

THERE'S STILL SNOW ON SILVER STAR

by

David Bareford

Production Draft (White)

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1911 NW Chapel Hill Drive
Woodland, WA 98674

CHARACTERS

ESTHER "ESSIE" GARNER, female, late 20s to mid 30s

HIRAM GARNER, Essie's father, male, late 50s

KATHERINE "KIT" COLE, female, mid 20s to early 30s

JAMES PATRICK WALSH, male, late 20s to mid 30s, Irish accent

TIME

Act One: a hot afternoon on August 27, 1902.

Act Two: the following Sunday evening, August 31st.

Act Three: the evening of September 12th.

Act Four: the morning of September 13th.

SETTING

The Garner homestead near the tiny settlement of Yacolt, Washington. A rustic farmhouse exterior with a covered porch stands across a dusty yard from the corner of a barn that includes a rustic door. A hand water pump stands over a tin catch basin near a wood pile and a splitting stump.

ACT I -- PROSPECT

SETTING: The Garner homestead near the tiny settlement of Yacolt, Washington. A rustic farmhouse exterior with a covered porch stands across a dusty yard from the corner of a barn that includes a rustic door. A hand water pump stands over a tin catch basin near a wood pile and a splitting stump.

AT RISE: A lone cello plays a mournful tune, fading to the sounds of buzzing flies and nearby chickens. ESSIE sits on the front porch, hunched over a galvanized tub as she plucks a chicken. She is a woman in the prime of youth but her face is lined with the harsh realities of frontier life, and her hands are stained ruddy with the life's blood of slaughtered poultry.

HIRAM (O.S.)

Confound ya, Delilah! Get in there! Git!

ESSIE

(calling out)

No call shouting at her! Not her fault!

HIRAM storms in. He is fifty-five-going-on-seventy, with a face like sun-baked leather and a lean-muscled frame dressed in "going to town" clothes.

HIRAM

No call? Durn near sunset! If she ain't walk so Dad-blamed slow--

ESSIE

She's a plowhorse, not a thoroughbred.

HIRAM

Should sell her for glue! Lost her spirit after Samson died, bad cess to her!

ESSIE

Stop cursin' poor Delilah!

HIRAM

Shouldn't have even gone! Whole day wasted.

Hiram throws down a burlap bag, crosses to the pump and works the handle to get a splash of water to wash his face.

Essie crosses to the bag and pulls out a potato plant, leaves, tubers, and all. The stem and leaves are spotted brown and partly withered, while the potatoes are blackened and look almost charred.

ESSIE

What did the extension office--

HIRAM

Charcoal rot, they called it. Ain't never heard a such a cussed thing!

ESSIE

What did they say to do?

HIRAM

They tol' me--

Hiram's words are stopped by a violent cough. His breath begins to come in wheezes, as if he can't catch a full breath.

ESSIE

Pa?

Hiram waves a reassuring hand and tries to answer, but the coughs come again. Essie moves over to him.

ESSIE (cont'd)

You got your cigarettes?

(Hiram nods, coughing)

Well, fish 'em out!

Hiram pulls out a metal tin of medicinal cigarettes and a box of matches. With shaking hands, he lights up and takes a long pull. He regards the cigarette.

HIRAM

Like my pipe better.

ESSIE

Not a matter of what you like. Doc Shoemaker come all the way out from Woodland, bring you those.

HIRAM

Yeah, well, they taste funny.

ESSIE

Better'n bronchial spasms.

HIRAM

Huh.

Hiram takes another drag and flicks the spent match to the ground. Essie runs to the discarded match and grinds it out with her shoe.

ESSIE

It's dry as sticks, you durned fool! Honestly!

HIRAM

(croaking)

It was out!

ESSIE
When's the last time it rained?

HIRAM
But it were already out!

ESSIE
Like to burn the place down.

HIRAM
Fine! Let it! What the extension people said anyhow...

ESSIE
What are you on about?

HIRAM
"Gotta burn it all up," they tol' me. "Kill the..." whatever, whatever. Whole field.

ESSIE
Burn the potatoes? That's their answer?

HIRAM
Every plant, right down t' the ground. Then plow it deep, rake 'n pile whatever's pulled up, and burn it again.

ESSIE
Huh.

HIRAM
Durn right, "Huh." Won't have a spud to sell. Be eatin' shoe leather and memories by Christmas.
(He takes a long drag)
Nothin' doin' but put the place up for sale.

ESSIE
(suddenly forceful)
You will do no such thing!

HIRAM
Ain't you been listenin'? We got no harvest!

ESSIE
And we'll get by, like always.

HIRAM
Essie, can't you see it? The place is dyin'! Slow and sure! First the boys left, then we lost your Ma to The Grip, then Samson up and keeled over--

ESSIE
But we're here! And we're staying.

HIRAM
Not when they take 'way the land for no harvest money!

ESSIE

No one can do that! We homesteaded this place!

HIRAM

Well--

ESSIE

This is Garner land, Pa. And last time I checked, I'm still a Garner!

HIRAM

Certainly got the Garner stubborn.

ESSIE

And I come by it honest, from you. Now come spring we'll buy up a couple hundred pounds of Jessup's crop, make our seed eyes from that, get a healthy--

HIRAM

Can't!

ESSIE

Can't?

HIRAM

Extension people said the ground's gotta set fallow a spell or the rot comes right back.

ESSIE

Fallow how long?

HIRAM

Be safe? Three year.

ESSIE

Three *years*?

HIRAM

'S why I gotta sell.

ESSIE

You are not selling! We'll just...grow something else.

HIRAM

I'm a tater farmer, Essie! All I know. Ain't set up for wheat, nor corn. Plus seed costs money, an I ain't got but fifty-three bucks to my name!

ESSIE

That's it?

HIRAM

S'posed to have a harvest next month!

Pause.

ESSIE

Well, we aren't licked. Not yet. Mary McCutcheon said she'd hire me for a spell to teach school once her baby comes. She's due in a less than a month, and I'll earn three doll--

HIRAM

No.

ESSIE

What?

HIRAM

No!

ESSIE

What do you mean, "no?"

HIRAM

Ain't right for a man to lean on his daughter to provide!

ESSIE

Of all the pig-headed--

HIRAM

Won't take your money. Won't do it.

ESSIE

I'm *here*, let me help!

HIRAM

Shouldn't *oughta* be here.

ESSIE

Oh, now you don't want me?

HIRAM

I want you to get on with your life, Ess! Find someplace better like your brothers done.

This is clearly a sore point and something she
doesn't want to discuss.

ESSIE

Pish! I have a bird to pluck.

She returns to the washtub and starts plucking again.

HIRAM

I mean it, girl.

ESSIE

I mean it, too. Meat'll go bad in an hour in this heat, I don't get it under cool water soon.

Silence. Essie plucks. Hiram regards her.

HIRAM

Ninety-eight was four years ago, you know.

ESSIE

I'm aware. Countin's a specialty of mine.

HIRAM

I'm only sayin' it's maybe time. Could start lookin' again.

ESSIE

At *who*? Tell me. Who? Aren't but eight or ten families this whole neck of the woods. Not a lot of eligible men to pick from!

HIRAM

Fred Fargher's wife died last winter.

ESSIE

Fred Fargher is near *your* age!

HIRAM

There's Will Eaton.

ESSIE

You mean *Billy*? He was in knickers not but--

HIRAM

Well, he's growed up now and--

ESSIE

Pa, stop it! I'm not going through that again.

Pause.

HIRAM

Don't have to be love, you know.

ESSIE

What doesn't?

HIRAM

Marriage. Can be just an agreement 'tween two consenting parties.

ESSIE

How romantic.

HIRAM

Romance ain't a gotta be a part of it, is my point. Better to build a life with someone, than alone.

ESSIE

Oh, so I should just march up to Fred Fargher and slap down a contract?

HIRAM

Don't have to be him. You could...put out an advertisement.

ESSIE

What, in the *paper*?

HIRAM

(shrugs)

Could do.

ESSIE

Is my own father seriously suggesting I become a *mail-order bride*?

HIRAM

Works for some, I hear.

ESSIE

I think I better go pull this poor chicken's guts out, lest I start in on *yours*.

There is a RING of a small bell and a cry of surprise.
A BICYCLE sails partly in, bearing KIT who wears
bicycle bloomers and is flushed from exertion. She
exudes youthful energy and an irrepressible spirit.

KIT

I love that downhill part!

ESSIE

Kit!

KIT

Afternoon!

HIRAM

Mrs. Cole! You're...you're barely dressed!

KIT

What? Oh, these? Bicycle bloomers. All the rage.

ESSIE

You can't expect her to pedal in a skirt, Pa.

HIRAM

But you can see...you're missing your whole...

KIT

It's a new century, Mister Garner!

ESSIE

I think they're quite fetching.

KIT
(with a curtsy)

Why, thank you.

Hiram is pointedly trying not to look.

HIRAM
I should...see to...Delilah...in, in the barn.

Hiram exits quickly into the barn.

ESSIE
Those stockings *do* leave little to a man's imagination.

KIT
Why do you think I wear 'em? Oh! I brung you some butter!

ESSIE
Brought.

KIT
Hmm?

ESSIE
You *brought* me some butter.

Kit sticks out her tongue at Essie.

KIT
Schoolmarm!

ESSIE
Dunce!

Pause. They laugh--this is an old exchange.

KIT
Speakin' of schoolmarms, I also *brung*...the Morning Oregonian.

She holds up a newspaper clipping.

ESSIE
I think the newspaper man swindled you. That's only a little piece of--

KIT
Ha, ha. They're looking for teachers. Five dollars a week.

ESSIE
Really?

KIT
And a teacher's cottage!

ESSIE

Why would I need a cottage?

KIT

‘Cause...it’s in Yakima.

ESSIE

That’s a hundred and fifty miles from here, over the mountains!

KIT

Have you seen it out east? Wide open spaces, not all hemmed in by trees...

ESSIE

I like trees.

KIT

They get *sun* in Yakima! ‘Less you prefer three hundred days of rain a year?

ESSIE

Rain makes the crops grow.

KIT

But the growing *there*! Melons, squash, apples...and you ain’t obliged to wait to mid-August for a half-decent tomato!

ESSIE

If it’s so nice, why don’t you go teach?

KIT

Me? I ain’t a schoolmarm. ‘Sides, I got Frank, the dairy. But you! You got no ties!

ESSIE

There’s Pa.

KIT

He can manage on his--

ESSIE

He can’t, though. Not alone. He’s gettin’ worse. His lungs...Doc Shoemaker’s got him on medicinal cigarettes for his cough, but it’s not helping. He can barely plow three furrows without stopping to cough, catch his breath.

KIT

Then he can hire a hand! You need to *go*. You got a *degree*, you’re smart, you got a life ahead of you!

ESSIE

(with finality)

No. I’m needed here.

(softening)

I do thank you for bringing this, but I’ll just teach for Mary McCutcheon this fall.

(off Kit’s look)

Because of her baby on the way.

KIT

When's the last time you talked to Mary?

ESSIE

Been a spell. Why?

KIT

We lost the school, Essie. It got took back.

ESSIE

Lost it how? And what do you mean, "took back?"

KIT

You know Ernie Bragg sold his place?

ESSIE

Heard about it. So?

KIT

So the school was built on Ernie's land.

ESSIE

Used to be, sure, but he donated the school plot years ago.

KIT

Well...seems he *planned* to, but he ain't never got around to actually transferring the title with the county, so legally he *didn't*. So when he sold his place the school house went with it.

ESSIE

Surely the new owner will allow us to--

KIT

Huh-uh. He took the school sign down, put up his own. Says some word in German. "We-er-hoose" or something. Frank says it means "warehouse." Anyway, the new guy's living there!

ESSIE

Living in the schoolhouse?

KIT

Mary's fit to be tied. She's gonna try to hold class at their house, but with fourteen students...

ESSIE

There room at your dairy? An old barn or something?

KIT

I tried. Frank wouldn't even bring up the subject with his Pa. "The Coles run a business, Katherine, not a charity." Frank Senior barks, and Frank Junior tucks his tail.

ESSIE

You shouldn't speak ill of your husband.

KIT

I'll stop speaking ill when he starts growing a spine.

ESSIE

We should get this butter inside, out of the sun. And I have to finish that chicken I started.

KIT

Wouldn't have to slaughter chickens in Yakima...

ESSIE

Would you stop with Yakima?

Essie and Kit exit into the farmhouse. We hear far-off HOOOF BEATS. Hiram re-enters and looks into the distance to find the source of the sound.

HIRAM

(calling to the house)

Essie! Someone's coming down the road! We know anyone rides a big blue roan?

(to himself)

Nice gait on her, too.

Essie and Kit re-emerge.

ESSIE

(seeing the visitor approach)

Who is he?

KIT

Who cares? Look at him...

ESSIE

Pa?

HIRAM

Dunno. Ne'er seen him afore. Fancy for this weather, too.

(calling out)

Just tie her by the rail there, where she can get at the trough!

They wait and watch in silence.

JAMIE strides in. His morning coat shows a little dust from the road but this is more than compensated for by his disarming smile and the air of confidence and charisma that clings to him. This is a man who could sell water to a fish. Kit smiles. Essie unconsciously smooths her hair.

JAMIE

(in a light Irish brogue)

God save you all and a fine day to you!

KIT

Afternoon.

JAMIE

Might I be addressing Mister W. H. Garner and his lovely...daughters?

HIRAM

Who's askin'?

JAMIE

Well, my father named me James Patrick Walsh, but only my mother calls me that, and then only when I've sinned. To everyone else, I'm simply Jamie.

KIT

An Irishman...

JAMIE

By blood and brogue only. My parents were from County Cork, but I'm a natural-born American and proud of it.

HIRAM

You ain't here 'cause...the paper? Already?

JAMIE

The...paper?

KIT

You're a newspaperman?

ESSIE

Now what would a reporter want with us? More likely, he's a traveling salesman.

JAMIE

Oh, not traveling anymore, Miss. Aren't I after buyin' a place not two months past? Right here in Yacolt.

HIRAM

In where?

JAMIE

Yacolt...the town...where you live too?

HIRAM

We live in Garner.

ESSIE

(to Hiram)

Can you not make trouble?

JAMIE

The town's named Yacolt. I'm not mistaken.

HIRAM

It's *Garner*. I should know: I'm Hiram Garner. Ran the post office here for eight years 'til the consarned U-S-P-S made me close mine down. Said Joe Eaton opened his Yacolt mail drop a year afore mine, which he most assuredly did not!

JAMIE

And a crying shame if he did! 'Garner' rolls off the tongue mickle more smooth and free than any 'Yacolt!'

HIRAM

Cain't argue with that.

JAMIE

Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, Hiram. And this lovely creature is...?

KIT

Katherine Ann Cole. From Cole's Dairy Farm. But soon I'll prob'ly let you call me Kit.

JAMIE

I await that day with trembling anticipation, Katherine Ann Cole of Cole's Dairy.

Kit flashes him a dazzling smile.

HIRAM

Now this here is--

ESSIE

Esther Garner. His full-grown daughter who can speak for herself.

JAMIE

Enchanted to meet you, Miss Garner. If it is *Miss* Garner?

KIT

Oh, it certainly is...

ESSIE

What can we do for you, Mister Walsh?

JAMIE

Well, you can start by callin' me Jamie.

ESSIE

I don't think just yet.

KIT

Essie!

(to Jamie)

She's just a little prickly 'cause of the heat. Jamie.

HIRAM

A real worker, this one is. Dawn to dusk.

JAMIE

Sure and that's very admirable in a--

HIRAM

--An' she keeps the house as neat as a pin!

ESSIE

Can we not discuss me when I'm standing right here?

JAMIE

Forgive my rudeness, Miss Garner. Meant no disrespect.

ESSIE

And I took none, Mister Walsh. But as Kit points out, it is indeed a bit warm to chat idly while standing in the sun. May we ask what it is you're selling?

JAMIE

Oh, I'm not here to sell you a thing. In fact, it's quite the opposite: I'm a purchasing agent.

ESSIE

Then what is it you buy?

JAMIE

Land. Property.

HIRAM

You don't say...

JAMIE

For a real estate investor named Frederick Weyerhaeuser.

KIT

Weyerhaeuser?

JAMIE

He buys prime timberland at premium--

ESSIE

We have nothing to offer him.

HIRAM

Essie! Whyn't you fetch Mister Walsh--

JAMIE

Jamie.

HIRAM

...Jamie...a glass of tea and be hospitable?

ESSIE

(pause)

Fine. Do allow me to play the gracious host.

KIT

I'll come with you!

(to Jamie)

We'll be right back. Jamie.

JAMIE

(tipping his hat)

Miss Cole.

Essie and Kit move toward the house. When they are a little distance away, Essie whispers to Kit.

ESSIE

Except it's not *Miss* Cole, is it?

KIT

He don't gotta know that.

ESSIE

You're a married woman.

KIT

Don't affect my eyes, does it?

ESSIE

Supposed to keep them from wandering, or so they tell me.

KIT

Then they should tell that to men. But I meant him for you. Wouldn't it be grand to have a man like that?

ESSIE

Pish. I'm done with love.

They go into the house and exit.

HIRAM

Sorry. Essie can be a pistol when the mood strikes her.

JAMIE

Nothin' to apologize for. But I noticed the ring...is she...a widow?

HIRAM

No. Well, it's a long story...

(a sudden urgency)

But listen! Not much time!

JAMIE

Oh?

HIRAM

Your boss buys land, you said?

JAMIE

Aye. We just bought the Bragg place in town.

HIRAM

He lookin' for more?

JAMIE

Always.

HIRAM

I got a hundred and sixty acres here, all but a quarter of it virgin timber. Goin' rate in these part's maybe twenty-five an acre, but I'd drop it to twenty-three, twenty-two for you.

JAMIE

An interestin' proposal.

HIRAM

You won't find a nicer slice of heaven for fifty miles. Good water here, good soil.

JAMIE

Oh, I'm sure. Can't help but notice, though--your crop's blighted.

HIRAM

That? No! It's...just the time of year when the leaves turn--

JAMIE

I'm Irish, man. We're a wee familiar with potato blight. So no harvest for this year, and maybe the next two or three. Right away there's forty acres wasted.

HIRAM

Huh.

(pause)

Could drop it down to twenty per. Thirty-two hundred, now that's a good price.

JAMIE

What if I give *you* a number I'm--

HIRAM

(hearing the front door)

Shh! Pretend I said nothin'!

Essie and Kit return from the house with a glass of tea. Essie hands it to Jamie.

JAMIE

My thanks to you.

ESSIE

(to Hiram)

Now, has the charming Irishman finally said what he came for?

JAMIE

You say I'm charmin'?

KIT

I heard it.

ESSIE

A figure of speech. Why are you here, Mister Walsh?

JAMIE

Your father and I were discussin' a price for your land.

ESSIE

(to Hiram)

You what?!

HIRAM

Now, Essie, don't get all riled--

ESSIE

Riled up? This is Garner land! You homesteaded this from wilderness! You built that house with your own two hands!

HIRAM

It's just land, Essie...

ESSIE

Land that Jack and Asa and I were practically raised on! Land Momma's buried in! We are not leaving this land!

HIRAM

We ain't even heard his offer!

ESSIE

His offer?

(to Jamie)

What could you possibly offer us, Mister Walsh, to convince us to sell off one pebble of this place?

Jamie pulls out a fat roll of banknotes.

JAMIE

Cash on the barrelhead.

ESSIE

There isn't money enough.

HIRAM

How much do you have there?

JAMIE

Eight hundred and seventy-one dollars.

Essie bursts out laughing.

ESSIE

Are you crazy? That's barely five dollars an acre! Tell him to get off our land, Pa!

But Hiram is silent. He looks like he's seen a ghost.

ESSIE (cont'd)

Tell him, Pa...

HIRAM

Why did you...how did you come by that particular number?

JAMIE

Land deeds are a matter of public record, Mister Garner, as are their lien holders. And through my work in real estate I am in frequent contact with a number of financial institutions, most notably Vancouver National Bank, where I have several friends including John Andrews, whom I believe you know. A discreet question here or there, and...

ESSIE

What is he talking about, Pa?

HIRAM

You couldn't even do me two thousand? I'm sure Mister Weyerhaeuser--

JAMIE

You heard the offer.

HIRAM

A thousand, maybe?

JAMIE

Eight hundred seventy-one.

ESSIE

Excuse us!

Essie practically drags Hiram away from Jamie to talk privately. Kit follows.

HIRAM

I'm so sorry, Essie...

ESSIE

What is going on? What is that number?

HIRAM

That's how much I owe. To the dollar.

KIT

Owe? To who?

HIRAM

Vancouver Bank! I took out a loan last year...

ESSIE

What on earth for? For how much?

HIRAM

Three thousand.

ESSIE

Three thousand *dollars*?

HIRAM

It were an *investment*! I--

ESSIE

In what? And what did you use for collateral?

(Hiram says nothing)

Pa...what did you put up against a *three-thousand-dollar loan*?

(She realizes)

Oh, you didn't...

HIRAM

Had to.

ESSIE

No! You *didn't* have to! You gambled this land on some harebrained scheme?

HIRAM

It weren't a scheme! I told you: an investment. Went in on a steamboat.

ESSIE

A steamboat? You're a potato farmer!

HIRAM

An' I gotta get crops to market! Teamsters bleed me for two hundred a year, haulin' spuds to Portland...And the *Mascot* charges highway robbery! So six of us farmers 'round here went in on a new steamboat called the *North Fork*. To come all the way up to Colvin's Landing an' carry our crops for free. Rest of the time 'twould turn a profit running folks down the Lewis to Etna and Woodland, then points south to Vancouver, Portland.

ESSIE

Except let me guess--it *hasn't* turned a profit.

(off his look)

Worse?

HIRAM

The boiler bust at La Center last month. Burnt to the waterline.

ESSIE

So no money and no boat to show for it.

HIRAM

And the loan comes due the first of October. I still owe 'em eight hunnerd an' seventy-one dollars or they foreclose and seize the place.

ESSIE
Six weeks.

KIT
And you can't pay it?

HIRAM
Coulda if we'd got a harvest, but now...

ESSIE
We'll figure a way.

HIRAM
There ain't no way! Either we sell to this Irishman or the bank takes it for nothin'.

KIT
(suddenly realizing)
Oh, good Lord above!

ESSIE
What?

KIT
I just 'membered! Weyerhaeuser!
(blank looks)
His company!

ESSIE
What about it?

KIT
That's the name put up on our schoolhouse! He's the chiselin' polecat bought Ernie's land
an's livin' in the school!

ESSIE
Is he *trying* to ruin my life?

HIRAM
Oh, Essie...weren't s'posed to be this way. I was gonna--
(A coughing fit takes him)
I was plannin'--
(More coughs)
Can't...breathe...

ESSIE
Get your cigarettes!
(Hiram pats his pockets)
Where did you leave them?

HIRAM
...barn...barn, I think...

ESSIE

Go! Go get 'em! I'll handle this.

HIRAM

(mumbling)

Wasn't..s'posed to...

ESSIE

Go!

Still coughing, Hiram exits. Jamie watches him curiously.

JAMIE

Is he all right, there?

ESSIE

Fine. He's fine.

JAMIE

(indicating the well)

I can draw him some water...

ESSIE

No need. We'll just be a minute more.

KIT

(to Jamie)

Very polite of you!

They turn away from Jamie again.

ESSIE

Polite doesn't mean he's not still evil.

KIT

'Course not...easy on the eyes, though.

Essie regards Jamie thoughtfully.

ESSIE

Huh.

KIT

Essie...what are you schemin'?

ESSIE

What? Nothing!

KIT

You're up to somethin'.

Bareford -- There's Still Snow on Silver Star -- 22.

ESSIE

Am not.

KIT

Are. You make that face.

ESSIE

What face?

(Kit demonstrates)

I do not!

KIT

You never see yourself. What are you up to?

ESSIE

(to Jamie)

Mister Walsh? What would you say if I offered you a hundred acres at half of market?

KIT

You can't sell to him!

ESSIE

Shh...follow my lead...

Jamie crosses toward the women.

JAMIE

My offer is for the full homestead.

ESSIE

And this is a counteroffer. It's called negotiation.

JAMIE

You have no basis to negotiate, Miss Garner. You can't divide a parcel when it's under lien. Until that loan's paid off, it's all or nothin'.

ESSIE

I see.

JAMIE

So I bid you a good afternoon and blessings upon your house. Miss Cole, a pleasure.

ESSIE

Sunday!

JAMIE

I beg pardon?

ESSIE

Next Sunday...I'll...make us all a nice pork roast with baked potatoes and all the fixings. That is, if you're free.

JAMIE

Askin' me to dinner? Now why would you be doin' that?

ESSIE

Because that's what people do when they have a new neighbor in town. We get to know each other like civilized folks.

JAMIE

You're still tryin' to negotiate.

ESSIE

Not negotiate. Talk. Find common ground. You write down your best offer and seal it in an envelope, and we'll do the same with the lowest price we'll accept. After we eat, we'll open the envelopes and perhaps have some room to come to an agreement.

JAMIE

And if we don't?

ESSIE

Then at least you've had a nice meal.

KIT

Essie's an *amazing* cook. Her apple pie is to die for!

JAMIE

I admit I can't recall the last time I had the prospect of such a fine repast.

ESSIE

So you'll come? Say...six o'clock?

JAMIE

'Twould be an honor. Wild horses couldn't keep me from it.

ESSIE

Then we have an accord. 'Til Sunday.

JAMIE

Sunday...

Jamie shakes Essie's hand lightly, tips his hat, and exits.

KIT

What are you plottin', Essie?

ESSIE

I don't think I should say.

KIT

I'm your best friend. Have to tell me. It's practically a law.

ESSIE

You won't like it.

KIT

I ain't budging. I'm as stubborn as you are...

ESSIE

...and twice as mean.

KIT

...and twice as mean.

ESSIE

Look. I think I know a way to keep our place, pay off Pa's loan, *and* get the school back.

KIT

Sakes alive! How?

ESSIE

By remembering my Jane Austen.

KIT

Everything's so clear now. The world is saved.

ESSIE

Do you recall the first line of *Pride and Prejudice*?

KIT

I'm guessin' it ain't "Once upon a time?" Go on, tell me, I know you're dyin' to.

ESSIE

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

(Kit still isn't getting it)

Don't you see? All I have to do is marry Jamie Walsh.

KIT

MARRY HIM? Have you lost all sense and sensibility?

ESSIE

It makes perfect sense! If Walsh buys the land, we can pay off the loan. Then when he marries me, the farm stays in the family. We'll have this house to live in so he won't need the school and we'll be able to give it back to Mary. Three birds, one stone.

KIT

You'd wed him just to keep the farm?

ESSIE

Why not? *Men* have married for land and titles since King Arthur!

KIT

But you don't know this Irishman from Adam!

ESSIE

'Course I don't. But he's rich, he's handsome, and he solves all my problems.

KIT

So it's that easy?

Bareford -- There's Still Snow on Silver Star -- 25.

ESSIE

No, it's not *easy*. I have to convince him to marry me! Now are you going to help or not?

KIT

This is a horrible plan, Esther Garner, and it's gonna end awful...so of course I'll help you! Now come on.

They exit into the house.

ACT II -- PROPOSAL

SETTING: Outside, the last vestiges of twilight streak the evening sky, and darkness creeps over the Garner homestead.

The walls of the house have opened to reveal a simple but well-kept room that includes a heating stove and a dinner table set for three. A pair of taper candles still glow but have melted considerably. Two settings show evidence of finished meals; one is noticeably untouched, and an envelope rests on the plate.

AT RISE: We hear a single cello being joined by another, the melody and counter-melody intertwining. The mood is still quiet, but becoming hopeful.

HIRAM stands on the porch, pensively observing the fading sunset as he smokes his pipe. He is in "Sunday" clothes but seems to have made himself more comfortable by unbuttoning his collar, abandoning his jacket, and rolling his shirt sleeves.

ESSIE enters the dining room from another part of the house. She wears a simple but lovely dress and has clearly taken time to make herself look pretty. She immediately crosses to the table and blows the candles out, then moves to the porch.

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------|
| | ESSIE |
| Left you to watch those lights. | |
| | HIRAM |
| Ain't no harm done. | |
| | ESSIE |
| Till the house burns down. | |
| | HIRAM |
| Let it. | |
| | ESSIE |
| You're in a fine mood. | |
| | HIRAM |
| I'll bust his nose. | |
| | ESSIE |
| Line starts behind me. | |

They stand a moment in silence.

ESSIE (cont'd)

The Irishman wanted to buy, is what galls me. Did all that legwork to learn about the loan. Came up here to make his offer. Makes no sense he wouldn't show now, at least talk about it.

HIRAM

Huh.

Hiram taps out his pipe and moves back inside. He finds a whiskey bottle and pours himself a large drink.

ESSIE

Last thing you need. You had plenty at dinner.

HIRAM

Leave me be.

(he drinks)

Dark as a tomb in here. At least set a lamp.

Hiram takes the oil lamp and tries to light a match, but the drinks are beginning to take their toll. Twice the match goes out. On the third time, he tries lifting the lamp to the burning match.

ESSIE

Stop! You'll spill it and burn us up!

HIRAM

Cheap penny matches...

ESSIE

Give it here.

She takes the lamp, sets it on the table, and lights it.

HIRAM

Look so much like your Ma, in that dress.

ESSIE

Pretty little thing...stupid to even wear it. Stupid to think selling to Walsh is any better than letting the bank evict us.

HIRAM

Either way, least there's an end to it.

ESSIE

An end? This is our home!

HIRAM

It's a graveyard, Essie! A home for broken things. What do we got here? A field that's poisoned. A house like to fall down if I don't prop it up year after year. Initials carved into a barn post, remindin' me Jack and Asa ain't comin' back. A bed upstairs, too big by half without my Hattie in it...

(MORE)

HIRAM(cont'd)

(Another gulp of whiskey)

And a daughter flutterin' about me like a bird with a broken wing.

ESSIE

You're drunk.

HIRAM

And you hate me.

ESSIE

I don't.

HIRAM

You do. Bitterness and blame just rolls off you. And why not? It's my fault we've lost the farm. Should 'a known not to risk the loan. Or how to stop the rot. I'm the one should 'a listened to Hattie when she said she...she was...

Hiram downs his liquor in a single gulp and slams the glass onto the table. Essie regards him a moment, then pours another shot for him.

ESSIE

Not your fault. Steamships burn, and crops sometimes wither. Mama took sick so sudden no one could have predicted.

HIRAM

Should'a given her a better life, 'stead'a makin' her claw this place outta wilderness.

ESSIE

She had no regrets, living here.

Hiram shoves the whiskey away.

HIRAM

She did. On her deathbed. Said she was sorry she couldn't make you a wedding dress.

Essie downs the whiskey in the glass herself. Winces. She's not accustomed to hard spirits.

ESSIE

Go to bed, Pa. We'll figure out what to do in the morning.

Hiram shuffles out, clearly affected by his drinking.

Essie takes up a bucket and heads out to the pump. She pumps some water into her bucket and stretches her back, stares into the heavens, pensive. Night closes in.

After a moment, she gets her pail and starts in, but a nearby WHICKER of a horse is heard. She turns.

Hello?

But there is nothing.

That you, Delilah?

She clearly does not think so. A little unnerved, she cautiously moves back to the house, reaching above the front door to pull down a Winchester rifle. She steps out on the front porch, barrel held low. She peers into the darkness.

Who's there?

With the ease of familiarity, she levers a round into the chamber. Slowly, a silhouette slips in around the barn.

JAMIE

Don't shoot. It's Jamie.

ESSIE

Not the most compelling reason to hold my fire.

JAMIE

You're upset.

ESSIE

When a woman extends an dinner invitation, Mister Walsh, she doesn't mean sneak in three hours later.

JAMIE

And I do apologize for that.

ESSIE

What happened to "wild horses?"

(He doesn't answer)

Get on out of here. Pa's gone to bed, dinner's long since put away, and you've a fair piece to ride in the dark.

JAMIE

What about our negotiation? I have my sealed envelope, as instructed.

ESSIE

Then give it here, we'll swap. If we have something to discuss, it'll be another day.

JAMIE

I'm afraid this envelope comes at a cost.

ESSIE

Does it now. What's your price?

JAMIE

Pie. I was promised apple pie "to die for."

Essie's anger is in conflict with her need to save the farm. Her Jane Austen plan stands on the knife edge. She can send Jamie away and retreat to safety, but unless he crosses that threshold--

She jerks the muzzle of the rifle toward the front door.

ESSIE

I won't brew coffee, this late.

JAMIE

We'll make do.

Jamie enters the house. Essie follows him and puts the rifle back on the rack above the door.

ESSIE

Make yourself comfortable. I'll just be a moment.

She exits to the kitchen. Jamie slowly walks around the room, taking it all in. A framed document on the wall catches his eye, and he examines it closely.

Nearby he finds the scrap of newspaper Kit brought announcing the call for teachers in Yakima. Jamie gets the lamp from the table to be able to read it. Essie enters with two plates of pie.

JAMIE

(re: the framed document)

Willamette University? You're a college graduate?

ESSIE

A teaching degree.

JAMIE

You're a teacher?

ESSIE

Was a while, in Salem. Won't you sit down?

JAMIE

Only if you join me.

ESSIE

Well, it would be odd to eat pie standing up.

They sit, eating in silence a while.

JAMIE

Standing or sitting, this is delicious.

ESSIE

The secret is two tablespoons of Kentucky bourbon.

JAMIE

You're full of surprises, Esther Elizabeth Garner.

ESSIE

I'm not.

JAMIE

Aren't you, though? You graduate college, then come back to Yacolt. That's surprising to *me*. When you could've gone anywhere: a college, a big city...

(He holds up the paper)

...Yakima...

ESSIE

Kit brought that. It's just an ad from the Morning Oregonian.

JAMIE

Are you going to apply, then?

ESSIE

Yakima's a long way from here.

JAMIE

They're offerin' a cottage. With electricity.

ESSIE

Then I certainly *won't* apply. Wouldn't have that wiring in any house of mine.

JAMIE

Ah...you'll hold back the tide of progress, will you?

ESSIE

Progress? Electricity? I suppose it is...in the same way that Mister Gatling's Repeating Gun is progress. Not all things we can invent are for the good. Risk burning down your house every time you turn a switch.

JAMIE

And what do you think happens if I push over this lantern?

ESSIE

(sharply)

DON'T!

JAMIE

All right...

A long moment passes as they regard each other.

ESSIE

I don't like electricity, Mister Walsh, because it hides in the walls and pretends to be friendly, until it decides it isn't and it kills you. At least with a lantern I can see the danger and I know to be wary.

JAMIE

You seem to be wary a lot. With me, for example.

ESSIE

I am quite at my ease with you.

She really isn't.

JAMIE

Oh, naturally. You're the very picture of ease and comfort.

ESSIE

Well, perhaps I don't have the Irish gift for blarney, but I suppose that's what makes you a good salesman.

JAMIE

As I said, I'm a buyer. *You're* the salesman. You're the one tryin' to make a pitch.

ESSIE

A...pitch?

JAMIE

Like in baseball. A pitch is...you put forth your reasons why the customer *should* buy a thing, and if you do well enough...home run.

ESSIE

That's a terrible metaphor. A baseball pitcher is trying to throw the ball *past* the batter, trick him into a swing that *misses*. In a pitch I should want the customer to *lose*, to strike out out. Not hit a home run.

JAMIE

We can't both win in baseball.

ESSIE

It's late for games, Mister Walsh. You know what I'm...what *we're* offering you, or you wouldn't have come.

JAMIE

Perhaps I want to hear it from your lips. Pitch me your land, Miss Garner. Make me want to buy it.

ESSIE

I don't play baseball.

Silence. Essie won't meet his gaze.

JAMIE

If you won't even come to the mound, I'll simply walk off the field.

ESSIE

You're being ridiculous.

JAMIE

And you're losin' a customer. Pitch.

ESSIE

Alright! Sakes alive.

(She stands and begins to present)

Our homestead is a hundred and sixty acres, with forty cleared for farming and another--

JAMIE

If I didn't know what your product *was*, I wouldn't be sitting here.

ESSIE

Ugh! You are the most frustrating--

(with a sigh)

Fine.

(a new tack)

A fair value for our land is twenty-five dollars an--

JAMIE

What are you doing, woman?

ESSIE

I'm...pitching!

(Jamie scoffs)

You asked me to sell it to you! I'm telling you the price!

JAMIE

Saints in heaven! Cost is the last thing you mention!

ESSIE

Well, how would I...! I'm not a salesman!

JAMIE

I can see that!

Pause.

ESSIE

All right, Mister Walsh: teach me how to pitch.

JAMIE

For starters, you never start with a price. Or talk of value, or even money. None of it. You don't even start by describin' the product.

ESSIE

What, then? I have to say *something*.

JAMIE

First, you have to make the customer feel they can't live without whatever it is you're selling.

ESSIE

But what if that's not true?

JAMIE

Oh, it's rarely true at the start. You have to *create* the need.

ESSIE

Pish. A person either has a need or they do not. I can't manufacture that.

JAMIE

Oh, but you can! Show them they have a problem, then show them how what you're sellin' solves it. Then, mention a few superlative qualities your product has, but get the customer to describe it in their own words. To tell *you* why the thing is so good.

ESSIE

I see. Then what?

JAMIE

Then, create a sense of urgency, the notion that if they don't act quick, they'll miss out and forever regret it. And only then, at the very end, do you mention the price. And be ready to walk away if they don't jump at it.

ESSIE

But I want them to buy. Why would I walk away?

JAMIE

Why does a woman flutter her eyes then turn her gaze? Have you never flirted, Esther Garner?

ESSIE

I...yes. Naturally. But it has been...a long time, and I fear I was never very skilled at it.

JAMIE

Oh, I doubt that. To be sure, I'm surprised you're not wed.

ESSIE

At my age, you mean?

JAMIE

Those waters are fraught with torpedoes.

ESSIE

Then a wise sailor charts a different course.

JAMIE

Well, I can't fault you for being single. Bit of a rolling stone myself.

ESSIE

Not anymore; you have roots now. You bought Ernie Bragg's place.

JAMIE

Bought and sold, to a logging company what wanted the timber.

ESSIE

You sold Ernie's land again? Already?

JAMIE

It's what Weyerhaeuser does. We buy land, sell it back to loggers and sawmillers.

ESSIE

You haven't sold the schoolhouse?

JAMIE

I kept that last acre. Had to live somewhere.

ESSIE

I should think a rolling stone would simply rent a room.

JAMIE

Tried to board at a place, couple of them. Always the same answer: "No Irish wanted."

ESSIE

So you only own a single acre?

JAMIE

Weyerhaeuser owns it, I just do business for 'em.

ESSIE

Then stop making me dance for you, "making a pitch," and let's *get* to business! Did you bring your offer?

Jamie pulls out a sealed envelope and hands it to her.
Essie moves to the table and uses a knife to slit open
the envelope.

She glances at the note, looks up at Jamie. Back to
the note. Reads for several moments.

JAMIE

How long does it take a schoolteacher to read a number?

ESSIE

It's a bit more than that.

She shows him a page covered in writing that looks
like a letter. He lunges for the page.

JAMIE

That's the wrong--

Jamie pulls up short as Essie points the knife at him to
keep him back.

JAMIE (cont'd)

That's the second time tonight you've threatened me with violence, Miss Garner. If you're not *born* Irish, you certainly speak it fluently.

ESSIE
(reading)

“Dear Mother...”

JAMIE
What?

ESSIE
(reading)
“Have relocated to the town of Yacolt in a fine hotel...”

JAMIE
Please give it back. I obviously put the letter in the wrong envelope, and my mother’s going to get a very strange--

ESSIE
This is what you gave me. This is what I shall read.
(She keeps reading.)
“...in a fine hotel...”
(to Jamie)
Except there’s no hotel here: that’s a lie. Let’s see...blah, blah, blah...
(reading)
“I’ve become engaged to a lovely girl, and I hope to wed by Christmas...”
(to Jamie)
Who?

JAMIE
What?

ESSIE
Your fiancée! Who is she?

JAMIE
No one. Ma prays to see me wed. I just said it to give her a smile.

ESSIE
So that’s *also* a lie?

JAMIE
Devil the thought! ‘Tis but a harmless fiction that--

ESSIE
I can’t do business with you! How can I respect a man who lies to his own *mother*?

JAMIE
(suddenly shouting)
I am a respectable--!

ESSIE
Keep your voice down! Pa is sleeping!

JAMIE
I am a respectable man--

ESSIE

Who would say anything to get what he wants! Who's already using a loan to strong-arm my father!

JAMIE

Being a shrewd businessman is not--

ESSIE

How do I know there even *is* a company you work for? This whole Mister Weyerhaeuser may be a false pretense!

JAMIE

False pretense? Well, you're a fine pot to be callin' the kettle black!

ESSIE

What?

JAMIE

You invite me to a fine dinner, just to get to know a neighbor?

ESSIE

To talk about the land.

JAMIE

And no other reason in the world, is it?

ESSIE

What other reason could there be?

From his pocket, Jamie pulls out a folded piece of newspaper and slams it on the table.

JAMIE

This! Your friend Kit's not the only one gets the paper!

ESSIE

What is that?

JAMIE

Oh, is it my turn to be after readin'? Very well, then!

(reading the page)

"Yacolt woman seeks husband. A fine girl, smart as paint, works from dawn to dusk. Inquire at the Garner homestead--"

Essie snatches the paper away.

ESSIE

What?!

JAMIE

(from memory)

--No reasonable offer refused."

Essie reads the ad incredulously.

ESSIE

What? I didn't...

JAMIE

(mockingly)

Oh, I didn't! I didn't! You didn't invite me up here to snare me into a marriage?

ESSIE

That wasn't--!

(a realization)

Pa...

The dam bursts. With a scream of fury, Essie bolts for the bedrooms. Jamie catches her around the waist and spins her away.

ESSIE (cont'd)

Let me go! I've got to talk to Pa!

Jamie manages to get the knife out of her grasp.

JAMIE

Pr'aps not with a knife in your hand!

Essie, now disarmed, wrenches herself out of Jamie's grasp.

ESSIE

Offering me at market like a prize mare!

JAMIE

I'm sure he meant well--

ESSIE

"Smart as paint?" That's how he describes his daughter?

JAMIE

No harm done. No one even answered the ad.

That did not make things better.

JAMIE (cont'd)

No! I didn't mean it like that! I meant--

ESSIE

Stop talking, Mister Walsh.

(collecting herself)

Now I do need coffee.

She moves to the stove, opens the door, reaches for the woodbox, stops, then viciously kicks it.

JAMIE

Problem?

ESSIE

Wood box is empty. Can't heat the stove.

Jamie reaches out a hand toward an ax leaning beside the stove.

JAMIE

May I?

Essie considers this a moment, nods.

ESSIE

Just need a few pieces, some kindling.

Jamie exits the house, moves to the splitting stump, and splits a round or two, then begins working one into smaller sticks for kindling. Essie moves to the front porch and silently watches him. He collects up the wood and heads in. Essie reaches for the wood, but he shakes his head.

JAMIE

Allow me.

Jamie moves to the stove and lays in a fire as Essie prepares coffee for the pot. Jamie strikes a match, and soon a ruddy glow comes from the stove.

ESSIE

Thank you.

JAMIE

My pleasure.

(tries to rub dirt off his hands)

Is there a washbasin I might...

Essie sets the coffee pot on the burner, then brings a pitcher and basin to the table. Jamie holds his hands over the basin, and Essie gently pours water over them. He washes his hands, and she hands him a towel.

JAMIE (cont'd)

I thank ye, Miss Garner.

ESSIE

Esther. Or just plain Essie.

Pause.

JAMIE

Esther, then.

(He looks at her for a long moment)

Do you wish to marry?

Essie freezes.

ESSIE

What?

JAMIE

The advertisement, I mean. Did your Da run it because you're seekin' a husband and he just thought to help?

ESSIE

No!

JAMIE

So you're not thinkin' to wed at'all, then?

Essie is caught between her truth and her plan.

ESSIE

Not to a man who decides he wants to marry--sight unseen--from a few lines in a newspaper!

JAMIE

Right. Of course. Does sounds a mite foolish when you put it like that.

ESSIE

Imagine the unsavory bachelor who might answer such an ad! Certainly no one respectable.

JAMIE

Oh, to be sure!

ESSIE

A gentleman like yourself, for example, would never respond to an adver--

JAMIE

No, no!...no. Perish the thought! I simply brought it as a...as a curiosity.

ESSIE

Right.

There is an awkward pause. Finally, Essie screws up her courage.

ESSIE (cont'd)

You said before...your mother wishes to see you wed. You've never been?

JAMIE

I have yet to sample the joy of connubial bliss, more's the pity.

ESSIE

But surely you have prospects...
(Jamie makes a "not really" sound)
...looking?

JAMIE

Well, I'm not takin' out newspaper ads, if that's what you mean.

ESSIE

(a bit embarrassed)

No.

JAMIE

Ah, Essie, I don't mean to shame ya...even if it 'twas your Da's idea. There's nothing wrong in the world with wantin' to wed.

ESSIE

Do *you* want to get married?

JAMIE

Is that a proposal?

Jamie smiles. Essie realizes what she's said.

ESSIE

I...I only mean...

JAMIE

(reassuringly)

'Twas but a jest. I took your meanin'.

(pause)

To be earnest, I don't often think of marriage one way or t'other. Too busy movin' about, surveyin' the land, buyin' an' sellin'--

ESSIE

--showing up late to dinner.

JAMIE

And showing up late to dinners, aye. Critical part o' the job, don't ya know...

A moment of connection through humor. Then Jamie moves to tend the stove and speaks without looking at Essie.

JAMIE (cont'd)

...but there are nights...when the world's gone still, and the fire's burnt low, and I'm lyin' alone in my bed...that I do wish for a girl beside me. A soft arm on my chest, long hair spillin' across the pillow...

ESSIE

If you simply wish for a woman to share your bed, Portland boasts many...houses of ill repute that--

Jamie turns suddenly.

JAMIE

Why would ya say such things?

ESSIE

I only meant...marriage is not *required*. To quell those nighttime...urges.

JAMIE

It's not about the...

(He lowers his voice)

...lovemakin'...that makes me want to marry. I mean, that's part of it, I suppose, but it's more than that.

ESSIE

What more? Why is marriage so good?

JAMIE

Why don't you ask your Da?

ESSIE

Don't want to ask him. Or your Ma. I want to hear it from you. What is it about marriage that appeals to you?

Jamie shrugs as if to say "never mind," but Essie's steady gaze and continued silence don't let him off so easily.

JAMIE

All right.

(pause)

Have you ever been at a crowded party and seen the look a husband and wife share when they spy each other across the room? Or that moment when he takes her hand to help her climb into a coach an' she glances up at him? When I see that...I want it. I want what they have. It makes me angry...jealous, even...for what I don't yet possess.

ESSIE

My mother would tell you envy is a sin.

JAMIE

Aye, yours and mine both. But I can't help it. I've fought my whole life against being poor, being Irish, being looked down on by toffs and swells with their walking sticks and fancy button boots. But havin' a wife on my arm who looks at me just so, it'd show 'em I'm just as good a man as they are.

ESSIE

You think of a wife as simply a prop for your own vanity?

JAMIE

There's some pride involved; I won't deny it. Ah, but there's more than that. A husband and wife look at each other in a way they look at no one else. And when their eyes meet... why, it's a secret passes between them.

ESSIE

A secret?

JAMIE

Aye. They share something others'll never know. For all the broadcloth and taffeta and silk hats and parasols, they see each other without all of that. It's like a bit o' witchcraft.

ESSIE

I'm not sure it's quite so magical, just to see a naked woman without her--

JAMIE

Whist yourself! Why d'ya keep talkin' coarse like that?

ESSIE

I'm....I'm sorry. I didn't mean--

JAMIE

It's not the *clothes* I'm talkin' about, Esther, nor even the lack thereof. It's someone who *knows* you, who's *seen* you...the secret you. The you without armor, or pretense, or hid behind words...seen you where wealth an' poverty an' bein' Irish or not don't matter a fig. *That's* how I want to be seen, and to see a wife.

ESSIE

You won't get *that* from an ad in the paper...

JAMIE

No, I s'pose I won't. If it exists in the world, at'all.

Pause.

ESSIE

But...imagine a marriage based on respect, dedication. Things you can lean on. A clear-eyed agreement between two consenting parties.

JAMIE

Wed with no love, is it?

ESSIE

Romance doesn't have to be part of it. Better to build a life *with* someone, than alone.

JAMIE

Makes for a tedious life together, though, doesn't it? And somewhat awkward when it comes to the gettin' of children.

ESSIE

Still...such marriages work for many.

JAMIE

Blarney.

ESSIE

What?

JAMIE

You don't believe a word of that.

ESSIE

How would you know what I believe?

Jamie takes her left hand and holds up the ring on her fourth finger.

JAMIE

Whose ring do you wear?

Essie pulls her hand away.

ESSIE

No one's.

JAMIE

Someone's, I think.

ESSIE

It was years ago.

JAMIE

Yet it's still on your finger.

Pause.

ESSIE

I think the coffee's ready.

Essie takes the coffee pot off the stove, pouring two mugs for them.

JAMIE

Might you have cream?

ESSIE

In the icebox.

Essie exits into the kitchen. Jamie quickly moves to the washbasin, pours a little water to wet his hands, and runs them through his hair to slick it back tidy again. For the first time we have seen him, he seems nervous.

JAMIE

Come on, Walsh. You can do this.

Essie returns with the cream.

ESSIE

It's from Cole's Dairy in town.

He carefully pours the cream just onto the top of both mugs...

JAMIE

How my Da always did it. Just float it on top.

...then reaches for the nearby whiskey bottle.

And some Irish sugar.

He pours a little whiskey into each cup, and hands one to Essie. She tries it, and her eyes go wide.

ESSIE

Oh!

JAMIE

Too much?

ESSIE

No...it's good. I don't mind a little Irish.

JAMIE

Let's sit on the porch, drink it under the stars.

Essie nods, a little nervous. Jamie brings along the whiskey bottle as they move to the front porch.

JAMIE (cont'd)

So quiet up here. Peaceful. And not near as rainy as up north.

ESSIE

Oh, it rains plenty.

JAMIE

Hasn't once in two months I been here.

ESSIE

That's just summer. The Good Lord turns off the water like a tap in these parts. But come October right up through June...you'll forget what dry means.

JAMIE

Beautiful country, though. Have you lived here long?

ESSIE

It's all I remember. Pa moved us here when I was five. I've barely been away from it. Perhaps that's why it's so hard to imagine giving it up.

JAMIE

Have you never wished to travel? To see the world?

ESSIE

I've left here twice. Once for college, once for work. The first time I was away, my mother took sick and died. The second time...in Salem...was worse. I'm sure you think me quite superstitious.

JAMIE

"It is very unfair to judge anybody's conduct, without an intimate knowledge of their situation."

ESSIE

That's from *Emma*! You've read Jane Austen?

JAMIE

My mother quoted her often. Taught me to read usin' her books.

They sit a moment in silence, sipping coffee. Essie works up her courage.

ESSIE

Can I ask you a question?

JAMIE

Aye, let fire.

ESSIE

Being...seen. By a woman. You've never...had that?

JAMIE

Not by all the saints and prophets.

ESSIE

So you've haven't...

(she can't say it)

...with a girl?

JAMIE

'Course I have! Many times!

Essie turns away, embarrassed to have asked such a personal question. Seconds tick by.

JAMIE (cont'd)

(softer)

That was a lie.

ESSIE

You don't have to tell--

JAMIE

Twice. For the first I was out with me mates, blind drunk, and they paid for...and with Caroline...I didn't find out she was already wed 'til after we...

ESSIE

Oh...

JAMIE

Sure, and I've done some wickedness. Things I'm not proud of.

ESSIE

I'm not one to throw stones. I--
(pause)
I've been with someone before, too.

JAMIE

Give you that ring, did he?

ESSIE

His name was...Harrison. We were engaged to be married and, and one night things got...
and we...I know it was sinful.

JAMIE

There are worse sins. But he didn't marry you.

ESSIE

We both were teaching at the Glen Oaks Orphanage in Salem. One night...there was a fire.
Harrison was killed. And Billy Travers, one of the boys.

JAMIE

I'm so sorry.

ESSIE

So I'm neither a wife nor a widow, but no longer a maid.

JAMIE

When did it happen?

ESSIE

Four years ago. You'd think I'd be done mourning, but it stills feels like I'm walking in
hip-high mud.

JAMIE

Tell me the story.

ESSIE

I can't, Jamie...I...

JAMIE

You can. Honor Harrison's memory to me.

ESSIE

Jamie...I barely know you.

JAMIE

Sometimes that makes it easier.

Jamie offers the whiskey. She nods and he pours a
bit more into her cup. Essie drinks. Drinks again.

ESSIE

Don't look at...I can't have you watching me while I tell it.

JAMIE

Look away then. Turn your gaze to the stars. But tell me.

Essie turns her back to Jamie, then ends up leaning back against him. There is a long pause.

ESSIE

It was the middle of the night, two-thirty, three. My room was on the second floor above the kitchen, right next to the girls' dormitory. I woke up to one of the girls coughing...the walls weren't that thick. She coughed a few times, and I thought to give her some drops. I got up and felt for my robe, then I turned the switch for the lights, but there was nothing.

JAMIE

Electric lights?

ESSIE

Glen Oaks got them in ninety-seven, the year before. But they weren't working. I didn't know why. I thought maybe the power company stopped providing current after midnight.

She falls silent. Pause.

JAMIE

And the coughing girl?

ESSIE

I heard her again, and by the time I felt my way to their room, a couple more were coughing with her. When I opened the door I got hit with a wave of smoke. Not smoke like a campfire or a kitchen stove, but something acrid, bitter. Made your eyes burn and your breath rasp in your throat. And there was a lot of it.

Six girls slept in that room. Most were awake except Charlotte, who we roused and then I herded them all into the hall. Annabeth was crying. We started for the stairs but as we turned the corner in the hall, we saw the flames. They were coming up from the first floor, licking up the wallpaper and burning the carpet runner. Charlotte screamed and I started yelling my head off to wake everyone else up. We ran for the back stairs, narrow little steps built for a maid to come down to the kitchen. By the time we got down and outside, the fire had reached the dining room. Rachel had gotten the first floor girls out, and Mister Denny with the boys on the third floor had opened a window and was yelling that they couldn't get to either stairs.

She pauses.

JAMIE

Where was Harrison?

ESSIE

He bunked over the carriage house, and he came running up bringing a ladder. He got onto the back porch roof and told Mister Denny to take sheets and use them like ropes. To lower the boys down to where Harrison could grab them so they could climb down the ladder to the ground.

JAMIE

He got the boys out?

ESSIE

And Mister Denny. But when we counted heads, we were one short. Billy Travers was missing. Mister Denny hadn't seen him. So then my brave, beautiful, stupid Harrison climbed up the hanging sheet to the third floor window. Smoke was pouring out. He gave me a look, a little smile. Then he just disappeared inside. Not two moments later, that whole half of the house went down...collapsed into nothing. The flames jumped thirty feet high, more. No one could even get close. We never found Billy or Harrison after.

Grief hits Essie, and she turns her face to Jamie's chest. Finally, her emotion subsides but she doesn't pull away.

ESSIE (cont'd)

Never told anyone all of that. Can't believe I told a complete stranger.

JAMIE

Am I so strange?

Essie pulls away a little, wipes her eyes.

ESSIE

And here I am, blubbering to the man who's trying to take our land from us.

JAMIE

Esther...

ESSIE

(forcefully)

Why do they want it? Why does Weyerhaeuser want our land so badly?

JAMIE

Money. Profit. They're businessmen doin' business, that's all.

Essie stands and moves away.

ESSIE

Blarney, Mister Walsh.

JAMIE

I'm sorry?

ESSIE

Oh, I believe they're businessmen. I believe they don't care *why* we might sell our land to them. I even believe they won't pay full market value so they can sell it again later for profit. I understand how business works. But this...what you're doing...this...*extortion*? Going to all the trouble to find out about Pa's loan, pull favors at the bank, come here and talk tough to scare us into selling for a song? That's all *you*. Not Weyerhaeuser: *Walsh*. And I bet if I sent Mister Weyerhaeuser a telegram about the skulduggery and dirty business his representative employs, he'd have some strong words for you.

JAMIE
(after a pause)

Aye. I suppose he would.

ESSIE
Then stop it! Stop cheating us!

JAMIE
Do you know how I get paid? You say you know how business works. Do you know what a commission is?

ESSIE
You get a part of the money from a sale.

JAMIE
Five percent of the *profit* of a sale. That's how the company pays me. No salary, not a wage. Straight commission. So if Frederick Weyerhaeuser makes a thousand dollars profit, I get fifty. Fifty lousy dollars. So it's in my best interest to make him as much profit as possible.

ESSIE
And be as underhanded as you can to get the lowest price.

JAMIE
Aye. And I'm good at my job.

ESSIE
Are you proud of that, Jamie Patrick? Is that the kind of man you'd like to be?

JAMIE
Why d'ye think I was late tonight? Spent nearly two hours ditherin' on the road, starting for here, then turnin' back, then turnin' 'round yet again. Talkin' to meself, wrestlin' with my conscience as sure as if it was Jacob's angel. My horse likely thought I was crazy.

ESSIE
So if you knew you were cheating us, why bother coming at all?

JAMIE
I came because I decided to tell you: Weyerhaeuser won't be buyin' your land for any price.

ESSIE
Jamie, if they don't, the bank'll just foreclose!

JAMIE
I can't leave you and your Pa with no place to live!

ESSIE
Now you decide to be a gentleman?

JAMIE
But I'm not a gentleman, and I never will be. I'm the son of a coal miner from County Cork. Lofty dreams and golden fortunes...not exactly my lot in life.

ESSIE

Not all dreams have to be grand. Some are quiet, and simple. What do you want, Jamie? Dream.

JAMIE

It doesn't matter what I--

ESSIE

Dream.

Pause.

JAMIE

I dream a house to call my own. To breathe the Lord's clean air and feel the sun on my rolled-up shirt sleeves...I dream a' workin' the land with ax and plow, havin' a wife to come home to when the day's work is through. That would be riches indeed.

ESSIE

You can have that. Our land would make it real. But *you* have to buy it. You, yourself. Not Weyerhaeuser.

JAMIE

I'll consider it.

ESSIE

Weasel words.

JAMIE

Meaning what?

ESSIE

Meaning you say "consider," but really you'll hem and you'll haw, you'll put it off...and come October the bank'll seize the land and you'll have missed it.

JAMIE

Easy enough to buy it at auction after...

ESSIE

But you're here tonight! Just you and me. No banks, no companies, no other bidders, just...us. This moment won't come again. Make your dream real, Jamie. What do you say?

Jamie seems to think a moment, then claps slowly.

JAMIE

Now that's a pitch.

ESSIE

No. It's an offer. And it's real.

JAMIE

Real. And whose real money shall I buy your land with? I'm not a rich man, Esther. It's barely nine hundred to my bottom dollar. Your Da's price will be thousands more.

ESSIE

How do you know that?

JAMIE

Because I know how much your land is worth!

ESSIE

It's only worth as much as the price someone's willing to put on it.

Essie goes back inside and hands Jamie an envelope
from the table.

ESSIE (cont'd)

My Pa's offer. The lowest price he's willing to accept.

Jamie opens the envelope, reads.

JAMIE

Do you know what it says?

Essie shakes her head no. Jamie hands her the paper.

ESSIE

"Eight hundred and seventy-*two* dollars."

JAMIE

A dollar above the loan amount.

ESSIE

He'd rather you have it than be shamed by the bank taking it. Please, Jamie.

JAMIE

All right. I'll buy your land, for your Da's price. Me, not the company. To finally have
somethin' I can call my own.

ESSIE

No.

JAMIE

You just asked me to buy it, woman! What do you mean "no?"

ESSIE

You've already admitted that price is robbery. So let me add an additional cost to ease
your conscience.

JAMIE

I also admitted I only have nine hundred dollars to my--

ESSIE

The schoolhouse. I want the schoolhouse and the acre around it thrown in.

JAMIE

And here I was teachin' *you* to negotiate.

ESSIE

You living there has closed our school!

JAMIE

And I'm not deaf to the uproar! So very well: I accept.

ESSIE

Then it's a--

JAMIE

Not so fast. You see, I'm a shrewd negotiator, too. And since we're bargainin', there's somethin' else I'd ask from your Da.

ESSIE

More? He's given you our home! What else could he possibly offer you, Jamie?

JAMIE

Yourself, Esther Garner.

ESSIE

Me?

JAMIE

That dream you pitched me, it included a wife to come home to.

A chill grips Essie's spine. Things just got real.

ESSIE

So it did.

JAMIE

And you see, between the time I saw you last week and our meetin' tonight, I saw a certain advertisement in the paper...

ESSIE

You said you brought it as a curiosity!

JAMIE

Aye: curious because it confirmed you were single: I took a fancy to you the moment I saw you.

ESSIE

No. You saw me in the heat of the day when I was up to my elbows in chicken guts! Hardly a Venus rising from the waters.

JAMIE

Lovely still for all that. And look how you clean up.

ESSIE

Don't say such things. I'm not a schoolgirl in pigtails you need flatter.

JAMIE

How can it be flattery if I mean it?

ESSIE

Pish. I know I'm nothing special.

JAMIE

You think I am? I'm not. *We're* not special, and that's the point, Essie. We die tomorrow, no one notices, no one barely sheds a tear. But you're a person could see me, and I you. Through the ups and downs, the big moments and the quiet ones. To bear witness to a life lived together. Does that not appeal to you, even a trifle?

It clearly does, and the thought is terrifying. Essie takes a step back.

ESSIE

What if...if you don't like what you see?

JAMIE

But what if I do? What if I fall madly in love with what I'm lookin' at?

ESSIE

I don't...I hadn't...

She steps back again.

JAMIE

This far, Essie. This far and no further.

ESSIE

What?

JAMIE

Each step I take, you answer with one back. Well, here I plant my feet.

A long moment passes between them. Slowly, Essie returns to Jamie until they stand very close. Jamie lifts Essie's chin and kisses her. When it is done, they do not part.

From the house, a hastily-dressed Hiram emerges. He peers out through the still-open front door to see the couple, just as Essie pulls Jamie into another kiss.

Hiram snatches down the rifle from above the door.

HIRAM

You! You clear outta here! Go on! Git!

Jamie reflexively jumps away from Essie.

JAMIE

I can explain!

ESSIE
(to Hiram)

Put that down!

JAMIE
Esther and I were--

HIRAM
Essie and you are nothin'! You didn't have the brass to face me, so the offer's took back!
I'm sellin' nothin' to some no-account Irishman!

ESSIE
Pa!

JAMIE
Mister Garner, I'd like to ask your permission to--

HIRAM
You don't got my permission to ask the time of day! Git on outta here, an' don't come back!

Essie moves to Hiram and yanks the gun out of his hands.

ESSIE
Give me that!
(to Jamie)
You! You're goin' nowhere!
(to Hiram)
You! Inside the house! Now!

Stunned, Hiram and Jamie each obey.

HIRAM
Now listen, daughter--

Essie snatches up the newspaper ad.

ESSIE
Did you do this?

HIRAM
Oh.

ESSIE
Oh?! You put me up for auction in the paper!

HIRAM
Was tryin' to help you find a husband 'fore it's too late!

ESSIE
You think I'm not married because no one would have me?

HIRAM

Well, you ain't found no one yet!

ESSIE

So I should just marry the first man that answers that ad? Is that it?

HIRAM

I'm tryin' to care for you!

JAMIE

(calling to them)

I should be getting home, let you two talk.

HIRAM

Durn right you--

ESSIE

I told you to stay put!

JAMIE

Aye, but as you mentioned earlier, I've a fair piece to go in the dark. I do thank you for the pie.

Jamie turns to leave. Essie runs into the yard.

ESSIE

Wait! Can I ask you something, before you go?

JAMIE

(turning back)

No harm in a question.

Essie looks at Hiram, then back at Jamie.

ESSIE

James Patrick Walsh, will you marry me?

Blackout.

INTERMISSION

ACT III -- PERIL

SETTING: Almost two weeks have passed. The night is dark, and a single lamp dimly lights the inside of the Garner home.

AT RISE: We hear a soft but lively violin tune, full of energy and hope. KIT appraises a wedding dress of an older 1870s style, trying to maneuver it into the best light. She puts it down and lights a second lamp.

ESSIE (O.S.)

Kit? Kittie?

KIT
(calling out)

What? Does it not fit?

Essie nearly runs in. She wears a white wedding dress of 1890s fashion.

ESSIE

I smell smoke!

KIT
I just lit up another lamp, is all. Let me see you.

ESSIE

No, that's not it.

KIT

Stop movin'!

Essie opens the front door and steps out.

ESSIE

You smell that?

KIT
Get back here, girl! Show me the dress!

ESSIE

Fire out there somewhere.

KIT
I don't smell nothing. Far off, if it is.

ESSIE
Smells...big. Haze over the stars, too.

KIT
You're worse than Frank's dumb dog, barking at leaves fallin'.

Essie closes the front door.

ESSIE

Wish Pa and Jamie were back.

KIT

They'll be here when they get here. Won't see 'em tonight, anyhow.

ESSIE

He said they might.

KIT

It's thirty miles to Vancouver, twice that back. You think Delilah's still got sixty-mile days in her?

ESSIE

Not many.

KIT

So, tomorrow. Meantime, we get a girls' night for weddin' dresses an' whiskey! Now spin. Spin!
(Essie twirls in the dress.)
You sure you don't want my Ma to make a dress for you?

ESSIE

Why? This is beautiful!

KIT

I don't know...no one does sleeves like that no more.

ESSIE

You don't like it?

KIT

Of course I like it! It was *my* dress! It's just...years out of style, is all.

ESSIE

Don't need to be Beau Brummell. It'll just be a private little ceremony.

KIT

Your Ma's is so classic, though. You sure it don't fit?

ESSIE

Not in my tightest corset! She was skinny as a split rail! In yours I at least have some freedom.

KIT

Aaah! May as well up-and-call-me a plump dairymaid! You owe me a shot for that.

ESSIE

Pish.

KIT

Don't "pish" me! Where's the booze?

Essie gets a whiskey bottle and two glasses.

ESSIE

Besides, your Ma'd be weeks getting fabric, sewing a new dress...

KIT

What's the rush? You could string that Irishman along for months 'fore you wed!

ESSIE

The *loan*, Kit. That's the whole point of doing this! So he pays off the loan.

KIT

Is it? 'Cause it seems to me Jamie and your Pa are in Vancouver doing that as we speak. So you already got what you want.

ESSIE

No, I don't! Right now I've *got* exactly *nothing*! After the bank they go to the title company to sign the deed over to Jamie. Meaning this ain't even Garner land we're sitting on anymore.

(pause)

I don't have anything until Jamie says, "I do."

KIT

(raising a glass)

To weddings, then.

ESSIE

And to friends who loan bridal dresses at a moment's notice.

KIT

Does look good on you.

They drink. Essie sips while Kit shoots.

ESSIE

How do you gulp it like that? I could never--

KIT

Hold the glass against your lip.

ESSIE

What?

KIT

I'm teaching you. Hold it against your bottom lip. Now breathe. When I say go, you're gonna open your mouth and tip your head back fast. Don't move the glass, just let it pour right in. Then swallow before you have a chance to think. Ready? Go!

Essie shoots the remainder of the whiskey. Her eyes go wide and she coughs a bit. Kit laughs.

ESSIE

Ooo. That burns...

KIT

School is in session.

(MORE)

KIT (cont'd)

(pause)

You think you'll ever teach again?

ESSIE

Won't need to, once the land's all settled.

KIT

Ain't a matter of need. What do you *want*?

(off Essie's look)

You're a college graduate, Esther! How many women can say that? All that study you done? Them years your Ma worked at Mr. Spark's store to help pay for it?

ESSIE

I know, I just--

KIT

This is your chance to get free of this place!

ESSIE

You think leaving makes me free? Tearing off pieces of me and leaving them behind?

KIT

What pieces? You got no ties to--

ESSIE

See that stove? I learned how to cook on that very stove. I watched Pa make this table, hiding it under canvas in the barn so he could surprise Momma with it come Christmas. How many summer days did you and me and Asa play in these woods?

KIT

Forest pirates!

ESSIE

Forest pirates...

KIT

And his stick sword with the tin-can hilt...

ESSIE

All of it. This place isn't holding me down. It's who I *am*.

KIT

I just meant...maybe losin' the place could be an opportunity, is all. Maybe it's Fate tellin' you to get back out into the world.

ESSIE

I've been out in the world, and it kicked me in the teeth.

KIT

I know, darlin'.

(She pours another round.)

To Harrison.

ESSIE

Harrison.

They both shoot the whiskey.

KIT

See? You're a natural!

ESSIE

Whoo...should the room be spinning?

KIT

It'll slow down, presently.

ESSIE

But maybe you're right...maybe Fate *is* working on me. If you'd told me last month I'd be trying on wedding dresses...

KIT

Behold the power of a classified ad...

ESSIE

Oh, I wish you'd'a been here to hear me light into Pa about that! "Smart as paint," he called me! Honestly!

KIT

Well, you are.

ESSIE

And to see his face when I proposed! And Jamie's for that matter. Completely pole-axed!

KIT

Worth it just for the shock. But my point is, you can still walk away. No one's vowed nothin', not yet.

ESSIE

We have a verbal accord. Jamie'll keep his word.

KIT

I know: this is business, not flowers and romance, but you don't want a marriage without love, trust me.

ESSIE

What do you mean, trust you? You *did* marry for love, remember?

KIT

But Essie, think it through. You marry Jamie, he'll expect you to...to be a *wife*. With everything that means.

ESSIE

I know that.

KIT

You ready for that part?

ESSIE

There's many might relish that part, man looks as he does. There's nights I would, too, if I'm being truthful.

KIT

Wait...you aren't...catchin' feelin's?

ESSIE

No!...Maybe...I don't know. It's like...since I started entertaining the notion of bein' wed, I've felt...different. Like there's possibilities again. Maybe even hope. Not to mention I forgot how nice a good kiss feels.

KIT

You *kissed* him already?

ESSIE

There was moonlight, and Irish coffee--

KIT

You ain't known him a fortnight! You can't be ready for that!

ESSIE

Good Lord, Kit! It's time to *be* ready! What I can't do is mope around forever like I been doin', waste my life as an old maid. It's *four years* since Harrison!

KIT

So it's four years, five, a decade! Hearts ain't trains, Essie, running some engineer's timetable! You jump into wedlock with the first pair of blue eyes you meet and you'll...

(she collects her thoughts)

You 'member what happens 'round here, the first warmth of Spring? Every gal and her sister starts droolin' at all the plants, growing pretty in the hothouses. So what do they do? Snatch 'em up, get their gardens in early. And almost every year, we catch a late frost and more'n half those gardens up and die.

ESSIE

I've seen. So?

KIT

So my Momma never checks a thermometer, or lets a date on a calendar make her rush. She lifts up her eyes to the south, toward Silver Star Mountain, and she'll say, "There's still snow on Silver Star, Kittie. Can't put plants in the ground just yet." And she waits 'till the time is right. And every year, her garden thrives.

(pause)

Should'a listened to her myself.

ESSIE

What?

KIT

Nothin'. Is that hem too short, do you think?

Bareford -- There's Still Snow on Silver Star -- 63.

ESSIE

It's *not* nothing.

KIT

Your legs are longer'n mine.

ESSIE

Kittie, something's wrong.

KIT

I'm fine. Hey, trim that lamp down. It's getting smoky in here.

ESSIE

There. Now tell me.

KIT

Don't wanna.

ESSIE

Have to. You're my best friend. It's practically--

KIT

--a law.

ESSIE

--a law.

KIT

I s'pose turnabout is fair play.

ESSIE

You mad I'm marrying Jamie?

KIT

No! If you're dead set on it, then no. And if you are startin' to feel something...then I'm happy for you, really.

ESSIE

Then what?

KIT

Just wish it were me, felt something.

ESSIE

What do you mean?

From outside in the direction of the barn, a wispy gray HAZE is beginning to hang in the air. Not a full rolling smoke, but just enough to be seen.

KIT

It's...Frank. Well, me and Frank. He and I, we ain't...

Kit falls silent.

ESSIE
Aren't what? Getting along?

KIT
In love no more.

ESSIE
Pish. That's the whiskey talkin'.

KIT
It ain't, though...

ESSIE
What happened? You have a fight?

KIT
No, not a bit. Not mad at him, or nothin', or he at me.

ESSIE
Then what?

KIT
Cain't tell ya what. I look at him, I don't feel...not one damn thing. He could be any feller on the street. An' I can see him lookin' back at me the same way.

ESSIE
Does he...treat you bad?

KIT
Never hit me, don't yell much. Always provides for us, and faithful as a hound dog.

ESSIE
You see? He does love you. He's doing the things that love does.

KIT
He's only doing what's he's got to, to honor his weddin' vows. And it's awful.

ESSIE
No one said *any* marriage is a cakewalk. But you both *wanted* to be wed. You just need some time to remember why.

KIT
I 'member bein' scared to go off on my own. I remember latchin' onto the boy with the soft eyes and broad shoulders who stood to inherit the biggest dairy in the county.

ESSIE
Nothing wrong with that. At least it's security.

KIT
Security's not love. Ain't no more than a business deal.

ESSIE
Well, then we can commiserate our contract marriages together.

KIT

But if marriage is a contract, what happens when I can't hold up my end of the bargain?

ESSIE

What...what do you mean?

KIT

I mean I've kindled two babes for Frank and got no young-uns to show for it.

ESSIE

That's not your fault!

KIT

'S what Frank said too, after the first one come out stilled. "You'll be all right, Kittie, we'll have more..." Then last year...well, you saw the second...

ESSIE

Rosemary was a little angel.

KIT

That Heaven only lent me three days.

ESSIE

I know...

KIT

What you cain't know was the look Frank gave me, like I was broken. You know he didn't even make the coffin? Had to use my best picnic basket to bury her in.

ESSIE

Is that when...things changed?

KIT

I don't know. I was in a bad way after that--well, you 'member. By the time I could lift my head again, Frank and me were...the way we are.

ESSIE

Oh, Katherine, I am so--

KIT

No...don't want your pity! But neither do I wish a contract marriage on you! Don't want you walkin' in my shoes.

ESSIE

Good, because they really don't go with this dress...

KIT

It were a simile, you nincompoop!

ESSIE

It was a *metaphor*, actually.

Schoolmarm.

KIT

Dunce.

ESSIE

They embrace. Outside, the HAZE grows thicker.
Then the sound of rapid HOOFBEATS coming to a
halt. Jamie runs into the yard.

JAMIE
(shouting)

Esther!

Essie and Kit jump, startled.

KIT

Is that...?

Jamie dashes to the house and bursts in the front door.

JAMIE

Essie!

KIT

You can't! It's bad luck to see the bride before--

JAMIE

There's a fire!

ESSIE

I knew it...

KIT

The barn?

JAMIE

No, no, the barn's fine! Listen! Down east of Portland--

ESSIE

Where's Pa?

JAMIE

We split up near Yacolt Creek. I came on ahead, he went into town to warn them.

KIT

Warn them? Why?

ESSIE

You're scaring me, Jamie!

JAMIE

Just stay calm!

ESSIE

Saying that never helps!

JAMIE

Then listen to me, will you! East of Portland, a forest fire got started a few days ago. A bad one. Jumped the Columbia at Cascade Locks and--

ESSIE

The fire crossed the *Columbia River*?

JAMIE

I said it was bad. It's been burnin' north and west--

KIT

Not towards us?

ESSIE

Oh, dear Lord...

Essie takes a step away, trying to control the rising panic that grips her.

JAMIE

Hiram and I started seeing smoke near Venersborg, and by the time we got to Hockinson, smoke was so thick people were lightin' lanterns to see.

KIT

Is Vancouver...burnt up?

JAMIE

As far as we heard, Vancouver's all right, and Portland too. Most the fires' east of there, back a' Silver Star Mountain, but they say it's moving north through the valleys, jumpin' tops o' trees as fast as a horse can run. When we heard it was headed this way--

KIT

Headed to Yacolt?

JAMIE

Aye, so we turned 'round and came back as fast as we--

KIT

I have to get home!

JAMIE

How? Your horse in the barn? I didn't see...

KIT

Bicycle.

JAMIE

Wouldn't be ridin' toward town if I had my 'druthers. That fire's comin'.

KIT

But the dairy!

JAMIE

Hiram's gone to warn them.

KIT

Will he bring Frank here?

JAMIE

He didn't mention one way or t'other. We think the main fire's southeast of town, maybe three miles an' movin' north. If it holds to that path, it may miss Yacolt and this place altogether. But the blasted wind is blowin' straight into our faces from the east, pushin' it this way.

KIT

What do we do, Essie?...Essie?

Kit moves to Essie. Essie seems to realize the others are still there.

ESSIE

We stay here. Fire won't reach us here.
(She looks to Jamie.)
Right?

Jamie is torn between being comforting and being truthful.

JAMIE

Aye. We'll be fine here...pass us right by.

KIT

For a salesman, you're not very convincing.

JAMIE

Listen, Esther...Hiram wanted you to pack up some things.

ESSIE

What things?

JAMIE

Things you can't replace, things you might need...after. In case we do need to run.

ESSIE

Pa thinks...he really thinks it'll come here?

JAMIE

Well, your timber's on the east side there, nothin' separates it from the rest of the forest.

ESSIE

The potato field does! Between here and the woods there's nearly a quarter mile of open land!

KIT

A quarter-mile ain't nothin' if it jumped the Columbia! We gotta run! Now!

ESSIE

No! Kittie!

KIT

Didn't you hear him? It's coming!

ESSIE
We don't know--

KIT
This place ain't special! Your trees'll burn
like any other!

JAMIE
(sharply)
Katherine!

(Kit is startled silent)
We have a little time. Not much, to be sure, but some. But only if we keep our wits about
us. Now, can you help Esther pack? Can you do that?

(Kit nods)
All right. I need to see to my horse. She's had a long day, an' it might be a longer night.

Essie reaches for Jamie's hand and squeezes it. Jamie
exits into the barn, while Essie and Kit go into the house.

KIT
(almost to herself)
Frank'll be here soon, once he hears. He'll bring my horse and we'll ride away safe, or
we'll stay here and wait it out. It'll be fine. The fire's east of us, off in the hills...it'll move
on north, and pass us by...

Kit finally notice that Essie has stopped, almost
frozen. She looks around the room, growing more
frantic as she takes in everything she sees.

KIT (cont'd)
Essie?

ESSIE
How do you know what to take? How do you choose what tomorrow might be the entire
sum of your worldly possessions?

KIT
Well, what's important?

ESSIE
All of it! It's all important! It's my life! And also...*none* of it is, it's all just...
things and I don't care about any of it except you and Pa and...Jamie.

KIT
Jamie said to pack things you can't replace.
(She looks around the room.)
Your diploma! Can't replace that.

ESSIE
It's a piece of paper! What good has it done me?

KIT
Oh! Your Ma's wedding dress!

ESSIE
Which I can't fit into...

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KIT

The rifle?

ESSIE

For what? To shoot my neighbors as we run from a fire?

Pause.

KIT

Still, you might want some clothes.

ESSIE

(laughs despite herself)

I love you, Kit. Yes. Thank you. Help me?

They exit into another part of the house. Jamie comes out of the barn with a bucket, which he starts to fill at the pump. A voice is heard from offstage.

HIRAM (O.S.)

Git in the--

(a rasping cough interrupts)

--consarn ye, Delilah! Git on!

JAMIE

Hiram? Praise the saints! You made it.

Hiram enters, still coughing.

HIRAM

The night ain't over yet...you got water there?

Hiram uses a ladle hanging near the pump to draw a drink from the bucket.

JAMIE

Are you all right there?

HIRAM

All the smoke in the air...aggravates the bronchial whatever, whatever...

JAMIE

Mister Garner, I been thinkin'...if the fire does come this way, get into your trees--

HIRAM

Won't be nothin' stoppin' it.

JAMIE

Aye. And I hate to say it, but if it starts into the timber I won't then be wantin' to...I mean, it wouldn't be worth it to--

HIRAM

Stay? 'Course not! Listen, no shame in runnin from this, son...this is God's wrath poured out on mortal men.

JAMIE

That bad, is it?

HIRAM

Huh! Saw Jim McCutcheon...their place is south an' east o' town...Jim's got him a new barn he's buildin'. He tol' me just the wind ahead o' the fire yanked the new roof right off the posts, all in one piece. Threw it into his garden a hunnerd feet away. Then he saw the flames comin', said they were near three hunnerd feet high.

JAMIE

Jesus, Mary and Joseph...the end of the bloody world.

HIRAM

For some, maybe. Not for us. We're all runnin'.

JAMIE

To where?

HIRAM

Most folks is headin' for the crick, to hunker down an' shelter in the water.

JAMIE

An' why do they s'pose that'll save 'em? This fire is--

HIRAM

(suddenly)

What do you expect us to do, young'un?! Give up an' die? We're tryin' to live through this thing the only way we--

Hiram is racked by more violent coughs, but his shouting has drawn Essie and Kit out of the house.

ESSIE

Pa? Pa!

Essie runs to clasp Hiram in a fierce embrace.

HIRAM

I'm alright, darlin', I'm alright.

ESSIE

Use your cigarettes!

HIRAM

Last thing I need right now is more smoke.

KIT

Mister Garner? Did Frank come with you?

HIRAM

I stopped by the dairy, but I missed him. Charlie Landon said Frank and his folks took out on horses, headed south to Camas or some such.

KIT

Without me?

HIRAM

Prob'ly thought there weren't time to fetch you. Lotta folk buried their valuables, ran as best they could. They--

(more coughing)

...they'll be back when it's all done. Now Walsh, I got an extra set o' traces in the tack room. Let's hitch both mine and yours to the buckboard, and we'll--

ESSIE

The wagon? Why are you hitching the wagon?

HIRAM

Think we're ridin' double on poor Delilah? She's tuckered as it is! 'Sides, need to throw in some tools and such to keep safe.

ESSIE

You're leaving?

HIRAM

'Course we're leavin'! What else?

ESSIE

Staying! Staying in our home, that's what else!

HIRAM

Fire don't give a damn, our home! Feel that breeze? Wind don't blow east to west here, Essie, you know that. That's the fire's doin'. It's comin' right through here, blowin' ash and cinder ahead and settin' everything a-light. It'll be God's own mercy we 'scape with our lives.

ESSIE

No...no...no. We've got a good clear area 'round the house here and--

HIRAM

Once it gets through the trees, it'll come 'cross the taters and light up that dry grass in the side pasture. Now get whatever house stuff you wanna--

ESSIE

But if we mowed a firebreak--

HIRAM

That's pasture's a stone's throw from the barn. The heat alone would--.

ESSIE

But if it was wide enough--

Hiram tries and fails to stifle more coughs.

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HIRAM

For God's sake, just do what I say, for once! Get your things to the wagon!

KIT

Come on, Ess!

Kit run into the house and exits to the back rooms.

HIRAM

Irish! Let's hitch up the wagon.

Hiram exits into the barn. Jamie lingers with Essie.

JAMIE

(gently)

Go collect up your things, now. Time is fleetin'.

ESSIE

The fire won't come here. It can't.

JAMIE

How d'ye figure? The thing is miles wide and blowin' right toward us!

ESSIE

I'm safe here!

JAMIE

Esther, hope is one thing, but...

ESSIE

No! Every time I leave this place--tragedy. I'm staying right here!

JAMIE

Is a house worth dyin' over?

ESSIE

It's not just a house! It's...this is all the life I have left, James.

Kit emerges from the house with a huge armload of dresses and other clothes.

KIT

I just grabbed up all your dresses and some of your Pa's things, too.

ESSIE

(barely registering her words)

Sure...

Hiram enters from the barn, breathing in ragged gasps.

HIRAM

Walsh!

JAMIE

Yeah?

HIRAM

I appreciate you like my girl, but this ain't time to gab! Let's go!

KIT

Come on, Ess, we need to get goin'!

Kit exits into the barn. Jamie takes Essie by the arm and half-guides, half-pulls her near the barn and she numbly follows. Then he steps back.

JAMIE

You get to the creek and you stay safe, do you hear me?

ESSIE

What about you? You're coming with us!

JAMIE

I'm not. I think I can save the house and barn.

HIRAM

How?

JAMIE

Like Essie said, a firebreak in the fields. I'll mow a wide swath betwixt here and the woods.

HIRAM

So you can die tired? You can scythe that whole field, won't even make that fire blink!

JAMIE

If it doesn't work, I'll run. But if the saints do smile...

ESSIE

I won't have you stay on my account.

Kit enters from the barn.

KIT

Essie?

JAMIE

I have a stake in this too. Don't want to live in a school house forever.

KIT

What is happening? Why are we still talking?

JAMIE

I'm stayin' here to fight.

KIT

Fight what?! The *fire*?

HIRAM

That's a fight you can't win, son!

JAMIE

I'm Irish. Story of our lives.

Pause.

HIRAM

What you are is a fool. But it's your funeral.

JAMIE

(to Essie)

I'll find you after it's over.

KIT

C'mon, Essie.

Kit holds out a hand for Essie, who moves to take it
and then embraces Kit.

ESSIE

I love you, Kit. Keep Pa safe.

Essie steps back towards Jamie.

KIT

Essie, no! You have to come now!

JAMIE

Listen to her, Esther. Run away. Live.

ESSIE

I lost one fiancé to a fire. I won't lose another. I'll see you soon, Pa.

HIRAM

You get in that wagon *now*!

ESSIE

I'm not a child anymore! You can't order me around!

HIRAM

You are gonna be the death of me! Ain't the time for your cont--
(violent coughing)

...contrary--

(more coughs)

...you are as stubborn as your mother!

ESSIE

And twice as mean! And that's from you.

HIRAM
(a burst of energy)
Fine! Then *I'm* stayin'! We'll *all* stay an' burn!

KIT
Essie, please!

HIRAM
(nearly gasping for breath)
Mebbe I can...plow up the...the side pasture and...

ESSIE
You can barely stand!

Hiram staggers past Essie back toward the house.

HIRAM
...or, or wet down the...roofs and keep the--

He doesn't get far before his knees buckle.

JAMIE
Hiram! Pa! ESSIE

Jamie catches Hiram before he falls completely, but the older man is weak and struggling to breathe.

JAMIE
Let's get him into the house!

ESSIE
No! The wagon. Get him out of here.

KIT
Yes! Let's go!

Kit runs to help Jamie walk Hiram back to the barn.

HIRAM
If you say "fight," girl, then let's stay an'--

Coughs interrupt him. Essie comes near.

ESSIE
No. I *won't* be the death of you, Pa. Not today, not ever.

HIRAM
Esther Elizabeth...

ESSIE
Please. Go.

Hiram starts to protest once more, but coughs get the better of him. With effort, he controls his breathing and shrugs off Jamie and Kit to stand on his own.

HIRAM

Hattie would be so proud of you. God be with you, daughter.
(to Kit)

Come on, girl.

Hiram exits into the barn.

ESSIE

Kit, I need you to take care of him. You drive the wagon: he's in no shape.

KIT

I can do it.

ESSIE

I know.

KIT

You're my best friend in all the world.

ESSIE

And I'll see you when all this is over.

KIT

That a promise?

ESSIE

Promise.

They embrace. Kit exits into the barn. Jamie and Essie stand a moment in silence.

KIT (O.S.)

Come on, girls! Let's go! Hah!

A wagon rattles away.

JAMIE

Alone at last.

ESSIE

Did you really think we can beat it, the fire?

JAMIE

No. But for your sake, I mean to try.

(pause)

Do you really think it'll just magically pass us by?

ESSIE

No. I don't.

JAMIE

Then why did you...why didn't we leave with the wagon?

ESSIE

To where? Where will we go?

JAMIE

Your Da said the creek--

ESSIE

The creek! Yacolt Creek? I can wade across that and barely get my corset wet!

JAMIE

Then maybe we could go to--

ESSIE

It doesn't matter where we go! Fire doesn't care! It wants you to run! It chases you, waits for you, gets ahead and lays a trap for you...

JAMIE

We can't just give up!

ESSIE

This is my home! It was going to be our home!

JAMIE

But if we run and live--

ESSIE

I'm tired of running, Harrison!

Pause.

JAMIE

It's Jamie.

Essie pulls away.

ESSIE

Go if you want to. This place is all I have left, and if the fire wants me...then I'm deciding where to meet it. Right here. On Garner land.

JAMIE

Burning's a terrible death. Esther. Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

ESSIE

It's no more than I deserve.

JAMIE

Are you mad? You don't deserve--

ESSIE

It's my fault! All right? I killed him!

JAMIE

What are you on about? Killed who?

ESSIE

The fire in the orphanage. I didn't tell you the whole story.

JAMIE

Not really the time for tales at the--

ESSIE

You have to know!

(pause)

After the orphanage burned, there was...an investigation. The fire inspector found that someone pounded in a nail to hang a picture, and the nail hit an electrical wire inside the wall. I don't know how all that works, but it was enough to make a spark, and the cotton insulation in the wall smoldered and caught fire later that night. A stupid sixpenny picture nail.

JAMIE

It doesn't matter what started--

ESSIE

It *does* matter, because *I hung the picture!*

JAMIE

Essie...

ESSIE

An inch left or right...but no! I had to have things just so! Perfectly centered. And I killed the man I was going to marry. So you need to go! Leave now, so I don't get you killed too.

(Jamie doesn't move.)

Go!

Essie suddenly shoves him back.

ESSIE (cont'd)

Go on!

(Another shove)

Get out of here!

She moves in to push him again, but he catches her and pulls her into an embrace.

JAMIE

(softly)

Shh, shh. Your picture nail didn't kill him, Esther. Harrison died saving children, courageously, and on his own terms. He was a hero, not a victim, and you're no killer.

Jamie gently pushes Essie back to arm's length.

JAMIE (cont'd)

And we're neither of us dying today, you hear me?

The haze grows. A few ashen leaves drift down.
They both take notice.

JAMIE (cont'd)

It's comin'. These blowing embers'll be the main danger. Fill the trough and get buckets ready to put out hot spots, and I'll start on the firebreak.

Essie comes back to herself.

ESSIE

Right. Oh! On the way, open the chicken coop so the poor birds can run off if they need to.

JAMIE

Right.

Essie runs into the house as Jamie exits into the barn.
They both return to the yard moments later, she with a pair of buckets and he with a scythe. They share a look.

ESSIE

How do I get myself into these situations?

Jamie's laugh is genuine.

JAMIE

Shout if you need me.

He runs off behind the barn.

ESSIE

(quietly)

I think I've needed you for years.

Essie moves to the pump and works the handle rapidly to fill the catch trough. She dips one bucket full, then the second, setting them nearby, then refills the tub again. She pauses to catch her breath.

JAMIE (O.S.)

Essie! A bucket!

Essie grabs up a bucket and runs offstage.

ESSIE (O.S.)

Over there, too!

Jamie runs on, grabs the second bucket, runs off. A moment later, Essie runs in again with an empty bucket, fills it, starts pumping again. Jamie enters, fills his bucket.

JAMIE

I told you, those embers...

ESSIE

Keep a bucket close.

JAMIE

Everything's just so dry.

(He pauses to catch his breath,
splash water on his face)

You sure you don't want that teaching job in Yakima?

ESSIE

And leave this idyllic place?

(They share a brief laugh)

But now you own the land. I can hardly leave my future husband behind.

JAMIE

Well, technically, I don't.

ESSIE

Don't what?

JAMIE

Own the land.

ESSIE

Of course you do. You paid off the loan and changed the title, just today.

JAMIE

We didn't. Never got all the way to Vancouver. Your Da and I turned back at Hockinson to come warn you.

ESSIE

Oh. Well, I suppose we can settle the title later. And anyway, I'm grateful you found me more important than the land.

JAMIE

My thinkin' was more that with the fire comin', you're a lot easier to grab and run with.

ESSIE

(with pretend shock)

Mister Walsh! There'll be no grabbing of the bride until--

(she sees something and turns
instantly serious)

Jamie! The barn roof!

Jamie sees the hot spot, grabs up the bucket and runs
to hurl water onto the barn roof. Essie snatches up
the second bucket and joins in.

After a few trips, Jamie rests by the pump.

JAMIE

I think it's out.

Essie re-enters and starts back to the pump--

JAMIE (O.S.)

Stop! Turn around!

Essie, confused, turns around, and we see that the back of her skirt is scorched and a portion of the fabric is smoldering. Essie struggles in panic against the wedding dress.

ESSIE

No! Get me out of this! Help me!

Together they lift off the outer dress, leaving Essie in her corset and combinations. Jamie uses the folds of the skirt to smother and tamp out the burning dress. Essie calms a little.

JAMIE

Not how I imagined this coming off.

They are both a little embarrassed, and Jamie looks away. Off into the distance, he sees something much more terrifying.

JAMIE (cont'd)

Essie...on the slope there. It's here.

For the first time, Essie sees her worst nightmare, what would later be called the Yacolt Burn: a forest fire, miles wide, with flames roaring hundreds of feet into the air, creating its own windstorm and surging forward at the speed of a galloping horse.

ESSIE

Oh God!

JAMIE

I have to finish the firebreak!

He starts to run out.

ESSIE

No!

JAMIE

What?

ESSIE

Those flames are twice as tall as the trees!

JAMIE

But it's still a-ways off! A mile or more. And it's still gotta come down the slope and work its way through the trees and potatoes.

ESSIE

No! It's too late!

Essie's resolve breaks. She snatches up the burned dress and runs into the house.

JAMIE

Essie!

Jamie follows her.

JAMIE (cont'd)

Don't lose your head on me now, Esther Elizabeth!

ESSIE

It's the end of the world out there! The wrath of God come down!

JAMIE

The Almighty's been mad at me for years; I'm still here!

ESSIE

We're going to burn...we're just gonna--

Jamie grips her shoulders.

JAMIE

Wife! *You're* still here, too! And by Heaven, I'll not see either of us burn this day. We have to run.

ESSIE

(regaining her composure)

How long do we have?

JAMIE

Thirty minutes? Less? We can't wait until it's right upon us to--

ESSIE

Then we collect some things. To help us get by the first few days. But not so much we can't carry it.

JAMIE

What things? There's a whole house here!

ESSIE

Don't need the whole house. Just food, blankets, practical things.

She begins collecting things, sometimes disappearing into another part of the house to retrieve some items.

ESSIE (cont'd)

A loaf of bread...apples...kitchen knife...

JAMIE

Candles and matches...work gloves...

ESSIE

A blanket...my sewing kit...

The table is beginning to pile up. Essie looks around: what else?

JAMIE

How are we going to carry all this?

ESSIE

Maybe the blanket? Wrap it up inside?

JAMIE

Wait! Here.

He retrieves a plain chest and hoists it onto the table.

ESSIE

My hope chest...

JAMIE

Perfect! We could use a little hope right now.

He opens the chest and looks inside. He pulls out a stack of porcelain plates and sets it aside.

JAMIE (cont'd)

Won't need china for a while.

(A stack of folded cloth.)

Bed linens?

ESSIE

No use without a bed.

He sets these aside also as Essie looks in. She freezes a moment, then slowly pulls out a dark broadcloth jacket, clearly a man's. She holds it up, regards it for a moment, then hugs it to her chest.

JAMIE

His?

Jamie starts to return the jacket to the chest, but Essie stops him and takes it from him. She regards it a moment, kisses it, and sets it aside.

ESSIE

This far and no further. I've carried him long enough.

Jamie begins to quickly pack the emergency supplies into the chest. He spies the burnt wedding dress.

JAMIE

Don't forget your dress.

Essie surveys the damage.

ESSIE

It's gone. Kittie's gonna kill me.

JAMIE

What about this one?

Jamie hands Essie her mother's wedding dress. She picks up the bodice and measures it against herself.

ESSIE

The vainest hope of all.

The dress goes in. Jamie closes the chest.

JAMIE

Say your goodbyes to the place.

He moves the chest to the front porch as Essie takes a final look around. In an impulsive final move, she retrieves her diploma from the wall and leaves the house to put it in the chest. Jamie is standing in the yard, staring at the fire.

JAMIE (cont'd)

All those trees. What a waste. D'ye know how much money even your patch of woods was worth to loggers?

ESSIE

It doesn't matter.

JAMIE

Not now, for certain. I won't even have a job, come next week. Back to bein' riff-raff, beggin' at the back door...

Essie suddenly notices something.

ESSIE

Jamie...

JAMIE

(oblivious)

Mister Weyerhaeuser will be after sayin', "Sorry, Walsh, no forest land to buy and sell, no need for you..."

ESSIE

No, Jamie, the wind!

JAMIE

What about it?

ESSIE

It's blowing *toward* the fire now!

JAMIE

Aye...but I think it's just the fire drawing all the air into it.

ESSIE

But if it *has* changed...it could push the fire away!

JAMIE

Not in time! Look at those flames! It's already starting into your woods! And once it gets to the potato field, those dead plants'll go up like matches.

ESSIE

That's it! Wait here!

She runs into the house.

JAMIE

What?!

Inside, Essie hastily lights two lanterns, as Jamie eyes the distant fire nervously.

JAMIE (cont'd)

Essie! We need to go!

Essie runs out with the lanterns.

ESSIE

Take these. Run past your firebreak and use them to set the potato field on fire.

JAMIE

Have you lost your ever-lovin' mind? There's literal hellfire on earth not a half-mile away and you tell me to go startin' more?

ESSIE

The potato bushes'll burn fast, and the wind will carry the fire back toward the trees.

JAMIE

So?

ESSIE

So if we're lucky, the trees will catch too.

JAMIE

You *want* to burn down your forest?

ESSIE

What I want is to burn up everything the big fire can feed on to keep coming this way.

Bareford -- There's Still Snow on Silver Star -- 87.

JAMIE
(realizing)

Starve it of fuel!

ESSIE
We can't mow a firebreak big enough, but we can fight fire with fire.

JAMIE
You are a mad, brilliant, beautiful woman!

ESSIE
You should marry me.

Jamie looks at her a moment, smiles, then dashes off with the lanterns.
Essie watches his offstage efforts as the lights fade.