

THE RELUCTANT HEN

A play in two acts

By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

© 2022 by Craig Houk
1325 Taylor Street NW, APT 2
Washington, DC 20011
617-515-1838
hok1969@gmail.com

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Synopsis

Pete Anderson, a well-meaning but dangerously misguided husband whose desperate longing for a child collides with his wife Peggy Lynn's repeated miscarriages and emotional exhaustion. As financial strain, small-town gossip, and the suffocating presence of Pete's sharp-tongued mother Nancy Jo tighten around the couple, Pete hatches a reckless plan to secure the family he craves, entangling himself with the fiercely independent Sandra Miller in a decision that spirals into betrayal, violence, and devastating consequences. What begins as a portrait of working-class domestic tension deepens into a tragic examination of masculinity, ownership, motherhood, and the brutal cost of hope in a world that offers few choices and even fewer mercies.

Characters

PETE ANDERSON Male, Late 20s/Early 30s

NANCY JO ANDERSON Female, Late 50s/Early 60s

PEGGY LYNN KENNEY-ANDERSON Female, Late 20s/Early 30s

SANDRA MILLER, Female, Late 20s/Early 30s

BUCKY TURNER Male, Late 20s/Early 30s

LAUREEN TURNER Female, Late 50s/Early 60s

WOMAN

Plays **DOROTHY BENNETT**, Female, Early 20s

Plays **VERLA CLAIRE BAKER**, Female, Late 30s/Early 40s

Time

1952 – 1953

Setting

McCurtain County, Oklahoma

Scene Breakdown

1-1	Early 1920s	Mid Afternoon	The Bennett House
1-2	Aug 1953	Early Morning	The Farmhouse
1-3	Oct 1952	Morning	The Farmhouse
1-4	Oct 1952	Mid-Morning	Murdock's Feed Supply
1-5	Oct 1952	Early Evening	The Farmhouse
1-6	Oct 1952	Around Midnight	Bucky's Cabin
1-7	Oct 1952	Around Midnight	The Farmhouse
1-8	Nov 1952	Dusk	Murdock's Feed Supply
2-1	Dec 1952	Middle of the Night	Laureen's Shack
2-2	Dec 1952	Midday	The Beauty Salon
2-3	Dec 1952	Midday	Laureen's Shack
2-4	Jun 1953	Late Afternoon	The Farmhouse
2-5	Jun 1953	Late Afternoon	Bucky's Cabin
2-6	Jun 1953	Early Evening	Bucky's Property
2-7	Jun 1953	Early Evening	Bucky's Cabin
2-8	Jun 1953	Evening	Laureen's Shack/Total Darkness

2-9	Jun 1953	Evening	Somewhere Along Route Two Fifty-Nine
2-10	Jul 1953	Midday	Bucky's Cabin
2-11	Aug 1953	Early Morning	The Farmhouse

PERUSAL

ACT 1

SCENE 1

Early 1920s. The Bennett House in Spencerville.

(Police sirens wail in the distance, growing louder. Dorothy Bennett appears on the front stoop, an infant in her arms.)

DOROTHY

What on earth is going on?

(A car screeches to a stop. Dorothy calls out, alarmed.)

Frank!? Frank, what's happening!?

FRANK

(Off.)

Get back inside, Dorothy! Now!

(Tire squealing. Dorothy turns to go. A series of gunshots. Lights out. End of scene.)

SCENE 2

1953. August. Morning. The farmhouse.

(Pete sleeps in a chair, feet propped on an ottoman, his wrist in a cast, as Tom Corbett, Space Cadet – or perhaps Sky King – plays on the television; otherwise, the house is quiet. A long moment. Suddenly, A bicycle bell rings off, followed by a rolled newspaper thudding against the screen door, stirring Pete. Nancy Jo appears in the kitchen archway, lights a cigarette, and watches the program for a beat before a timer goes off, pulling her back into the kitchen – sounds of an oven door, pans, dishes. She returns with a tray, cigarette still in her lips, crosses to Pete, and nudges his legs off the ottoman with her foot, waking him.)

PETE

Huh. What're you doing? What the hell's matter with you?

NANCY JO

Breakfast.

(Sets the tray down.)

Creamed chipped beef on toast.

PETE

Shit on a shingle.

NANCY JO

(Flatly.)

Never gets old. You want coffee?

PETE

Sure.

NANCY JO

Be right back.

(She exits. Pete yawns, stretches, rubs his eyes, starts eating, glancing at the TV. Nancy Jo returns with two coffees, sets one beside him. She sits, ashtray in hand, smoking.)

PETE

Thanks.

(They sit. He eats; she smokes and watches.)

You're not gonna eat?

NANCY JO

Watching my figure.

(A joke. Neither laughs. A long moment passes.)

Paper boy come yet?

PETE

Think so. Heard something on the porch.

(Nancy Jo exits, returns with the paper, settles, begins reading. Another quiet stretch.)

NANCY JO

You heard from Peggy Lynn?

PETE

Hm?

NANCY JO

Peggy Lynn. Have you heard from her?

PETE

Yeah. Talked to her on Friday.

NANCY JO

And?

PETE

And what?

NANCY JO

She's been gone near two weeks now.

PETE

So?

NANCY JO

So... is everything alright?

PETE

Of course it is. Everything's fine.

NANCY JO

She was only meant to be gone a week.

PETE

Jesus. She stayed a little longer with her brother, Jack. Hasn't seen him in a while. What with the war and all.

NANCY JO

Alright. You could've said that sooner. Otherwise, how would I know? And I could do without the sarcasm.

(Pete backs off.)

PETE

She'll be home in a couple days.

(They sit quietly. Nancy Jo idly tugs at her hair.)

NANCY JO

I'm overdue for a shampoo and set.

PETE

(Irritated, not hostile.)

Oh, so, that's what this is. You need your hair done...

NANCY JO

No.

PETE

I'm getting the third degree about my wife's whereabouts because your roots are showing?

NANCY JO

Alright. That's enough. I just asked a simple question. You're the one who's making something of it.

PETE

She'll be back at the salon Wednesday. I'm sure she'll squeeze you in.

NANCY JO

That'd be nice. Though that's not why I was asking after her.

(The television pops and goes dead. They are both startled.)

PETE

/ Dammit!

NANCY JO

/ Oh, for the love of-

(A baby cries off.)

PETE

You mind checking on your grandbaby?

(He moves to the television. Nancy Jo takes a long drag, stubs out the cigarette, rises.)

This place needs new wiring.

NANCY JO

And who's paying for it?

(She exits down the hall.)

PETE

Whole house'll burn down one day.

(He fiddles uselessly with the TV.)

NANCY JO

(Off.)

Is it busted?

PETE

Yeah. Probably a capacitor.

NANCY JO

(Off.)

I'll call Jimmy. See if he can fix it.

(Pete takes the tray into the kitchen. We hear dishes, running water. The baby continues crying. Nancy Jo re-enters, moves to the archway.)

I can't get her to settle.

PETE

(Off.)

She's hungry. I'll take care of it.

NANCY JO

I don't understand why your wife won't breastfeed. I fed you; you hardly fussed at all.

PETE

(Off.)

I don't want to talk about it.

NANCY JO

All I'm saying is, that baby'd be happier and healthier if she had some of her mother's milk.

PETE

(Pete enters with a bottle.)

Then take it up with Peggy Lynn when she gets back. See how that goes.

NANCY JO

Not on your life.

PETE

And since you're so concerned about my daughter, maybe cut back on those cigarettes?

NANCY JO

Maybe I will.

PETE

Alright then.

(Pete exits down the hall.)

NANCY JO

I'm gonna sit on the porch before it gets too hot.

(She takes her coffee, exits. Sits. Lights another cigarette. The baby cries, then settles. An old pickup passes, honking. Nancy Jo shades her eyes, recognizes the driver, calls out.)

Oh, hey, Millie!

(Nancy Jo smiles and waves. As the pickup passes, her smile curdles into a frown.)

Well, that little bastard.

(Pete enters from the hallway with the baby and steps onto the porch.)

PETE

Who was that?

NANCY JO

Millicent Brown. In her rusted-out pickup. Her boy was playing around in the back of it – gave me the middle finger. Can you believe that? Devil's spawn. I almost hoped he'd fall out and break his neck.

PETE

He's just a kid. No harm in it. You gonna call Jimmy about the television or what?

NANCY JO

Darn it. I knew I was forgetting something. I'll call him now.

(Pete stays on the porch. Nancy Jo goes inside, crosses to the phone, and reaches for it – it rings. She startles slightly, answers.)

Hello...? Well, I'll be, I was just about to call you... Yes, our TV's on the fritz again, and I was hoping your husband could come take a look. Pete says it's something to do with the, uh...

PETE

(Calling into the house.)

Capacitor.

NANCY JO

Capacitor, whatever the heck that is... Well, that'd be wonderful. Tomorrow morning's fine; I'll be here. Thank you, Emma. And thank Jimmy for me, won't you....? What's that...? Oh. That's right, you called me. I nearly forgot. What's the scuttlebutt...? Mm-hm... What...? Oh, come on, Emma, that can't be right. You sure you heard correctly...? Oh my God... Oh my God, that's awful. Do they know who it is...? I see... Well, if you hear anything more, you call us, alright? Thanks again. I'll keep an eye out for Jimmy in the morning. Bye, Emma.

(She hangs up. She gathers herself, then heads back out to the porch. Pete has settled with the baby. Nancy Jo lights a cigarette. They sit quietly.)

I'm telling you right now... if that television can't be fixed, we're going to have to do without for a while.

PETE

Alright, there's no need to exaggerate. Things ain't that bad.

NANCY JO

Aren't they?

PETE

No.

(They sit in silence.)

NANCY JO

We never had to worry about money when your father / was alive.

PETE

/ Don't you ever get tired of reminding me / what a disappointment I've been?

NANCY JO

/ All I'm saying is, your father took good care of this house. The farm. You and me. And I... well, I miss him. That's all I meant.

(They sit quietly.)

PETE

I start back at the lumber camp Sunday.

NANCY JO

Oh. Well, that's good. Though I imagine Peggy Lynn won't like you being gone overnight. Not with the baby.

PETE

I'll stay over only when I have to. Long days, so there's not much I can do about it. And it's not like I enjoy bunking with a bunch of filthy men.

NANCY JO

And you're sure you're ready?

PETE

Either that or sit around here listening to you talk about how broke we are.

NANCY JO

I meant your arm.

PETE

Oh. Right. It's fine. Cast comes off in a few days. Hell, Bucky took the worst of it.

NANCY JO

How is he?

PETE

Haven't seen him. I think he's sore at me. Last I heard, he's still laid up with a busted head and cracked ribs. Lucky that log didn't kill him.

NANCY JO

He'll bounce back. He always does.

(Nancy Jo smokes. Pete tends to the baby.)

You don't want to know what Emma told me?

PETE

No interest in gossip.

(They sit quietly.)

NANCY JO

They found a body.

PETE

A body? What do you mean?

NANCY JO

Someone dead. Floating in Hugo Lake.

PETE

That's awful.

NANCY JO

Fisherman found it wrapped in an old rug, tied up with rope.

PETE

Jesus... That's terrible. They know who it is?

NANCY JO

Not yet. Emma said she'd call if she hears more.

PETE

That's just... terrible.

(They sit quietly.)

NANCY JO

I don't understand how someone could do that.

PETE

No use dwelling on it.

NANCY JO

Someone was murdered, Pete.

PETE

You don't know that. Could've been an accident.

NANCY JO

An accident? Someone wrapped it up and dumped it in the lake.

PETE

I hear you. But what good does it do, getting worked up over something you know nothing about?

(They sit quietly.)

NANCY JO

So close to home.

PETE

Enough. Listen. Why don't you find something else to do? Take your mind off it. Start by putting the baby back in her crib.

NANCY JO

She'll start crying the second I take her.

PETE

No, she won't. Here.

(Nancy Jo sets her cigarette aside as Pete hands over the baby.)

Take her easy.

(Nancy Jo takes the baby.)

Careful.

NANCY JO

I think I know how to hold a baby, Pete. I only dropped you once – maybe twice. But never on your head.

PETE

Shhh.

NANCY JO

Alright, alright. Come on, Pearl. Grandma's got you.

PETE

Watch your step.

(Nancy Jo exits into the house with the baby, disappearing down the hallway. Pete watches them go. He picks up Nancy Jo's still-lit cigarette, brings it to his lips, and inhales. Nancy Jo returns from the hallway, crosses to the front door, and steps out onto the porch.)

NANCY JO

Weren't you just giving me grief about smoking?

PETE

You left it burning.

NANCY JO

Mm hm.

PETE

You get the baby settled?

NANCY JO

I did. Went straight down without a peep. Fast asleep.

(A car pulls up. They both look off.)

Looks like we've got company.

(End of Scene.)

SCENE 3

1952. October. Morning. The farmhouse.

(The stage sits empty, quiet, almost eerie. Suddenly, Peggy Lynn rushes in from the hallway.)

PEGGY LYNN

Pete! Pete, we gotta go!

(She grabs a coat.)

Come on, Pete! I don't want to be late! Pete!

(Nancy Jo enters from the kitchen, dressed for fall.)

NANCY JO

Good God, Peggy Lynn, do you have to be that loud? I heard you out by the chicken coop.

PEGGY LYNN

(Pulling on her coat.)

Well, I'm sorry, but Verla Claire Baker's first in my chair this morning, and she's asking for the works. I've got a full day, back-to-back, and if I don't start on time, I'll never catch up.

NANCY JO

Verla's got about as much hair on her chin as she does on her head.

PEGGY LYNN

Exactly. So, you know what I'm up against.

NANCY JO

Alright, alright. Pete's outside with the truck. Waiting on you.

PEGGY LYNN

(Checking herself in the mirror.)

Oh. Okay. Well... I didn't know.

NANCY JO

How would you since he didn't tell you.

PEGGY LYNN

He's sweet sometimes.

(She grabs a large bag.)

NANCY JO

He does take good care of you.

PEGGY LYNN

I never said otherwise.

(She suddenly tilts forward, nauseous.)

NANCY JO

You alright?

PEGGY LYNN

Yeah, no, I'm fine. It's just... my stomach's a little off.

NANCY JO

That's no good. I'll get you some Alka-Seltzer.

PEGGY LYNN

No, don't bother. It'll pass.

NANCY JO

You sure?

PEGGY LYNN

Yeah. There's no time anyway.

(She doubles over.)

No. No, I'm gonna be sick.

(She drops the bag and hurries off down the hall.)

NANCY JO

Oh, for—

(Following, calling after.)

Peggy Lynn, you'd better not make a mess in there! Pull your hair back and put your head inside the bowl!

(Nancy Jo shakes her head, pulls out a cigarette, removes her coat, hangs it, sits, and lights up. Pete enters from outside, dressed for fall – no cast – and steps inside.)

PETE

What's going on? Where's Peggy Lynn?

NANCY JO

In the toilet.

PETE

Still? We gotta go.

NANCY JO

She's throwing up.

PETE

Throwing up? What're you talking about?

NANCY JO

Her stomach's upset, so she's in there throwing up. I don't know how else to say it.

PETE

She was fine earlier.

(He moves toward the hall.)

Peggy Lynn!

NANCY JO

Leave her be.

PETE

I was just gonna check on her.

NANCY JO

Oh, come on, Pete. You can't be that stupid.

PETE

What? What'd I do now?

NANCY JO

The one thing you're good at. Knocking her up.

PETE

You better not be messing with me.

NANCY JO

(Exasperated.)

To what end? Honestly—

PETE

How far along?

NANCY JO

Not sure. But she's been hiding it at least a couple weeks.

PETE

Can't say I blame her.

NANCY JO

I suppose not.

(Nancy Jo smokes. Pete processes.)

Pete...

PETE

Yeah?

NANCY JO

Don't get your hopes up.

(Peggy Lynn reappears from the hallway, pale. An awkward pause as they look at her.)

PEGGY LYNN

Yeah, no, I'm fine. Thanks for asking.

PETE

(Pete moves to her.)

I'm sorry, baby.

PEGGY LYNN

Best keep your distance.

(Pete backs off.)

PETE

I'll get you some water.

PEGGY LYNN

That'd be wonderful. Thank you.

PETE

You got it.

(He exits into the kitchen.)

PEGGY LYNN

(Calling after.)

With ice! Lots of ice! Mostly ice! You know what? Forget the water! Just bring me a cup of ice!

PETE

(Off.)

Coming right up!

(Peggy Lynn moves closer to Nancy Jo.)

PEGGY LYNN

So... Nancy Jo...

NANCY JO

Mm hm.

PEGGY LYNN

In case you haven't figured it out yet, I'm pregnant.

NANCY JO

You don't say.

PEGGY LYNN

Again.

NANCY JO

I've lost count.

PEGGY LYNN

I do appreciate your disdain. Ever so useful in situations like these.

NANCY JO

Glad to help.

(Nancy Jo blows a puff of smoke.)

PEGGY LYNN

It's not my fault.

NANCY JO

Maybe not. But the rest of us are paying the price for your bad luck.

PEGGY LYNN

I assume Pete knows?

NANCY JO

He does. Didn't figure it out on his own, of course.

(Pete returns with a cup of ice.)

PETE

Here you go, baby.

PEGGY LYNN

(Taking it.)

Thank you. Now, we really have to go.

PETE

Peggy Lynn—

PEGGY LYNN

I know what you're gonna say. It's not up for discussion.

(She retrieves her bag.)

I've got a full day of women waiting to be made beautiful. And we need the money.

(She checks herself in the mirror.)

Ack. I'll fix my face in the truck.

NANCY JO

(Rising.)

I'll call Connie. Tell her you're running late.

PEGGY LYNN

Well, knock me over with a feather.

NANCY JO

A simple "thank you" will do.

(Peggy Lynn exits with bag and ice. Pete follows. Nancy Jo heads for the phone.)

Oh. And Pete.

PETE

Yeah?

NANCY JO

Pick up some chicken feed while you're out.

PETE

Alright.

NANCY JO

We did pretty good this week. Almost four dozen. Even Miss Tillie laid a few.

PETE

That's good.

NANCY JO

And don't go to Patterson's anymore. I don't like their mix. It's farther, but that new place – Murdock's – is better. Cheaper, too.

PEGGY LYNN

(Off.)

Pete!

PETE

I gotta go.

NANCY JO

Go on, then.

(Pete exits. Nancy Jo picks up the phone, dials.)

Hi, Connie? Nancy Jo Anderson... I'm fine, thank you. How are you...? Good, good... Listen, Peggy Lynn's running a little late... I know, I know, and she knows too, but it's not her fault... No, everything's fine. My back seized up this morning, so I had her clean out the henhouse and collect the eggs... Isn't that the truth... She's a hard worker, that one. Don't know what I'd do without her.

(She rolls her eyes, sticks out her tongue.)

Yes, I'm sorry. You'll have to keep Verla Claire entertained. Maybe toss a ball, see if she fetches it.

(She laughs.)

They just left, and Pete’s probably driving like a maniac, so they’ll be there soon... Alright. You have a lovely day... Mm-hm... Bye.

(She hangs up, takes a long drag, and exits into the kitchen.)

SCENE 4

1952. October. Later that same day. Outside Murdock’s Feed Supply.

(Sandra Miller stands, pulling off her work gloves and knocking dust from them. Pete approaches from behind.)

PETE

Excuse me, Miss—

SANDRA

(Turning.)

I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t care for “Miss.” Mr. Murdock gets a pass – he signs my paychecks. You can call me Sandra.

PETE

(Taken aback.)

Well, shit. Sorry. Sandra. And you can call me Pete.

SANDRA

Alright then, Pete. What else can I help you with?

PETE

Uh... nothing, really. It’s just... Look, I feel a little foolish saying this, but—

SANDRA

Let’s not beat around the bush. I’ve got work to get back to.

PETE

Right. I just wanted to say, I appreciate you helping me load that feed onto my truck.

SANDRA

Well... You’re welcome. It is my job.

PETE

Exactly. And that’s... what I wanted to—

SANDRA

Have I made you uncomfortable?

PETE

What? No. No, of course not.

SANDRA

Only asking because you seem to be struggling with the idea that a woman helped you carry four fifty-pound bags of feed to your automobile

PETE

Now hold on—

SANDRA

Relax. I'm not offended. I'm used to it. Only man who doesn't seem to mind is Casper Ferguson.

PETE

Oh, I know Casper. Everybody does. Quiet fella. Never married – if you catch my meaning.

SANDRA

He's kind. And he understands women are good for more than just sitting in kitchens, drinking coffee, smoking, gossiping till it's time to get supper on the table. If you catch mine.

PETE

I suppose I do.

SANDRA

Mr. Murdock's son usually handles the heavy lifting. But he's off at school, business picked up, so I stepped in. Temporary, of course, until they find someone less... female. Otherwise, I run the register. So, no need to fret. The men are still in charge.

PETE

You are something else.

SANDRA

So, I've been told. Now, I've got to get back.

(She starts off.)

PETE

You from around here?

SANDRA

Born and raised.

(She keeps moving. Pete follows.)

PETE

Hey, hold on a second.

(She stops, turns.)

SANDRA

You're gonna get me fired.

PETE

Is it proper for a man to give a woman cash for helping him out?

SANDRA

Depends what she helped him with.

PETE

What? Oh. No. No, that's not what I meant.

SANDRA

(Amused.)

You're making this very easy for me.

(She holds out her hand.)

So... how much you got?

PETE

Oh. Yeah, sure.

(He pulls out his wallet, steps closer.)

Damn. Smallest I've got is five.

SANDRA

That's alright. I was just kidding anyway.

PETE

No, it's fine. Take it.

(He offers the bill.)

SANDRA

I'm not taking your money. And it's too much besides.

PETE

Come on.

SANDRA

That's generous. But no.

(An impasse. Pete relents, tucks the money away.)

SANDRA

Tell you what. You can use that five to buy me a drink tonight. Over at the Tap-N-Fill.

PETE

Oh—

SANDRA

Before you answer, I can see you're married.

(She nods to his wedding band.)

Don't read into it. You seem decent, and if you're free, I wouldn't mind the company. Besides, they don't like ladies showing up without a chaperone.

PETE

I'm flattered, but—

SANDRA

Didn't I just say not to read into it?

PETE

You did, but—

SANDRA

You know. A man and a woman can share a drink without ending up in bed.

PETE

Feels more complicated than that?

SANDRA

I'm not looking for complicated.

PETE

I just don't think it's right.

SANDRA

Fair enough. I respect a man who knows his limitations.

PETE

My what now?

SANDRA

There you go again. Reading into things. I'll be there either way. Maybe I'll ask Casper to join me. I expect he'll keep his hands to himself. I should get back to work.

PETE

That register won't run itself.

SANDRA

No, it will not.

PETE

Nice meeting you, Sandra.

SANDRA

Likewise, Pete.

(She offers her hand. They shake.)

PETE

Guess I'll see you next time I need feed.

SANDRA

Unless your chickens burn through two hundred pounds in a month... there won't be a next time.

PETE

What do you mean?

SANDRA

I mean, I won't be here.

PETE

You're leaving? Where to?

SANDRA

(A small chuckle.)

Wouldn't you like to know.

(She exits. End of scene.)

SCENE 5

1952. October. Early evening, same day. The farmhouse.

(The stage sits empty. Pete enters carrying two bags of chicken feed, drops them near the porch, and heads back off. Peggy Lynn appears, bag in hand, exhausted. She climbs the steps and enters the house. Nancy Jo emerges from the hallway. She is dressed neatly, hair set, finishing a clip-on earring.)

NANCY JO

Well, finally.

PEGGY LYNN

Finally what?

NANCY JO

I'm gonna be late for card club.

PEGGY LYNN

Oh. Right. That's tonight. Sorry. It's been a very long day, Nancy Jo.

NANCY JO

Where's Pete?

PEGGY LYNN

Getting the chicken feed out of the truck.

(Peggy Lynn removes her coat, drops into a chair. Nancy Jo steps onto the porch.)

NANCY JO

Pete!

PETE

(Off.)

Yeah?

NANCY JO

Get a move on! I need you to drive me to card club!

PETE

(Off.)

Alright, keep your pants on! I'll be right there!

NANCY JO

Leave the bags on the porch! I'll take them to the shed in the morning!

PETE

(Off.)

They're heavy!

NANCY JO

I can manage!

PETE

(Off.)

Yes, ma'am!

NANCY JO

And pick me up around eleven! That's when Evelyn gets especially drunk. And mean. She can't stand losing to me. And she always does!

(She reenters, checks herself in the mirror.)

What's he been up to?

PEGGY LYNN

Who? Pete?

NANCY JO

Who else?

PEGGY LYNN

I don't follow.

NANCY JO

I sent him out for one errand this morning. He's been gone all day.

PEGGY LYNN

I think he and Bucky picked up some daywork. That's what he told me.

NANCY JO

Doing what?

PEGGY LYNN

Didn't say. Just that he made some money.

NANCY JO

Hm. Well, that's something. Except how am I supposed to know these things if no one tells me?

PEGGY LYNN

I just heard it myself on the way home. That's about all I could get out of him. Otherwise, he just stared straight ahead, sour as anything. Something's going on with him... and between you and me, I don't care to know what.

(During this, Pete carries the remaining bags onto the porch, then enters, pulling the truck key from his pocket. He offers it to Nancy Jo.)

PETE

Here.

NANCY JO

What am I supposed to do with that?

PETE

Drive yourself.

NANCY JO

What? Are you out of your--? I don't have time for this. Let's go.

(She moves past him toward the door.)

PETE

I'm not kidding. You can drive yourself. I'm tired. And I'm in a mood.

PEGGY LYNN

Oh, now come on, Pete—

PETE

Stay out of it, Peggy Lynn.

PEGGY LYNN

(Rising.)

Never mind him. I'll take you, Nancy Jo.

PETE

No. You're staying. We've got things to talk about.

PEGGY LYNN

I'm tired too. Maybe I don't feel like talking.

PETE

Doesn't matter what you feel like. I've got things to say.

PEGGY LYNN

What's gotten into you?

PETE

(Quiet, controlled.)

I need you to keep your mouth shut. Alright?

(Peggy Lynn is bewildered. To Nancy Jo.)

Take the key and go. You remember how to drive, don't you?

NANCY JO

(Taken aback.)

I do. And alright. If you insist.

(She takes the key.)

If you're hungry, there's a casserole in the fridge. Set the oven to three-fifty – twenty minutes.

(On her way out.)

Let's hope I don't perish in some horrible accident.

PETE

(Calling after Nancy Jo.)

You trying to cheer me up?

NANCY JO

Well, I never.

(She exits down the porch steps. Silence in the house.)

PEGGY LYNN

I'll turn on the oven, then freshen up. Can you put the casserole in?

(She heads toward the kitchen.)

PETE

Peggy Lynn, just... hang on a second. Please.

PEGGY LYNN

You know what, never mind. I've lost my appetite. I'm gonna take a bath and go to bed. Maybe you ought to sleep out here tonight.

(She turns toward the hallway.)

PETE

God damn it. Now, you listen to me.

PEGGY LYNN

Do not raise your voice at me. Where do you get off talking to me like that?

PETE

Sit down.

PEGGY LYNN

I will not sit down.

PETE

You will. And you're gonna hear me out whether you like or it not.

PEGGY LYNN

Well, I can promise you, I won't like it. Not one bit.

(She makes a point of sitting.)

I'm sitting. So, this better be good.

PETE

Peggy Lynn—

PEGGY LYNN

You have my undivided attention.

PETE

I want a baby. Real bad.

PEGGY LYNN

Oh, good Lord, Pete. I know. It's all you ever talk about—

PETE

Boy, girl – it doesn't matter. I want you by my side. Every step. For as long as you'll have me.

PEGGY LYNN

I'm not going anywhere. Except maybe away from Nancy Jo... if that's even possible.

(They share a brief, weary smile.)

PETE

That's just it. She's never giving up this farm. It'll fall down around her first.

PEGGY LYNN

Well, she won't live forever. At least I hope not. And when she's gone, it'll be yours.

PETE

No. It won't.

PEGGY LYNN

Why not?

PETE

Dad made her promise not to leave it to me. Said I didn't earn it. Didn't deserve it.

PEGGY LYNN

You have got to be— Well then what the hell is she gonna do with it?

PETE

I don't care.

PEGGY LYNN

Oh, come on. This land's worth something. The equipment alone – just sitting out there in the barn. And you're gonna let it all go? Not even fight for it? Talk to her? Otherwise, what are we doing here?

PETE

I think it's time we left.

PEGGY LYNN

Oh yeah? Where to? With what money?

PETE

Not today. But soon. We're gonna have a baby, Peggy Lynn. I promise. And I'll find steady work, something I'm good at. Something that pays. I'll buy us a small house. Little backyard. Maybe a dog. Nothing fancy – just ours. I may not be much good at anything... but I'll be a good father. The best I can be. I'll give us a life. The three of us.

PEGGY LYNN

I love you, Pete. I do. You're a good man... with a good heart. But sometimes... I think you're as dumb as they come.

PETE

(Quietly, conceding.)

That's probably true.

PEGGY LYNN

Wanting a baby doesn't mean I can give you one. You understand that don't you?

PETE

I do. But I have hope.

PEGGY LYNN

You've got hope. So, what do you need from me? Because it doesn't matter what I do, we both know how this ends. Same as every time. So, what? Do you want me to quit the salon again? Risk losing my clients? Sit around this house, perfectly still, doing what's expected of me? What is expected of me, Pete? Because nobody seems to agree. Doctor Wheeler says, "Take up smoking; it'll calm your nerves." Doctor Bowman says, "A little vodka in your orange juice might help." Stay in bed. Don't read – too exciting. Don't argue with your husband – you like that one, don't you? And my favorite – don't reach above your head, or the cord might wrap around the baby's neck. God forbid I strangle my own child.

(Nearly in tears.)

Every time you get me pregnant, I have to live through that again. Don't you see? It doesn't matter what I do, my body keeps failing me. But sure – full steam ahead. Pete's got hope

PETE

I'm going out.

PEGGY LYNN

Probably for the best. Get some air. Clear your head.

PETE

For a drink.

(He moves for the door.)

PEGGY LYNN

A drink?

PETE

Over at the Tap-N-Fill.

PEGGY LYNN

And how exactly are you getting there? You just sent your mother off in the truck.

PETE

I'm gonna walk.

PEGGY LYNN

Oh, for God's sake, Pete. You will not.

PETE

I love you, Peggy Lynn.

PEGGY LYNN

This is how you show it? By getting drunk.

PETE

Don't wait up.

(He exits. Peggy Lynn rushes after him.)

PEGGY LYNN

(On the porch.)

Pete! Pete, what is wrong with you? Come back here! Pete!

(She reenters, goes straight to the phone, flips through an address book, dials.)

Bucky, it's Peggy Lynn... I'm alright but listen. I need you to pick Pete up... No, he's not here, he took off... Not for good. He's headed to the Tap-N-Fill... I know, he usually asks you, but he's lost his damn mind and he's walking... Nancy Jo has the truck... No, I don't have time to explain. Just find him... Route 259's your best bet... No. Just take him wherever he wants. Let him get it out of his system, then bring him home. I'll leave the door unlocked. Make sure he sleeps on the couch. I'll set out blankets... Yes, I'm sure. And Bucky. Listen to me. I don't want to hear a word about whatever happens tonight. Do you understand? ... Good.

(She hangs up. A long breath and then a sharp pain hits. She winces, breathes through it until it passes, then slowly exits down the hallway. End of scene.)

SCENE 6

1952. October. Around midnight. Bucky Turner's cabin.

(Near darkness. Moonlight filters through a window. After a moment, the front door opens – two figures in silhouette.)

BUCKY

Sorry. It ain't much, but it's mostly clean. Hang on, I'll get a light.

(He moves through the dark, finds a lamp, clicks it on. The room glows dimly.)

There we go.

(Turning to Sandra, still in the doorway.)

What do you think?

SANDRA

You're right. It isn't much.

BUCKY

(Laughs.)

Well, you don't have to stay. I can take you back to the Tap-N-Fill. Or home. Just say the word.

SANDRA

No, it's fine. I'm happy to hang around a bit. But only for a bit.

BUCKY

Fair enough. I'll grab you a beer. Sit wherever you like.

SANDRA

Thanks.

(She sits. Bucky pulls two beers from a small fridge, opens them, hands one over, and sits.)

BUCKY

I was born right over there. By the fireplace.

SANDRA

You're kidding.

BUCKY

Nope. Just me and my folks. Put in plumbing and electric about ten years ago. Before that, we bathed in the creek, did our business outside.

SANDRA

That's a little too rustic for me.

BUCKY

For most folks, I reckon. Anyway... Mom laid down some blankets right there on the floor, and that's where I came into the world. Dad helped deliver me.

SANDRA

Why on earth would they do that? There had to be a doctor somewhere nearby.

BUCKY

Didn't have the money. And Mom knew what she was doing; delivered three of her siblings when she was young. Dad, though – nervous wreck. Barely got me into her arms before he passed out. Dropped like a sack of flour – cracked his head on the hearth

SANDRA

Jesus.

BUCKY

Mom figured he wasn't dead but didn't have the energy to check. Had her hands full with me.

SANDRA

Your mother sounds like quite a woman.

BUCKY

That she is.

SANDRA

And your dad? Was he alright?

BUCKY

Oh yeah. Lump on his head, cut over his eye. Ugly man to begin with, so no real loss. I got my looks from him.

SANDRA

Did you now? Well, if you're fishing for a compliment, you're wasting your time.

BUCKY

So, you agree I'm an ugly man.

SANDRA

I'll agree you're a man. What is it you do, Bucky Turner? Besides picking up strange women in bars.

BUCKY

A little of everything. Day work. Odd jobs. And sometimes – just for the hell of it – I'm a lumberjack.

SANDRA

A lumberjack? Now that's something.

BUCKY

Not as much as you'd think. I load logs onto trucks. That's about it.

SANDRA

Still dangerous work, isn't it?

BUCKY

Can be. Seen men get hurt. Some bad. A few killed. I've been lucky so far – knock on wood. Otherwise, it's not much to write home about.

SANDRA

Maybe that's how it looks to you. A woman might see it differently.

BUCKY

Not many women in that line of work. And the ones who are? Well... they don't look or act much different than the men. Not the kind folks pay attention to.

SANDRA

That's a narrow view, don't you think? Plenty of kinds of women out there. Might be worth sampling before you decide. Who knows? Your great love could be hiding under all that grime

BUCKY

You ain't from around here, are you?

SANDRA

Born and raised.

(The lamp bulb pops. Darkness.)

BUCKY

Damn it. You alright?

SANDRA

I'm fine. Spilled a little beer, though.

BUCKY

No harm done. This place has seen worse. Hang on. I'll grab another bulb.

SANDRA

Actually, I could use your toilet if you don't mind. Kind of urgent.

BUCKY

Oh. Sure. Sorry. It's just past the kitchen. Give me your hand.

SANDRA

Thanks.

(He guides her through the dark.)

BUCKY

Right there. On your right. Here, let me just get the, uh—

(A light clicks on offstage. A door closes. Bucky returns, rummages through a drawer, finds a bulb, replaces it, and switches the lamp back on. Just as the light comes up, there's loud knocking at the front door.)

PETE

(Harsh whisper.)

Bucky! Bucky, open the damn door!

BUCKY

Jesus Christ.

(He crosses, opens it.)

It's unlocked, you dipshit.

(The two speak in urgent, hushed tones.)

What the / hell's the matter with you?

PETE

(Entering.)

/ What the hell's going on in here?

BUCKY

Nothing's going on. We were talking.

PETE

Bullshit. The lights just went out.

BUCKY

So? What's your point? That's not your wife back there. Not your girl either. And here you come, ready to stake a claim like she's yours. You barely know her.

PETE

You were supposed to honk the horn. That was the signal, wasn't it? Next thing I know, I see headlights flashing, I gotta crawl out the back window, tear a damn hole in my pants. Standing outside with my thumb up my ass while the two of you get it on in here

BUCKY

Sounds like that hole came in handy then.

PETE

Fuck you.

BUCKY

Oh, come on. Honking the horn was the dumbest part of that plan. And I didn't stop you from knocking sooner, did I? You weren't exactly rushing in. Just because you've got cold feet doesn't mean I'm in here taking advantage. What's going on with you, Pete

PETE

You're supposed to be my friend.

BUCKY

I am your friend. But this? This is on you. I did what you asked. Dropped you off, went to the Tap-N-Fill, brought her back here. What, I'm supposed to ignore her? We were just talking. That's it. The bulb blew on the lamp. That's why it went dark.

PETE

(Breathing hard, unraveling.)

This was a stupid idea.

BUCKY

Alright. Okay. It ain't too late to change your mind, you know. Nothing's happened that can't be undone. So, why don't head on out and I'll—

(Sandra enters from the bathroom.)

SANDRA

Pete?

PETE

(Quietly.)

Aw shit.

SANDRA

What... what are you doing here? You two know each other?

BUCKY

Oh, yeah. We know each other. Me and Pete go way back.

SANDRA

And?

BUCKY

And what?

SANDRA

And what's he doing here?

BUCKY

(To Pete.)

She wants to know why you're here.

PETE

Right. Uh... Yeah. This is... awkward. My wife and I had a fight. Pretty bad. She threw me out. And, well... Bucky's my best pal, so this is the only place I could think to go.

SANDRA

Oh yeah? What were you two fighting about?

PETE

I don't... I don't really want to get into it.

SANDRA

I'm not asking about your wife. I heard you and Bucky out here tossing curse words back and forth like a football.

PETE

Oh, uh—

BUCKY

Right. Well, I'm gonna step outside, have a smoke. Maybe check on Lauren while I'm at it. Don't wait up.

(Bucky exits.)

SANDRA

Lauren?

PETE

His mom. Lives in a little shack down by the water.

SANDRA

A shack?

PETE

Yeah. Didn't want to spend her twilight years under her son's roof, so Bucky built her a place out back. She's comfortable.

SANDRA

And his Dad?

PETE

Left a long time ago. Bucky was just a kid.

SANDRA

I see.

PETE

Yeah, so...

SANDRA

What about you?

PETE

What about me?

SANDRA

Just you and your wife? Any kids?

PETE

No. Not yet. We're trying.

SANDRA

And your folks?

PETE

Mom's still around. Dad passed little over ten years now.

SANDRA

Was he a good man?

PETE

Yeah. He was. Serious, too. Wanted a whole passel of kids – boys, if he had his way. But my mom... she could only give him me. Truth is, I wasn't cut out for farm work. Tried it but it near killed me. Up before sunrise, breaking my back till dark. Too tired for anything but eating and

sleeping. Felt like I was missing out on being a kid. So, I started slipping away. Leaving him to it. He never said a word. Just took out a loan, hired some help, got the place running like a machine. Money came in steady... for a while. Then he died. And it all fell apart.

SANDRA

Only thing any of us can do is appreciate what's in front of us. Right now. Otherwise what? Chase after something that's gone? Maybe something that was never there to begin with.

PETE

And you? I bet you've got stories.

SANDRA

I don't dwell on the past. You went to a lot of trouble to get me out here.

PETE

I don't know what you mean.

SANDRA

I think you do. Lucky for you, I don't mind a little adventure now and then.

PETE

No. You got this wrong.

SANDRA

Do I?

PETE

Listen—

SANDRA

What is it you want, Pete? Bored at home? Looking for something on the side? Or planning to leave your wife altogether?

PETE

I love my wife.

SANDRA

And that's why you're here trying to get laid?

PETE

I don't know why you gotta talk like that.

SANDRA

So, is it?

PETE

(Irritated, not hostile.)

You're not exactly innocent either. All high and mighty. Telling me just because a man and a woman have a few drinks doesn't mean they'll end up in bed together. And yet here you are, alone in a cabin with a man you just met.

SANDRA

Yeah, well. Here's the difference between you and me: you can't wipe your ass without checking in with the missus first, and I don't answer to anyone. At anytime. Least of all you.

PETE

You're hard as nails.

SANDRA

I'm soft when I need to be.

PETE

Is that so?

SANDRA

I'm not complicated, Pete. Just because you can't figure me out doesn't make me a puzzle needs putting together.

PETE

I'm not much good with puzzles.

SANDRA

Most men aren't. except maybe Casper / Ferguson.

PETE

/ Aw, hell. Not him / again.

SANDRA

/ I happen to like his / company.

PETE

/ Yeah, yeah. Sweet / old man.

SANDRA

/ He is a sweet old man.

PETE

/ Fine. But why are we talking about him now? You're killing the mood.

SANDRA

The mood? What mood is that, Pete?

(Pete hesitates, uneasy, conflicted. He then closes the distance and kisses her. She meets him with equal intensity. They pull at each other, messy, urgent, unresolved. The moment is charged, not tender. As it builds, Peggy Lynn cries out in the distance. Lights snap to black. End of scene.)

SCENE 7

1952. October. Continuous from the previous scene. The farmhouse.

(Peggy Lynn continues to cry out. Nancy Jo, just back from card club, climbs the porch steps and enters. Peggy Lynn emerges from the hallway, blood on her nightgown. Nancy Jo takes it in, steady.)

NANCY JO

(To herself.)

Oh, boy.

(She moves to Peggy Lynn, practical, composed.)

Peggy Lynn. Listen to me. You're fine. It never gets easy, but you're fine. Alright? Come on. Sit down.

(She guides her into a chair.)

I'll get you some water?

PEGGY LYNN

No.

NANCY JO

No?

PEGGY LYNN

I want a steak. And a glass of wine.

NANCY JO

I'll open some olives. Once you're settled, maybe I'll make you some eggs. How's that?

PEGGY LYNN

Don't do me any favors.

(Nancy Jo heads into the kitchen.)

NANCY JO

(Off.)

I would've been home sooner, but we let Evelyn win a few hands – put her in a fine mood. So, we all had a lovely evening. No fuss. Just good old-fashioned pinochle and gossip.

(She returns with water, hands it to Peggy Lynn, then opens a jar of olives and passes it over.)

Here you go. Eat as many as you like. They'll help.

(She sets down her purse, takes out a cigarette, starts to light it, and then stops. She glances at Peggy Lynn, thinks better of it, but keeps the cigarette in her hand.)

I'm not a kind woman. I know that. And I've been hard on you. Truth is... you're the best thing that's ever happened to Pete. He doesn't deserve you. But that doesn't mean I have to like you. You're bossy. You've got a mouth on you. And there's only room for one she-devil in this house. But really. Why should you care what I think? I'm old. Set in my ways. You can twist yourself up arguing with me. Or you can let me stew in my own bitterness and be kind to yourself instead. That's what matters.

(Peggy Lynn eats olives, drinks. Nancy Jo studies the unlit cigarette in her hand.)

PEGGY LYNN

Go to hell, Nancy Jo.

(She rises and heads down the hallway.)

NANCY JO

(Calling after.)

Leave your nightgown in the bathroom! I'll soak it overnight!

(The nightgown flies out from the hallway, landing on the floor.)

Or just leave it there on the floor, where I most certainly won't miss it.

(She lights the cigarette at last. End of scene.)

SCENE 8

1952. November. Roughly six weeks later. Outside Murdock's Feed Supply.

(Laureen Turner enters, arms full of supplies. She struggles and then drops everything. Sandra Miller, having just locked up and slipped the key through the mail slot, rushes over.)

SANDRA

I knew it. I told you I'd help you to your car. You alright?

LAUREEN

Yes, I'm fine. Just fine. You were right. These bags are heavy. I just didn't want to keep you past hours.

SANDRA

It's no trouble. Here. Let me get that.

(She starts gathering the items, repacking them.)

LAUREEN

I appreciate it but be careful. Don't go straining yourself.

SANDRA

Don't worry. I'm sturdier than I look.

(She continues collecting things.)

LAUREEN

That's very kind of you.

SANDRA

Happy to help.

LAUREEN

I imagine you're eager to get home after a long day.

SANDRA

Actually, I'm hitting the road from here. Got a long drive ahead.

LAUREEN

Oh? Vacation?

SANDRA

No. I'm moving. Just finished my last shift. Packed the car this morning. Soon as you're squared away, I'll be on my way.

LAUREEN

Well, that's exciting. Though now I feel terrible, holding you up like this.

SANDRA

You're not. I've got time.

LAUREEN

Listen. I hope you don't mind me asking— No. Never mind. None of my business.

SANDRA

Go on.

LAUREEN

I shouldn't. I'm just being nosy.

SANDRA

Now I'm curious.

LAUREEN

I've got a sense for these things. And I'm rarely wrong.

SANDRA

Alright...

LAUREEN

How far along are you?

(Sandra stops, looks up at her.)

Five... six weeks, I'd guess.

SANDRA

I'm just gonna finish this up and get you to your car.

LAUREEN

I've upset you.

SANDRA

No. Not at all. Just... an odd question for someone you don't know.

LAUREEN

For most women, it's something to celebrate.

SANDRA

Most women?

LAUREEN

That's right.

SANDRA

And you've spoken to most women?

LAUREEN

Not sure I follow.

(Sandra finishes repacking, hands Laureen a bag, keeps the others.)

SANDRA

When I was a girl, I didn't care for baby dolls. Didn't care much for real babies either. It never felt right to me. I know what's expected. But the idea of bringing a child into this messed up world... it doesn't sit well with me. Since I'm here, though, I'll make the most of it. For myself. I've been planning this trip for a long time, and nothing's going to stop me from moving on. What some might call a blessing; I might call an inconvenience. Come on. Let's get these loaded.

LAUREEN

Alright.

(They start off.)

SANDRA

I'm Sandra, by the way.

LAUREEN

Laureen.

(As they exit, Bucky appears. A cigarette in one hand, a length of rope in the other. He takes a final drag, drops the cigarette, grinds it out. Then he pulls the rope taut between his hands and follows them. End of Act 1.)

ACT 2

SCENE 1

1952. December. Middle of the night. Laureen's shack.

(Sandra lies on a bed, restrained, but with enough slack to move her arms and legs. She appears asleep, though it's more likely she's passed out from exhaustion. The space is dim, lit only by thin moonlight through a window. A long, quiet beat. A faint squeak. Another beat. Another squeak. Sandra stirs. A third squeak, closer. She turns her head. Another squeak. She turns again. Silence. She faces forward, then slowly looks up. A sudden squeak as the rat drops from the rafters, landing on her. She screams, then instinct takes over. She traps it, thrashes, and beats it until it goes still. Silence returns. End of Scene.)

SCENE 2

1952. December. Midday. The salon.

(Peggy Lynn has just finished with Verla Claire.)

PEGGY LYNN

You're all set, Verla Claire.

VERLA CLAIRE

You mind if I see the back?

PEGGY LYNN

Right. Of course.

(She turns the chair, hands her a mirror.)

Here you are.

VERLA CLAIRE

Thank you.

(She studies her hair.)

I'll be honest, Peggy Lynn. This isn't your best work.

PEGGY LYNN

You're right. I'm sorry. Here, let me fix it.

VERLA CLAIRE

No, no. It'll do just fine. I look presentable, and that's a win. Except I'm worried about you. Everything alright?

PEGGY LYNN

Of course. Everything's fine.

VERLA CLAIRE

I don't buy it.

PEGGY LYNN

I'm sure you've got places to be.

VERLA CLAIRE

Three brats at home, and the only time my husband's willing to watch them is when I'm here. After this, I'm buying myself a purse, a pair of pumps, and having a cocktail before I go home to make dinner. So do me a favor... tell me what's wrong. Might make me feel a little better about my own unfortunate life when it comes time for me to get back to it.

PEGGY LYNN

You regret having kids?

VERLA CLAIRE

Of course not. I love my kids. It's other people's I can't stand. I'll tell you a secret if you promise not to repeat it.

PEGGY LYNN

Okay.

VERLA CLAIRE

I love my husband too.

(Peggy Lynn smiles.)

It's not for everyone.

(Peggy Lynn laughs.)

You and Pete still trying to—?

PEGGY LYNN

Verla—

VERLA CLAIRE

Come on. It's no secret. And it's alright to talk about it... with me. I'm no gossip. I know what folks say about me, and none of it's very nice. Doesn't bother me, though. I don't have time for pettiness. So, go on.

PEGGY LYNN

If you were in my position. And you had a chance to have a child – but not of your own choosing, and maybe not in a way that's entirely proper... What would you do?

VERLA CLAIRE

Oh my.

PEGGY LYNN

I've said too much.

VERLA CLAIRE

No, you haven't. But before you say more, answer me this: do you want a baby?

PEGGY LYNN

Very much.

VERLA CLAIRE

And Pete?

PEGGY LYNN

Of course. He wants a baby more than anything.

VERLA CLAIRE

No. What I mean is... Do you want Pete?

PEGGY LYNN

He's all I have.

VERLA CLAIRE

Embroider that on a pillow, you'll make a fortune. Listen to me. If you want a baby, you do whatever you have to do. And Pete... well, he's a man. Useful, until he isn't. And if he becomes a problem – or worse, puts you in danger – you get away from him. As far and as fast as you can. Do you understand me?

PEGGY LYNN

I don't think–

VERLA CLAIRE

Do you understand me?

PEGGY LYNN

Yes.

VERLA CLAIRE

Good. And if you need anything, call me. No details, though. I don't want to be tangled up in anyone else's mess. But from a distance... I'll help where I can

PEGGY LYNN

I haven't earned that kind of support.

VERLA CLAIRE

You're a good woman. Maybe you get caught up in the gossip now and then, but you work miracles in this chair. Today being the exception. So, get your shit together.

(She stands, pulls out cash, hands it over.)

Here. And a little extra.

PEGGY LYNN

(Looking at it.)

I think you made a mistake, Verla. This is way too much.

VERLA CLAIRE

There's more where that came from.

PEGGY LYNN

Thank you.

VERLA CLAIRE

Don't mention it. See you in two weeks.

PEGGY LYNN

Of course. Bye, Verla Claire.

(Verla Claire exits. The phone rings. Peggy Lynn checks the time, then answers.)

Thank you for calling 'How Do You Do'. This is Peggy Lynn; how may I help you...? Oh. Hey, Geraldine... Mm-hm... Yes, I can fit you in late next week... Now? I was just about to close... I see... No, you're right, that is an emergency. How soon can you get here...? Good. The sooner

the better. I can get you in and out before your dinner... My pleasure. I'll see you soon. And Geraldine? Don't you worry, your husband's getting that promotion. And I'll make sure you look gorgeous when it happens.

(End of Scene.)

SCENE 3

1952. December. Midday. Laureen's shack.

(Sandra lies on the bed, still restrained. She's calmer now, still tired, uneasy, quietly afraid. A tray with utensils, an empty plate and glass rests on her lap. Bucky sits nearby at a table, absorbed in a game of solitaire.)

SANDRA

I've finished.

(Bucky doesn't hear her.)

Bucky.

BUCKY

Yeah?

SANDRA

I've finished my lunch.

BUCKY

You have? Good. That ought to make Laureen happy.

(Sandra looks down at the tray. Bucky keeps playing.)

SANDRA

Would you mind?

BUCKY

(Looking up.)

Oh. Yeah. Sure.

(He crosses, takes the tray, pauses.)

You alright?

SANDRA

Why do you ask?

BUCKY

There's... looks like some blood there.

SANDRA

Sorry. Not much I can do about it.

(She indicates the restraints.)

BUCKY

Something wrong with the baby?

SANDRA

No.

BUCKY

Well... that's good.

(He sets the tray down, returns to his seat, resumes his game.)

SANDRA

There's nothing wrong with the baby because there is no baby.

BUCKY

Whatta you mean, no baby? You lose it?

SANDRA

What? Like it slipped out in the night and wandered off into the woods?

BUCKY

That ain't funny.

SANDRA

There's not much around here that is.

BUCKY

You better be pulling my leg.

SANDRA

That blood you saw? I got my period this morning.

BUCKY

Aw, come on. No man wants to hear about that.

SANDRA

You know what that means, don't you?

BUCKY

Yeah, I know what it is; I just don't want to hear it.

SANDRA

It means I'm not pregnant. It means I never was.

BUCKY

No. No. You're lying.

SANDRA

Bucky—

BUCKY

I know what you're gonna ask and it ain't happening.

SANDRA

You have to let me go.

BUCKY

I can't.

SANDRA

There's no baby. There's no reason for any of this.

BUCKY

You think I'm stupid.

SANDRA

I'm hoping you'll be sensible.

BUCKY

I think we're past that. There ain't nothing I can do for you. You want to talk; you wait for Laureen. She'll have plenty to say. Me? I'm done.

(He settles back into his game.)

SANDRA

Sometimes... it's not the woman who's to blame.

(Bucky stops but doesn't look at her.)

Bucky. Look at me.

(He does, reluctantly.)

Maybe Pete... how do I put this? Say you're fixing yourself a nice big bowl of pudding. You've been looking forward to it. Maybe you even plan to share it. But the recipe calls for three cups of milk... and all you've got is one. You know what that means, don't you? No pudding. Not for anyone.

BUCKY

There's a whole lot I don't know. And a whole lot more I don't care to know. But I know this: there's a bond between men that ain't like anything else. And I ain't talking about being queer, so don't go there. Pete's more than my best friend. He's a brother to me. I'd do anything for him. So, if he needs three cups of milk and he ain't got it, I'll make sure he gets what he needs.

(End of Scene.)

SCENE 4

1953. June. Late afternoon. The farmhouse.

(The stage sits empty, eerily quiet. Suddenly, a crash from the kitchen.)

NANCY JO

(Off.)

Oh, for the love of—!

(Peggy Lynn hurries in from the hallway, visibly pregnant, crosses to the kitchen archway.)

PEGGY LYNN

You okay in there?

NANCY JO

(Off.)

I'm fine.

PEGGY LYNN

What happened?

NANCY JO

(Off.)

Knocked over my good ceramic bowl. It's everywhere, so watch your step.

(Pete appears outside, climbs the porch, enters. He looks rough, dirty, cut up, wrist in a cast.)

PEGGY LYNN

Jesus, Pete. You look awful.

(She notices the cuts, then the cast.)

Are you hurt? What happened to your arm?

PETE

It's my wrist. Broke it.

PEGGY LYNN

How the hell did you manage that?

PETE

Accident at work. Lost my footing, fell off the truck.

(Nancy Jo appears in the kitchen archway.)

NANCY JO

Did I hear that right? You broke your wrist?

PETE

I did.

NANCY JO

Unbelievable. You alright otherwise?

PETE

I'm alive.

NANCY JO

I can see that. I suppose this means you'll be out of work for a spell.

PETE

I'll find something. Something that doesn't need two hands.

NANCY JO

Doesn't leave you many options.

PETE

You gonna start in on that now?

NANCY JO

No. You're right. I'm glad you're alright. Sit down, put your feet up. You've earned a beer. I'll get it.

(She heads into the kitchen. Pete sits.)

PETE

Bucky's in the hospital.

PEGGY LYNN

What? What happened with him?

PETE

When I fell, I knocked a log loose. He was underneath when it rolled.

PEGGY LYNN

Good Lord. That's awful. You think he'll be alright?

PETE

No idea.

(Nancy Jo returns with a beer, hands it to Pete.)

NANCY JO

Here.

PETE

Thanks.

NANCY JO

You know. This might be a blessing in disguise.

PEGGY LYNN

Oh really? How's that??

NANCY JO

For one, it might keep you from running off to see your brother.

PEGGY LYNN

Nancy Jo, I–

NANCY JO

You're about ready to pop, and you think it's wise to drive five hundred miles to San Antonio alone? It's ridiculous. And I've got plenty to do around here; I can't be tending to this one every second of the day.

PETE

I don't need tending. Christ, I can manage just fine.

NANCY JO

(To Peggy Lynn.)

And what happens if you go into labor? Or something goes wrong with that baby? After everything you've been through, you go and do something this foolish. I don't understand it.

PEGGY LYNN

Nobody asked for your opinion. Doesn't stop you, though, does it? And it doesn't matter anyway; you've got no idea what you're talking about.

NANCY JO

Is that so? Then enlighten me. Hard to be helpful when no one shares anything with me. Can't give proper advice without the full picture.

PEGGY LYNN

Helpful? You've been anything but.

NANCY JO

You've got a roof over your head, don't you?

PEGGY LYNN

And what good is that doing us? Sitting on land going to waste – equipment rotting away in the barn – while we scrape by on top of a gold mine.

NANCY JO

Except you don't have a say in that.

PEGGY LYNN

Neither does Pete.

NANCY JO

That's right.

PEGGY LYNN

Then maybe keep that in mind the next time you feel like telling us how to take care of this baby.

NANCY JO

If you even have that baby.

PETE

(He rises.)

That's enough!

NANCY JO

(To Peggy Lynn.)

You give me a grandchild, and maybe we'll talk about selling the farm.

PETE

I said, that's enough! I'm not gonna have you talking to my wife like that. And I'm not using our baby as some bargaining chip. Do whatever the hell you want with the farm. I don't give a goddam.

(The phone rings.)

Fucking phone!

(Nancy Jo answers the phone.)

(Note: Lauren's dialogue – in gray – is not heard by the audience.)

NANCY JO

Hello?

LAUREEN

Hey Nancy Jo. It's Lauren.

NANCY JO

I'm sorry, who?

LAUREEN

Laureen Turner. Bucky's mom.

NANCY JO

Oh, Laureen. My goodness, it's been a long time. How are you?

LAUREEN

I'm doing just fine.

NANCY JO

Good. Good. And how's Bucky? I just heard.

LAUREEN

He's hurt pretty bad. Doctor says he'll be alright, though.

NANCY JO

Oh. Well, that's a bit of good news, I suppose.

LAUREEN

Yeah, listen. I need to speak to Pete. Is he there?

NANCY JO

Of course. Yes, he's right here.

(She extends the receiver.)

It's Laureen Turner.

PETE

(Taking it. To Nancy Jo.)

Yeah, I figured that out.

(Into phone.)

Hey, Mrs. Turner—

LAUREEN

What the hell did you do to my son?

PETE

Alright, okay, now just calm down. It was an accident.

LAUREEN

You nearly killed him, you dumb shit.

PETE

I know, and I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I must've got distracted—

LAUREEN

Oh, you got distracted. Well maybe I ought to get distracted. Maybe I ought to forget about this whole damn thing...

PETE

Mrs. Turner, listen—

LAUREEN

Because I don't have time to deal with your little problem over here. Not when my son can't get off the couch – ribs cracked, head stapled shut.

PETE

Fuck.

LAUREEN

But guess what? Today just happens to be your lucky day.

PETE

I'm not feeling very lucky right now.

LAUREEN

She's in labor.

PETE

Are you screwing with me?

LAUREEN

You'll know when I'm screwing with you. So, listen. I suggest you tell Peggy Lynn to get herself ready...

PETE

I'll let her know.

(He looks to Peggy Lynn.)

LAUREEN

Because between delivering this baby and tending to Bucky, I won't have time to call you back. So, you'd better get moving.

PETE

Understood.

LAUREEN

Oh, and Pete?

PETE

Yeah?

LAUREEN

I'm fresh out of patience. So, you keep your head on straight. Or I'll knock it clean off.

PETE

Yes, ma'am.

(Pete hangs up the phone.)

NANCY JO

(To Pete.)

Everything alright?

PETE

(To Nancy Jo.)

Why don't you head out back, check on the hens. It's about that time.

NANCY JO

I want to know what's going on, Pete.

PETE

Miss Tillie hasn't had much of an appetite. Might be coming down with something.

NANCY JO

I'm not talking about the damn chickens.

PETE

Peggy Lynn, you want to go for a ride?

NANCY JO

A ride?

PEGGY LYNN

Well... I suppose I could be persuaded. Let me grab a sweater—

(She starts toward the hallway.)

PETE

No need. There's one in the truck. Everything we need is in the truck. Go on. I'll meet you outside.

(Peggy Lynn exits out the front door and off.)

NANCY JO

What the hell are you two up to?

PETE

It's a beautiful afternoon. I'd like to spend it alone with my wife.

NANCY JO

I see.

PETE

So, listen. I don't want Tillie ending up in a stew. Make sure you check on her. We can't afford to lose any hens.

NANCY JO

I take very good care of those hens, don't you worry. And before you go...

PETE

What is it?

NANCY JO

You been out to the barn lately?

PETE

No. Why?

NANCY JO

I was out there this morning. Looked like someone's been tampering with the lock.

PETE

Probably just kids trying to get in. I'll take a look later, make sure nothing's missing.

NANCY JO

I can check it.

PETE

No. Too much shit out there. You'll hurt yourself. Just leave the key on the kitchen table. I'll handle it.

NANCY JO

Alright. Enjoy your afternoon.

PETE

Will do.

(Pete exits out the front door and off. Nancy Jo stands for a moment, thinking. She then crosses to the telephone, picks up the receiver, dials.)

NANCY JO

Hi, Millie. It's Nancy Jo... I'm well, thank you. Listen. I was wondering if I might borrow your old pickup for a few hours. Got some errands to run... Oh, that's wonderful. And you're sure you don't mind...? That's very kind... No, no. I'll walk over. No need to bring it by... What's that...? Your youngest won a blue ribbon for his potbellied pig? Well, isn't that something. Good for him, that's exciting... Yes, he's a good boy. I especially enjoy the sweet little hand gestures he makes at me when he rides by on his bike... You know what, never mind. He's a very good boy.

(She rolls her eyes, sticks out her tongue.)

Alright then. I'll see you shortly. Thanks again

(She hangs up, grabs her purse, pulls out a cigarette, lights it as she heads for the door, and exits down the porch steps. End of scene.)

SCENE 5

1953. June. Late afternoon. Bucky's cabin.

(Bucky lies on the couch, barely visible in the dim light, wrapped in blankets, bandaged and broken. A quiet beat. The front door swings open. Laureen enters in a hurry, wiping her hands on a rag as she heads straight for the phone.)

BUCKY

Laureen—

LAUREEN

Stop calling me Laureen. I'm your damn mother. And what the hell are you doing out here?

BUCKY

I can't move. I hurt all over.

LAUREEN

You'd hurt a lot less if you'd stayed in bed.

BUCKY

It's stuffy in there.

LAUREEN

Did you open the window?

BUCKY

Didn't have the strength.

LAUREEN

And yet you made it all the way out here.

BUCKY

Just barely. It's cooler out here.

LAUREEN

You take the Percodan?

BUCKY

I did.

LAUREEN

Take another. Where are they?

BUCKY

I got no damn idea.

LAUREEN

Watch your mouth.

(She searches quickly, finds the pills, grabs a glass, fills it with water, and returns.)

Here.

(Bucky moans.)

Sit up.

BUCKY

I can't move.

LAUREEN

Oh, for—

(She shakes out one pill... and then a second pill.)

Take two. You'll be fine. You're a sturdy fella.

(She lifts his head.)

Open.

(He does. She drops the pills in.)

Good. Now drink.

(She tips the glass; he swallows.)

There you go.

(She sets the glass and bottle aside.)

Now... I've got a baby to deliver.

BUCKY

What?

LAUREEN

That's right. She's in labor.

BUCKY

Holy shit. It's / happening.

(Laureen goes to the phone and dials.)

LAUREEN

/ I told you to watch your mouth.

(NOTE: This is the same phone call from Act 2, Scene 2, now seen from Laureen's perspective. Nancy Jo's dialogue – in gray – is not heard by the audience.)

NANCY JO

Hello?

LAUREEN

Hey Nancy Jo. It's Laureen.

NANCY JO

I'm sorry, who?

LAUREEN

Laureen Turner. Bucky's mom.

NANCY JO

Oh, Laureen. My goodness, it's been a long time. How are you?

LAUREEN

I'm doing just fine.

NANCY JO

Good. Good. And how's Bucky? I just heard.

LAUREEN

He's hurt pretty bad. Doctor says he'll be alright, though.

NANCY JO

Oh. Well, that's a bit of good news, I suppose.

LAUREEN

Yeah, listen. I need to speak to Pete. Is he there?

NANCY JO

Of course. Yes, he's right here.

(She extends the receiver.)

It's Laureen Turner.

PETE

(Taking it. To Nancy Jo.)

Yeah, I figured that out.

(Into phone.)

Hey, Mrs. Turner—

LAUREEN

What the hell did you do to my son?

PETE

Alright, okay, now just calm down. It was an accident.

LAUREEN

You nearly killed him, you dumb shit.

PETE

I know, and I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I must've got distracted—

LAUREEN

Oh, you got distracted. Well maybe I ought to get distracted. Maybe I ought to forget about this whole damn thing...

PETE

Mrs. Turner, listen—

LAUREEN

Because I don't have time to deal with your little problem over here. Not when my son can't get off the couch – ribs cracked, head stapled shut.

PETE

Fuck.

LAUREEN

But guess what? Today just happens to be your lucky day.

PETE

I'm not feeling very lucky right now.

LAUREEN

She's in labor.

PETE

Are you screwing with me?

LAUREEN

You'll know when I'm screwing with you. So, listen. I suggest you tell Peggy Lynn to get herself ready...

PETE

I'll let her know.

(He looks to Peggy Lynn.)

LAUREEN

Because between delivering this baby and tending to Bucky, I won't have time to call you back. So, you'd better get moving.

PETE

Understood.

LAUREEN

Oh, and Pete?

PETE

Yeah?

LAUREEN

I'm fresh out of patience. So, you keep your head on straight. Or I'll knock it clean off.

PETE

Yes, ma'am.

(Laureen hangs up the phone.)

BUCKY

Why you gotta give him such a hard time? It was just an accident.

LAUREEN

I used to wonder which one of you was dumber. Well, the verdict's in. And it's you.

(Laureen exits. End of Scene.)

SCENE 6

1953. June. Early evening. Outside, somewhere on Bucky's property.

(Pete enters, Peggy Lynn following, struggling to keep up.)

PEGGY LYNN

Hold on, Pete. Can you just... slow down a second. Please.

PETE

What's wrong?

PEGGY LYNN

I can't breathe. I need to take this thing off. I feel like I'm suffocating.

PETE

Here, let me—

(He moves toward her.)

PEGGY LYNN

No. I've got it.

(She pulls the padding from beneath her dress, gasping, trying to steady herself.)

PETE

You alright?

(He steps closer.)

PEGGY LYNN

Keep your distance.

(Pete backs off.)

PETE

Alright. Take your time. No rush.

PEGGY LYNN

I want to go home.

PETE

We just got here.

PEGGY LYNN

No. I want to see my brother. I need to be with my family.

PETE

Oh, for Christ's sake, Peggy Lynn. We're about to be a family. I did this for us. I did this for you.

PEGGY LYNN

You did what for me? Go on. Say it.

PETE

I'm telling you... I can feel it. The second we hold that baby, nothing else is gonna matter. It'll take all this pain away. It'll make us whole.

(Peggy Lynn slaps him hard. He stumbles.)

Jesus Christ! What was that for?

PEGGY LYNN

You are a pathetic, conniving, ignorant, miserable excuse for a man...

PETE

Aw, geez, Peggy Lynn.

PEGGY LYNN

I don't think I will ever forgive you for what you've done. Maybe someday I'll make peace with it. Maybe. But right now... Right now I am so full of rage I feel like I might split open and spill out onto the ground. One thing I do know – one thing that will never change – That baby will never be mine. Hell hath no fury, Pete. And by my count... you've got two women scorned.

(End of Scene.)

SCENE 7

1953. June. Early evening. Bucky's cabin.

(Bucky lies asleep on the couch. The room is dim and eerily quiet. A sudden knock at the door. Bucky stirs, groans. Another knock. The knob turns and the door opens. Nancy Jo stands there, purse in hand.)

NANCY JO

Hello? Anyone home? Bucky?

(She steps inside.)

Pete? Peggy Lynn?

BUCKY

They're out back.

NANCY JO

(Startled.)

Oh! Good Lord, Bucky. You scared me half to death.

BUCKY

Sorry, Mrs. Anderson.

NANCY JO

No, it's fine.

(She moves closer, taking him in.)

How're you holding up?

(He groans.)

You don't look so good.

BUCKY

Don't feel so good neither.

NANCY JO

I'm not surprised. I'm sorry about what happened.

BUCKY

You and me both.

NANCY JO

Pete feels awful about it.

BUCKY

What for? He didn't do nothing wrong. I don't blame him none. He knows that, right.

NANCY JO

Of course he knows. Still... he's torn up with guilt. And if you ask me, he ought to be. Anything I can get you? Another blanket? Pillow? I could fix you something to eat.

(She starts toward the kitchen.)

BUCKY

No, I'm alright. I appreciate it, though.

NANCY JO

It's no trouble.

(She glances at the prescription bottle.)

BUCKY

Really... I'm good.

NANCY JO

Alright then. But I bet you're thirsty. How about a beer.

BUCKY

Well... probably shouldn't. But I wouldn't turn one down.

NANCY JO

Thought as much.

(She grabs a beer from the fridge, opens it, brings it over.)

Here you go.

(Bucky takes it, struggling to sit up.)

You gonna manage that?

BUCKY

I'll give it a try.

(He grunts, lifting it.)

NANCY JO

Hold on. I might have something that'll help.

BUCKY

Oh yeah?

NANCY JO

(Digging through her purse.)

Just a second... I know it's in here...

(She finds it.)

There we go.

(She produces a drinking straw.)

BUCKY

A straw? Ain't no way I'm drinking beer through a straw. That's downright unmanly.

NANCY JO

Nonsense.

(She unwraps it, drops it into the bottle. Bucky eyes it with suspicion.)

Go on. It's not like your dick's gonna drop off.

BUCKY

I don't know why women gotta talk like that.

NANCY JO

Women have been talking like that a long time, Bucky.

(Bucky continues staring at the straw.)

BUCKY

I'm sorry. I just... I just can't do it.

NANCY JO

You'd better drink that beer, or I'm gonna attach a nipple to it and feed it to you myself.

BUCKY

Alright, alright. Just... Jesus, just stop. Please.

(He awkwardly drinks through the straw.)

NANCY JO

You and Pete have always been good boys.

BUCKY

You think so?

NANCY JO

I do. Better than most. You got into your share of trouble, sure, but never anything worth losing sleep over. Except lately... Feels like something's shifted. Like things might've gone a little too far?

BUCKY

You asking?

NANCY JO

In the nicest way possible. What's going on out back, Bucky?

BUCKY

I'd rather not say.

NANCY JO

Fair enough. Then I'll just go take a look for myself.

(She rises.)

BUCKY

Hang on a second.

NANCY JO

What is it?

BUCKY

I think... maybe you ought to stay here.

NANCY JO

Oh yeah?

BUCKY

And we can talk.

(Nancy Jo sits.)

NANCY JO

Alright. I'm listening.

BUCKY

Right. Well... For starters... Peggy Lynn ain't pregnant.

NANCY JO

Mm hm. Tell me something I don't know.

BUCKY

Okay. So... there's a young woman out back. Holed up, so to speak. In the shack—

NANCY JO

Your mother's shack?

BUCKY

That's right.

NANCY JO

Go on.

BUCKY

And... well... she's about ready to pop.

NANCY JO

Pop how? She's in labor?

BUCKY

Mm hm.

NANCY JO

I see. Pete's baby?

BUCKY

That was the plan, yeah.

NANCY JO

And Peggy Lynn? She in on this? Or is she just along for the ride?

BUCKY

Hard to say.

NANCY JO

This girl have a name?

BUCKY

Sandra.

NANCY JO

Sandra what?

BUCKY

Miller.

NANCY JO

Sandra Miller.

BUCKY

Says she's from around here, but I ain't so sure.

NANCY JO

Well... You might be interested to know... that's Frank and Dorothy Bennett's daughter.

BUCKY

What? No. No, that ain't right.

NANCY JO

I can see how you might be a little confused.

BUCKY

I ain't confused. That baby's name was Ruby. Everybody knows that story. Ruby Bennett. Shot dead on the front steps... along with her parents

NANCY JO

That's how the story's been told.

BUCKY

Those cops fired over fifty rounds. There's no way that baby lived.

NANCY JO

Well... maybe I heard different.

BUCKY

Oh, come on. You're just pulling my leg.

(Nancy Jo shrugs.)

Doesn't matter anyway. Ain't got nothing to do with all this.

NANCY JO

I knew Dorothy Bennett. She was a very nice woman – quiet, reserved, devoted, and well-liked by just about everyone. Frank, on the other hand... well, he was troubled, to put it mildly. In and out of jail before he ever met her. First time for stealing two hundred dollars from the Haworth post office – got six months for that. Then a payroll robbery over in Choctaw County – got out early on parole. That’s when he met Dorothy, at a church social. Claimed he’d turned his life around, and she believed him. Maybe he even believed it himself, for a time. They married. And then came Ruby.

BUCKY

I ain’t feeling so great, Mrs. Anderson. Might be best you head on home. Everything’s gonna be just fine.

NANCY JO

You see, the trouble with Frank Bennett was... he was a selfish bastard. Never satisfied. Angry at the world for not giving him what he thought he was owed. And when a man decides he’s owed something, he’ll do just about anything to take it. Problem was, Frank didn’t have the brains to match his ambition. Can you imagine? Barely a man and trying to hold up the First National Bank & Trust in Oklahoma City... with a pistol.

(Bucky groans.)

Well, you know how that ends. Fool runs from the police – leads them straight back home to Spencerville. And poor Dorothy – hearing the commotion – steps out onto the porch at the worst possible moment. Ruby in her arms. And then the bullets start flying. But I doubt you understand what a woman’s capable of when her child’s in danger.

BUCKY

Mrs. Anderson–

NANCY JO

Now, you can say that baby died. But I know different. Dorothy had a sister who lived nearby, and she took little Ruby; hid her away for a very long time. And those of us who knew kept it to ourselves. That child had been through enough.

BUCKY

Christ.

NANCY JO

Bucky.

BUCKY

Yes, ma’am?

NANCY JO

I asked you if that baby out there belonged to Pete.

BUCKY

Yes, ma'am, you did.

NANCY JO

And you said, "that was the plan."

BUCKY

I did.

NANCY JO

What did that mean?

BUCKY

I think maybe I misspoke.

NANCY JO

I don't think you did. Bucky... did you have your way with Sandra?

(Bucky is silent.)

I need you to answer me. Truthfully.

BUCKY

Pete's my best pal.

NANCY JO

I know he is.

BUCKY

There ain't nothing I wouldn't do for him.

NANCY JO

And that includes helping him have a child if he couldn't on his own.

BUCKY

Yes, ma'am.

NANCY JO

You are a good boy, Bucky.

BUCKY

I like to think so.

NANCY JO

Well... I think it's time I was going.

BUCKY

Okay.

NANCY JO

You comfortable?

BUCKY

I'm alright, I guess.

NANCY JO

Here. Let me take that. You've had enough.

(She takes the beer, sets it aside. Gently adjusts him tenderly. Pulls a blanket up, eases him back.)

I'll grab you another pillow before I go.

BUCKY

Thank you, Mrs. Anderson.

(She retrieves a pillow and returns, standing over him for a moment. Then, without hesitation, she presses the pillow over his face and holds it there. He struggles weakly, then goes still. She keeps the pressure on a moment longer before releasing. She exits, leaving the door open. After some time passes, she returns with a length of rope, moves behind the couch, and pushes Bucky's body off so it drops onto a rug with a dull thud. End of Scene.)

SCENE 8

1953. June. Evening. Total darkness.

(The following dialogue may be done live, or pre-recorded. Either way, the voices should feel hollow, echoing, distant. Time is compressed. Sandra can be heard throughout – breathing, moaning, crying, possibly wailing. The action is not visible to the audience.)

LAUREEN

Now listen to me, Sandra. You're gonna be alright. I just need you to breathe, but don't push. Not yet. Okay? I'm gonna reach in and break your water to move things along. Do you understand? It's gonna be uncomfortable, but I won't hurt you. Alright now... you'll feel some pressure... there we go. That's it. You're doing just fine. Don't push. Don't push yet. You gotta hold it. That's it. Good girl. Keep breathing. Keep breathing. Keep breathing. Okay. Good. Now go on... push.

(We hear Sandra strain, grunt, and breathe for an extended period.)

That's it. You're doing great. Keep going. Don't stop now. Keep pushing. Keep pushing.

(Sandra screams.)

That's it. Good. Good! There she is!

(We hear an infant cry.)

And look at her. My God, she's beautiful.

(End of Scene.)

SCENE 9

1953. June. Not long after the previous scene. Somewhere along Route 259.

(Sandra stumbles onstage, disheveled, shaken, freshly postpartum. She's disoriented, unsure which way to go. Headlights flare. A truck pulls up. Engine cuts. A door opens, then shuts.)

NANCY JO

(Off.)

Sandra!

SANDRA

Leave me alone!

(Nancy Jo appears.)

NANCY JO

Sandra—

SANDRA

Don't come any closer!

NANCY JO

It's Nancy Jo.

SANDRA

I don't know any Nancy Jo.

NANCY JO

No. I'm sure you don't. But I knew your mother. Though I imagine you don't remember much of that?

(She takes a cautious step closer.)

SANDRA

Back off!

NANCY JO

Alright. I won't come any closer. Are you alright?

SANDRA

No, I'm not alright. Do I look alright to you? I need to get out of here.

NANCY JO

I understand. Now listen. I can get you somewhere safe. My truck's right over there. I can take you wherever you need to go.

SANDRA

And why would I trust you?

NANCY JO

I know what's happened, though I had nothing to do with it.

SANDRA

What do you mean, you know?

NANCY JO

I know about the baby.

SANDRA

Who are you?

NANCY JO

Pete's mother.

SANDRA

Oh, good Lord. Just my luck.

NANCY JO

Sandra—

SANDRA

No. You listen to me. You can go fuck yourself, Nancy Jo. And while you're at it, the rest of them can join you.

(Sandra turns, starts off.)

NANCY JO

(Calling after.)

Before you go... You need to look in the back of that truck!

(Sandra stops. Turns.)

SANDRA

Do I look like an idiot to you?

NANCY JO

You do not.

(She pulls out a key.)

Here. Take it.

SANDRA

I don't need a key to look in the back of a pickup.

NANCY JO

I want you to know you can trust me. Take it. Call it collateral. I'll stay right here. Give you your space. And if you decide to take off in that truck, I'll understand. Though it doesn't technically belong to me. But first... you need to look.

SANDRA

This better be worth it.

(She snatches the key.)

NANCY JO

That depends on you.

(Sandra moves off, never taking her eyes off Nancy Jo. A long, tense beat. Then she reappears.)

SANDRA

Is that—?

NANCY JO

It is.

SANDRA

And you—?

NANCY JO

I did.

SANDRA

You're just as crazy as the rest of them.

NANCY JO

All I care about right now is that baby.

SANDRA

I see. And what about me? What about what I've been through?

NANCY JO

Like I said, I can help you. If you let me. You've got a car, I assume.

SANDRA

I do. But I've got no idea what they've done with it.

NANCY JO

I think I know where it is. So, are you coming with me, or not?

SANDRA

As long as I don't end up dead in the back of that truck.

(End of scene.)

SCENE 10

1953. June. Several days after the previous scene. Bucky's cabin.

(Laureen sits quietly on the couch. A long stillness. At last, she rises, crosses to the phone, picks up the receiver, and dials.)

LAUREEN

Hi, Nancy Jo. It's Laureen... Listen, I'm sorry to bother you again. I was hoping Pete might be around...? No...? I see. Have you had a chance to talk to him...? Right... No, I suppose everything's fine. It's just I still haven't seen or heard from Bucky, so I thought maybe Pete might know where he is... Mm hm... Okay. Well, he's been working a lot lately, hasn't he? That's good to hear... So, you haven't heard anything then... Understood... Yes, I filed a police report – no word yet... Well, I imagine you've been busy with the new grandbaby. How's she doing...? That's wonderful. I'm sure she's precious... Oh, alright. I won't keep you... You'll call me if you hear anything...? Thank you... Alright then. Bye.

(She replaces the receiver. End of scene.)

SCENE 11

1953. August. Morning. The farmhouse.

(Continuous from Act 1, Scene 1. Nancy Jo has just exited down the hall with baby Pearl. Pete smokes her still-lit cigarette. Nancy Jo reappears from the hall, crosses to the front door, and steps onto the porch.)

NANCY JO

Weren't you just giving me grief about smoking?

PETE

You left it burning.

NANCY JO

Mm hm.

PETE

You get the baby settled?

NANCY JO

I did. Went straight down without a peep. Fast asleep.

(A car pulls up. They both look off.)

Looks like we've got company.

PETE

Well, I'll be. That's Peggy Lynn.

NANCY JO

Oh yeah?

PETE

That's her brother's car.

(A car door opens and shuts.)

NANCY JO

Well, hey, Peggy Lynn! I was wondering when you'd be getting back!

(Peggy Lynn appears.)

PEGGY LYNN

You can cut the shit, Nancy Jo. Where are my bags?

NANCY JO

Oh. Alright. They're packed – in the closet in my bedroom. Help yourself.

PETE

What the hell's going on?

(Peggy Lynn pushes past him into the house. He follows.)

Peggy Lynn–

(She exits down the hallway. Pete stops, then turns back out to the porch.)

What the fuck is going on?

NANCY JO

Language, Pete. I've got no idea.

PETE

Bullshit.

NANCY JO

I prefer not to take sides.

PETE

Take sides? Looks like you're in on it.

(He pivots, storms down the steps.)

Jack! Jack! Over here! Hey! Why don't you come inside? We got beer! Maybe we can talk this through!

(He bristles.)

Son of a bitch.

NANCY JO

Oh my. That's the second time this morning someone waved a middle finger in my direction. Though I don't believe that one was meant for me.

PETE

Fuck this!

NANCY JO

Pete—

PETE

Peggy Lynn!

(He storms back inside. Peggy Lynn reappears from the hallway with her bags. Pete reins himself in.)

Peggy Lynn, please—

PEGGY LYNN

Get out of my way, Pete.

(They face off.)

You do understand that if I'm not in that car in ten seconds, my brother is coming in here. And he will beat the tar out of you.

(Pete steps aside. Peggy Lynn passes him, exits onto the porch, and down the steps. Pete follows.)

PETE

Peggy Lynn—

(She turns.)

PEGGY LYNN

You said you wanted purpose. Isn't that what you told me?

PETE

That's right.

PEGGY LYNN

Well, now you have it. All six pounds, nine ounces of it.

(She turns and goes.)

NANCY JO

Bye, Peggy Lynn.

PEGGY LYNN

Drop dead, Nancy Jo.

(Peggy Lynn exits. A car door slams. The car drives off.)

NANCY JO

I have been nothing but nice to her.

(Pete stares at Nancy Jo, silent, unraveling.)

You're at a loss for words, aren't you? I can see the gears turning. Trying to figure out who to blame. Come inside.

(She goes in. Pete follows.)

Sit.

(Pete sits. Nancy Jo exits to the kitchen, returns with a waste basket. She begins pulling cigarette packs from her purse – and from around the room – dropping them in.)

Money's tight. No two ways about it. So, I'm selling the equipment out in the barn. And I don't feel the need to involve you in that decision. You understand? Anyway... that money's already gone. Took an advance from my savings and used it to help a young lady in need.

PETE

Peggy L--?

NANCY JO

No. Not Peggy Lynn. Jesus, Pete. Do I really need to spell it out for you? So, now it's just you and me. And that sweet little baby girl. And everything's going to be just fine.

(The phone rings.)

I think you ought to get that.

(Pete doesn't move. The phone keeps ringing.)

Pete.

PETE

Yes ma'am?

NANCY JO

Answer the phone.

PETE

Alright.

(Pete crosses, picks up the receiver.)

Hello...? Oh. Hi, Emma... Yeah... yeah, she told me. Said they found a body floating in Hugo Lake...?

(End of play.)