

STRATAGEM

By

MIKE SHELTON

INT. DINER - NIGHT

The place is old fashioned, with a long counter adorned with stools stretching across its entire length, and a few booths along the wall that are decorated with tiny broken jukeboxes.

BEN, a late forties man, sits at the counter and sips from a cup of coffee. Across from him is ABBEY, an early forties woman. She holds a towel in her hand and wipes off the counter.

In a booth against the wall are DAVIS, an early thirties man, and ULYSSES, a late fifties man. They sip their own coffees and Ulysses reads a newspaper.

Ulysses smacks the paper with his hand in frustration.

ULYSSES

I tell you, sure as shit, this
Allworth fella sure knows what he's
doing.

Ben turns in his stool to face Ulysses.

BEN

What'd you mean?

ULYSSES

Talking to all the newspapers,
telling them how he's fixing up the
town, bringing it into the twenty
first century. Sure seems to be
working.

BEN

I think our town's just fine the
way it is.

ULYSSES

Tell that to the Wilsons, or the
Bakers, or the Larsons. Hell, tell
it to all the people that just up
and sold their land.

BEN

I don't need to tell anybody. If
somebody wants to sell their land
so we can have some fast food joint
or a cell phone store, that's their
right. Me? I'm staying.

ULYSSES

You say that now, but what happens when we get all these yuppies moving in? You gonna be comfortable co-habiting with them?

ABBEY

Why don't you just lay off Ulysses.

ULYSSES

I'm just asking the man a question.

BEN

If I didn't know better, I'd say you were thinking of selling yourself.

Ulysses thinks it over for a second.

ULYSSES

Maybe I am.

Davis' eyes go wide with shock.

DAVIS

Daddy, don't talk like that.

ULYSSES

Well, it's true. Fella's offering good money for our land. It'd be foolish not to take him up on it.

DAVIS

So you sell the farm? Then what?

ULYSSES

Don't know. Maybe I'll get myself one of them condominiums in the city, enjoy life. Maybe play some golf.

BEN

Golf? You ain't never played golf in your whole life.

ULYSSES

So, maybe I'd like to start.

ABBEY

Why don't you just put a couple holes on your land then? Lord knows you got enough.

ULYSSES

So I can maintain it? That's all I need is to give myself more work. Hell, we don't get enough rain to keep up with the crops let alone some dang golf course.

BEN

So that's what this is about.

ULYSSES

What?

BEN

You're afraid the drought is gonna bankrupt us, so you wanna cut your losses and sell while you can.

ULYSSES

And what's wrong with that?

BEN

It's a chickenshit move, Ulysses.

Ulysses is angry. He gets up from his seat.

ULYSSES

Aw hell, you don't know nothin'. You wanna stay here with the yuppies, you go right ahead. Me? I'm selling.

Ulysses walks toward the door.

BEN

Yeah, cause you sure as hell won't have that on your golf course in the city.

Ulysses stops and turns around. He has tears in his eyes.

ULYSSES

But it's supposed to be like that there, Ben, not here. And I can't stand to see it change.

ALLWORTH, a mid thirties man dressed in expensive clothing, enters the diner. He takes a seat at the counter next to Ben, who looks straight ahead.

Abbey looks to him.

ABBEY

Coffee?

Allworth smiles a bright smile.

ALLWORTH

Please.

Abbey pours a cup of coffee as Allworth turns to Ben. Ben doesn't move.

ALLWORTH

How we doing today Ben?

BEN

Fine. Yourself?

ALLWORTH

Good, good. Another productive day.

BEN

Manage to screw some more people out of there land, did you?

ALLWORTH

Screw? I've done nothing of the sort. I'm offering top dollar.

Ben nods toward Ulysses, who still stands by the door.

BEN

If you're interested, there's another sucker right there. Right, Ulysses?

ULYSSES

Well...I...uh --

BEN

Go on. Tell him like you just told us.

Ulysses is silent.

ALLWORTH

You interested in selling your land?

BEN

Sure he is. Wants to go to the city and play golf.

ALLWORTH
That's good a dream as any.

BEN
Except the dumb bastard don't
realize that top dollar for land
around here won't get him squat
nowhere else.

ALLWORTH
That's simply not true, Ben.

Ben laughs slightly.

BEN
Right.

Ben takes a sip of his coffee. Abbey looks out the window
to see a crowd of people in the street.

The look to the sky and chat amongst themselves.

ABBEY
What's going on out there?

Abbey exits the diner, and the men follow.

EXT. DINER - NIGHT

Everyone looks to the sky at a bright red light that flashes
in the distance.

DAVIS
What the hell is it?

ALLWORTH
Looks like an airplane.

ULYSSES
Ain't no damn airplane. They don't
flash like that.

ALLWORTH
Sure they do.

BEN
And they sure as hell don't fly
that low.

ABBEY
That looks like it's over your
farm, Ben.

BEN

I was afraid of that.

DAVIS

We should probably check it out. Could be a U-F-O or something.

The crowd collectively gasps. Allworth motions his hands in front of him in an attempt to ease the crowd.

ALLWORTH

Now now, people. It's not a UFO, it's probably just a weather balloon or something. No reason to be alarmed.

BEN

Yeah, wouldn't want nothing to put a taint on this place, right?

Allworth puts his hands on his hips.

ALLWORTH

And what's that supposed to mean.

BEN

Wouldn't want anything to scare off your precious gas stations.

Allworth laughs.

ALLWORTH

You kidding me? Something like that would cause this place to skyrocket. Tourists would come from all over to see it.

BEN

Well, if I run into any green men, I'll be sure and tell them that.

Ben walks to his pickup truck.

ABBEY

Hold on. I'll close up shop and go with you.

Ben nods and Abbey heads inside the diner.

EXT. BEN'S FARM, BARN - NIGHT

The area is completely dark except for the headlights from half a dozen cars that arrive single file.

The cars come to a halt and the driver's and passenger's exit.

Everyone looks to the sky. The red light is gone.

ULYSSES

What's going on here?

ALLWORTH

I told you, it was just a plane. Probably just flew over and disappeared.

BEN

That wasn't no damn plane.

Ben walks to his pickup truck and takes a shotgun from the back. Allworth throws up his hands.

ALLWORTH

What are you doing? Put that away!

BEN

I'm gonna check things out. Make sure nobody's been screwing around.

ABBEY

Don't you think the gun's a bit much?

BEN

I don't know what was here. Better safe than sorry.

Ben slowly walks around the perimeter of the barn. He scans the area.

He turns the corner and stops.

BEN

Son of a bitch!

The crowd runs to Ben's side. A calf lies dead and mangled. Ben lowers his gun and sighs in frustration.

ABBEY

I'm calling the police.

Abbey runs into the house.

He looks to Allworth, who stands in shock, mouth agape.

BEN
Just a plane, huh?

ALLWORTH
I...I...

BEN
You didn't have anything to do with
this did you? Send a couple people
out here to try and scare me off?

Allworth snaps out of his confusion.

ALLWORTH
What? No!

BEN
You sure? Cause it'd be really bad
if you turned out to be screwing
with my livelihood.

ALLWORTH
I didn't. I wouldn't do that! I'm
a businessman!

BEN
And didn't you say that something
strange happening around here would
be good for business?

Allworth stands in silence for a moment. The townspeople
look at him in disgust.

DAVIS
I do believe he did say that.

Allworth looks to the crowd with pleading in his eyes.

ALLWORTH
I did, but I wouldn't do anything
like this. I didn't kill your cow,
Ben, I swear.

Ben pumps his shotgun, which causes Allworth to jump in
fear.

Ben slowly walks to the front door of his barn and stops.

He stands with his shotgun in front of him like a guard on
duty.

Allworth slowly walks toward Ben.

ALLWORTH
Ben, I didn't do this. It's just
ridiculous.

Ben looks straight past Allworth.

BEN
Fine. Then I guess you won't have
to worry about being the one to get
a hole blown in them for sneaking
around on my property.

Abbey returns and stands at Ben's side.

ABBEY
I called the sheriff. Says he's
been getting calls all night about
it. He's on his way.

ALLWORTH
He doesn't think I did it, does he?

ABBEY
Didn't ask him.

Ben looks to the crowd of people.

BEN
Okay, folks. Why don't you all
just head on home. Sheriff will
get this straightened out.

The crowd reluctantly walks to their vehicles and drives
off.

Allworth walks away.

BEN
Where do you think you're going?

ALLWORTH
I'm going home. Like you said.

BEN
Oh no. I think you oughta stick
around. Sheriff may have a few
questions for you.

Ben looks to Ulysses and Davis.

BEN
You fellas can head on home if you
want.

ULYSSES

How the hell we gonna do that? You
drove us here.

BEN

Take my truck. I ain't going
nowhere. See that Abbey makes it
home okay too.

Abbey shakes her head.

ABBEY

I'm staying here with you.

DAVIS

Me too.

Davis walks to Ben's truck and grabs a shotgun. He stands
next to Ben on guard.

ULYSSES

Now why the hell you gonna go and
do that?

DAVIS

Ben's our friend, Pa. He needs our
help.

Ulysses and Davis look at each other. Allworth looks back
and forth between them, nervousness on his face.

Ulysses stamps his foot on the ground.

ULYSSES

Aww, hell!

He stands next to Davis.

ULYSSES

Woulda been nice if I had a gun.

BEN

Sorry. Only got two.

A police car drives up the road with its lights flashing. A
white van follows closely behind.

The police car stops and SHERIFF, early thirties exits. He
walks to Ben.

SHERIFF

Evening, Ben.

BEN
 Sheriff.

SHERIFF
 What seems to be the problem?

BEN
 Don't know really. We saw a bright red light out this way from the diner, so we figured we'd come check it out. That's when I found one of my calves dead.

SHERIFF
 Dead?

BEN
 Yeah. Like something cut it all to hell.

Ben looks past the Sheriff to a REPORTER and a CAMERAMAN exiting the white van. He nods at them.

BEN
 What's that?

Sheriff turns and looks at them.

SHERIFF
 Channel three news. Got wind of the whole thing and wanted to check it out.

Allworth throws his hands up in frustration.

ALLWORTH
 Wonderful.

Sheriff looks at Allworth.

SHERIFF
 Coming to check out your investment, are you?

ALLWORTH
 I'm just here as a concerned citizen.

SHERIFF
 Citizen? Is that right?

ALLWORTH

That's right.

SHERIFF

I didn't know screwing people out of their homes qualified you as a citizen. As far as I'm concerned, you're my number one suspect.

ALLWORTH

But I didn't do anything.

SHERIFF

Sure. I've heard it a thousand times before. You ain't the first fella to show up here and try to scare people out of their homes.

ALLWORTH

That's completely unethical! I'd never--

SHERIFF

We'll just see about that. I'm gonna do a little looking around. You just hope I don't find anything.

The sheriff smiles, and for the first time it's revealed that he has a silver tooth.

The sheriff walks along the perimeter of the barn with his gun drawn and disappears around the corner.

The Reporter and Cameraman charge up to Ben. The light from the camera shines directly in his eyes and the reporter shoves a microphone in his face.

REPORTER

So tell us about this unexplained phenomena. Do you have any theories?

Ben squints and holds a hand to his face to shield the light.

BEN

Ain't no phenomena, or whatever you call it. Somebody killed one of my calves.

REPORTER

But, what about the light? Any idea as to what that was?

BEN

Speaking of lights...can you get yours out of my face?

REPORTER

Oh yeah, sure.

The reporter snaps a finger and the cameraman turns off the light on the camera.

REPORTER

Now, about the mysterious light.

BEN

Nope. Probably just something that Allworth decided to use as a distraction.

ALLWORTH

That's ridiculous. If I did it, why would I want to draw attention to it? Why would I come out here with you?

ABBEY

Maybe you figured nobody'd suspect you then.

ULYSSES

Yeah.

ALLWORTH

Are all you goddamn yokels this retarded? I swear, first you all let me buy your land from you for cheaper prices than the Louisiana Purchase, and now you think I killed your goddamn cow! Shit, it probably was a U-F-O. Don't they have a habit of flocking to all the crazy hillbillies anyway?

Davis takes a step toward Allworth.

ULYSSES

Why you no good...

Ulysses and Allworth raise their fists at one another. A loud rumbling noise emits from the barn.

Everyone turns to look at it as the bright red light starts up again and rapidly flashes inside.

DAVIS
Goddamn, it's inside!

The group slowly steps back away from the barn as the rumbling noise gets louder and the red light flashes faster and brighter.

Abbey grabs hold of Ben's arm.

ABBEY
What is it?

BEN
I don't know.

The reporter looks to the cameraman.

REPORTER
Are you getting this?

The cameraman nods yes.

Davis looks at the surrounding area.

DAVIS
Where's the sheriff?

A blood curdling scream echoes throughout the night. Abbey nuzzles in closer to Ben. Allworth covers his ears.

ALLWORTH
Make it stop. Make it stop!

The rumbling and flashing ceases, and all is dark and quiet once again.

REPORTER
Holy shit did you see that?

The reporter looks at the group, who just stare. The reporter looks to the cameraman.

REPORTER
Make sure you edit out that I said
shit.

The cameraman gives a thumbs up.

ALLWORTH

What happened? Where's the sheriff?

BEN

I don't know, but I'm gonna find out.

Ben walks toward the barn. Abbey grabs his arm.

ABBEY

No, Ben. It might not be safe.

BEN

I'm sure it's fine. Just stay close.

The group slowly makes their way toward the barn. Ben unlatches the barn door, and they head inside.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

They walk through the darkness of the barn.

ULYSSES

Hell. I can't see nothing.

BEN

You got your lighter on you?

ULYSSES

Yeah.

BEN

Then light it.

Ulysses retrieves a lighter from his pocket and flicks it on, but it offers little help.

DAVIS

What about the cameraman? Don't you got that bright light on there?

CAMERAMAN

Yeah, but he told me to turn it off.

BEN

You can turn it back on now. Just don't shine it in my face.

The cameraman flips the light on, and Abbey and Allworth scream and point at the ground.

A skeleton with a silver tooth lies at Ben's feet.

Ulysses stands with his mouth wide open.

ULYSSES

Jesus. It's the sheriff.

ALLWORTH

Wha...What the fuck happened to him?

BEN

I don't know, but we better get the hell out of here before it happens to us.

Allworth runs from the barn with the others close behind.

EXT. BEN'S FARM, BARN - NIGHT

The group watches Allworth run to his car and throw the door open. He reaches in and seconds later reappears with a briefcase.

He opens it up and empties it's a contents to the ground. Papers swirl around in the wind.

ALLWORTH

That's everybody's contracts. You tell them the deals are off. I'm not about to invest in a place that does...

Allworth motions toward the barn.

ALLWORTH

...that to people. Have a nice life.

Allworth gets into his car and speeds off.

The group looks to the reporter and cameraman, who stand in shock.

REPORTER

Uh...yeah. I'd say it's about time we got out of here as well.

BEN

What you don't wanna stick around? Get more for your story?

REPORTER

No. I think we've got
enough. We'll be in touch if we
need more.

The reporter and cameraman head to their van and speed off.

Ben scratches his head and smiles.

BEN

Something tells me they won't be
back.

ULYSSES

And I can't say I blame them one
bit. I think I may get the hell
outta here myself.

Sheriff pops up behind Ulysses.

SHERIFF

They gone?

Ulysses jumps in fear.

ULYSSES

Jumpin' Jesus!

Davis raises his shotgun.

DAVIS

He's a pod person! Get him.

Ben grabs the gun from Davis.

BEN

Knock it off you damn fool.

DAVIS

But he's dead. We saw him.

BEN

You think you saw him. Just like
Allworth did.

ABBEY

What's going on here?

BEN

That skeleton in there came from a
college.

SHERIFF

Up in California. Hard as hell
finding one with a silver tooth.

ABBEY

But, why?

BEN

So we could spook Allworth into
doing exactly what he did. Tearing
up the contracts.

ULYSSES

That ain't right.

BEN

Right? You wanna talk about
right? You heard him admit he was
cheating everybody. Just like I
told you.

ABBEY

But what about the light and the
noise.

BEN

I'll show you.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Ben points at the ceiling.

BEN

And the generator turned on the
light and the pulley system that
spun it around. Pretty simple
contraption, really.

Davis looks to the sheriff.

DAVIS

And you were hiding up in the loft
the whole time?

SHERIFF

Somebody had to kick the generator
on.

ABBEY

So you were here earlier too then?

SHERIFF

That's right.

Abbey waves her hands in front of her.

ABBEY

Okay, I can see why Ben would go through all this trouble, but why you?

SHERIFF

Well, I don't wanna see anyone get screwed out of the property any more than you do, but the truth is, I'm a small town sheriff and I wanna make sure my town stays small.

ULYSSES

So now what?

BEN

We go back to our lives, and take pride in the fact that we done punked a rich city slicker.

Ben smiles and the entire group shares a laugh.

THE END