

FORETOLD

by

Malcolm Hart & Tim Chester

TITLES OVER

Dawn is breaking. We're gliding some hundred feet above the ground. It's still too dark to make out the landscape beneath us but we can tell by the feeling of even flight that it's flat... a desert, maybe. We're gliding across it towards a rim of light at the horizon.

Flatness gives way to rocky escarpment. We rise with the contour of the land to meet the first flash of early morning sun. We dip into the still darkened valley, glide across a glittering river, soar above steep cliffs at the far side to clash with the sun again. We circle lazily.

In daylight the landscape takes on color and form. Behind us an arid desert, below us an escarpment of red rock, a valley cut deep into it by a rushing river red with its mud.

At the fringe of the escarpment, massive, nude boulders diminish in scale, spilling out onto prairie that stretches as far as the eye can see.

EXT. WEATHER-BEATEN FACE OF AN OLD MAN. DAY.

Faded blue eyes stare out from beneath the brim of a worn and greasy felt hat at this empty desolate landscape.

The old man, JOHN PICKLES, squats in the red dirt. He's wearing layers of dirty, threadbare clothes under sweat stained Buckskins. His long, grizzled grey hair is bunched either side of his face and tied with beaded and feathered thongs like an Indian. Necklaces and a beaded leather pouch hang around his scrawny, bird-like neck. Hawkish nose tilted up as if sniffing the air, flimsy red eyelids lowered; he's as immobile as the landscape he surveys, almost part of it you might say, time and weather-eroded as the rocks around him, eternal as the red dirt he's sitting in. He's watching a distant trickle of smoke rising from the prairie.

We glide off again, floating effortlessly from the rocks, out across the grassland towards the smoke.

END TITLES

EXT. A BRANDING PARTY. DAY.

Two cowboys ride down and rope calves for branding. The younger man, BART, about seventeen years old, holds them down while, SETH, an older man about thirty wearing an eye-patch,, brands them. A buzzard circles above them.

Bart cast upward glances. Seth sizzles the calf's rump with the branding iron and releases him with a yank of the rope. The calf springs up and trots away.

The buzzard settles ten or fifteen paces from the men. Bart picks up a rock and flings it at the bird. Then another. Missing it at each throw, he runs at it. The bird retreats but won't be run off.

SETH

Forget it. Sooner we finish,
sooner we get there.

Bart leaps into the saddle of his pony and races off towards a bunch of cattle, his lariat swinging around his head. He isolates a calf, ropes it, belays the lariat around the horn of his saddle faster than the eye can see and slides down the rope to bulldog the calf. He holds the calf down while Seth Brands it.

BART

This'ns the last.

Seth presses the red hot iron into the calf's rump.

SETH

Israel'd put this brand to your backside
leavin' a unbranded calf to be thieved.

He kicks over the fire, pours water over the ashes and irons. Bart watches several clouds of dust driving across the plane.

BART

C'mon Seth! Don't want ém to leave
without us, do we?

Seth takes his time packing the irons. They mount up and ride off at a leisurely pace.

EXT. THE RANCH. EVENING.

The ranch house and outbuildings sit, along with numerous other dwellings, inside the elbow of a shallow stream amongst a meagre stand of dusty trees, some kind of oasis in this scrub wilderness.

There's an air of excitement and preparation. Two pair of horses are being backed up either side of the shaft of a stout wooden coach.

Seth and Bart ride in and head for the bunkhouse.

INT. RANCH HOUSE. SAME TIME.

A plain looking woman of about thirty years, RACHEL. She has an anxious, pinched face, thin lips, restless pale blue eyes, greying hair pulled back in a bun. There's an air about her of long suffering 'crazy wisdom'. She watches the life going on around her with suspicion. Joyless, she goes around the house filling lamps with kerosene, trimming wicks, lighting them.

Two lusty men in their late twenties, JAKE and ZACK, rush into the house hollering and whooping. They're in their sweaty work-clothes and they tear them off as they run through the house. Jake slaps Rachel on the behind as he rushes past her.

RACHEL

Save it for your fancy whores!

Jake swings around, grabs her and holds her tight against him. She struggles.

JAKE

If you was sweet enough - wouldn't be
no need fer no whores.

He tries to kiss her. She hits him with a lamp. He takes it away from her. Holds her even tighter speaking quietly right into her face so no one else can hear.

JAKE (cont'd)

No one ain't never gonna marry yr
so who yr savin it fer?
Ain't yr own brother good enough fer yr?

ZACK

Jake! C'mon!!!

Jake hoots with laughter as he lets Rachel go and runs out after Zack. Rachel, sobbing, continues lighting and trimming lamps.

INT. BUNKHOUSE. SAME TIME.

A mood of excitement. Ranch hands BIRD DOG, GINZY, CORSO, MERRYWEATHER, joshing, washing themselves down and changing into clean clothes, combing hair, etc. Bart and Seth enter join in the banter and set about washing up and changing clothes.

INT. RANCH HOUSE KITCHEN. SAME TIME.

MA, an elderly woman in black dress, white hair poking out beneath mop-cap, sits in a rocking chair by the stove.

She's talking to ISRAEL VAN DAM, a powerfully built, darkly handsome man of thirty six years or so, long haired and bearded, scowling dark eyes beneath heavy brows. He's all cleaned up and dressed for a party.

He stands in front of the mirror, pulls on a voluminous traveling coat, sets a black Stetson firmly on his head. He takes a large revolver from a drawer, checks the chambers and sticks it in his belt. He looks at himself admiringly. His mother doesn't share his admiration.

MA

All this whorin' an' drinkin'. Preacher says
no good'll come of it. Preacher says lechery and drinkin'
is leadin' you straight to damnation.

Israel pulls on his gloves. Strides to the door.

ISRAEL

You tell that preacher of yours
if he sets foot here again I'll kick his ass.

He swings on his heel and leaves.

EXT. THE STABLE YARD. SAME TIME.

The sun is setting, the men are mounted. Young Bart, one eyed Seth and the four others. Zack is up on the buck board of the coach, reins in hand. His younger brother Jake, shotgun on shoulder waits at the open door of the coach. Everyone is turned expectantly to the ranch house.

Israel appears at the door of the house moving fast, his traveling coat billowing around him as he walks swiftly to the coach. Everything about him, every gesture, every look, personifies authority. He steps up into the coach and sinks back into the upholstery.

ISRAEL

Jake?

Jake, wild eyed and excited, slams the coach door.

JAKE

Ready when you are brother! Let 'em roll!

Jake springs up onto the buckboard next to Zack He fires off both barrels of his shotgun into the air and yells.

ZACK

Angels of heaven! Here we come!!

Everyone screams and hee-haws and the whole entourage jerks into action, racing out of the yard and down the path as if their lives depended on it.

They ford the shallow stream and break out onto the prairie moving fast and are soon lost to sight in clouds of dust and the gathering gloom.

INT. A BROTHEL IN AGUA DULCE. NIGHT.

An outrageous drunken bacchanal. Naked and half naked cowboys romping with three gaudy ladies of the night, on beds on the floor, wherever the spirit takes them. Bart, wide-eyed, excited is having an orgasm to the cheers and hee-haws of his work-mates.

GINZY

Attaboy Bart! We knew y' had it inya!

1ST LADY

Ain't him it's in Ginzy my love...

Whooo...wahoo...

Bart is astride his lady, bucking underneath him. Corso slaps him with his Stetson.

CORSO

Ride 'er cowboy! Hee haw!!

BART

Shiit! I'm... Heee... hic... Jesus!

His lady rolls away from him exhausted. Corso passes Bart a bottle of whiskey. He guzzles and looks around for Maudy. Maudy disengages herself from Ginzy.

MAUDY

C'mon kid. Let's see what you're made of...

She swings herself on top of Bart. He grins enthusiastically.

INT. BROTHEL SALOON. SAME TIME.

Downstairs, in the saloon, a card game is in progress.

Israel presides. Seth stands behind him. The other players are Jake, Zack, Bird Dog and a STRANGER. Everyone helps himself liberally to a bottle of whisky passed around hand to hand.

There's a pile of money in the centre of the table. The Stranger, in a shabby coat, eyes the kitty avariciously. He looks at Israel, then at the cards in his hand - a royal flush in spades. He shuffles his cards around and places them down in front of him.

STRANGER

Never seed a hand like this
but once.

He empties all his pockets of all the money he can find, covers the bet and, by way of raising the stake, adds the rest of his money to the pile. One by one the others turn in their hands, all except Israel. He covers the bet and raises it. The stranger is annoyed.

STRANGER (cont'd)

That ain't fair Mister.
You saw I ain't got no more money!
You hafta see me!

Israel smiles.

ISRAEL

I could've seed yer...
but I raised yer.

SETH

You cain't cover the bet
then you're the loser no matter
what cards you got.

The stranger, overcome with greed and frustration, his eyes dart this way and that.

STRANGER

I'll sign you a paper.

Israel, not thinking the suggestion worthy of a reply, spits.

ZACK

Ain't you got nuthin to put up?

Ain't you got no hoss, no saddle or nothin'?

The stranger's sweating, Shakes his head. Looks at Israel.

STRANGER

No mister. It ain't fair... You knew I couldn't cover.

Jake cocks his head in the direction of what looks like a large bundle of clothes propped in a dark corner of the saloon.

JAKE

Ain't that your bundle?

Must be somethin' there the value of money.

Jake swings around from the table and strides to the bundle. He stands over it bellowing with laughter.

Looking up at him is a scared fourteen year old girl, LUNA, huddled in a tattered shawl. Jake pulls her to her feet.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Well! What we got here then?

He tries to pull up her skirt to look at her legs. She spits at him and pulls away,

ISRAEL

Bring her over here to the light.

Stranger is on his feet, watching, thinking fast.

STRANGER

Luna. Come here my sweet...

Jake drags the girl to the card table. She's pretty as only an adolescent can be. Beneath her rags and grubby, childlike appearance blooms a beautiful young woman. Israel admires her and the stranger is quick to take advantage of his interest. He grins at Israel.

STRANGER (cont'd)

I sign a paper. If I lose you can have her!

She'll work for yers... she'll work off the debt.

How about it my friend?

Israel looks at Luna then at the stranger.

ISRAEL

Get paper and pen.

The stranger writes on the paper and signs it, Passes it triumphantly to Israel.

Israel turns over his cards. A full house. The stranger smiles and turns over his cards one at a time.

Ace of spades. King of spades. Queen of spades. Knave of spades...Two of hearts.

He can't believe it. He picks up the two of hearts and looks around the table. Israel and Seth exchange glances. The stranger turns the card over, looks under the table. Then it dawns on him he's been duped. Israel is reaching for the pile in the middle of the table when the stranger goes for his gun.

STRANGER

You thievin' cocksuckers...

Seth blasts him from over Israel's shoulder. The stranger sprawls dead on the saw-dust floor. Israel doesn't bat an eye. He's counting the money.

Luna runs at him, claws at him screaming. Israel flings her away from him and stands. He strides to the door with Seth, cocks his head towards Luna.

ISRAEL

Bring my winnins.

Luna kicks, bites and scratches as Seth tries to subdue her.

EXT. THE PRAIRIE. DAWN.

The sky is beginning to lighten. Israel's Coach and outriders rattle across the landscape at speed.

INT. ISRAEL'S COACH. SAME TIME.

Israel lounges back in his seat. Opposite him sits Luna, bound and gagged. Her eyes burn with hate. The coach is splashing across the stream and running up the path to the ranch house. The sun is rising.

INT. RANCH HOUSE - MA'S BEDROOM. SAME TIME.

Ma is awakened by the sound of the horses and coach driving into the yard. She gets out of bed and goes to the window, holds the curtain aside.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE YARD. SAME TIME.

The coach draws up to the house, Jake jumps down and opens the coach door. Israel gets out and, to the amusement of the rest of the men, flings the struggling Luna over his shoulder and walks into the house.

INT. MA'S BEDROOM. SAME TIME.

Full of foreboding, Ma lets the curtain fall.

INT. ISRAEL'S BEDROOM. A FEW MINUTES LATER. Israel is naked. He's stalking Luna. She cowers in a corner. He drags her out and rips off her grubby clothes.

He drags her screaming and yelling to his bed and rapes her. Exhausted, he falls asleep. Luna lays a distance from him, staring expressionless at the ceiling.

EXT. A VAST DESERT LANDSCAPE. DAY

Twenty or so horses in file tethered head to tail. Leading them, a solitary rider. Horses and rider are covered in dust. They've come a long way.

The rider, a handsome mustached Mexican of about thirty years, ELOI, reins in. They have arrived at the top of a ridge. Shielding his eyes from the late afternoon sun he surveys the landscape before him. In the middle distance some kind of building or fortification, a trickle of smoke from its chimney. Eloi puts heels to his horse and leads the line of horses out across the desert towards the building.

EXT. MILITARY POST. SUNSET.

Eloi leads the horses through a gate in the fort opened by a soldier. They greet each other, herd the horses into a corral. Eloi, familiar with the fort, rides to the adjutant's office. An army lieutenant in buckskins, a man his own age, comes out to greet him. They are pleased to see each other.

INT. ADJUTANT'S QUARTERS. NIGHT.

Eloi, washed up, shaved and in clean clothes, sits at a table with the lieutenant. They've eaten and are well into a bottle of tequila.

LIEUTENANT

Good bunch Eloi.

He slides a bag heavy bag across the table. Eloi picks up the bag and slips it into his saddlebag lying under his chair.

ELOI

Thanks

He sighs. Fidgets.

I'm getting old for this kind of work..

LIEUTENANT

It can't be easy. You need a hired hand.
Rest up here a few days. I'd enjoy the company.

ELOI

Maria is by herself... you know how it is.

LIEUTENANT

Elizabeth used to complain about me
being away from home all the time.
Now she has the kids she don't have
time to think about it.

They chuckle. The Lieutenant pours more tequila. Passes a glass to Eloi. Gives him a meaningful look. They chuckle, clink glasses and drink.

EXT. THE PRAIRIE. DAY.

A buzzard circles lazily in the sky; glides off towards the hills overlooking the Van Dam ranch. It settles amongst some boulders.

EXT. THE HILLS. DAY.

The old man John Pickles is seated cross-legged in the dirt amongst the boulders. He pulls out a soft leather pouch from somewhere around his neck, takes out a pipe, fills it from the pouch. He lights up and sits, smoking, gazing out at the Van Dam ranch.

Almost imperceptibly at first, the light starts to fade. He watches the landscape darkening before his eyes. He slowly looks to the sky. The powerful noon-day sun is going into eclipse.

INT. ISRAEL'S BEDROOM. SAME TIME

Luna is in the bed giving birth. She's screaming in the last stage of labor. Ma is midwifing for her. Rachel hovers in the background biting her nails, nervous, apprehensive. She looks to the window as the light diminishes.

MA

One more push now...

Luna is perspiring and wide eyed.

LUNA

It's goin' dark.

MA

Concentrate gal! One more push now.

A rising wind slams the shutters. Rachel looks in terror at the darkening window. Luna yells out. The baby's coming. The wind begins to howl as the room grows ever darker. Rachel whines.

RACHEL

What's happening Ma?

MA

The child's being born. Get some lamps quick!

Rachel brings a pair of lamps. Luna lies back in the bed exhausted. The wind howls outside and shutters bang. Ma has the squalling baby in her arms. She coo-choo the babe, turns him upside down and around. Ma passes him to Rachel who recoils.

RACHEL

That child's the spawn of Satan.

Ma glances at Luna; hisses at Rachel.

MA

How can you even think such a thing?

Where you get such a notion?

RACHEL

Him being born like this in the dark
in the middle of the day...

Luna stirs. Both Ma and Rachel stop their rants. Luna looks up smiling. The baby squalls.

LUNA

My baby...

Ma, still troubled, hands the babe back to its adoring mother. He smiles up at Luna. She smiles back at him. The wind dies and the light begins slowly to return.

EXT. A MEADOW IN FRONT OF THE RANCH HOUSE. DAY.

Standing on a flat bed wagon, a fiddler jerks spastically to the rhythm of his fast and reckless blue-grass music. Everyone in polite party mood. A dozen or so couples dance, some men without women dancing with each other. They drink. Families with their children sit around in the warm sunshine. A solitary buzzard circles high above.

EXT. VERANDA OF THE RANCH HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Watching the party from the shade of the veranda, Israel and Seth sit drinking from a jug of whisky. Ma not in good mood sits knitting in her rocking chair. Luna sits next to her breast feeding her baby. Both seem apprehensive. Rachel can be seen through a window skulking inside the house.

A surrey drawn by a black horse, fording the stream and driving up the path to the house has everyone's attention. The gaunt figure of the PREACHER dismounts the surrey, tethers the horse and strides towards the ranch house.

Israel gets out a knife and starts cleaning his fingernails. The preacher stands, legs astride, on the path beneath the veranda, looks fiercely up at Israel, disclaims angrily, loud for all to hear.

PREACHER

Was it not sign enough for yer?
Satan laying a cloak of darkness over the sun
so his spawn might steal into this world
like a thief in the night?

As the preacher holds forth, the fiddler stops playing, the dancers stop dancing. Everyone drifts towards the house to see what's happening. The preacher turns to them.

PREACHER (cont'd)

Yer dare celebrate the displeasure of the Almighty?
Go home! Fall on your knees.
Hope the Lord will forgive you
being here today partaking of this blasphemous obscenity.

He turns to Israel, pointing at him.

PREACHER (cont'd)

No forgiveness for you Israel Van Dam.
You cast your lot with the Devil a long time ago.
What could the good lord have to say to you?

Israel signals Ginzy and Corso. They nod and walk over to the preacher. The onlookers are uneasy about Israel's irreverence towards the preacher but none man enough to stand against him. Ma struggles to intervene but Israel shoves her back into her chair. Ginzy and Corso, hugely amused, set about rough-handling the preacher all the way down the path to his buggy. Kicked, falling, crawling, the preacher clammers aboard. Supporting himself on the frame, he stands and shouts, finger pointing to the sky.

PREACHER

You are arrogant in His sight
Israel Van Dam!
He will surely strike you down!

He whips up the horse and drives off in a cloud of dust.

Israel and his men laugh and drink more whisky. Shrinking from them Luna, Her babe in her arms; she and Ma go back to the house. Suddenly everyone's sober. The party's over. They shuffle away to their buggies and leave. They make desultory salutations to a frowning Israel as they depart. He spits at them.

EXT. THE VERANDA. LATE AFTERNOON

Israel and Seth sit by themselves passing the whisky jug back and forth. Glaring out at the deserted meadow. Israel, ego severely damaged and his dominance threatened, glowers angrily at the turn of events, the Preacher's prophecy of doom for all to hear. Seth spits. Israel drinks.

ISRAEL

I'm gonna kill that fucking preacher.

Did ya hear him?

Seth nods. Conciliatory.

SETH

Yeah. Pay 'im no mind.

Silence. Israel notices a movement in a shadow.

ISRAEL

Who's that?

Seth turns to see raggedly old John Pickles furtively picking up jugs and bottles and draining them of whatever's left in them.

SETH

Just old John Pickles...

ISRAEL

What's he doin' here?

SETH

He's anywhere there's a free drink...

Strange fellow.

Folks say he can cure disease

make rain and tell fortunes.

Learned it off the Injuns they say.

Israel is interested. Takes a long pull at the whisky jug.

ISRAEL

Bring him over.

Seth wanders down, talks to the old man. After a moment's reticence, John Pickles cautiously accompanies Seth up to the house. Israel regards the old man with curiosity. He chuckles. He addresses him with false civility.

ISRAEL (cont'd)

Welcome Mister Pickles.

We're celebrating the birth of my son.

Israel leans down from the veranda, smiling, passing the whisky jug to the old man.

ISRAEL (cont'd)

Drink his health in a right and proper manner.

John Pickles is delighted. He nods his head, politely takes the jug, tilts it into his mouth guzzling like a foal at the tit. Israel watches amused. The old man takes his fill and hands back the jug. Smacks his lips.

JOHN PICKLES

Hmmm. Fine stuff. Mighty fine stuff.

He turns and starts to amble off.

ISRAEL

Mister Pickles?

Seth stands in the old man's way. The old man turns to Israel.

ISRAEL (cont'd)

Folks say you know a thing or two.

Ain't that right Seth?

The old man looks from one man to the other with apprehension.

They say you can tell about the future.

What you say to that Mister Pickles?

Pickles is beginning to be uncomfortable. Would like to leave. Grins.

JOHN PICKLES

Don't want t' believe nuthin' y'hear
nor much of what y' see.

I'll be goin' now. Thanks kindly...

Seth puts his hand on his gun belt.

SETH

That ain't polite Mister Pickles.
Partakin' of yer host's liquor
and then just movin' on.

Pickles looks this way and that. Israel comes down off the veranda, stands face to face with him. The old man avoids Israel's eyes. Israel's civility is wearing thin.

ISRAEL

The preacher says my child's a son of darkness...
spawn of Satan he says. You know better 'n that
doncha John? You know that ain't true.
Why doncha tell us how it's really gonna be.
What's in store f'r the boy?

The sun is setting. John Pickles hangs his head. Both Israel and Seth are drunk out of their minds. Israel seems to contemplate the setting sun; bull anger is back in his voice.

ISRAEL (cont'd)

C'mon old man! We ain't got all day.
You drunk my liquor... Now tell us
how it's gonna be for the boy... or does Seth here
have t' beat it out on yer?

The old man, not at all keen to answer, makes as if to leave. Seth grabs him by his scrawny neck. All pretense of politeness vanishes. The old man wriggles, chokes, splutters. And then, to Seth's surprise, with an odd wrench of his body the old man is out of his grasp and squatting a few yards away, tenderly feeling his neck, anger in his eyes. He turns to Israel. spits.

JOHN PICKLES

Yer'n arrogant fuck Israel van Dam!
Yer right. I drank yer booze so I owes yer.
I dunno shit 'bout Satan... but I know this!
There's a hex on yer house. I see yer dead
and all them what follows yer.

Fear and doubt hidden beneath his bullishness, Israel laughs.

ISRAEL

Someone gonna kill me? Gonna kill all of us?
What you talkin' about?

JOHN PICKLES

It's writ you fool.

John pickles spits and turns to go. Israel's anger is getting the better of him.

ISRAEL

Writ? What's writ? Answer me you miserable old fuck!
What's this all got to do with the fucking kid?

John Pickles ignores him, wants to leave, eyes glancing this way and that. Seth, standing in the old man's way, reaches for his pistol. Pickles scuttles around him like a jackrabbit into the gathering dusk faster than Seth can draw and fire.

At the sound of the shot, a buzzard breaks cover and flaps off into the darkening sky. Seth walks drunkenly to where he thought he shot Pickles but can't find him. He puts up his pistol. Shakes his addled head with incomprehension.

Israel, fear of doubt in his drunken eyes, looks to Seth in bewildered disbelief hoping for explanations.

ISRAEL

It don't make sense. Them premonitions.

What's goin' on? The kid?

Was he saying it'll be the kid'll kill me?

He tries a derisive laugh. Then, fists clenched, He shakes his head. His eyes wide and wild he looks to Seth.

No fuckin' way.

He sits down head in hands. Seth, eyes cast down, shakes his head. Sits down next to him. Silent, brooding.

SETH

What if there weren't no kid...?

He looks at Israel. A moment between them of sobriety and understanding. Israel looks away.

INT. LUNA'S BEDROOM. LATE THAT NIGHT.

Luna sleeps. The baby sleeps in the crib next to her bed. The door opens silently; Israel, drunk, enters as quietly as he can. He moves unsteadily across to the crib and looks down at the sleeping babe. He picks him up. The baby starts to cry. Luna awakes. She sees Israel standing there wrapping the baby in a blanket to muffle its crying. Luna screams at him.

LUNA

My baby!!!

Israel looks down at her contemptuously, turns and staggers to the door. Luna is out of bed screaming and clawing at him.

LUNA

Ma! He's taking my baby! My baby!

Ma...

Israel strikes her knocking her to the floor. He's confused. He yells at her.

ISRAEL

This ain't no son of mine.

He's cursed ain't you heard?

Thars no place for him in my house.

He staggers with the child out the door and locks it. Luna is screaming.

EXT. THE RANCH HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Luna's screams can be heard. Lamps are lit in other windows. Seth waits by his saddled horse. Israel comes out of the house. Seth mounts up. Israel hands him the bundled baby. Seth nods to Israel. Ties the bundle to his saddle bow. A full moon is beginning to rise as Seth gallops off. Israel sits on the veranda. He's drained.

EXT. AN ENCAMPMENT. MOONLIT NIGHT

The full moon is high. Eloi is encamped just below the ridge of a boulder strewn escarpment. He is asleep. The fire is out. Cooking utensils are set neatly by. A saddle blanket is folded over a rock and a fine Spanish saddle decorated with Toledo silver, is set upon it. A black horse, hobbled nearby, grazes silently. Eloi is stretched out on his back, saddle bags containing his gold for a pillow, a serape for a blanket, a Winchester rifle by his side, barrel towards his feet. All is silent.

He's awakened by the neighing of a horse... hooves clattering over rock. His eyes flick open, his hand grasps the Winchester, finger on trigger. He remains totally motionless, only his eyes move in the direction of the sound. He listens. Silently, drawing the rifle close to his body, he rolls onto his stomach, crawls up to the rim of the escarpment and cautiously looks over. A man, recognizably Seth, is leading his horse, stumbling and clattering, up the rock-strewn incline. He passes beneath Eloi and climbs on.

Eloi lowers his head, puzzled. Crouching low he makes his way along the ridge, stops again raising his head cautiously above the rim.

Seth's climb has brought him close to the ridge from where Eloi is watching him. He looks around. Sure he's unseen he unhooks the bundled babe from his saddle and lays him on a flat rock. Unwrapped, the babe lies there looking up at him, gurgling.

Eloi can hardly believe his eyes. Seth looks around again, scratches his chin, shakes his head, covers the baby's face with the blanket and draws his pistol. He's startled by the sudden metallic crash of a lever-action rifle being cocked.

ELOI

Hold it!!!

Seth freezes, looks up. Eloi is crouched above him, rifle aimed at him poised to shoot.

Drop the gun!

Seth is completely baffled. He shrugs, let's his gun drop to the ground. Eloi scrambles down to confront him. He steers him away from the baby with the barrel of his rifle. Keeping one eye on Seth he examines the baby.

ELOI

Are you insane?

Seth is embarrassed.

SETH

The kid's father... my boss...
wants him gone

Eloi is incredulous.

ELOI

What kind of father orders
his own child to be killed?

Seth clears his throat and spits.

SETH

He ain't no happier about it
than you mister.

ELOI

Is he crazy?

Seth is awkward; looks away.

SETH

Child's hexed.
Preacher said It were the work of Satan

Eloi picks up the babe with his free hand. The babe gurgles up at him.

ELOI

He looks all right to me...

SETH

Maybe so mister..
but it'd be best for all on us
if he was dead.

Eloi is enchanted by the child. He smiles up at Eloi and Eloi smiles back at him.

ELOI

So you're hexed eh?

Seth is growing agitated.

SETH

Look mister. Until that child's dead
I daren't show my face again to his father...

Eloi holds the child close; considers the situation.

ELOI

I'm on my way home to a country far from here
and I'm taking him with me.
As far as your boss is concerned the child is dead.
Only you and I will ever know the truth.

Seth surrenders to the situation. He mounts his horse.

SETH

Another time – you an' me might've swapped lies
over a bottle of tequila.
Way things are... the day we meet again
will be a black one.
Adios!

Seth wheels his horse and canters off. Eloi nuzzles the babe watching Seth ride away into the night.

EXT. A BROAD RIVER. SUNRISE.

Eloi, the baby slung in front of him, rides towards the river. The rising sun turns the sluggish river blood red. They ford the river.

EXT. OPEN COUNTRY. DAY.

Eloi and the baby ride through red rock canyon country. Eloi is a fine horseman, his bearing impeccable, bandoliers of cartridges across his chest. The horse, well bred, well trained and groomed, has an elegant gait. The baby, in a make shift rig, bounces rhythmically against Eloi's stomach.

EXT. A TREE. HIGH NOON.

They rest in the shade of the tree, Eloi feeds the babe bread sopped in water. Beyond the cool shade, scrub desert stretches to the shimmering horizon.

EXT. AN ENCAMPMENT. NIGHT.

Eloi and the babe are bedded down together, asleep.

EXT. ENCAMPMENT. EARLY MORNING.

Eloi feeds the babe and cooks food for himself.

EXT. HILLY COUNTRY. DAY.

They ride through increasingly hilly country, mountains rising on the horizon.

EXT. THE SIERRAS. DAY.

It pours with rain. They ride among the clouds high above the timber line.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL. DAY.

They ride down a steep mountain trail. Eloi reins in the horse, looks out across the landscape, a sun-dried plain stretching to the horizon. In the middle distance a patchwork of corn fields bright green in the afternoon sun. Adjacent to the corn fields, a small group of whitewashed adobe buildings. Eloi smiles, lifts the babe so he, too, can see them.

ELOI

Home.

He touches heels to his horse and they continue their descent.

EXT. CORNFIELD. SAME DAY.

They ride through the fields towards the adobe buildings. In the distance a dog barks.

EXT. PATIO OF A HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Hearing the dog barking, a beautiful young Mexican woman of about twenty-two years, MARIA, comes out of the house, anxious. She shields her eyes from the low sun, peering into the distance. A solitary rider approaches, his diffused image dancing in shades of haze. Maria can hardly contain her excitement. The dog leaps the wall and runs off towards the approaching rider. Maria hurries back into the house.

INT. HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Maria sings as she moves quickly around the house putting pots on the stove, bringing dishes from the larder. She looks at herself in the mirror, splashes water on her face, changes her dress, brushes her hair.

EXT. HOUSE. A HALF HOUR LATER.

Eloi tethers his horse, hangs the baby's rig on the saddle horn. He touches the baby's cheek. The baby smiles. Eloi puts finger to lip.

Peeling off his gloves and taking of his sombrero, he makes straight for the door of the house. Maria is rushing from the house and they collide into each others arms. They hug fiercely. There can be little doubt of the love they feel for each other. They speak in Spanish.

MARIA

Only God knows how much I miss you.

She looks up brightly into Eloi's smiling face.

MARIA (cont'd)

And my gift?

She starts searching his pockets for her usual gift without success. She' frowns, disappointed. With his arm around her Eloi takes her to his tethered horse.

ELOI

I didn't forget you...

She thinks, perhaps, her gift is in his saddle bag. She looks at the bundle hanging from the saddle without comprehension.

MARIA

What is it?

Eloi gently unhooks it. Maria is mystified. She accepts the bundle.

MARIA (cont'd)

My gift?

She uncovers the baby and is overwhelmed with emotion. Unable yet to have conceived a child herself, she holds the baby close. Eyes closed, she murmurs a prayer.

MARIA (cont'd)

For me? No. It can't be...

She looks at Eloi in wonderment, confusion, happiness.

But who does he really belong to?

Eloi speaks softly.

ELOI

We are his parents now.

Maria is still having difficulty accepting the reality of the situation. All she can do is cuddle the child, kissing him, murmuring to him.

MARIA

My precious gift. El Regalo.

INT. ELOI AND MARIA'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

Eloi adds a log to the fire. Maria is curled up under a blanket on the bed. The baby is asleep beside her. Eloi curls up with them. Their conversation is relaxed.

MARIA

I want to know...

ELOI

Of course you do...

He stares into the fire as if looking for inspiration.

It was a wagon train of settlers from the East...

or what was left of it...

I came across it two days out from the fort.

Apaches had completely destroyed it.

This little one had been hidden...

I heard him crying.

Maria is again overcome by her emotions. She cuddles into Eloi.

MARIA

We are his parents?

Eloi blows out the lamp and gets into bed beside Maria.

MARIA (cont'd)

A gift from God. El Regalo di Dios.

ELOI

El Regalo.

EXT. ELOI'S HOUSE. DAY.

Maria, heavily pregnant, watches Eloi riding around the corral with El Regalo. Now a three year old, he sits in Eloi's lap holding the reins. Eloi spurs the horse into a canter. The young El Regalo laughs and holds on tight to the reins.

Maria gives a little cry and collapses. Eloi makes all haste to get to her.

INT. ELOI'S HOUSE. SAME DAY.

Eloi delivers Maria of child while El Regalo watches fascinated.

Maria lies exhausted and triumphant in the bed with her newborn swaddled beside her. Eloi shows the babe to Regalo.

ELOI

This is your sister Pilar.

Regalo smiles. He's pleased. Everyone's pleased.

A LONG FADE IN, THE SOUND OF THUNDERING HORSES

EXT. CANYON. DAY

A herd of thirty or forty horses are being driven out of the canyon by two horsemen, one recognizably Eloi now about fifty years old. He's still a fine figure of a man, has not lost any of his bearing, but his handsome face is lined and his mustache and hair are greying. The other horseman is presumably El Regalo, now twenty years old. He, too is a fine figure of a man. Dressed in black from head to toe, a flash of a scarlet bandana beneath his sombrero, a gold ring in one ear, arched eyebrows over intensely dark eyes, a wispy,

youthful mustache curling around the corners of his mouth. His enthusiastic style of riding characterises his youth in comparison with Eloi's mature, almost military bearing.

EXT. A CORRAL OUTSIDE ELOI'S HOUSE. DAY

Eloi and El Regalo herd the wild horses into the corral and drop the barred gate closing them in. They lean against the corral, checking out their catch.

ELOI

They'll bring a good price.

El Regalo's attention is drawn to a spirited white stallion that kicks at the posts of the corral, resentful of its capture. Regalo goes to touch its muzzle; the horse tries to bite him, turns and kicks. El Regalo is amused.

EL REGALO

D'you see him father?

He's for me.

INT. ELOI'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

Maria and PILAR, now a beautiful young woman of seventeen years, clear the table. Eloi and El Regalo sit at a chessboard. Eloi lights a cheroot as he directs El Regalo how to place the pieces. The boy isn't enthusiastic.

EL REGALO

I prefer cards to this.

ELOI

Cards are for childish minds.

EL REGALO

In San Estobal I see men playing cards all the time.

They don't think it's a game for children.

They gamble a great deal of money on it.

ELOI

A serious man doesn't gamble for money.

El Regalo weighs Eloi's words.

EL REGALO

Win or lose a game is a game.
How will playing chess help me
break the stallion in the morning?
How will it teach me to hunt?

Eloi completes the arrangement of the pieces.

ELOI

Hunting is like chess, a game of cunning.
Thinking ahead...setting traps... laying in wait.
Winning the hunting game is very important.
If you win your family eats. Lose and they go hungry.

Eloi pushes a Pawn forward.

Pilar sits by the fire, plucking the strings of a guitar and singing softly. Maria watches the warm familial scene with pride, a woman fulfilled. El Regalo studies the board. He swings out one of his Knights.

EXT. THE CORRAL. DAWN.

Eloi and El Regalo. The sun has yet to rise. The young white stallion stamps impatiently, kicks at the corral timbers. Between them they isolate the stallion.

El Regalo checks his moccasins are tightly tied, adjusts a small woven bag slung across his back. He nods. He and Eloi lift the bar of the corral. The frightened young stallion rears, snorts, bellows, then charges out, through the cornfields and away towards the hills. El

Regalo shakes Eloi's hand then trots after the horse. Eloi and the rest of the horses watch him go.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE. DAY.

Running easily, El Regalo makes his way up hill. At the top he stops and looks about him for the horse. The stallion's nowhere to be seen. He kneels and examines the grass around him, finds some tracks, sees their direction and takes off again at a steady trot.

The young stallion grazes on a hillside. Far away a figure can be seen running at a steady pace towards him. He snorts and stamps and canters off away from the oncoming runner.

El Regalo comes to a stream. He's breathing hard. He looks around and finds tracks. He splashes across the stream, looks again for tracks, finds them and sets off. The sun is high. He runs through a forest, his pace slower.

The stallion breaks out of the forest, snorting, breathing hard. He looks back the way he's come; stands stock still, listening. He lowers his head and starts to graze. After a moment his head is up again, listening. He shakes his mane and canters off.

The sun is low as El Regalo struggles to maintain his pace. He runs less steadily, occasionally stumbling.

The stallion is beginning to slow.

The sun is setting as El Regalo reduces his pace to jogging. Only grim determination keeps him going.

INT. ELOI'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

On the table a single plate, knife, fork and glass. Eloi and Maria sit staring silently into the fire.

MARIA

He'll be all right?

ELOI

He'll be fine.

Maria smiles, Eloi shrugs, puts a hand on hers. Far away a wolf howls. She leaves Eloi sitting by the fire. He stares impassively into the dying embers.

EXT. FOREST. MOONLIT NIGHT.

El Regalo drags himself along, walking, staggering, grasping at trees to hold himself up. Dawn is breaking. El Regalo crawls on hands and knees through bushy country, hardly able to keep his eyes open.

He crawls into a clearing to find the stallion lying on the ground sound asleep.

He crawls over to him, takes a length of rope from the bag he's been carrying on his back and, with difficulty but without protest from the inert stallion, hobbles him. He collapses on the flank of the horse and falls fast asleep.

EXT. A DISTANCE FROM ELOI'S HOUSE. DAY.

El Regalo mounted on the stallion gallops full tilt, both he and the stallion fully dressed and armed. They thunder towards an avenue of fence posts set firmly in the ground. From each post dangles an earthenware pot. El Regalo draws a carbine from its sheath. Standing in the stirrups and firing the carbine from the shoulder, he explodes the dangling pots in rapid succession as he races past them.

Eloi looks on with satisfaction but conceals his pleasure as El Regalo, exhilarated and excited, rides up to him.

EL REGALO

How was I? Did I give em hell?

ELOI

A bit slow.

The last two would have cut you down for sure.

EL REGALO

Yeah. But...

Eloi cuts him short.

ELOI

Dead is dead.

EXT. SAME LOCATION. DAY.

El Regalo crouches like a gunfighter some twenty paces from a row of earthenware pots dangling from the branch of a tree. His right hand is poised, fingers extended, just above the butt of his holstered pistol, his left hand hovers over the pistol's hammer. Eloi stands behind him, watching. El Regalo's body is frozen in unbearable concentration; sweat runs down the back of his neck.

ELOI

Too tense. Too tense. Relax. Let the action flow.

Try it again.

El Regalo drops his arms, wipes his brow, closes his eyes to better imagine the feeling then takes up the posture again.

ELOI (cont'd)

OK. Draw!!!

El Regalo, at the speed of light, draws his pistol and fanning the hammer with his gloved hand discharges six shots almost as one. Six of the dangling pots explode almost simultaneously.

ELOI (cont'd)

Excellent! Show me it wasn't luck.

El Regalo smiles, ejects the spent cartridges into his hand, reloads the pistol and holsters it resuming the 'gunfighter' stance.

ELOI (cont'd)

Draw!!!

Again El Regalo moves with the speed of light loosing off six shots and exploding the remaining pots. Exhilarated, he ejects the cartridges into his hand, reloads and holsters the pistol. Eloi brings a cup of cold water to the perspiring El Regalo.

ELOI (cont'd)

That was fast.

El Regalo drains the cup, balances the empty cup on the back of his gloved hand.

SLOW MOTION 1,000 FPS

He begins the draw, his right hand closes ever so slowly around the butt of the pistol, draws the pistol slowly from its holster, forefinger pulls trigger tight. His left hand is moving irrevocably towards the hammer the cup turning over lazily in mid air. The barrel of the gun slowly lines up with the cup before it has a chance to fall, ejaculating smoke and flame into it blowing it ever so slowly to smithereens.

REAL TIME

El Regalo swings around triumphantly to Eloi who is already walking away. El Regalo shrugs.

INT. HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Maria has been watching the shooting practice. She is concerned. She turns to Eloi as he walks in. He flops down in a chair. Maria pours coffee for him. He registers her concern.

ELOI

What did you think?

Maria's unhappy. Eloi sips his coffee.

MARIA

You know what I think.

Eloi knows what she thinks. He nods.

ELOI (Reflective)

We live in uncertain times.
The world changes around us.
A man must learn to defend himself –
defend his home - his family.

Maria, no less unhappy, nods.

INT. EL REGALO'S ROOM. NIGHT.

El Regalo sits at a table, his pistol disassembled in front of him. He cleans and oils the parts. A knock at the door. Pilar enters and sits on his bed.

PILAR

What are you doing?

EL REGALO

You can see what I'm doing.

He finishes wiping the parts and reassembles the gun. He stands, gives the pistol one last polish, spins the well-oiled chamber and slides the gun into its holster and hangs it on the wall. Pilar takes his hand.

PILAR

I have a favor to ask.

She smiles.

Gomez Da Silva wants to take me
to the fiesta at San Estobal tomorrow.
Papa says I can only go if you will accompany us.

El Regalo looks dubious.

PILAR Cont'd)

You must come....

Besides Gomez's sister Raquel wants to see you again.

EL REGALO

Gomez's sister? That little road runner?

PILAR

Road runner? When did you last see her?

It's said she's the most beautiful girl

south of the Sequia Madre.

He laughs.

EL REGALO

Are you serious? Raquel Da Silva?

Anyway. You're the most beautiful girl

south or north of the Sequia Madre.

Pilar blushes, pinches him. Puts an arm around him.

EXT. FIESTA. DAY.

Music and spirited dancing. GOMEZ, tall and handsome, dances with Pilar. El Regalo dances with RAQUEL.

The fiesta. Row upon row of stalls selling everything. Cooked foods, pottery, charcoal, cures for strange diseases, knives, guns, clothes, chickens, jewelry, candles, religious paintings and figurines, baskets, etc. Hundreds of people in their best Sunday clothes mill around the stalls gossiping, laughing, arguing, buying, selling.

The dance over, the two young couples wander through the fair. They pause at the fringe of a crowd gathered around a fortune teller, an OLD CRONE. She's inspecting the hand of a young man. Grinning toothless, she glances up at her client's serious face then back to his hand.

OLD CRONE

Ah ha! I see... oh such a beautiful lady...
I see a wedding and a long life
of prosperity and happiness.

The young man nods his head but needs to know more. The Crone quickly concludes.

May all the saints in heaven
heap abundant blessings on you.

She pushes the young man's hand away and takes a silver coin from her next client. The young man pushes the new client away, angrily thrusts his hand back under the Crone's nose.

YOUNG MAN

Wait a minute! Wait a minute!
How many children?

The old crone, irritated, glances at his hand.

OLD CRONE

Seven.

The onlookers applaud quietly. The young man, satisfied, goes on his way. She returns her attention to her next client, a simple, middle-aged farmer.

OLD CRONE

You are married. And your wife...

She pauses in thought. Her eyes widen in realization.

OLD CRONE (cont'd)

Your wife has the name of a flower!

The farmer nods, impressed. He turns to the onlookers.

FARMER

Rosa! My wife's name is Rosa!

A gasp of admiration at the Crone's accuracy.

OLD CRONE

You are hard working...ambitious...

I see wealth... great wealth.

The farmer is beside himself with excitement.

FARMER

How much?

OLD CRONE

So much that to find out

will cost you another peso.

The farmer consults his purse and comes up with another peso. The crone pockets it and rapidly reels off the extent of his fortune.

OLD CRONE (cont'd)

Seven cows sixteen chickens

and a she-goat.

Overcome with joy he goes on his way to the polite applause of the audience. The crone continues her touting, grins toothless at Pilar.

OLD CRONE (cont'd)

And you my pretty one...
don't you want to know
if your husband will be rich and handsome?

Pilar turns shyly away. The crone turns to another.

OLD CRONE (cont'd)

And you sir?

He's sceptical, sneers, shakes his head.

OLD CRONE (cont'd)

Don't you want to know
who your wife is with
while you stand here shaking
your head like an old goat?

The man looks around, realizes his wife is not by his side and, furious, hurries away to the laughter of the crowd. The crone spots El Regalo.

OLD CRONE (cont'd)

Oh handsome young warrior.
Do you have the courage to look into the future?

He fingers his moustache smiles at Raquel. She smiles back encouraging him.

Don't you want to know
if you will be lucky in love...
victorious in battle?

The crowd parts and allows El Regalo through to the Crone. He hands her a peso and extends his palm. The crone smiles her toothless smile up at him then looks at his palm. Suddenly she drops her theatrics. She's disturbed, confused. She pushes his hand away.

OLD CRONE

There are some hands I cannot read.

I'm tired... It's late. I must go...

She pulls her shawl around her shoulders and starts to push through the crowd. El Regalo grabs her arm.

EL REGALO

I've paid you.

Get on with your business.

The crone fumbles in her clothing, produces the peso and gives it back to him.

OLD CRONE

I'm tired... It's late. I must go...

El Regalo, growing impatient, refuses to accept the coin. The crowd is silent, expectant.

RAQUEL

Come on El Regalo... Let's go.

PILAR

Yes. Let's go.

EL REGALO

Not until this old witch reads my palm.

He tightens his grip on the crone's arm. She shrinks from him.

OLD CRONE

You're hurting...

EL REGALO

Why don't you want to read my palm?

Her eyes dart this way and that looking for a way to escape but El Regalo's grip is too tight. She whispers to him.

OLD CRONE

I can't tell you here... not here...

come to my house at sunset... alone!

He drops her arm and she scuttles away. The crowd breaks up, some of them look curiously at El Regalo. He's affected by the encounter. He's moody.

GOMEZ

Your not paying any mind
to that old crack-pot are you?

PILAR

Come on... Gomez is right.
Let's dance.

Regalo is confused, upset.

EL REGALO

I need to be alone.
Gomez. See the girls get home safely...

He turns to Raquel who is patently disappointed.

EL REGALO (cont'd)

Forgive me.

Allow me to call on you again...

She's piqued; turns her back. Regalo walks away.

EXT. THE CRONE'S HOUSE ON A HILL. SAME EVENING.

The sun is setting behind the hill as El Regalo rides toward the tumbledown house. He dismounts at the house and tethers the white stallion. He knocks on the rotting door. No answer. He pushes the door open and enters.

INT. CRONE'S HOUSE. SAME TIME.

A bare room, walls and ceiling blackened by a fire smoldering in the middle of the floor. The crone is squatting by the fire, in her lap a number of small, spindly mushrooms. Eyes closed, she chews them, rocking slowly back and forth. El Regalo, apprehensive but unafraid, squats by the fire opposite her. He's in earnest.

EL REGALO

Well? My hand.

What was it you saw?

Her eyes open. She intones.

OLD CRONE

A man must have courage

to know his fate.

El Regalo, growing impatient.

EL REGALO

I'm ready to hear anything

you've got to tell me.

OLD CRONE

I can tell you nothing.
Only the black lioness can tell you.

El Regalo is puzzled.

The black lioness. You must
ask the black lioness...
she'll tell you.

He's annoyed by her oblique answer. He humors her.

EL REGALO

And where would I find this...
black lioness?

By way of an answer she gives him a handful of mushrooms from her lap. She puts several in her own mouth indicating he should do the same. He hesitates at first then puts a number of them in his mouth and starts to chew.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN TRAIL. DAY.

A large black lioness basks on a rock. She watches the approach lower down the mountain of a single horseman.

EXT. LOWER DOWN THE MOUNTAIN. SAME TIME

El Regalo rides cautiously up the mountain trail. He dismounts at a stream crossing the trail. Examining the moist earth he finds the spoor of a large cat. He looks around and up the mountain but sees nothing. He remounts and continues up the trail.

EXT. HIGHER UP THE TRAIL. SAME TIME.

The lioness raises her head, watches El Regalo riding up towards her. She stands, stretches, yawns and silently bounds off the rock into bushes and foliage around the trail. She disturbs a bird.

EXT. LOWER DOWN THE TRAIL. SAME TIME.

El Regalo sees a bird fly out of a thicket. He reins in and dismounts. He draws his carbine from its sheath and like a shadow continues upward on foot.

EXT. A TREE BRANCH ABOVE THE TRAIL. SAME TIME.

The lioness springs silently onto a branch of a tree overhanging the trail and crouches there indistinct in mottled shadow. As El Regalo comes within range she springs. His horse screams and rears. El Regalo swings his carbine around to the leaping lioness and fires. The lioness roars with pain and bounds away up the mountain. El Regalo quickly strides up the trail to where he'd shot the animal, examines the rocks and finds blood. He follows the blood trail to a cave.

INT. CAVE. DAY.

He enters cautiously, carbine raised and cocked. He's baffled by a glow of light deep in the interior of the cave. He advances silently. He's amazed.

Deep within the cave is another chamber. Not the den of an animal as he may have expected but a square, smoke-blackened room lined with human bones and skulls set in serried ranks around the walls, a fire glowing dully in the middle of the floor. Dead lizards and snakes and grubby packages hang from the smoke-blackened ceiling. Squatting by the fire on an animal skin, the old crone nursing a bloody wound in her upper arm. She sobs and whimpers with the pain.

El Regalo crosses the chamber, grabs the crone by the hair, jabs his carbine into her neck. She screams.

OLD CRONE

Let me go! Let me go I am dying!

EL REGALO

My hand! What did you see?

He pulls her hair tighter. She screams.

OLD CRONE

You're cursed!!!! That's what I saw.

I saw you are cursed!!

EL REGALO

Cursed? What do you mean cursed?

He pulls her hair even harder. She screams again, bites his hand and springs away from him into a corner of the room. She spits at him. He advances on her.

OLD CRONE

Keep away from me!!

EL REGALO

Tell me!

OLD CRONE

All right you fool! I tell you! I tell you!

You're cursed to kill your father and fuck your mother.

How about that???

What you think of that then???

El Regalo is stopped in his tracks. The crone enjoys his confusion and discomfort.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE NIGHT.

As if in a nightmare El Regalo gallops across a tormented countryside through fields of raging, swirling corn towards Eloi's house.

EXT. ELOI'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

Thundering along, El Regalo draws his carbine. Eloi come out the house wondering what all the commotion is about and El Regalo, standing in his stirrups, charges at him, shooting him several times as he rides past. Eloi falls bloody to the ground. Maria and Pilar, alarmed at the sound of gunfire, rush from the house. They run to Eloi's prone, body as El Regalo spins his horse around and charges down on them firing repeatedly.

INT. THE CRONE'S HOUSE. DAWN

El Regalo lies unconscious on the floor. He stirs and slowly sits up. Looks around the room. The fire is out. He's alone. The door is banging, swinging open and closed in the early morning wind.

El Regalo staggers out of the house and throws up. He finds his horse, drags himself into the saddle and slowly rides off.

EXT. A HILL OVERLOOKING ELOI'S HOUSE. SUNRISE.

El Regalo rides to the rim of the hill and pauses. His face haggard, his eyes hollow from the previous night's experience. He looks down at his home.

Diminutive in the landscape, Eloi comes out of the house in pants and undershirt, stretches and yawns in the warmth of the early morning sun. Goes to the well and draws water.

Maria comes to the door sweeping the doorstep. She props the broom against the door and walks out onto the patio.

She stares into the distance. Eloi puts down the bucket and joins her, puts his arm around her. Pilar comes out in her nightdress. The three of them stand for some moments looking off into the distance. Maria picks up the broom and goes back inside. A trickle of smoke rises from the chimney. Eloi picks up the bucket, looks around again before disappearing back inside the house with Pilar.

El Regalo. overcome by this simple scene, tears form in his eyes. He wheels the stallion around and rides slowly away into the mountains to the north.

INT. ELOI'S HOUSE. DAY.

Eloi, Maria and Pilar. Maria stands by the window gazing out as if expecting someone. Eloi wanders the room, head bowed in thought.

PILAR

What could have happened to him?

ELOI

I thought you'd be able to tell us.

Why didn't he return with you?

MARIA

Did you quarrel?

PILAR

Not at all. He was moody. He asked Gomez to see me home.

He said he wanted to be alone for a while.

MARIA

Why did he suddenly want to be alone?

It's not like him.

PILAR

It was that old woman. A fortune teller...

Eloi looks up. He ponders this development.

ELOI

A fortune teller?

Did she speak to him?

PILAR

Yes... well no.

I mean I don't know.

MARIA

Either she did or she didn't.

PILAR

She was going to then she started making excuses.
Said she was tired and had to go.

ELOI

What did he say? Was he angry?

PILAR

Just moody. He asked Gomez to see me home
then he left.

Eloi digests the information, his look of concern deepening. Maria looks at him perplexed.

MARIA

Where do you think he's gone?

ELOI

Wherever he is he'll be all right.
He knows how to take care of himself.

He turns to Pilar

I want you to come with me
to San Estobal and show me
where all this happened.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN. DAY.

It snows heavily. Huddled in a serape, staring aimlessly ahead, El Regalo rides up the mountain towards a snow-covered pass. He has three days growth of beard, snow mounts on his sombrero and shoulders as he battles upwards towards the pass.

The pass behind him, he descends towards the timber line. Snow turns to rain. He rides through dripping forests.

EXT. A FOREST CLEARING. NIGHT.

The stallion tethered, El Regalo lies at the foot of a great mesquite, saddle and harness strewn carelessly around him. His dark ringed eyes stare hopelessly into a small smoky fire.

EXT. SCRUB DESERT. HIGH NOON.

El Regalo, face wasted, cheeks sunken and bearded, half hidden in the deep shadow of his sombrero. His clothes and harness filthy.

The sun is setting as he rides out of the desert into hills that roll down to a broad, shallow river. In the distance beyond the river, rise hills of red rock and behind them mesas topped by friendly puffy white clouds.

EXT. RED ROCK HILLS. DAY.

John Pickles sits motionless among the rocks watching El Regalo's progress. Pickles has not changed at all from the person he was more than twenty years ago, ageless and timeless.

We take off and glide effortlessly towards the river. We make broad lazy circles high above El Regalo, hardly able to hold himself in the saddle, as he reaches the bank of the river. He slowly fords the river, mounts the far bank and stops. He slides from the saddle. As his feet touch the ground his legs give way and he sinks to his knees, body slumping forward. He is motionless as if in prayer.

A buzzard circles around him, landing twenty paces away perched on a rock watching him.

INT. ISRAEL VAN DAM'S RANCH HOUSE. SUNSET.

Rachel, now an old maid, finishes lighting the lamps and sits with Ma and Luna by the fire. Ma is very old, swaddled in a blanket. Luna, about thirty-four has grown into the

dark beauty promised by her youth tempered by an almost masculine hardness. The three women are dressed in black. They sit in silence.

RACHEL

You shouldn't torture yourself year after year like this.
And us too. It ain't right.
Whoever heard of anyone keeping a death-day?
It ain't Christian. Let the dead bury the dead
and be done with it.

LUNA

Ain't no one gonna forget what happened here
twenty years ago today. Not no one.
Y'dried up old spinster!
What would you know about losing a child?

RACHEL

Ma? You gonna let her talk to me like that?

MA

Shut up Rachel. Go put up the soup.

Rachel leaves in a huff.

MA (cont'd)

She's right y' know.
Y' shouldn't torture y'self like this
Life's too short.

LUNA

If only there'd been a grave Ma
I could've satisfied my grief.
Now I need 'memberance to satisfy my hate.

INT. THE KITCHEN. NIGHT.

The family at table eating dinner. Israel at the head flanked by Jake and Zack. Age has not dealt kindly with either Israel or his brothers. Their faces have fleshed out, their hair receding and grey, their paunches overflow their gun belts and strain at their shirt buttons. Ma sits at the other end of the table flanked by Rachel and Luna. The men eat noisily, slurping soup and guzzling beer. Israel pushes his plate away, sucks his teeth.

ISRAEL

Jes' look at 'em. Three crows in a row
and not a brood hen among 'em.

Jake and Zack guffaw. Luna glares at them. Rachel fidgets, Ma ignores them.

JAKE

I dunno. I think they look mighty purty in black.
Hey Rache! That black stuff your wearin's
got me stirring in ma britches.
Come on over an' sit on ma lap.

Rachel gets up and hurriedly leaves the table. The men guffaw and drink more beer.

ISRAEL

We cain't bring your little one back
but we can as sure as hell make another jes' like him.
Yeah. You do look mighty purty in black.
Wha' dya say Luna?

MA

Shame on yer Israel. May God forgive yer.

ISRAEL

Shut it Ma! I ain't offerin' you no favors!

It's Luna I'm addressin'.

Luna eyes him coldly.

LUNA

I told you twenty years ago.

Lay a hand on me ever agin

I'll take a knife to yer while yer asleep.

Luna helps Ma to her feet and they leave the room. The men watch them go, Israel suddenly sullen.

JAKE

Why dya take that shit?

If she was mine...

Israel slams his beer mug on the table.

ISRAEL

She ain't yorn!!!

Kitchen door opens and Seth enters. Like the others he's older, greyer but still a fine figure of a man and recognizable by his eye patch. His other eye takes in the scene. He's cool.

SETH

Evenin' all.

ISRAEL

What kept ya?

Seth helps himself to soup, brings it to the table, sits.

SETH

One o' them heifers got out
the pen. Took all day t' find him.

He slurps up the soup.

SETH (cont'd)

Anyone see them riders this mornin'?

ISRAEL

Riders?

JAKE

Yeah. We saw em.

Me an' Ginzy up the back forty.

ISRAEL

Goddam! How come you didn't say?

How many was there?

SETH

I seed three.

JAKE

Yeah three. Me and Ginzy seed three.

ISRAEL

What did they want?

SETH

They was too far off for conversation.

JAKE

Yeah they was too far off.

I thought they was Indians first but they wasn't.

I hollered but they jes' rode off.

Ginzy thought they was up to no good.

ZACK

Maybe we should bring the herd in closer.

What yer think?

Thars no end of drifters these days...

JAKE

Thars only three on em. What we worried about?

ZACK

Maybe they was jes' connoiterin'...

checkin out the lay of the land.

Maybe thars more of em holed up somewheres

waiting t' hear which way the wind blows...

JAKE

Yer reckon?

ISRAEL

Won't hurt none t' bring the herdin closer.
What yer think Seth?

SETH

Wouldn't hurt none.

EXT. A CAMP BY THE RIVER. SUNRISE.

The sound of water gurgling and splashing over rocks. Birds call to each other. A white horse, tethered, is grazing amongst some trees. El Regalo lies prone beneath a poncho next to the ashes of a fire.

His face has aged, not so much with time as with experience. It's not just the growth of beard on his cheeks and chin, the softness has gone, there's a hardness around the eyes and mouth. His recent experience, the decisions he's had to make, have matured him from pretty boy into a man.

A shadow falls across his prone body. Two young Apaches, teenagers, mounted on ponies stare down at him. They calmly discuss in dialect what to do.

1ST APACHE

Is he dead?

2nd Apache dismounts. With knife drawn he cautiously approaches El Regalo's inert body. El Regalo's eyes open. Without energy to react defensively he gazes unseeing into the eyes of the young knife-wielding Apache..

1st APACHE (cont'd)

He's alive then.

2nd Apache nods, raises the knife.

2nd APACHE

He's one of them.. Shall I send
him to his ancestors?

1st Apache considers.

1st APACHE

Let me look.

He dismounts. Squats with his friend over El Regalo who, barely conscious, gazes up at them without comprehension. 1st Apache picks up El Regalo's rifle, examines his gun belt and pistol. He feels the textures of El Regalo's saddle.

1st APACHE (cont'd)

He's not one of them.

EXT. APACHE ENCAMPMENT. DAY

Set in the neck of a canyon, a dozen or so Tepees. Armed guards keep watch amongst the rocks high in the walls of the canyon. They watch the two young warriors bring El Regalo and his horse into the encampment. A small crowd gathers around them. Questions are asked.

2nd APACHE

He is not one of them.

El Regalo's limp body is lifted down and carried into a large tepee.

INT. TEPEE. DAY.

El Regalo lies on a blanket. Squatting next to him, an elderly woman.

Swaying back and forth she intones a song in dialect waving a bouquet of smoldering herbs above his head. El Regalo's nostrils quiver. He opens his eyes. The woman smiles.

El Regalo looks around the tepee. His clothes and weapons, cleaned, are spread around him. He turns to the woman.

EL REGALO

Where am I?

The woman doesn't understand his Spanish. She replies in dialect.

OLD WOMAN

You are safe. You have slept well
and now you need to eat.

You are all bones. We will fatten you up.

El Regalo unable to understand what she is saying is reassured by the tone of her voice.

EL REGALO

How long have I been here?

The woman nods and smiles.

OLD WOMAN

I have seen prairie dogs
with more meat on them than you.

She picks up a plate of food and starts to feed him.

INT. TEPEE. NIGHT.

El Regalo is wakened by the sounds of drumming and chanting. He raises himself slowly, listening.

EXT. THE ENCAMPMENT. NIGHT.

Men sit around a fire chanting and watching strangely clad, masked and painted 'Devil Dancers' gyrating around the fire.

El Regalo, haggard, unshaven, dressed in his clean clothes comes cautiously, unsteadily out of the tepee. He surveys the scene for a few moments then walks slowly towards the fire. He is still dazed as he seats himself expressionless amongst the audience of Apache men. They take little notice of him. The dance comes to an end, the audience gets to its feet and silently disperses.

An elderly man, the Chief, takes El Regalo by the arm. They sit again by the fire. The old man speaks to El Regalo in faltering Spanish.

CHIEF

We should be thanking the Spirit
for your return to health
but sadness is upon us.
Our nation has run its course in this world.
Whitemen are our pall bearers and no one mourns.

He pauses.

When my sons found you
they say you too were on your way.
I ask myself why does this young brave
wish to leave this world?
What is so heavy upon his heart?

EL REGALO

I have no wish to leave this world.
But it is true. My heart is heavy.

The old man pokes the fire. Silence.

CHIEF

You have ridden from far away.

El Regalo nods.

Have you no home?

El Regalo thinks about it.

EL REGALO

I had a home.

CHIEF

Was it not a good home?

El Regalo saddens.

EL REGALO

It was a good home.

The old man gives this some thought.

CHIEF

I ask myself why does a young man

leave a good home?

Is there something else

from which he tries to escape?

El Regalo finds difficulty in answering. He shrugs, hangs his head.

EL REGALO

Something like that.

El Regalo sighs.

I must soon be on my way again.

The old man warms his hands at the fire. Pokes it around.

CHIEF

You should stay a while.

Regain your strength.

Your fate will wait for you.

El Regalo nods.

EXT. ELOI'S HOUSE. DAY.

A winter landscape. Beyond the fields of withered cornstalks rise hills and beyond them the snow covered Sierras. Eloi, wrapped in a heavy poncho, leans against the bars of the empty corral gazing at the mountains.

INT. ELOI'S HOUSE. SAME DAY.

Eloi and Maria sit by the fire drinking coffee. They are in cheerless mood.

MARIA

How much longer are you going to wait?

ELOI

How many times do I have to tell you?

He's all right. I know it.

He can take care of himself.

MARIA

Why doesn't he let us know?

He could have sent word.

I'm afraid. So afraid.

She breaks down in tears. Eloi tries to comfort her. Pilar comes into the room distressed by Maria's sobbing.

PILAR

What is it Mama?

Pilar and Eloi try to comfort her. Eloi sits back with a great sigh.

ELOI

Pilar there are things you don't know about.

Things that happened before you were born to us.

Pilar is curious.

PILAR

Things? To do with my brother?

ELOI

Yes. Things I haven't even told your mother.

Maria looks askance at Eloi. He takes her hand.

El Regalo is not our natural son.

Pilar is amazed.

PILAR

Not my brother? Of course he is.
What are you trying to tell me?

ELOI

He's not your brother by blood.
Your mother and I are not his natural parents.
We adopted him. Do you understand?

Pilar digests the information. Sad at first, she shrugs.

PILAR

Why have you waited so long to tell me this?

ELOI

I tell you this now because I think
he has gone in search of his real parents.
It's only natural.
That fortune teller that day in San Estobal
must have told him something.
These old Cueranderas are very smart
when it comes to knowing about such things.

Still tearful. Maria looks at Eloi with reproach.

MARIA

You told me his parents were dead.

Eloi stares into the fire.

ELOI

I thought it would be easier.

MARIA

So? Who are his parents?

ELOI

I never met them. It was a strange circumstance.

For whatever reason they did not want him.

I offered to take him.

MARIA

How much longer are you going to wait

before you go look for him?

ELOI

As soon as the pass is clear.

I'll sew the corn and leave

as soon as the pass is clear.

Silence. Pilar deep in thought.

PILAR

I'm coming with you.

EXT. APACHE ENCAMPMENT. DAY. The camp is alive with young braves on horseback whooping and hollering as El Regalo, now his former self, prepares to leave. He bids farewell to their chief. The chief embraces him.

CHIEF

Go well my son.

EL REGALO

Stay well father.

El Regalo mounts up, waves to the Chief and his squaws and rides, surrounded by the jubilant braves, out of the camp. The braves rein in and watch El Regalo gallop out of the canyon into the vastness of desert.

EXT. THE VAN DAM RANCH HOUSE. SUNSET.

Israel, his brothers and Seth sit drinking silently on the veranda gazing out at the ranch land. They are in their work clothes, sweaty from the day's labour. Seth breaks the silence. He murmurs.

SETH

There they are.

ISRAEL

What?

SETH

Them three.

Seth nods in the direction of the hills beyond the stream. The others look.

Three horsemen small on the hill on the horizon. One of them raises his arm, another twenty horsemen come into view. He leads them at a steady gait, down the hill towards the stream.

JAKE

Shit!

ZACK

Didn't I tell ya?

The brothers get to their feet.

ISRAEL

Sit down!

He turns calmly to Seth.

ISRAEL (Cont'd)

Get the rest of the boys.

Bring scatter guns and some rifles.

Move slow.

Seth moves off. Israel coolly watches the advancing horsemen.

EXT. THE HORSEMEN. SAME TIME.

Comancheros. Anglos, Mexicans, Indians. A scurvy-looking bunch, each of them an individual expression of carelessness and cruelty. Their leader, DONOVAN, a longhaired Anglo, a brace of pistols in his belt, flanked on one side by another Anglo, KURT, squint-eyed and burly, and, on the other side, by an expressionless, bare-footed Apache, JOHNNY NOT AFRAID, wearing a military tunic, medals and all.

KURT

Bet they got women down there.

The Apache gives him a scornful look.

DONOVAN

Your dick'll be the fuckin' death of you.

I ain't seed no women but I seed men with guns.

You'd better pay attention to business

or you might jes' get that fuckin' pecker o' yourn
shot right off.

KURT

They cain't be no more 'n six of em.

What y' afraid of? Let's git to it.

What ya say Johnny? Y'fuckin' savage...

Johnny Not Afraid ignores him. Kurt resents his superior attitude. They splash across the stream.

DONOVAN

Leave the talkin' to me. Understood?

Don't no one move till I give the signal.

The horsemen come up the path to the ranch house at a walk. Donovan halts them ten paces from the veranda.

EXT. VERANDA. SAME TIME.

Israel sits alone on the veranda sipping whisky, a shotgun across his lap. Donovan, smiling, rides closer to the veranda. Israel cocks the shotgun.

ISRAEL

That's far enough!

Donovan reins in his horse, his lieutenants close behind him.

DONOVAN

Evenin' t' ya.

ISRAEL

Yo're trespassin' my land!

Donovan looks around to see if Israel has any back-up.

DONOVAN

Jes' passin' through. We're on our way t' California
and runnin' short on a few things.
Thought we might buy fresh horses
and victuals from yer...

Israel spits.

ISRAEL

We ain't no general store.
We ain't got nuthin' t' sell.

Donovan sees the curtain move in the window behind Israel. Luna's face indistinct in the shadow. Behind Donovan, Johnny Not Afraid sniffs the air. Kurt, restless, has seen the woman in the window and his hand is already stroking his crotch. Donovan, eyes darting this way and that, smiles. Tension is high.

DONOVAN

Well then... guess we'll be movin' along.

KURT

Fuck you Donovan. I ain't movin' no where...

He draws his pistol. A shot rings out and Kurt is dead, a bullet between the eyes. His body falls to the ground. Israel is on his feet menacing Donovan with the shotgun. Israel's men armed with rifles and shotguns appear from around corners, from behind the chimney stack on the roof and from behind trees.

Jake and Zack armed with rifles join Israel on the veranda.

The horsemen are shocked and waiting for Donovan's order. Scared by the shotgun aimed at him, Donovan holds up his hand, recomposes himself, grins.

DONOVAN

Oi' Kurt w's always in such a danged hurry.

He wheels his horse and rides slowly back to the bunch. They're tense, their horses skittish. Donovan cocks his head towards Kurt's body. Two of the bunch load Kurt's body across his saddle. Donovan grins at Israel and rides away followed by Johnny Not Afraid and the rest of the bunch.

Israel and his men watch them ride away down the path, across the stream and up into the hills. Seth breaks open his pistol, ejects a single spent cartridge and replaces it with a fresh round from his belt. The men rib him and slap him on the back.

INT. RANCH HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Luna stands at the window holding back the curtain watching Israel and the men caterwauling outside. Her hard, beautiful face is set in concern. She lets the curtain drop.

SUPER: AGUA DULCE, ARIZONA

EXT. MAIN STREET. DAY.

There's very little activity on the mid-morning main street of the town. A few old men sit on verandas playing dominoes or whittling wood. A chambermaid hangs linen out of a window in the hotel. An elderly Mexican is sweeping out a store onto the dusty sidewalk. He pauses, looking down the street. Takes a cigarette butt from behind his ear and lights it. He's watching El Regalo riding into town.

As El Regalo rides down the street everyone stops what they are doing to watch him. The Mexican takes the cigarette out of his mouth and waves to him as he approaches. He greets him in Spanish.

MEXICAN

Good day young man!

El regalo reins in his horse.

EL REGALO

Good day to you sir.

A fine town you have here.

The Mexican looks down the street at the watching townsfolk.

MEXICAN

Some might say so.

EL REGALO

You live here?

MEXICAN

Twenty years or more – if you can call it living.

Why do you leave Mexico?

If I had known

what it was going to be like here

I would never have left.

There's nothing here for us.

Go home. Get married.

El Regalo laughs.

EL REGALO

Perhaps you can help me. I'm looking for work;

not here in the town - a ranch perhaps?

I work well with horses and cattle.

MEXICAN

You are of course crazy. Loco.

No one will hire a Mexican in these parts.

The Gringos call us Greasers.

They think we are either lazy or bandits.

Anyway there's no work like that around here.

The nearest spread is the Van Dam ranch

and he's never hired a Mexican yet.

EL REGALO

Is it far?

MEXICAN

A day's ride.

But you'll be wasting your time.

EL REGALO

Which direction?

MEXICAN

North north. North. Take the bridge just follow the trail.

EL REGALO

Thank you for your kindness sir.

Stay with God.

MEXICAN

Go with God.

El Regalo salutes the old man and rides on. The old man relights his cigarette butt and watches him go.

EXT. THE VAN DAM RANCH. SUNSET.

Across the landscape drovers can be seen returning from their day's work.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE YARD. EVENING.

Israel's coach is being made ready for a journey.

INT. RANCH HOUSE KITCHEN. SAME TIME.

Luna and Israel are alone. Israel in his best clothes sits at table loading a pistol from a box of shells. He drinks from a jug of whisky. Luna glares out the window at the activity in the yard. She is anxious, unsure of herself.

LUNA

How long you aim to be gone?

Israel looks up in mock surprise.

ISRAEL

Talkin' t' me?

He looks around the empty room demanding it bear witness.

ISRAEL (cont'd)

This some kind of occasion?

You wanna know how long I'll be gone?

Why the hell should you suddenly care?

He slides shells into the empty chambers of his pistol and slams it shut. Luna is having difficulty getting to the point of what's really on her mind. She's reluctant to converse with Israel but the need is pressing.

LUNA

Them Comancheros...

Israel looks up.

ISRAEL

What about 'em?

LUNA

Ain't heard no mention of 'em these past few days.
I was wonderin'...

Israel spins the chamber of his pistol and jams it in his belt.

ISRAEL

... if they'll be back?
I doubt it. I scared the shit out of 'em.
They won't be back. You can bet on it.

Luna bursts into anger.

LUNA

I know you don't care about me
but what about Ma and that idiot sister of yorn?
The rest of the women and children?

Israel corks the jug he's been drinking from. Carrying it with him he goes to the door. He concedes gruffly to Luna's concern.

ISRAEL

Bart and his boys'll look after the place while I'm gone.
if them Comancheros do come acallin'
I hope they have better luck wit yer
than I've had these twenty years!

He slams out.

EXT. THE YARD. SAME TIME.

Everyone's waiting, Jake at the coach door, shotgun over his shoulder, Zack on the buckboard reins in hand, Seth and four others mounted. Israel gets into the coach whisky jug dangling from a finger. Jake closes the door, Israel nods, Jake clambers up to the

buckboard and Zack cracks the whip. Bart and a few disappointed young hands watch the departure.

INT. KICHEN. SAME TIME.

Luna anxious at the window watches the entourage roll out of the yard, down the trail and across the stream. She watches it climb into the hills until it's lost in its own dust and the gathering gloom of evening. She takes a shotgun from the wall and loads it.

EXT. RED ROCK COUNTRY. DAY.

The ageless John Pickles leans comfortably against a rock appearing to doze in the warm sunshine. His eyes open, he squints into the distance. Far off, making his way across a flat deserted landscape, a lone horseman.

Birdlike, we take off and float in his direction. We circle lazily above him. It is El Regalo. He looks up at us for a moment, then ignores us and rides on.

He rides out of the flat desert into a terrain of rocky hills. The trail leads him down to a river spanned by a simple wooden bridge wide enough for no more than two horsemen. He rides onto the bridge. He's about half way across when Israel's coach and outriders round a bend on the far side of the river and race on coming to a halt the other side of the bridge.

INT. ISRAEL'S COACH. SAME TIME.

Israel is drunk and dozing. He opens his eyes realising the coach has come to a halt. He shouts angrily up to Zack.

ISRAEL

I didn't give no order t' stop.

Seth leans down from his horse to the coach window.

SETH

We're at the bridge. Someone's comin' across.
Ain't room fer us till he's crossed.

ISRAEL

Damn yer eyes Seth!
You givin' th' orders now?
Get this damn rig movin'.

El Regalo is about two thirds of the way across. Israel's outriders and coach roll somewhat hesitantly onto the bridge and advance towards him. Surprised by their behaviour El Regalo reins in his stallion. The two outriders in front of the coach rein up a few feet from him, Seth in the rear standing in his stirrups straining to see what's happening in front. El Regalo remains perfectly still and impassive. The outriders in front are apologetic.

1ST OUTFIDER

We have a problem. Comprende?
It's our boss. Had a tad too much t' drink...

2ND OUTFIDER

The condition he's in it'll be
lot less trouble fer everyone if yer...

Israel sticks his head out of the coach.

ISRAEL

A fuckin' Greaser! Goddamn yer eyes!!!
Ride on!!!

Zack exchanges glances with Jake. Jake yells at El Regalo.

JAKE

Go back kid we're comin' through.
Whip 'em up Zack!

Zack shrugs and touches the whip to the horses.

1ST OTRIDER

Hold on there Zack...

Israel pulls his gun, leans out the window and cocks it. Jake cocks his shotgun. There's confusion between the men at the front and those behind. Tension rises, the horses skittish.

2ND OTRIDER

Hold on a minute...

El Regalo doesn't turn a hair. Israel glares along the bridge at him. There's a moment of hesitation... he levels the pistol. El Regalo's first bullet strikes Israel square in the forehead killing him instantly. Almost simultaneously he kills Jake then Zack as he goes for his gun. The front-riders hesitate then go for their guns and El Regalo dispatches them equally as coolly. Seth and the outriders at the rear turn tail. El Regalo draws his carbine, kills two of them as they flee but only manages to wound Seth who races out of view before El Regalo can take another shot at him. The deafening echoes around the canyon of the few seconds of shooting disturb a buzzard. It floats around high above the bridge.

El Regalo dismounts, ejects the spent shells from his guns and reloads them. He examines the carnage, releases the horses; they trot happily across the bridge and away. He puts his shoulder to the coach rocking it on its springs until it tumbles off the bridge, then mounts up and rides at a steady gait off the bridge and back onto the trail.

EXT. VAN DAM RANCH HOUSE. LATE AFTERNOON.

Up on the roof a sixteen year old boy, BILLY, hollers excitedly.

BILLY

Thar's a rider comin' in Miss Luna!

Miss Luna? D'ya hear? Thars a rider comin' in.

Luna comes quickly onto the veranda, shotgun in hand. She peers into the distance. A lone rider is making his way slowly down the hillside and across the stream. Luna yells to Billy.

LUNA

Go get your Pa! Be quick boy!

The boy slides down the roof, jumps to the ground and scampers off to one of the other houses on the ranch. Luna comes down off the veranda, shotgun cocked. Billy and his dad, BART carrying a rifle, followed by Bart's wife ELLIE and the wives and kids of other ranch hands, come running out to see what all the commotion is about.

Seth, almost falling from the saddle is riding slowly up the path towards them. Luna grabs the bridle of his horse. Bart lowers Seth to the ground, his shirt soaked in blood, his face ashen. Luna kneels by his side. Seth's one eye looks at her recognizing her. He tries to smile.

LUNA (cont'd)

What happened Seth?

Who done this to you?

Where are the others?

Seth groans, coughs, catches his breath.

SETH

All dead...

She can't believe her ears.

LUNA

Dead?

BART

Jeezus! All of 'em?

LUNA

Israel?

Seth nods.

BART

Who done it?

Seth's eye shifts around avoiding Luna's eyes.

SETH

Them danged Comancheros.

He slumps unconscious.

EXT. THE BRIDGE. DAY

The Comancheros are lined up, Donovan and Johnny Not Afraid to the fore, all looking with amazement and curiosity at the remains of Israel's party scattered all over the bridge, the coach halfway in the river.

DONOVAN

Well fuck my boots.

Jus' look what t'day brings.

They dismount and walk amongst the bodies and inspect the coach. Johnny Not Afraid, still barefoot, inspects the boots on various bodies. Others search pockets for money, tobacco, looking inside mouths for gold, at fingers for rings. Donovan clammers down on the wreck of the coach. Israel's dead and bloody face stares up at him from inside. Donovan grins, opens the door, leans in and rifles Israel's pockets. He finds a watch on a gold chain and pockets it.

He takes Israel's whisky jug, shakes it, smiles. He clammers with it back onto the bridge. Everyone's in a good mood. He passes the jug around. Donovan addresses his followers.

DONOVAN (cont'd)

Ain't I bin sayin' all along
it's high time we settled down?

Greeted by guffaws.

DONOVAN (cont'd)

Well it looks like we got ourseln a rancho!
Let's move on in!!

Everyone slaps thighs, whoops and fires pistols in the air. The whisky jug empty, they mount up whooping and hollering and shooting, gallop across the bridge and up the trail that leads to the Van Dam ranch.

INT. RANCH KITCHEN. EARLY MORNING.

Seth, his arm in a sling, looking much more alive than dead, hungrily slurps food. Ma sits by the stove, Rachel washes dishes. Luna tosses a flattened bullet on the table by Seth's plate.

LUNA

Thought you was a gonner.

Seth picks up the bullet and examines it.

SETH

I'm mighty grateful Miss Luna

RACHEL

I cain't believe Israel's gone.
I jes' can't believe it. I jes' cain't.

SETH

He's gone all right Miss Rachel.

LUNA

And good riddance!

RACHEL

You bitch! D'you hear that Ma?
How can you say that about Israel!
Did ya hear what she said Ma?

MA

Hold on t' yer draws Rachel!
He had it comin'. I told him so often enough.
It was writ.

Seth shifts his eye to Ma, finishes his food and sits back.

LUNA

Let the dead bury the dead.
Ain't that what y' say Rachel?
Right now our problem is stayin' alive.
Won't take them murderous scum long
t' put two and two together.
What you think Seth?

Seth's eye wanders around while he tries to grasp the situation.

SETH

Yeah. Uh huh. Yeah.
Them Comancheros'll be comin'....

LUNA

What should be our plan?

SETH

Plan?

LUNA

Come on man! Pull y'self together!

They must think we're easy pickin's
now Israel's gone.

Seth stumbles through the confusion of thoughts in his mind

SETH

Yeah. Guess y'r right.

They're interrupted by young Billy shouting from the roof outside.

BILLY O.S.

Miss Luna! Miss Luna!

A rider! A rider...

Luna grabs the shotgun and hurries outside. Seth's eye is going overtime, trying to figure out what's going on. He goes to the window. Sees El Regalo riding up the path to the house. Seth grabs his hat and gun belt. Seth goes to the door. Rachel is totally confused.

RACHEL

Where y' goin'?

Seth's in a hurry.

SETH

Now Israel's gone...

well there ain't no place f'r me now Miss Rachel

Rachel's hysterical.

RACHEL

What about them Comancheros?

SETH

That's what I mean. Miss Luna's right.

They'll be comin'. Ain't no one-eyed one-arm man
and a bunch o' women and children
gonna stop 'em. I'm fer gittin'.

If you take my advice you'll git too.

He leaves. Rachel runs to the back window just in time to see him mount up and high-tail it away as if the Devil was after him. Rachel starts snivelling. Turns to Ma.

RACHEL

Ma? What's goin' on?

Ma is asleep, snoring gently.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Luna watches the approaching horseman with curiosity. She lowers the hammers of the shotgun. El Regalo rides into the yard, self-assured and handsome. He glances at Billy on the roof and various armed men and women emerging from behind trees and buildings. He rides up to Luna on the veranda, reins in front of her. He's charmed by her beauty.

EL REGALO

Good day Senora.

It seems you are expecting someone.

LUNA

Who are you?

EL REGALO

May I get down?

LUNA

What's yer name. Where you from?

He dismounts and offers his hand.

EL REGALO

I'm called El Regalo.

Luna admires his good looks as she shakes his hand.

LUNA

What kinda name is that?

EL REGALO

It's Spanish. It means the gift.

He grins shyly. Luna smiles. She's charmed by this handsome young stranger. The bitterness of the past seems to lift from her. She becomes uncharacteristically more feminine, a woman responding to a man.

LUNA

The gift? Hmmm.

Any ways... howdy. I'm Luna.

EL REGALO

Luna.

LUNA

Luna.

EL REGALO

A beautiful name.

She's charmed.

LUNA

I kinda like it.

EL REGALO

In my language Luna means the Moon.

The attraction between them has taken them both by surprise.

A small crowd of men, women and children have drifted around them curious to see the handsome young stranger.

LUNA

You may as well come on in.

You can wash up

and I'll get yer somethin' t' eat.

INT. KITCHEN. LATER.

Luna serves food to El Regalo. Rachel watches them suspiciously. Ma sleeps on peacefully by the stove. Luna looks around for Seth.

LUNA

Where's Seth?

RACHEL

Gone.

LUNA

Watcha mean gone?

RACHEL

Jes' lit off. He ain't nuthin' but yellin'!

Leavin' us an' the children t' fend fer ourseln.

LUNA

That bastard!

Did he say where he was goin'?

RACHEL

Didn't give time to say nothin'.

Jes' lit off like th' devil w's on his tail.

The minute you mentioned them Comancheros

he was gone. That's what set him off.

If he'd been anything of a man...

She bursts into tears. Luna sits down, deflated.

EL REGALO

Is that who you're expecting?

Comancheros?

LUNA

A bunch of 'em bin hangin' around f'r some time.

Tried their luck down here a few days ago.

One of em got killed.

LUNA (cont'd)

Guess they waited around f'r a chance to get revenged.
Bushwhacked 'em and killed 'em all.
It figures they'll come f'r us next.

El Regalo goes to the window. The news of the deaths of all the menfolk makes him uneasy. It's too close to his recent experience on the bridge for his comfort. But the threat of an attack by Comancheros preoccupies him. He goes outside onto the veranda with Luna determined to defend her. He appraises the lie of the land.

EL REGALO

If you're right we don't have much time.

LUNA

There's more than twenty of 'em.

EL REGALO

I need dynamite and kerosene.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE. DAY.

Bunched together, the Comancheros gallop hard across the countryside whooping and hollering. They string out in a line, racing each other, Donovan in the lead, Johnny Not Afraid not far behind. They lead the bunch down the hill towards the Van Dam ranch, splashing across the stream,

climbing the bank on the other side. Donovan's horse is spooked. He struggles to keep it under control. Johnny Not Afraid and the rest, horses sweating and breathless, rein in alongside him. They look apprehensively towards the ranch house.

The ranch is completely still and silent. No sign of human or animal life. No smoke from chimneys.

The Comancheros exchange anxious glances, disturbed by the unexpected stillness. The horses are skittish. Bridles jangle, leather creaks noisily in the silence.

INT. HAYLOFT. SAME TIME.

El Regalo lays prone in the shadow, motionless, with a rifle cocked and raised. Luna squats beside him with several loaded rifles ready to pass to him. He takes aim.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE. SAME TIME.

The Comancheros overcome the sense of foreboding that had overwhelmed them. They start to grin and shout to each other. Donovan sensing their renewed confidence draws his pistol.

DONOVAN

Well? What we waitin' f'r?

Three rifle shots ring out in swift succession, each one exploding each of three dynamite-wrapped drums of kerosene planted in the far bank of the stream. The kerosene ignited by the exploding dynamite is flung all over the place, the stream becoming an instant wall of fire behind the Comancheros. Before Donovan has time to react, the next bullet strikes him full in the chest killing him instantly and throwing the rest of the bunch into panic and confusion. They ride every which way to avoid the bullets and the flames.

INT. HAYLOFT. SAME TIME.

El Regalo mercilessly picks off one man after another. Luna watches in awe as she hands him one loaded rifle after another. Some of the Comancheros try to escape his deadly aim by braving the fire and perish. Only the horses are left alive, grazing upstream.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE. SUNSET.

The raging fire has reduced bushes and trees around the stream to smoking skeletons. The dead lay in the burned grass or float in the shallow water. El Regalo and Luna pick their way amongst the carnage. They pause over Donovan. He's wearing Israel's watch and chain across his vest.

LUNA

That's Israel's.

EL REGALO

You want it?

LUNA

What for?

I don't need no remembering.

EXT. THE MEADOW OUTSIDE THE HOUSE. NIGHT.

A victory celebration around a bonfire, everyone dancing, singing, having a good time. El Regalo and Luna dance together. There's little doubt, the way they dance, the way they hold each other's eyes, they are in love.

EXT. THE VAN DAM RANCH. DAY.

A hot airless morning. The landscape shimmers. Cattle crowd together immobile in the shade of dusty trees, tails flicking at flies. The grass is brown even around the dwindling stream. The muddy flats either side of its sluggish, brown water are baked dry and cracked. The paths and trails have turned to dust. A single buzzard circles lazily high above the ranch.

El Regalo and Bart ride slowly in the heat. Flies buzz, dust rises around them. El Regalo points out a calf trying to get to its feet. They ride across to it. Bart gets down to examine it, shakes his head, draws his pistol and shoots the dying calf. He mounts up and they ride on.

BART

That's seventeen jus' this week.

EL REGALO

Maybe we'll move the whole herd
until this drought is over.
Where's the nearest well?

BART

Ain't no well in a hundred miles.
Silver Spring's the nearest I know of
and we'd like as not lose the whole herd
tryin' t' get there.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE. DAY.

Luna swings a bucket down a well. She waits long and expectantly for it to hit the water. It's almost the full length of the rope. She pulls it up. The bucket's half empty and the water muddy. She hears a gunshot but pays no attention to it. She carries the bucket into the house.

INT. RANCH HOUSE KITCHEN. SAME TIME.

Ma, pale and drawn, eyes closed, mouth open, slumps wrapped in a shawl in her chair by the stove. Rachel sits at table, dirty crockery pushed to the side, playing some kind of solitaire. Luna strains the muddy water from the bucket into a pot and puts it on the stove. Ma talks almost in a whisper.

MA

I hear gunshots.
Must be them Comancheros agin.
Wait till Israel gets home.
He'll send 'em packin'.

Luna looks at Ma then glances impatiently at Rachel, engrossed in her card game. She has the cards set out face down in a circle. She turns them over slowly, one at a time.

LUNA

's all right Ma. Ain't no Comancheros.
No one here but you, me an' Rachel.

Turns to Rachel.

LUNA (cont'd)

I asked you t' clear the table and clean off them plates
before y' started with them damn cards.

Look at this mess!

She picks up a plate, ants scurry over stale bits of food. She drops it back on the table.

RACHEL

Don't fuss so. I'll do it in a minute.

She turns another card.

Now we're gettin' somewheres.

Now it all begins to make sense.

She turns another card over, studies it smiling knowingly as if the card has special significance. She frowns, biting her lip, Luna is losing patience.

LUNA

Dear Jesus...

Rachel looks up at Luna. Holds up a King card.

RACHEL

The king is dead. See?

A sword right through his head.

The King. That's Israel.

She turns another card. Queen of Spades. Holds it up for Luna to see.

That's you all dressed up in black
like yer do on death-days.

She turns another. A Knave.

RACHEL (cont'd)

That's Seth! See? Only one eye!
The yeller bellied sonofabitch.

MA

Is old Seth here?

LUNA

No Ma. Seth ain't here.
Here's a nice cuppa coffee t' warm yer bones.

She carefully puts the cup into Ma's hands.

MA

Y'r a good gal Luna.

RACHEL

Wouldn't ya know it?
Knave of Hearts! Luna's sweetheart.
All handsome young an' smilin'...
twirly little mustache an' all!

El Regalo walks through the open door. Dusting himself off he sits wearily at the table. Luna brings him coffee. She touches his cheek, he takes her hand. He addresses Rachel cheerfully.

EL REGALO

Any sign of rain in the cards today
miss Rachel?

Rachel looks at him suspiciously then down at the cards.

RACHEL

Nothin' 'bout no rain. Not about no rain.

She returns her attention to the cards.

LUNA

Did you check the herd? The cows 're dry.
There ain't much more than mud in the well.
Ain't bin like this in twenty years.

RACHEL

There weren't no drought 'til he come along.
Mayhap there'll be no rain 'til he's gone.

Embarrassed El Regalo gets to his feet and wanders to the window. Luna follows him, her arm around his waist.

EL REGALO

Maybe she's crazy - but what she
says is true. Everything was fine until I got here.

LUNA

Fine? If you hadn't got here when y' did
we'd all be dead or worse. And I'd have missed the
great love of my life.

She draws him close. He kisses her. Rachel giggles.

INT. LUNA'S BEDROOM. NIGHT.

Luna and El Regalo make love.

EXT. A STRANGE LANDSCAPE. DAY.

El Regalo rides dream-like across a white crystalline desert towards a bluff of purplish rocks. The sound of a hammer clinking against stone, faint at first, grows louder as he approaches the bluff. Riding through a passage in the rocks, he finds himself in a canyon, the hammering louder. Then it stops.

John Pickles sits among the rocks, a piece of rock in one hand, a hammer in the other. He examines the rock minutely, spits on it, rubs it with his sleeve, looks at it closely again then flings it away. He looks up at El Regalo.

JOHN PICKLES

Everyone's lookin' f'r somethin'.

Ain't that the truth?

He grins up at El Regalo.

What you lookin' f'r boy?

EL REGALO

I'm looking for Mister Pickles.

JOHN PICKLES

Well y' found 'im. What can I do f'r yer?

EL REGALO

They say you are a man of knowledge .

You understand the ways of nature.

JOHN PICKLES

Mayhap.

El Regalo dismounts, squats with the old man. John Pickles picks up another small rock, examines it, taps it with his hammer.

EL REGALO

I come from a ranch dying
for want of water. We...

JOHN PICKLES

I know where y'r from son.

He spits on the stone and rubs it.

Thar w's no water shortage
'til you comes along was there?

El Regalo shakes his head.

Y'see thars one 'r two things out o' kilter in the cosmosk...
Things left undone what should've been taken care of.

EL REGALO

Things?

JOHN PICKLES

Yeah. Things. Like Israel's death. His killer still ain't
been acknowledged. The cosmosk don't like that.

EL REGALO

Comancheros killed him. Everyone knows it.

JOHN PICKLES

Oh it was the Comancheros did it.
Was y' there? Did y' see?

EL REGALO

No...

JOHN PICKLES

Y' don't know for sure then?

EL REGALO

No. Not for sure.

The old man finds this amusing. El Regalo is growing impatient.

JOHN PICKLES

It weren't no danged Comancheros killt 'ím.
His true killer still ain't been acknowledged
and the cosmosk likes things acknowledged
all neat and tidied away.
If'n y' want rain first thing to do is find Israel's true killer.

El Regalo is non-plussed. He shrugs helplessly.

EL REGALO

Where would I look? I'm a stranger here...

Pickles interrupts, coughs, wheezes.

JOHN PICKLES

Not so much a stranger as y' think.

El Regalo gets to his feet, impatient.

EL REGALO

What are you getting at?
If you know who the killer is tell me.
I can go find him.

Pickles looks up at him. He can hardly talk for all his wheezing and chuckling.

JOHN PICKLES

It was you boy. You may not have known it.
It was you what killt 'em! Killt 'em on that bridge!
It was Israel y' killt and now y'r took up
with that woman of his.

He coughs and spits.

'Til yo'r gone from Van Dam's ranch
th'r won't be not one drop o' rain.
Not one drop 'til yo'r gone.
That's the way the cosmosk works son.

El Regalo is dumbfounded, horrified by the truth revealed and its implications.

INT. LUNA'S BEDROOM. NIGHT.

El Regalo twists and turns in his sleep, wakes with a start. Luna wakes and sleepily wraps her arms around him.

LUNA

Were y' dreamin' my sweet?

El Regalo's sweating.

EL REGALO

How did you know? How did you know it
was Comancheros killed Israel?

LUNA

What?

She shakes herself awake.

EL REGALO

Who told you it was
Comancheros killed him?

LUNA

Can't this wait 'til mornin'?

El Regalo shakes his head, still mystified. Luna, confused by his questioning, rubs her eyes trying to wake up.

LUNA (cont'd)

Seth. It were Seth told me. May he rot in hell.

EL REGALO

Who's Seth?

LUNA

Israel's top hand.

EL REGALO

Was he there when Israel got shot?
Did he actually see...

LUNA

What's this all about? Sure he saw.
Nearly got himself killt.
I took th' bullet out his shoulder.
He w's the only survivor outa th' whole lot.
What's got inter y'?
Why you suddenly interested in him?

El Regalo is fearful of the possibilities.

EL REGALO

Does he wear an eye patch?

Luna's surprised.

LUNA

That's the one. You know him?

El Regalo sinks his head into his hands. Luna, troubled, confused. Sits up in bed.

LUNA (cont'd)

Ain't y' gonna tell me what this is all about?

He gets out of bed and starts dressing.

EL REGALO

I've got to find him.

LUNA

Why?

EL REGALO

He's the only one knows for sure.

Luna is completely baffled.

LUNA

Knows what?

You're confusin' th' hell out a me...

EL REGALO

He's the only one that knows
who killed Israel.

Luna is out of bed, exasperated.

LUNA

We already know. Didn't he tell us?

EL REGALO

Where can I find him?

LUNA

Lord knows. Ask Bart. They're friendly.

She puts her arms around him fearful of the way things are happening.

Don't go...

EXT. MAIN STREET AGUA DULCE. DAY.

Weary and covered in dust Eloi and Pilar ride into town. they pause in front of a store, greeted by the old Mexican with a broom in his hand. We don't hear what they say to each other but it's clear Eloi is asking if he has seen El Regalo. It's also clear the old Mexican remembers him vividly and points in the direction he'd advised him to take. They thank him and follow his directions to the Van Dam ranch.

EXT. RED ROCK CANYON. DAY.

Eloi and Pilar ride down to the bridge spanning the river. Both cross themselves at the sight of the skeletal remains of men and the sun-bleached rotted coach. Something catches his eye. He dismounts and with a knife scoops a spent cartridge case from between planks. He examines it and pockets it. He mounts up and he and Pilar cross the bridge and follow the trail to the Van Dam ranch.

INT. A SHACK. DAY.

The shack is primitive, a cowboy's shelter. A stove, coffee pot, pan, table, chair and bed. Seth lies prone on the bed snoozing. Outside someone is shouting his name.

BART OS

Seth? Are you there Seth?

It's me. Bart.

Seth's eye flicks open. He swings himself off the bed, grabs a rifle and goes cautiously to the window. He sees Bart, on foot, clambering up the hill towards him.

BART (cont'd)

Seth? You there?

Seth holds himself out of sight.

SETH

Waddy want Bart?

BART OS

Thank the lord I found yer.
Can I come up?

Seth shows himself and the rifle at the window.

SETH

I prefer y' stay where y' are boy...

The door behind Seth flings open. El Regalo stands in the doorway, pistol drawn. Seth swings around. Fearful of El Regalo drops the rifle to the floor.

INT. RANCH HOUSE KITCHEN. DAY.

The kitchen in disarray, its routines forgotten. Seth is tied to a chair, head hanging, his one eye shifting nervously around the room. Ma is slumped by the stove barely breathing. Rachel, unconcerned, is doing the cards amid the dirty dishes on the table. Luna, beginning to show signs of strain, sits the other side of the table from Seth. El Regalo stands with his back to them looking out the window.

SETH

It's like he says miss Luna.
It was him shot every damn last one of us.

LUNA

Why did y' lie to us?
Why did y' say it was Comancheros?

Seth shrugs.

SETH

Don't sit well on a man. Eight of us killt by a young whippersnapper? No one would believe it.

EXT. VERANDA. SUNSET.

El Regalo and Luna contemplate the landscape.

LUNA

He was a pig. I'm glad it w's you killed him.

I love you.

I've never loved anyone in my life the way I love you.

He's slow to respond.

EL REGALO

I love you Luna but you can see I have to go.

She shakes her head.

LUNA

No. I don't see. We can go together.

I don't belong here. Take me with you.

He looks at her tenderly.

EL REGALO

What about Ma and Rachel?

LUNA

I cain't lose y' now. Let's go together.

He takes her in his arms. They kiss passionately. Something outside catches his attention. He frowns. Luna looks to see what's troubling him. Two riders are making their way slowly down the hill and across the dry bed of the stream. It's Eloi and Pilar.

El Regalo, mouth agape in disbelief, watches them approach. He unbuckles his gun belt letting it drop to the floor. Luna doesn't understand. He whispers to her, strangely, fearfully.

EL REGALO

My father and my sister.

She can't understand why he's so ill at ease. Eloi and Pilar rein in their horses. They, too are hesitant, unsure. El Regalo stays back half concealed in the shadows of the veranda.

ELOI

We've ridden a long way.

What kind of welcome is this?

EL REGALO

Just leave!

ELOI

We can't leave just like that.

What will I tell your mother?

Let's sit and talk this over.

You left us without so much as a word.

What got into you?

INT. KITCHEN. SAME TIME.

Seth pricks up his ears at the raised voices outside. He struggles to free himself. Rachel is absorbed in the cards. Ma hasn't moved for some time, perhaps not even breathing. Realizing who the visitors are he redoubles his efforts, manoeuvres himself to the table and grabs a knife and sets about sawing through his bonds.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Eloi dismounts. He can't fathom the cause of El Regalo's acute anxiety,

ELOI

We're tired and hungry.

Aren't you going to invite us...

He moves forward.

EL REGALO

Stay where you are!!

Eloi freezes. Luna is beyond comprehension. Pilar sits anxiously on her horse. The sun is low in the sky. Small clouds have begun to form on the horizon. Luna grabs El Regalo's arm.

LUNA

What's gotten into y'?

He ignores her.

EL REGALO

That day at the fiesta...

the fortune teller... the Cuerandera...

ELOI

We know.

EL REGALO

You know what she told me?

She said I was hexed!

Luna looks from Eloi to El Regalo. She feels her world is coming apart.

ELOI

You know what I think about such nonsense.
Be hexed if you want. We can still be friends.

EL REGALO

No. How can we be friends?
She said I'm going to kill you.

ELOI

Kill me? Why?

EL Regalo is exasperated.

EL REGALO

She said I was hexed to kill my father!
You are my father aren't you?

Eloi and Pilar exchange glances. Eloi with relief and urgency.

ELOI

No. I'm not your father.
Not your blood father.

A faint rumble of thunder. Clouds are building on the horizon. Everyone looks to the sky. No one notices Seth sidling out of the kitchen onto the veranda, creeping along to where the horses are tethered. El Regalo is baffled and going crazy.

EL REGALO

You're not my father?..
Then who is??

Another rumble of thunder. Luna sees Seth creeping off the veranda towards the horses. He puts a finger to his lips, his eye darting this way and that. Luna shrugs her indifference. Eloi sees Seth and tries to place where he's seen him before. He suddenly remembers as Seth dispenses with caution and makes a dash for a horse. Eloi recognizes him.

ELOI

Stop him. Stop that man! He knows!!

El Regalo takes a flying leap at Seth bringing him to the ground. Eloi runs to help. Seth is terrified face to face with Eloi. He snarls.

SETH

Goddamn! I warned y' mister...

This would be the blackest of days.

ELOI

He knows. He can tell you who your father is.

El Regalo puts a strangle hold on Seth and squeezes. Luna backs away, the full horror of the truth begins to dawn on her.

SETH

Ease up will ya... Ease up...

El Regalo relaxes his grip. Seth breathes more easily, his eye shifting back and forth between Eloi and El Regalo. He capitulates.

Yeah yeah. Israel w's yer father
and ya killt him like it was foretold.

El Regalo drops Seth. A heavier rumble of thunder as the sky begins to darken. In a daze, El Regalo stumbles towards Eloi, sinks to the ground. Eloi embraces him, comforts him. A lick of wind raises the dust. Pilar dismounts and runs to them. El Regalo is inconsolable.

EL REGALO

What have I done?

What have I done...

Luna, stunned, fully realizes the truth. It's more than she can bear. She retreats into the house. Through windows, Rachel can be seen going from room to room setting fire to the curtains. A few spots of rain explode in the dust. El Regalo looks around for Luna. He screams her name. He runs towards the house.

EL REGALO

Luna!!!

People are running out of their houses, jubilant at the thunder and impending rain. The tinder-dry ranch house is suddenly ablaze from top to bottom. People rally around but without water there's nothing they can do. El Regalo and Eloi mount the veranda but the flames beat them back. There's a gunshot from inside the blazing house.

The wind is whipping up, the sky dark. An immense flash of lightening and a simultaneous explosion of thunder brings on the rain.

The ranch folk are jubilant, the children dance and sing as the storm grows, the countryside around lit by lightening and shaken by claps of thunder. Seth, unnoticed, mounts up and rides away.

Eloi helps El Regalo into the saddle of the white stallion.

ELOI

Vamosos.

El Regalo nods. He, Eloi and Pilar ride away from the ranch. The rain is torrential. In the direction they are headed there's a break in the cloud at the horizon and the last of the setting sun.

END

© Malcolm Hart