

~~JOHN~~

~~I'm looking for my son. I wonder if
you might've seen him.~~

Start

EXT. BRITISH FIRING LINE - DAY

British soldiers in a skirmish line scan, with palpable tension, the field before them for any sign of the enemy.

The heat of the morning sun shimmers on the horizon.

The only sound is that of the incessant clicking of thousands of cicadas.

Beads of sweat glisten on the furrowed brow of a young soldier.

Pursed lips quiver and twitch with emotion.

A filthy finger trembles on the trigger of a musket.

A man swats a mosquito on the back of his neck.

A large drop of sweat falls from the end of a nose.

The sudden report of a musket, is followed by the cry of a young soldier, who arches back and collapses.

With war whoops, a throng of Continental Soldiers burst from the woods across the field.

And the battle commences...

EXT. BRITISH ARTILLERY BATTERY - DAY

John stands by with three other drudges, waiting to feed to the artillery battery the heavy crates of ammunition and bags of gunpowder as needed.

The ARTILLERY OFFICER gives the order...

ARTILLERY OFFICER

Fire!

The cannon next to John EXPLODES into service.

John wasn't ready, and the concussion knocks him back. He holds his head in dizzying pain and drops to his knees. This quiet farmer has never in his life experienced a sound as loud as this.

We hear what John hears—the muffled sounds of battle are overwhelmed by inner ear ringing and explosions.

Captain Stephenson screams words at John that cannot be heard over the inner-ear ringing. Finally, the enraged Captain kicks John's ass to get him back up.

A disoriented John whirls about, as the artillery crew begins preparing for the next volley. Mere seconds into battle, John has already fallen behind in his work.

Peter waves his arms to get John's attention, and gestures to the pieces of cloth in his own ears.

John suddenly remembers and removes the cloth pieces from his pouch and stuffs them into his ears.

An incoming cannon ball whizzes past John's head and CRASHES into the earth nearby, raining down dirt and debris.

John puts his head down and tends to his task of feeding the heavy bags of gunpowder to the powder handlers.

EXT. A SUPPLY WAGON - DAY (AN HOUR OR SO LATER)

Duke cowers under the wagon. The dog is terrified by the non-stop cannon fire.

Drenched in sweat, John approaches the wagon and retrieves two heavy crates of munitions from the wagon. He heaves one onto each shoulder and returns to the line.

Duke leaps up and follows John.

EXT. BRITISH ARTILLERY BATTERY - DAY

John (with Duke) returns with the munitions, which Grover grabs and immediately puts to use.

GROVER
(screaming over the roar
of battle)
'Bout bloody time, you lazy
bastard!

A sweaty, grimy Peter arrives with a yoke across his shoulders, from which hang buckets of water. The Ram Officer grabs a bucket, plunges the pole-sponge into the water, and swabs the searing-hot cannon, which sizzles and steams.

About twenty yards in front of the artillery, a line of infantry advances to meet the enemy, and they engage in close-in battle.

Duke runs onto the battlefield.

JOHN

Duke! Duke, get back here!

Duke darts around, trying to "herd" the soldiers.

PETER

Your dog is going to get 'imself killed.

JOHN

It's his instinct. He's herding the soldiers.

(shouting)

DUKE!

Duke continues to try to herd the soldiers, one of whom kicks him. That man is then shot through the forehead.

EXT. CONTINENTAL ARMY ARTILLERY LINE - DAY

A Continental Soldier loads a grapeshot charge into a cannon.

The cannon is fired.

EXT. BRITISH ARTILLERY LINE - DAY

Duke yelps, as he, along with several nearby men, are hit by the balls of the grapeshot.

John dashes out onto the tumultuous field of battle.

Great EXPLOSIONS rain down clods of dirt and fill the air with dense, black smoke.

PETER

JOHN!

John makes his way through the crossfire, dodging deep craters in the earth, until he arrives where Duke lies.

When he gets a good look at how badly the dog is injured, John's chin trembles, and he struggles to hold back tears.

JOHN

Oh, Duke... Look at ya.

John scoops up the badly injured dog, and trudges through the smoke and haze with Duke in his arms.

FLASH HIT: EXT. JOHN'S FARM - DAY

Martha stands in the sunshine.

MARTHA

When thou walkest through the fire,
thou shalt not be burned; neither
shall the flame kindle upon thee.

BACK TO SCENE.

John stumbles in a crater but recovers and continues on through the fiery hellscape surrounding him.

EXT. THE SUPPLY WAGON - DAY

John places the heavily panting Duke under the wagon. He pours water from his waterskin over the dog's parched mouth, when Stephenson appears over him.

STEPHENSON

Get this crate to the artillery
battery.

John is reluctant to leave Duke.

STEPHENSON (CONT'D)

Now!

John hoists a ponderous crate onto his shoulder.

EXT. BATTLE FIELD - DAY

John slogs toward the front line with the crate.

Gruesome carnage is everywhere...

A dead soldier's guts have oozed out. The fetid, grisly mess attracts a swarm of flies.

John averts his gaze, as he starts to dry-heave. When he does, he sees another man, who has had the back of his skull blown away, causing his face to collapse in on itself, like a discarded mask.

A little further on, John encounters a boy, who lies with dead eyes, staring, wide open, in a heart-breaking expression of utter surprise.

John stumbles onward.

JOHN
Please, God! Protect my boy!

EXT. THE SUPPLY WAGON - DAY

John arrives with more water for Duke.

JOHN
Duke?

John tries to jostle the dog awake, but the dog is stiff and motionless.

JOHN (CONT'D)
Oh... Duke.

John gathers up the dog, and weeps bitterly into his fur.

EXT. THE SUPPLY DEPOT - LATE AFTERNOON

As a group of sooty, sweaty men assemble (including Peter and Grover), cannons continue to thunder nearby.

John approaches, his dull eyes, red from grief.

Captain Stephenson dominates the center of the group.

STEPHENSON
A general retreat has been ordered.
For the remainder of the day, and
throughout the night, you men will
load that cargo...

He gestures to a mountain of ammo crates, barrels of gunpowder, muskets, rifles, and all manner of supplies.

STEPHENSON (CONT'D)
...onto those wagons.

He gestures to a long line of wagons.

STEPHENSON (CONT'D)
By tomorrow morning that cargo is
to be taken to the harbor and
loaded onto ships, at which time we
will evacuate to New York.
(MORE)

STEPHENSON (CONT'D)

We will leave nothing behind. Get to it, lads.

Captain Stephenson walks away.

JOHN

(to Peter)

Which direction is New York?

PETER

North.

JOHN

My son is south.

GROVER

(calling out)

Alright, men. We have our orders.
Form a line.

The men groan and grumble.

GROVER (CONT'D)

LET'S GET ONE WITH IT!

The exhausted men organize themselves into a line.

EXT. THE SUPPLY DEPOT - EVENING

The sun is on the horizon, producing an orange glow, which, along with the haze of the cannons lingering in the air, gives the scene the hellish appearance of Dante's Inferno.

The drudges are lined up, passing the cargo from man to man, from the depot pile onto the wagons. The heat has only grown more intense and each man is stripped to the waist.

John is between Grover (on his left) and Peter (on his right) serving as a mindless cog in this machine of men. Throughout the scene he never stops passing along the heavy cargo from the man on his left to the man on his right... from left to right, left to right, left to right...

Across the road a large pit has been opened in the earth and a graves detail is lifting corpses from a wagon and dropping them into the pit. They work at the same pace and rhythm as the cargo drudges.

As John works, he stares straight ahead.

There is a solitary white windflower in the field across the road, and it is this one, single spot of beauty upon which John fixes his gaze, as he moves crates from left to right, left to right, left to right...

The lovely little flower quakes as the ground rumbles from cannon fire.

Suddenly, a woman's feet step in view, and the hem of her dress obscures the little flower.

John looks up to behold an apparition of his late wife, Anne, lovely and fresh.

John squints at her radiance.

ANNE
(in a sweet, soothing
voice)
Have you given up, John?

He says nothing, continuing to work.

ANNE (CONT'D)
Our son has need of you, John. He,
too, battles death on this river of
bad dreams. You must go to him. Be
his hero.

When John speaks he does not open his mouth, as this conversation takes place only in his mind.

JOHN (V.O.)
I'm no hero.

ANNE
A father's love is enough to make a
hero of any man.

Anne walks away.

A pair of hands lift a crate from the pile, and hand it to the next man, who hands it to the next. It travels from the one pair of hands, to the next, to the next... from left to right. Eventually, it passes into the hands of Grover, who passes it on to... no one.

John is gone.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

FEET FLY through the bramble and undergrowth, leap over roots and rocks, and splash through a brook.

Through his open mouth John chuffs the night air. His dilated pupils strain to see obstacles ahead.

He dodges around tree trunks and under low branches.

Thorn bushes tear at his bare torso.

A vine trips him up.

He flies through the air, landing facedown, hitting his forehead on a rock with a sickening THUD.

HE IS OUT COLD.

BLACKOUT.

EXT. WOODS - EARLY MORNING

JOHN'S POV

Only BLACKNESS.

The sound of nearby rushing water slowly comes into focus, followed by morning birds singing.

Male voices can be heard, distorted and distant.

As John's eyes slowly open, sunlight bursts through the blackness.

BRITISH SOLDIER #1 (O.S.)
There he is...

Suddenly, two silhouetted figures step into view, obscuring the sun.

BRITISH SOLDIER #1 (CONT'D)
Get up... UP!

BACK TO SCENE

The forest is streaked with early-morning sunlight.

Two BRITISH SOLDIERS stand over John.

Soldier #2 loads his flint pistol.

Soldier #1 kicks John HARD.

BRITISH SOLDIER #1 (CONT'D)
Get your arse up, you bloody fool!
We haven't got all day.

INT. LIDDESDALE CHURCH - DAY

The service is in progress.

Martha and a few other congregants listen as Reverend Fieldstone reads from the Bible.

REVEREND FIELDSTONE
(reading)
Is any among you afflicted? Let him
pray. Is any sick among you? Let
him call for the elders of the
church, and let them pray over him.

Martha stands and limps her way to the front of the church.

REVEREND FIELDSTONE (CONT'D)
The effectual fervent prayer of a
righteous man availeth much.

Reverend Fieldstone looks up from the reading.

REVEREND FIELDSTONE (CONT'D)
Sister Martha? Do you have a need
this morning?

MARTHA
Aye, Reverend.

REVEREND FIELDSTONE
Let us pause to unite in prayer for
our sister, Martha.

MARTHA
Not for me. For John Armstrong.
Just now, the Lord has mightily
pricked my heart, urging me to
intercede in fervent prayer for
John. Without delay. We must all
pray.

The church members bow their heads to pray.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

John is blindfolded, with his hands tied behind his back.

BRITISH SOLDIER #1
John Armstrong, you are, forthwith,
to be executed for the crime of
desertion...

INTERCUT with Martha urgently praying IN CHURCH.

MARTHA

Father in Heaven, you know the
danger John is in. I do not.

Unable to see, John stumbles around.

BRITISH SOLDIER #1

...as per the orders of General
Clinton that any and all deserters
are to be shot on sight. Have you
any last words?

John freezes.

MARTHA

God, please be with your servant
John right now.

JOHN

(blind and confused)
Huh?

BRITISH SOLDIER #2

(mocking)
Huh?

The men laugh.

BRITISH SOLDIER #1

Ready...

Soldier #2 cocks the pistol.

BRITISH SOLDIER #1 (CONT'D)

Aim...

Soldier #2 raises the pistol and takes aim.

John thrashes about wildly.

BRITISH SOLDIER #2

Hold still so I can kill you, you
fool!

Confused, John freezes.

MARTHA

(urgent)
Protect John from harm.

BRITISH SOLDIER #1

FIRE!

MARTHA
Save him, Heavenly Father!

END INTERCUT

Soldier 2 pulls the trigger... CLICK. Nothing. The weapon does not fire.

BRITISH SOLDIER #2
Dammit!

While Soldier #2 works to fix the pistol, John runs.

Still blindfolded, he slams into a tree trunk. He tries running the other direction and stumbles over a root.

The men laugh at John, as struggles to get back on his feet.

John runs once more.

BRITISH SOLDIER #2 (CONT'D)
Run, old man! Run for your life!

BRITISH SOLDIER #1
Look at him! A chicken with his
head cut off!

Once again, John smashes into a tree, eliciting howls of laughter from the soldiers.

He presses his body into the tree trunk and rubs his face against the rough bark to roll the blindfold halfway off. With his one free eye, he sees the soldiers getting the pistol ready to fire.

John runs toward the sound of the rushing water. He reaches a cliff, and with his one eye, he looks down to see...

A WILD RIVER about sixty feet below.

The men catch up with him.

Soldier #2 raises the pistol.

John does a quick mental calculation: his chances for survival at the business-end of the executioner's pistol...

...versus his chances in the river's violent rapids.

Decision made... Without taking his eye off the soldiers, John allows himself to fall backward over the cliff.

John's body rotates during the fall, so that he is upside down... with his hands still tied behind his back.

As John falls, CELESTIAL VOICES SING GREGORIO ALLEGRI'S MISERERE MEI, DEUS.

EXT. THE RIVER BELOW THE CLIFF - UNDERWATER - DAY

WITH MUSIC CONTINUING.

John plunges, facedown, into the river.

The blindfold finally slips all the way off, but his hands are still tied.

He tries to reach the knife sheathed on his belt but is unsuccessful.

EXT. THE TOP OF THE CLIFF - DAY

The British Soldiers reach the edge of the cliff. Soldier #2 takes aim at John, writhing in the river below. He fires.

EXT. THE RIVER BELOW THE CLIFF - UNDERWATER - DAY

A ball shot rips through the water and grazes John's side.

Blood streams into the water.

He wriggles and jerks, attempting to turn himself face-up.

His hands remain tightly bound.

Horror fills John's eyes as he realizes that he is drowning.

EXT. THE TOP OF THE CLIFF - DAY

WE HEAR ONLY THE CONTINUATION OF MISERERE MEI, DEUS, AS...

The two British Soldiers take turns reloading and taking shots at John's body as he floats in the river's current. They laugh at this macabre target practice.

EXT. THE RIVER BELOW THE CLIFF - UNDERWATER - DAY

John struggles to get his face out of the water.

Then...

MARTHA (V.O)
When thou passeth through the
waters, I will be with thee;
(MORE)

MARTHA (V.O) (CONT'D)
and through the rivers, they shall
not overflow thee.

John stops moving, and relaxes his body as it floats away.

EXT. THE TOP OF THE CLIFF - DAY

The British Soldiers observe John's motionless body as it drifts downstream, trailing a wake of blood.

He appears to be dead, so John's executioners walk away.

EXT. THE RIVER BELOW THE CLIFF - DAY

The waters become tranquil, as the current takes John's body further downstream.

EXT. THE RIVER BELOW THE CLIFF - UNDERWATER - DAY

MISERERE MEI, DEUS BUILDS TO A CRESCENDO DURING...

John opens his eyes and recalls the English translation of *Miserere Mei, Deus* (from Psalm 51)...

JOHN (V.O.)
Have mercy upon me, O God,
according to thy lovingkindness.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me of my sin.

It's a momentary encounter with the sublime, as John beholds the underwater scene before him.

Rays of sunlight bounce off of the multicolored river rocks below.

A kaleidoscopic array of vividly-hued fish dart all around him.

Even his blood swirling in the water adds to the ethereal effect. This is an exquisite and sacred moment.

MUSIC FADES.

EXT. THE RIVER BELOW THE CLIFF - DAY

John's, now relaxed, body suddenly flips over. He takes in large gulps of air.

The roar of the rapids recedes, leaving only a chorus of woodland birds and the throbbing of a woodpecker as it echoes deep in the forest.

JOHN'S POV

Trees tower on either side of the quiet, glistening river creating a leafy cathedral, through which can be seen patches of an intensely blue sky.

BACK TO SCENE

John's wet face beams with joy, as he glides through the dappled sunlight, swept along by the river's gentle current.

The beauty around him revives John, both body and soul. The sheer exhilaration of simply being alive causes him to burst out in uproarious laughter.

EXT. FOREST - THE RIVER BANK - DAY

A rivulet of blood rolls down John's wet torso, as he kneels beside a sharp rock, using its edge to grind the rope binding his hands, until it snaps and falls from his raw wrists.

John is now stripped of everything but his pants, shoes, knife, and side pouch. He tears off a soft leaf from a nearby plant and uses it to apply pressure to his wound.

~~MONTAGE EXT./INT. VARIOUS~~

~~John travels from New Jersey to the Carolinas...~~

- ~~- He follows the river.~~
- ~~- He travels through woodlands~~
- ~~- He emerges from the woods onto a dusty road.~~
- ~~- With badly sun-burnt shoulders, John sits on the porch of a mercantile, hunched over a block of wood, which he is carving into a gorgeous swan figurine.~~
- ~~- Inside the mercantile John presents the swan to the STORE OWNER, who examines his handiwork. He is impressed with the swan, but not enough to trade anything for it. Shaking his head, he returns the swan to John. But just then...~~

~~The STORE OWNER'S WIFE appears. Her eyes light up as she sees John's swan. She is enchanted.~~

- ~~- John emerges from the mercantile wearing~~

Thank you for reading.
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Stop