.

Howling and yelping of dogs at a distance in the background.

#### **BYRON**

People. Friends. You know me. You all know me.  
I'm no liar. I'm no mad child crying wolf.  
I may be only twenty but I know a hawk from a handsaw.  
I'm old enough to know that what we face is my mother's fate:  
It's life or death for us.  
You've heard what happened to her. My mother, and those dogs.  
Dogs everywhere.  
Gone crazy.  
Crazed.  
All of them.  
Not rabid, maybe, but crazed.  
Even worse.  
They must be culled.  
Without exception.  
We don't know what's happening, but we are all in danger.  
They are all bloodthirsty.  
For *our* blood.  
Even ones kept at home.

**CLAIRE enters and steps onto the second box, alongside BYRON.**

#### **CLAIRE**

You all know Byron.  
I do, a bit.  
And we all knew his mother.  
*I* saw it happen. With my own eyes.  
How the pack attacked her. Outside her own house.  
Killed her. Tore her body apart.  
Literally.  
I figured I was next.  
Cooper even seemed to want to turn on me. Our own Cooper.  
I'm Claire, by the way. Gwen and Liam Hall's daughter.  
I barely know Byron; but I can feel the pain he is going through.

**BYRON**

Thank you.  
“Claire” is it?

**CLAIRE**

Yes, Claire. Claire Hall.

**BYRON**

Thank you, Claire....  
It’s a monster. What’s happening.  
It’s Grendel.  
I’m telling you: They are demons from Hell.  
I’m sorry Claire had to be there.  
And I’m thankful for whatever saved her.  
I thank you, Claire. We all should.

**VOICE (from the audience)**

What’s on your mind, Byron?

**BYRON**

What’s on my mind right now, Ed? I truly don’t know.  
Grief, and sadness, and loathing. My thoughts are a bloody mess.  
What’s it sound like?  
All I can think of is my mother’s body.  
Lying there. And picking her up. Shredded to death.  
That’s all I can think of: Those hateful creatures.  
Not the dogs we once knew, but Hounds of Hell, I swear to God.  
And what’s on my mind, Ed, is where was I?  
Where was I, and never saved her?  
Twenty years old and never lived up to her hopes for me.  
That! That’s what’s on my mind, if you need to know.

**VOICE (from the audience)**

What do you want us to do about it?

**BYRON**

Grab your knives. Grab your axes.  
Grab your hammers, and come with me.  
We’ll not get another chance.  
I warrant it.  
There’s enough of us.  
Enough of anger in me alone.  
Before they catch us, one by one, and tear our own throats out.

**VOICE (from the audience)**

Your grief isn't letting you think straight, Son.  
Don't you have any feelings for ....

**BYRON**

[*interrupting*] Grief.  
And hatred.  
As thick as blood.  
Those are my feelings.  
And all that yowling out there.

**VOICE (from the audience)**

But what's on your mind for us to do?

**BYRON**

To kill them.  
Burn every last body in a bonfire and bury their curséd teeth and ashes.  
She was my rock and refuge.  
When she died limbs of goodness died in me with her....  
[*beat*] Have you ever felt tears burning down your face while you were gagging?

**CLAIRE**

He's not himself.  
Who could be?  
Don't you see?  
But what he says is something we all must know is true.  
If we want to admit it or not.  
I'm losing Cooper.  
And he was a rock in my life.  
But something's happened. Awful.  
Terribly awful, to *all* our dogs.  
We don't know what.  
But we can't let it keep happening.  
Something's got to be done.

**ALEXANDER enters, carrying a large  
meat cleaver and wearing a thick leather  
jacket and protective gloves.**

**ALEXANDER**

Let's go. What are you waiting for?

**Darkness.**

SCENE 4

Two years earlier. In the rustic kitchen and family eating area of Byron's home. BYRON is now age eighteen, recently graduated from high school. He, his MOTHER, and his father, ALEXANDER, are sitting together at the table.

The battle axe of Scene 3 is hanging on display on the wall.

**MOTHER**

I don't know what to do. What should we do?

**ALEXANDER**

Just leave it alone.  
Leave well enough alone, Mother.

**MOTHER**

He's a friend, Zan.  
He saved Byron's leg. Saved his life.  
Remember?

**Pause.**

Remember how he fell in the lake, skating?  
And his friend, Davie, who died when they couldn't find him?  
Byron could have died, too.

**ALEXANDER**

I told him not to do no skating there.  
Or playing hockey on the ice.  
I told him.

**MOTHER**

I know you did.  
I know.  
But it was Doc Stevens who saved him.

**ALEXANDER**

What was I supposed to do?  
I didn't know they were there.

**MOTHER**

Too busy at the pub.

**ALEXANDER**

What?!  
What do you just mean by that?

**MOTHER**

I just mean that it was Doc Stevens we owe our Byron to.

**ALEXANDER**

I paid him, didn't I?

**MOTHER**

I mean, more than money.  
We owe him more than money.

**ALEXANDER**

I don't think so.  
Not what he's done

**MOTHER**

We don't know he's done a thing.

**ALEXANDER**

The whole town is wrong, I suppose you think.

**BYRON**

What did he do?  
I don't understand.

**ALEXANDER**

You're too young, Boy. Eighteen. That's too young.

**MOTHER**

He may have done nothing, Byron.  
Absolutely nothing, for all we know.

**ALEXANDER**

The whole town doesn't know what's what?

**MOTHER**

People figure things, when they don't know them.  
And they don't always figure them right.

**ALEXANDER**

Like you? you mean?

**MOTHER**

I could be wrong. I admit.  
I'm not perfect, Heaven knows.

**BYRON**

The lake is gone now.  
The whole thing.  
The forest swallowed it up.  
All of it.  
And I don't know how it did it.

**ALEXANDER**

What's that got to do with the Doc?

**BYRON**

I don't know.  
Only ... he saved me and we couldn't save Davie.  
And I never understood that. Why me?

**ALEXANDER**

Because Davie went in first. And you're a better swimmer.

**BYRON**

I still don't understand: Why me?

**ALEXANDER**

You ask too many questions.

**MOTHER**

[*directly to* BYRON] Because God has a plan for you to do something special.

**ALEXANDER**

Not that God business again.

**BYRON**

[*directly to* MOTHER] Then why did God take away my friend?

**MOTHER**

[*directly to* BYRON] Because God had a different place for him in mind.

**ALEXANDER**

[*directly to* BYRON] You have to become a man. God or no God.

**BYRON**

[*directly to* MOTHER] The memory's still so black I can barely see into it properly.

**MOTHER**

[*directly to* BYRON] It hangs over you like a wet cloud over your head.

**BYRON**

[*directly to* MOTHER] It makes me sad to remember.

**ALEXANDER**

[*directly to* BYRON] Get over it.  
It's been two years.

**BYRON**

[*directly to* ALEXANDER] He was so young to die, Man Dad.

**MOTHER**

[*directly to* BYRON] We all mourn for Davie's loss.  
But your father's right.  
One part of living in the end is to pass into eternity.  
Even for young boys. Sometimes.

**BYRON**

I can't get over what I can't understand.

**ALEXANDER**

Well, he's not going to go through life mourning for a friend.

**MOTHER**

[*directly to* BYRON] Why can't you understand it?

**BYRON**

[*directly to* MOTHER] Because I still think he's coming back.  
I still think that.  
I still watch for him in the distance. Running toward me. Or skating.  
Why did he have to die?  
What did *he* do?  
It's like the forest did it. God! I hate that forest!  
It didn't like him for some reason and so it killed him.

**ALEXANDER**

[*directly to* BYRON] You're talking crazy.

**BYRON**

[*directly to* ALEXANDER] It's how I feel.

**MOTHER**

[*directly to* BYRON] It's been two years, Byron.

**BYRON**

[*directly to* MOTHER] It's how I feel, Mother.

**MOTHER**

[*directly to* BYRON] I never knew.  
You've been so quiet about it.  
I never knew, or how could I have been happy knowing how sad you felt?

**BYRON**

[*directly to* MOTHER] You weren't skating with him when it happened.

**MOTHER**

[*directly to* BYRON] I was so happy when Doc fixed your leg.  
And it healed the way it did. Good as new. And it was so badly broken, Doc said.

**ALEXANDER**

Good deeds don't make no excuse.  
It's the evil men do that makes what lives after them.

**BYRON**

The evil a forest does.

**ALEXANDER**

It's just a forest. Stop satanizing it.  
The forest had nothing to do with what happened to your leg.  
It was just bad luck.

**BYRON**

It didn't feel that way.

**ALEXANDER**

Forests don't do evil.  
It's people who do evil.  
Not forests.  
Forests don't break legs. Or kill children.

**BYRON**

They do if they aren't kept safe.

**ALEXANDER**

Bull crap!  
What have you raised, Mother?  
A communist?

**MOTHER**

He has two eyes.  
And a heart, Zan.  
He was born with them.



**ALEXANDER**

Once had a brain in his head, too.

**MOTHER**

Still does.

**BYRON**

All I want you to tell me is what it is so bad that Doc has done.  
I sure haven't seen it.

**MOTHER**

That's ....  
Sorry, Son, that's not for your ears today.

**BYRON**

Or tomorrow, I bet.

**ALEXANDER**

Damn straight.  
Just keep your ears closed.

**BYRON**

I'm just saying, does a man have to relive every mistake he's ever made?  
Whatever it is.

**MOTHER**

Some mistakes ....

**BYRON**

It's not fair.  
It's just not fair.

**MOTHER**

Some things you just don't do in society.

**BYRON**

Everything I do ....  
Everything *you do* even, gets caught up in what other people think.  
I bet they wouldn't want people looking into their habits like that.

**ALEXANDER**

You do what you have to do so as not to make other people look.

**MOTHER**

I bet you do.

**BYRON**

Why can't you tell me?

**MOTHER**

We can't.

**BYRON**

Is it sex?...

I can't even go to a graduation dance without everybody talking about what my intentions are.

And I don't have any.

It's just a dance,

And I'm not interested in girls that way.

**ALEXANDER**

What??

**BYRON**

Or boys either, for God's sake.

**MOTHER**

We just can't. You're only eighteen.

**BYRON**

Shit! I can't stand it!

**BYRON rises and exits.**

**ALEXANDER**

[*beat*] What's wrong with him?

**MOTHER**

He's still sad about Davie.

And he's afraid.

**ALEXANDER**

Afraid of what?

**MOTHER**

Growing up.

And he's always looked up to Doc Stevens, since that accident.

**ALEXANDER**

Well, he needs to grow up.

The world doesn't dance to his step.

**MOTHER**

It is harsh, though.  
Doc swears he hasn't hurt anybody.  
And he probably hasn't.  
And we don't know if it's even true.  
What people are saying.  
What she saw.  
What she *says* she saw.

**ALEXANDER**

Why would she make it up?

**MOTHER**

Why did those teenage girls in Salem make the things up they did?

**ALEXANDER**

Salem?

**MOTHER**

The witch trials?

**ALEXANDER**

Oh. The Salem witches.  
That was ages ago.  
In the United States.

**MOTHER**

Same difference.

**ALEXANDER**

I wasn't there.

**MOTHER**

No. Of course not.  
My point is: How stories of a teenage girl can get way out of line with the truth.

**ALEXANDER**

Do you think she's lying?  
About all three of them being naked?  
In their bedroom.

**MOTHER**

She has no business peeping in.  
That's what I say.

**ALEXANDER**

Two men and a woman!  
Naked together?!

**MOTHER**

Different from two women and a man?

**ALEXANDER**

I never did that. If that's what you're saying.

**MOTHER**

Same difference.

**ALEXANDER**

No sense getting personal about this.  
It's what Doc did, and does.  
And our town has the right to kick him out. All three of them out.  
And that's that...  
Are you getting soft in the head?

**MOTHER**

I'd say we all are.  
Running a man like that out of town.  
For living peacefully like that.  
The way we need good doctors in this part of the country.

**ALEXANDER**

A good doctor can get away with whatever he wants?

**MOTHER**

This isn't a case of "whatever."  
They are adults; and they are doing no harm to the town.

**ALEXANDER**

So *you* say. And you're not God.

**MOTHER**

Thank God I'm not.

**ALEXANDER**

What does that mean?

**MOTHER**

It just means that I'm in no more position than anybody else here to judge another person who's not hurting another person.

**BYRON enters, fitted out for a camping trip.**

**BYRON**

I'm getting out of here.

**ALEXANDER**

Where?

**BYRON**

Going camping.

**ALEXANDER**

By yourself?

**BYRON**

What do you care?

**ALEXANDER**

Just saying: It better not be with any girl.

**BYRON exits.**

**ALEXANDER and MOTHER sit and look at each other, silently.**

SCENE 5

Two years earlier. In the exact same rustic kitchen of Scene 4. BYRON is now age sixteen. His MOTHER, and his father, ALEXANDER, are sitting together at the table when there is a knock at the door (actually, a kick). MOTHER goes to open it, and DOC STEVENS enters, carrying BYRON in his arms, his leg in a cast.

**MOTHER**

O! My God!  
What happened?...  
Here. Sit him down here.

**DOC STEVENS sits BYRON down in the other kitchen chair and takes off his coat.**

**DOC STEVENS**

Busted his leg.  
Worst I've ever seen for a sixteen-year-old.  
Like some unseen hand gripped it under the water.

**ALEXANDER**

I told him not to go playing hockey.

**DOC STEVENS**

They broke through the ice.  
Lucky, I guess, I was going by.

**MOTHER**

Why were you? going by the lake then?

**DOC STEVENS**

A hunch, maybe.  
A premonition.  
I'm not sure.  
It just didn't feel right to me today.

**MOTHER**

The lake?

**DOC STEVENS**

The forest by the lake.  
It didn't look right when I drove by earlier, and saw the boys.

**MOTHER**

Thank God you were there.

**BYRON**

Davie's gone.

**MOTHER**

He is?

**BYRON**

He fell through first. Then I did.  
When the ice broke.  
I just hung on, when Doc came.  
They got me out.  
But my leg was busted.  
Like Doc said.  
But no one could find Davie.  
He just disappeared.  
Then Doc took me to his office, and fixed my leg.

**ALEXANDER**

You're a good man, Doc.  
Thank you.  
We owe you.

**DOC STEVENS**

Just the standard. I'll send you the bill.

**ALEXANDER**

We owe you more than the standard.  
You are such a wonderful citizen in our town.  
What would we do without you?

**MOTHER**

Everyone looks up to you.

**ALEXANDER**

You're a champion.

**MOTHER**

When Margaret fell that time, who was it there to help her back into her house?

**ALEXANDER**

And when Zack nearly cut his hand off, who stitched it back?

**DOC STEVENS**

Just doing my job.

**ALEXANDER**

Looking after half the town half the time.  
A lot more than just doing your job, in my opinion.

**DOC STEVENS**

No family of my own.  
My life, what I live of it, is this town and you people.  
I actually don't know what I'd do if I ever left.

**BYRON**

Why did the ice break, Doc? It never did before.

**DOC STEVENS**

Don't know. Unless the forest, getting so close, had something to do with it.  
The trees and the roots.

**BYRON**

Was it God did it?  
I think maybe it was.

**DOC STEVENS**

I'm not the kind of doctor who can answer a question like that, Son.  
But dark forests ... you've got to be careful.  
I've learned that.  
Especially careful what you do near them.

**MOTHER**

Why?

**DOC STEVENS**

Don't know that either.  
Some say they attract evil spirits.  
More likely they pull the wickedness out of people and other creatures nearby.  
But whatever, dark forests warrant extra caution.

**ALEXANDER**

Maybe we ought clear it.  
Before it stirs up more old wives' tales.  
Right, Doc?

**BYRON**

Wait till my leg's better, if you do.  
I owe it a lick or two....  
It will get better, won't it, Doc?



**DOC STEVENS**

Give it time.  
It was a particularly bad break.  
But everything seemed to fit back okay.  
Just give it time.

**MOTHER**

How much is it we owe you?

**DOC STEVENS**

I'll send you my bill.  
And don't worry about that, either.

**MOTHER**

You are a fine, fine man, you know.

**DOC STEVENS**

And a man on the go.

**ALEXANDER**

To where?

**DOC STEVENS**

Back to the lake. Care to come with me?

**ALEXANDER**

Sure.

**MOTHER**

This part of the world would never be safe enough with you not here.  
We can't thank you enough.  
And don't ever leave us.

**ALEXANDER gets Doc's coat, and his own.**

**DOC STEVENS**

Don't plan to.

**ALEXANDER**

Well, let's go then.

**ALEXANDER and DOC STEVENS exit.**

**MOTHER**

There goes a saint.

**BYRON**

[*pause*] Mom?

**MOTHER**

What, Son?

**BYRON**

Do you believe what he said about the forest?

**MOTHER**

He's not the first.  
And won't be the last.  
That place just looks evil.

SCENE 6

Two years earlier. BYRON, now age fourteen, is entering the local pub, where MOLLY, ALEXANDER, and BUCK are sitting together at a table, laughing and drinking Canadian lager. ALEXANDER is in the middle.

**ALEXANDER**

**Seeing BYRON.**

What are you doing? coming in here, Bud?

You're fourteen.

You're under age.

Get out.

**BYRON**

Mom sent me.

To fetch you home.

Company's coming tonight.

**ALEXANDER**

In time.

In time.

[beat] Go tell your mother I said, "In time!"

**BYRON**

Mom said not to leave without you.

**BUCK**

Pretty cheeky boy of yours, Romeo.

**MOLLY**

[to ALEXANDER] Better be off, Sweetheart, Mother's a-waiting you at home.

**ALEXANDER**

I ain't finished.

Yet.

[beat] Go tell your mother I ain't finished yet.

**BYRON**

What are you doing?

**ALEXANDER**

Just having a friendly beer with my friends.

**BYRON**

With that woman?

**ALEXANDER**

Molly?  
Molly's not a woman.  
She's ...  
She's Buck's girlfriend.  
Ain't she?

**BUCK**

If you say so.

**MOLLY**

Don't piss me off, Sandy.  
I'm in no mood to be pissed off like that tonight.

**ALEXANDER**

You ask too many questions, Son.  
Now, be off with you.

**BYRON**

I'm waiting till you come home with me, Man Dad.

**MOLLY**

Don't forget this tab's on you, *Man Dad*.  
Don't want you forgetting something like that, too.

**ALEXANDER**

Goddammit to Hell!  
Can't a man have some time to his own around here?

**BUCK**

You're forgetting who you are, aren't you?  
You're not a man.  
You're a husband.

**ALEXANDER**

I don't need you, Buck, telling me who I am.  
I know how to swim.

**BUCK**

But how to shuffle, slide, and sidestep?  
You know that, too?

**MOLLY**

In a juke joint?

**ALEXANDER**

Oh, what the crap!!

If I must, I must.

Crap!

I'm out of here.

**ALEXANDER stands abruptly, throws  
some money on the table, and joins  
BYRON to exit the stage.**

SCENE 7

Two years earlier. It is Byron's twelfth birthday. He and MOTHER are **downstage center**. She has a present for him.

**MOTHER**

**Handing BYRON his present.**

Happy twelfth birthday, Byron.

**BYRON**

**Takes the present (not yet unwrapping it) and hugs her.**

Thank you, Mom.

Love you.

**Gives her another hug.**

**MOTHER**

[*pause*] Aren't you going to open it?

**BYRON**

**Unwraps the present. It's a man-size hatchet.**

O my God!!

A hatchet!

A full-size hatchet!

Thank you!

Thank you!

Thank you!

I love it, Mom.

**Gives her another hug.**

**MOTHER**

Now you're a man.

A young one.

But full-fledged.

**BYRON**

I can't wait to cut something down with it.

I love it. I just love it.

**Gives her a fourth hug.**

**MOTHER**

However ... you must promise me that you'll be careful all the time using it.

And not cut or chop things you shouldn't.

**BYRON**

I promise.

**MOTHER**

It could save your life someday.

**BYRON**

Save my life?

How?

**MOTHER**

Well, for example, say you get lost by yourself on a camping trip, or something.

And can't make a fire.

So you cut some kindling.

And branches, and stuff.

And find a flint stone.

And strike it with the blade to make sparks.

And, voila! There's your fire!

**BYRON**

Oh.

**MOTHER**

Never thought of that, eh?

**BYRON**

Nope.

**MOTHER**

Well now you know.

**BYRON**

You know what?

**MOTHER**

What?

**BYRON**

What I can't wait to do?

**MOTHER**

What? What can't you wait to do?

**BYRON**

Run over to Davie's and show him this.

**MOTHER**

Well then run. Or maybe walk. You know. Carrying a hatchet and all that.

**BYRON**

Okay.  
*Walk* over to Davie's.

**MOTHER**

And be home in time for dinner.

**BYRON**

**A fifth hug.**  
I love you, Mom.

**MOTHER**

I know you do.

**BYRON**

See you.

**MOTHER**

Dinnertime.

**BYRON**

Okay.

**BYRON exits, running.**



SCENE 8

Four years after Scenes 1 and 2.

The forest has reached **downstage center**.

ALEXANDER, MOLLY, and BUCK are drinking at a table in the local pub of Scene 6 when BILLY GOAT comes over to join them.

**BILLY GOAT**

Excusez-moi.

I am most interested in that dark forest of yours.

And people here have told me that this is the table I should come to.

**BUCK**

What do you think, Captain?

Should we let this fellow sit?

**ALEXANDER**

Sure.

Why not?

I guess we own as much a piece of that crap forest as anyone.

**BILLY GOAT**

**Sits with them.**

Merci.

Je m'appelle Billy Goat.

**ALEXANDER**

Je ne parle pas le français, Mr. Goat.

I'm Alex Alexander, at your service.

**BUCK**

The name's Buck.

And you can just call me Buck for short.

This is Molly the Unsinkable.

**BILLY GOAT**

The unthinkable?

**MOLLY**

Un *sink* able. No one drinks *me* under the table.

**BILLY GOAT**

Oh.

A pleasure meeting you all.

**MOLLY**

The pleasure is all ours, I assure you.  
You're the first goat who's ever ventured this far into our pub.

**BILLY GOAT**

Goat?

**Laughs.**

Oh, the name.  
A nickname I picked up as a kid.  
Climbing everything around: Hills and trees, vales and rooftops.

**BUCK**

See anything special while you were up there?

**BILLY GOAT**

I saw Comet and Cupid, and Donner and Blitzen,  
Venus and Saturn, and whatever fits in.

**MOLLY**

Clever.

**BILLY GOAT**

"Billy Goat" rhymes with Willy Oat, my real name.

**MOLLY**

And *that's* French?

**BILLY GOAT**

Australian, actually.

**ALEXANDER**

You play games, don't you, Mr. Oat?

**BILLY GOAT**

Been known to.

**BUCK**

We don't cotton much to people playing games here.

**BILLY GOAT**

Never my intent, I assure you.  
Sorry if I've said anything to offend.

**MOLLY**

But we can take a laugh, now and then, can't we? We're not all that uptight.

**BILLY GOAT**

Thankful to hear that.

**MOLLY**

So .... [*beat*] what's your interest in our dark forest?

**BILLY GOAT**

Superstition.

**MOLLY**

Superstition? You think what that crap forest has done to us is *superstition*?

**BILLY GOAT**

You probably know, don't you? that there are others like it in the world.

**ALEXANDER**

I never knew that. Did you, Buck?

**BUCK**

Nope.

**MOLLY**

Not me, either.

**BILLY GOAT**

Well, there are.  
And legions of superstitions surround them....  
Tell me about yours.

**MOLLY**

Nothing much to tell, really.

**BUCK**

Nope, not much to tell.

**ALEXANDER**

Except ... I lost a wife, six years ago.  
And my son, four years ago.  
His fiancée, too. About the same time.  
And his best friend, when he was young.

**MOLLY**

And a couple of Mounties.

**BUCK**

Not to mention a half dozen houses, a lake, and all of our dogs.

**BILLY GOAT**

Jesus Murphy!

**BUCK**

We tried to stop it, but it's like steel and roses. There's nothing we can do.  
Just nothing. As indestructible as the bowels of Satan himself.

**ALEXANDER**

Nothing cuts it down.  
Ate our axes and saws like fish and chips.

**BUCK**

We tried burning it.

**MOLLY**

No good.

**ALEXANDER**

The fire blew back and burned down the houses of us who started it.  
Mine, too.  
And did nothing to them trees.

**MOLLY**

Two Mounties went in ....

**BUCK**

[*interrupting*] After the bear that killed Claire ....

**ALEXANDER**

[*interrupting*] My son's fiancée.

**MOLLY**

But it wasn't a bear.  
Just as big as a bear though.

**ALEXANDER**

Big as a grizzly, with claws like hatchets and teeth like knives.

**MOLLY**

Their bodies were found the next day.

**BUCK**

Killed themselves.

**ALEXANDER**

Went crazy, and killed themselves. Just plum crazy.

**MOLLY**

Like our dogs did.

**ALEXANDER**

Killed my wife, the dogs did. Ripped her throat out.

**BUCK**

Bryon's mother.

**ALEXANDER**

My son, Byron, went crazy after they went into the woods and his fiancée died.  
All he wanted to do was to get out of this place.  
He saw the monster that killed her, you know, in the woods.  
Cut it with his knife....

**MOLLY**

Byron wanted to get out, but it wouldn't let go of his soul. Captured his soul.  
He wasn't a bad kid.

**ALEXANDER**

You go in, some do, and from then on it lives inside your brain, like a parasite.

**BUCK**

I've heard people call it "Grendel."

**MOLLY**

Or Grendel's mother.

**ALEXANDER**

God would be ashamed, to see a forest like that, of pure evil on His Earth.

**BUCK**

But He never goes in.

**MOLLY**

We cut a tombstone for it.

**BUCK**

Put it a good distance away. Where people would be warned.

**MOLLY**

Born the 14<sup>th</sup> day of December, 2012.  
Of pure evil.  
Stay away.  
Died. Who knows when?

**ALEXANDER**

The forest swallowed the tombstone.

**BUCK**

Like it swallowed the whole lake the boys used to go skating on.

**MOLLY**

It doesn't end. The forest eats itself and lasts forever.

**ALEXANDER**

Nothing lasts forever; and nothing is for always.

**BILLY GOAT**

The voice from outer space is.

**BUCK**

What voice?

**BILLY GOAT**

There's a recording orbiting the Earth. It's an endless loop.  
Recorded, they say, by the Soviet cosmonaut who was abandoned up there.  
After the fall of the Soviet Union.  
It goes on and on. Forever.  
People with shortwave radios can pick it up in the nighttime.

**ALEXANDER**

I tell you: Nothing is forever; and nothing is for always. I know. I've learned.

**BUCK**

You're kidding, aren't you? about an abandoned Soviet cosmonaut?

**BILLY GOAT**

Not at all.

**MOLLY**

But you do tell stories, don't you?  
You said you did.

**BILLY GOAT**

Not like that.  
All I ever did, a few times hiking around new villages, was to pretend to go out,  
in the morning, climbing, with all my stuff, and gear, and everything.  
People would see me leave; but then I'd take another path, away from the village,  
and not go back. And people would search and never find me.  
I heard that they called me the phantom climber.

**BUCK**

That's a Hell of a thing to do.

**BILLY GOAT**

It was when I was younger.  
And stupid, I admit.  
I don't do stuff like that anymore.

**ALEXANDER**

No.  
You go around stirring up stories about dark forests.  
Pretending you know shit about things in the world.

**BILLY GOAT**

There's a whole lot of deep soup out there.  
Trust me.  
Scary stuff.

**MOLLY**

Like what?

**BILLY GOAT**

In eastern Europe, for example, there's a dark forest worse than yours.  
Both Stalin and Hitler, they say, walked through it.  
They didn't die, they just went psychopath.  
It sucked the souls right out of them, like a dementor.  
Both of them.  
It does that to people. Floods their brains with delusions of grandeur and hatred.  
They come away with contempt for everybody else's life.  
It implants homicidal urges to kill.  
To kill helter skelter.  
Hysterical racism. Megalomania.  
Obsession with fear and distrust of all other living people.  
A lust for weapons at their side.  
It does that to people.... Like it did Vlad the Impaler.

**BUCK**

Who?

**BILLY GOAT**

Vlad the Impaler.  
Of Romania.  
Dracula.

**BUCK**

Oh. Dracula.

**BILLY GOAT**

They became mental prisoners of the dark forest.

**MOLLY**

Dracula was just a made-up story.

**BILLY GOAT**

The real Dracula wasn't made up.

He was a mass murderer, back in the day.

**MOLLY**

Actually?

**BILLY GOAT**

Actually.

**MOLLY**

Well, that was back in the day, as you say.

**BILLY GOAT**

Odds are there's a Dracula or a Hitler living in Canada right now.

**MOLLY**

Odds are greater that he's in the United States.

**BUCK**

It's like a black hole in space that no one knows diddly-squat about.

Black, with no color at all.

**ALEXANDER**

Funny, Buck, you saying that.

Doc Stevens ...

Remember him?

He wrote Ma that this would happen.

**BILLY GOAT**

Your mother?

**ALEXANDER**

No.

My wife.

That the mad dogs killed six years ago. Before we exterminated them.



**BILLY GOAT**

Oh.

**ALEXANDER**

Doc Stevens wrote her a letter saying that the forest here will keep on growing.  
And killing.  
Like a black hole in space, if we don't stop it.  
With no color.

**MOLLY**

But black *is* a color, Sandy.  
It's different from a void.  
Void is no sight at all. No vision.  
Black says there's still some meaning left, even if an evil one.  
Black says there's still something to think about.  
Black is not blank.  
Void says there's nothing.  
Void is a person's pupil that widens until it become a large fixed circle,  
after the person is dead.  
No rock, no fire, no light, no pain, no forest left.  
Like Byron. Lifeless.  
Unresponsive.  
Dead.

**ALEXANDER**

You really piss me off, sometimes, Molly.

**BILLY GOAT**

I'm so sorry for your losses, Alex.

**ALEXANDER**

[*beat*] After the forest did what it did to Claire, Byron was never really not dead.  
I know some had different feelings about him. And what happened in there.  
That it was his fault in some way. That he had only himself to blame.  
But his eyes lost focus.  
Cold, dead eyes. No feeling left in them at all....

**BUCK**

Whatever happened to Doc Stevens, after he left us?

**MOLLY**

I heard he moved to Alaska.  
Became a doctor in a frontier town over there.

**ALEXANDER**

He saved their asses. That's what he did.  
When Covid-25 hit, he got them onto it sooner than most any place else.  
They quarantined early, and then got the shots early.  
Not one of them died from it.  
Not one, except Doc Stevens himself.  
He never stopped doing good for others....  
I probably let myself misjudge him, back then, when we ran him out of town.

**MOLLY**

It was the forest, Sandy. Its effect on us.  
And it was Doc's destiny to save that town in Alaska.  
Nothing you could do about it.

**ALEXANDER**

Do evil, dark places really have something to do with people's fate?  
I guess they must.  
Those who stumble and die young. Why? Because they walked?  
We all walk. Most of us do anyway.  
Why, then, do some stumble and others don't?  
Why do some birds freeze to death and others don't?  
Why do some airplanes crash?  
What's the trigger? What's the trigger for a heart attack?  
What's the trigger for a suicide?  
I had not one more day to tell Byron I loved him.

**Pause.**

The last thing I remember him telling me was:  
"Man Dad, I tell you, I don't have two more days to live, and nothing to live for."  
And I didn't listen.

**Pause.**

Two Mounties went in, and they killed each other.  
What triggers were there for that?  
A jungle, that forest is. Pure evil.  
I call it Ironwood Darke. That's what I call it. Evil lives there.  
It releases evil into the air and into the ground. Evil and depression.  
Suffocating depression. Destroying the young and innocent first.  
Letting the old and guilty bury their own.  
Destroyed the dogs. Our children. My wife.  
And left the rest of us to bury ourselves in pain.

**BILLY GOAT**

I feel for you, Brother.

**ALEXANDER**

And we're still asking why.  
How much stupidity can a country endure?

**MOLLY**

[*pause*] As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.  
World without end.

**All of a sudden a giant gunshot.**

**Then darkness.**

**END**



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