

A STORM OF DESIGN

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FADE IN:

EXT. SMALL POOR FARM - DAY.

A small unpainted house with kitchen built on the side, smoke from chimney, old barn, pig pen, cow inside split rail fence - day.

EZRA and CALEB are in front of farmhouse, splitting wood. Caleb is a teen.

INTERCUT. BUCKBOARD WAGON APPROACHING - SAME TIME.

Two horses pulling wagon. Its lightly snowing.

CHARLES is wearing a black winter coat and a brown broad-rimmed hat. Portly frame. Charles holds the reins. His singing is muffled by the distance.

INTERCUT. SMALL POOR FARM - SAME TIME.

CALEB

Pa, someone's com'in.

Ezra looks out at the wagon, walks over to the covered porch and takes his shotgun, leaning against the wall.

EZRA

Boy, get the ax ready.

The wagon is close enough for Charles to be seen waving.

Ezra stands stoically, holding the rifle and the hip, pointing it toward the wagon as the wagon nears.

Charles, pulls the reins back to stop the wagon in front of the house, smiling.

CHARLES

Hello. The name is CHARLES.

EZRA

What do ya want?

Ezra pulls the hammer back. It clicks loudly.

CHARLES

Well, I meant to just pass by but I saw the smoke from the chimney. There's a large storm brewing and I need shelter for the night.

EZRA

We ain't got no room.

Charles points to the old barn.

CHARLES

That'll be fine for me and the horses. I don't want to be a bother. I can help with that wood to earn my keep.

EZRA

All right. You can sleep in the barn. You can take over on the ax after you tend to your horses.

CHARLES

Much obliged, friend.

MISS SARAH and little daughter MARY come out of the house in old patched dresses and stand on the porch. Miss Sarah has a green bruise on her cheek. MARY has welts on her arms and a cut on her lip.

Charles tips his hat to Miss Sarah.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Ma'am, my name is Charles.

MISS SARAH

I'm Sarah.

CHARLES

Please to make your acquaintance, Miss Sarah.

MISS SARAH

Ezra, I'd like to invite this gentleman in for supper this eve'nin if it's all right with you. We ain't had company for so long.

EZRA

We ain't got enough for nobody else.

CHARLES

I have food to share. A wonderful beef roast. It's frozen but it will make a nice supper in the hands of a good cook. It will help to earn my stay.

Pa lowers the barrel of his rifle toward the ground and slowly brings the hammer forward with his thumb.

EZRA
That's acceptable.

Charles slowly steps down off the wagon singing and walks stiffly and slightly hunched to the back of the wagon.

CHARLES
When I had a younger man's body I
moved much quicker.

Charles lifts the corner of the snow covered wool blankets and moves things around.

Ezra keeps a close suspicious eye on him.

Charles steps around the front of the horses with a burlap bag and walks up to the porch.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
I have to lighten my load to pull
the wagon through the snow in the
morning so I hope you can use some
of these items.

Charles looks into the bag.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
In here is the meat, a bag of
flour, a little coffee, yeast,
lard, sugar and salt. Oh, and a bag
of beans, some molasses and a
little honey.

MISS SARAH
I do believe I can make a meal out
of that. Thank you.

CHARLES
(to Caleb)
Son, why don't you take these in
for your Ma? I'll get my horses in
the barn then start on that pile of
firewood.

CALEB
My name is Caleb, sir.

CHARLES
You look like a capable young man.

Caleb looks at his Pa.

Ezra nods.

Caleb picks up the burlap bag and carries it inside.

INT. SMALL POOR FARM - EVENING.

Ezra, Caleb, and Charles sit near the bright fireplace.

Miss Sarah and Mary are getting the dinner ready as they walk back and forth from the kitchen to the table. (Miss Sarah is quietly singing.)

CALEB

I ain't never heard ma sing.

MISS SARAH

Ezra, Charles, and Caleb, dinner is ready if you would like to come sit at the table.

Ezra and Charles get up and walk to the table.

MISS SARAH (CONT'D)

Charles, you can sit right there on the bench.

CHARLES

Any idea how much snow we're going to get?

MARY

I'm gonna make a snowman tomorrow!

EZRA

You ain't doing noth'in til your chores are done.

MARY

Yes, sir.

Ezra is finishing his first helping. He raises his plate at eye level and stares silently at Miss Sarah until she notices.

Miss Sarah notices Ezra's stare and gets up from her meal, smiling.

MISS SARAH

Anyone else want seconds?

CHARLES

Ma'am, I don't think I could eat one more bit even if I pushed it down with my shortest finger. No, thank you.

Charles rubs his belly.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
Children, what do you think of your
ma's cooking?

MARY
It was real good. And I helped too!

CHARLES
You sure did, darling. You worked
like a busy beaver.

EZRA
Boy, bring in some firewood. And
don't leave the door open too long.
It's snowing hard.

Caleb stands and walks to the door, stopping only briefly to
pat his sister on her head and kiss his ma on her cheek.

CALEB
Supper was real good, ma.

MISS SARAH
Why don't you men move to the
chairs by the fireplace. Mary and I
will clear the table.

CHARLES
Of course Ma'am. I'll be right
there. But first, I have to lighten
my wagon as much as I possibly can.

Charles walks to the window and looks out.

Miss Sarah and Mary begin to take the supper dishes to the
kitchen.

Ezra remains in his chair expressionless, and follows Charles
with his eyes.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
I believe I have a few more items
in the wagon that I just must get
rid of. If you'll excuse me, I'll
go out and get them.

Charles takes his heavy jacket and hat from the peg on the
wall.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

(chuckles)

The horses are going to have a hard enough time just pulling me and the empty wagon especially after that meal.

Charles comes back in, covered with a thin layer of snow, with a burlap bag. He shakes off the snow and removes his coat and hat.

Charles seats himself with the family gathered around the fireplace and places the bag on the floor between his legs.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

If you'll allow me, I have to give a few things away.

Charles reaches into the bag, moving things around. He pulls out a new polished cherry wood smoking pipe and a large pouch of tobacco.

Charles stands, takes a few steps, and hands them to Ezra. Ezra takes them, and places them on the little table beside his chair without looking at them, and continues to stare at Charles.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

It's a cherry wood flat-bottomed pipe so you can set it on the table. That will reduce my load by a pound or two.

EZRA

I ain't got no use fer it.

CHARLES

These next items are a little heavier.

Charles reaches back in the bag again and pulls out a framed mirror, hair brush, and a spool of yellow ribbon.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Ma'am if you could take these from me before I break something I would really appreciate it.

Miss Sarah's face lights up. Mary gets up on her knees and looks.

Charles walks them over to Miss Sarah and hands them to her.

MISS SARAH

(coyly)

Oh, I suppose there's no sense in
break'in something like this. Much
obliged.

Charles reaches back into the bag.

CHARLES

Mary darling, this item isn't heavy
but it really needs a special
little girl to take care of it and
I'm not the one for that job.

Charles pulls out a little bundle wrapped in a pink blanket
and hands it to Mary. She takes the bundle and carefully un-
wraps the blanket to discover a beautiful baby rag doll in a
little dress with long doll hair.

MISS SARAH

Look Mary, a baby doll!

CHARLES

Would you like to take care of her?
She needs a little mommy.

Little Mary's face lites up. She smiles at the doll and nods.
She cradles it, hugs, and kisses it.

MARY

(to doll)

My name is Mary but you can call me
mommy. I love you.

MISS SARAH

Mary? What do you say to Mr.
Charles?

MARY

Thank you Mr. Charles.

Mary walks past Ezra and over to Charles and hugs him.

A faint flash of anger in Ezra's eyes.

CHARLES

You're welcome little mommy. Oh, by
the way, your baby doll needs a
name.

MISS SARAH

Mary, you can take your time thinking of the very best name - every new mommy does.

MARY

I already know. Her name is Elizabeth.

MISS SARAH

How sweet! Elizabeth is my middle name!

Mary smiles and nods at Miss Sarah.

CHARLES

This last item is for Caleb. It comes with a lot of responsibility. Ladies, if you'll please excuse us for a few minutes.

Miss Sarah stands up and takes Mary by the hand.

MISS SARAH

Oh, certainly. Come with me to the kitchen little darling, and help clean the supper dishes.

MISS SARAH (CONT'D)

Can I bring my baby?

MISS SARAH (CONT'D)

Well a course you can. I'm bringing 'you', ain't I? Cuz you're 'my' baby.

Miss Sarah and Mary go to the kitchen.

CHARLES

Ezra, this last item is meant for your son. I'm going to take it out of the bag. But before I offer it to him, both of you will make a promise.

EZRA

What if we won't?

CHARLES

If either of you won't make a promise, it goes back into the bag and I take it with me in the morning.

Charles reaches into the bag and pulls out a brown polished leather gun belt holding cartridges in small leather loops. In the holster is a slightly used six-shooter.

Caleb's eyes grow wide.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Ezra, my promise is that one day your son will save your wife's life with this gun. As the moon and stars are my witnesses.

Ezra's face is stoic but his eyes are nervous.

EZRA

What's that supposed to mean?

CHARLES

Now the promise I need from you Ezra, is that you will always allow your son to wear this gun or have it ready within his arms reach, and never take it from him. Can you promise me that?

EZRA

Yep.

CHARLES

Do I have your word then?

EZRA

You have my word. But how do you know he'll have to use it to save his Ma's life?

Charles locks his eyes with Ezra's eyes, and leans slightly forward.

CHARLES

I... 'know'. Your son 'will' take the life of a man to save his ma.

The oil lamp on the small table next to Ezra, dims. Ezra reaches over and raises the wick.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

(to Caleb)

Now son, I need a promise from you. Will you be brave enough to kill a man?

CALEB

(nervous)

Well, yes sir, a'specially for my Ma. I will be brave enough. But sir, can you tell me what's gonna happen?

CHARLES

I can't tell you, Caleb. If you knew, you wouldn't be watching out for what you weren't expecting.

CALEB

Sir, do 'you' know?

Charles holds his stare but doesn't say anything.

CHARLES

On your word as a man and with a handshake?

Charles stands up, extending his hand to Caleb.

Caleb stands and takes a few steps to Charles. Caleb reaches out his hand and they shake.

CALEB

Yes sir, on my word.

CHARLES

Very well then. Here take it. It's yours.

Charles reaches out the six-shooter to Caleb.

CALEB

Wow! Thank you, sir.

CHARLES

Now I'll head out to the barn and get some sleep. Before I leave in the morning, I'll teach you how to aim and shoot it.

Charles walks to the door then turns to the kitchen.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Thank you for supper Miss Sarah and Mary. I'll be heading for the barn now.

MISS SARAH

Good night Charles!

MARY

Good night Mr. Charles! Elizabeth says good night too!

CHARLES

Good night, Elizabeth!

Charles puts on his coat and hat. He pulls the door open and steps into the fresh snow as more snow falls.

INT. SMALL POOR FARM - BARN - MORNING.

Charles wakes from the pile of straw, throws off horse blankets, and sits up with pieces of straw in his beard and hair.

Charles struggles to push the barn door open. The snow is knee-level. He steps outside leading one horse. He sees Ezra and Caleb digging out firewood from the snow. Caleb is wearing his six-shooter.

EXT. SMALL POOR FARM - MORNING.

CHARLES

Good Morning!

CALEB

Good morning, sir.

CHARLES

Son, when you get a break I'll show you how to shoot that gun.

EZRA

He ain't got time today, with all this damn snow.

Charles leads the horse over to them.

Miss Sarah and Mary come out and stand on the porch.

CHARLES

There is no way I can pull my wagon through this deep snow but I have to get going. Ezra, may I leave the wagon and one horse here for your use?

EZRA

Yep.

CHARLES

I don't know when I'll be back but consider them your own until I return. If I don't return within six months, its all yours.

EZRA

That's a fair arrangement. If ya come back, you'll get the horse and wagon and go. And don't bring noth'in else.

CHARLES

(to Caleb))

They say that if you put arrowheads around your house the Indians won't come near.

CALEB

I have some arrowheads! I'll do that!

EZRA

You ain't putt'in no injun arrowheads around the house.

CALEB

Yes, pa.

Charles climbs up into the saddle and takes the reins. He looks down at Caleb and holds his silent gaze.

CHARLES

Remember your man-to-man promise son. Be ready.

CALEB

Yes sir.

Caleb reaches down and pats his six-shooter.

CHARLES

Tie that leather strap around your leg so the holster doesn't lift. When your arm is at your side, your palm should be against the handle.

Charles looks at everyone and waves.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

So long, everyone.

Miss Sarah and Mary wave from the porch. Ezra just stares.

Charles leaves on his horse and begins to sing.

INT. SMALL POOR FARM - DAY.
Three days later.

Heavy footsteps on the porch. Miss Sarah and Mary quickly stand together and smile toward the door.

Mary is holding Elizabeth. All three of them have brushed hair with yellow ribbons.

Ezra walks in, sees them, and stops.

EZRA
(growl)
Woman, git those outta your hair.
You look like a whore.

Miss Sarah's smile drops. She reached up and pulled the ribbon out of her hair then removes Mary's ribbon from her hair.

MARY
Ma, what's a whore?

Ezra hurries over to Mary. Mary hugs her mother's leg and drops her head.

EZRA
(yelling)
Don't you ever use that word again!

MISS SARAH
Ezra, She doesn't know what that word means; ain't never heard it afore.

EZRA
Woman, I thought I done taught you never to talk back to me!

Ezra takes a thick stick from the wood pile near the fireplace, and approaches Miss Sarah.

Mary runs to a corner, and crouches with her face buried in the corner.

Miss Sarah tries to elude Ezra while pleading and dodging his swings with the club. Ezra breaks furniture and the window. He throws furniture aside trying to get to her. Finally, his wife is trapped against a wall. As he raises the club, Caleb hurries into the house.

CALEB

Pa! Stop! You're gonna kill her!

Ezra turns to Caleb.

EZRA

You're next, boy!

Ezra strikes his wife on the head. Miss Sarah falls to the floor. Ezra raises the club again.

A loud BOOM! Hazy smoke hangs in the air in front of Caleb.

Ezra falls to the floor next to Miss Sarah.

Neither one of them is moving.

Caleb hurries to kneel down to check on Ezra and then Miss Sarah.

CALEB

Ma?

Miss Sarah doesn't respond. Her head is bleeding. Her eyes are slightly open. She is breathing.

CALEB (CONT'D)

(whisper)

You're alive!

Caleb takes a pillow from off the sofa and places it under her head.

CALEB (CONT'D)

Ma, don't move.

Caleb runs outside and returns with a handful of snow.

Caleb grabs a kitchen towel and wraps it around the snow.

Caleb gently applies it to the swelling on his ma's head.

Caleb places a small rug over the puddle of blood coming from under Ezra's body.

Caleb manages to get his ma to a chair.

CALEB (CONT'D)

Ma, pa is dead. I'm gonna get the wagon hitched up and load our things. We gotta leave.

Mary gets up and walks over to her ma.

Caleb casually takes things out of the house.

MISS SARAH
Ma! What happened to your head?!

MISS SARAH (CONT'D)
I fell darling. I'll be all right.

MISS SARAH (CONT'D)
Is pa sleep'in?

Tears run down Miss Sarah's cheeks.

MISS SARAH (CONT'D)
Yes. Let him be.

MARY
Is it gonna rain? I heard thunder.

Mary takes a blanket from a chair and covers her Pa then sits on the floor turning her attention to play with Elizabeth.

Caleb comes back into the house and kneels at his ma's chair.

CALEB
The wagon is packed. Now, get your warm clothes on and take sister on a ride in the wagon. Wait for me at the old maple tree. I'll take care of things here.

Miss Sarah stands to her feet.

MISS SARAH
Mary, if ya wanna go on wagon ride, you better get your coat on.

MARY
Yea! A wagon ride!

EXT. SMALL POOR FARM - DAY.

The wagon pulls away from the house with the cow in tow.

Caleb takes all three kerosene lamps and brakes them on the floor - one of them next to Ezra's body.

Caleb takes the bottle of spare oil and pours it around the walls.

Standing in the doorway, Caleb watches as the match falls to the wood floor. He stays until the flame slowly but eagerly spreads across the wooden floor.

Caleb closes the door and leaves just before the fire gets to Ezra's body.

EXT. SMALL POOR FARM - DAY.

Caleb reaches into his pocket and tosses arrowheads around the house then walks away, following the wagon tracks.

EXT. SMALL HILL - SAME TIME.

Unnoticed.

A parked buckboard wagon hitched to two horses.

A canvas covers large humps in the back.

Charles sits in the seat with his black winter coat and broad-rimmed brown hat, watching the small farm house burn.

Charles pulls the wagon toward the distant stormy sky and begins to sing.

FADE OUT.