

THE CHINA HORSE

By

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INT. GUEST BATHROOM – SUBURBAN CHICAGO HOME (MID-1990S) – DAY

In a medicine cabinet mirror, LEXIE ANDERSON (15) frowns at her blue-streaked punk hair. She tries to tame it from anarchy into simple rebellion, though only she knows the difference. Her thrift shop 1930s-style party dress and cheap plastic sandals contrast sharply with her wild mane.

After struggling for a moment with an awkward wrist corsage, Lexie arranges it upside-down inside her right wrist to cover six scabbed but recent incisions sliced the wrong way.

INT./EXT. CAMPER – DAY

Silver-haired STELLA RAMSEY (late 60s) tries to pin a corsage of white orchids on her mint-green summer dress without jabbing herself. But her hands shake as she slowly maneuvers the pearl-capped pin through the thin fabric. Her miniature daschunds, Ollie and Trixie, yap at her feet.

Stella pricks her finger with the corsage pin and winces. She keeps it from bleeding on her dress as she opens the door to

THE DRIVEWAY

of a well-kept suburban Chicago home. Parked next to a catering truck, Stella's camper sports many bumper stickers, inc. "Bernie for Congress 1994" and "Don't Tread On Me!" with a snake logo.

The bright sunlight makes her squint. As the dogs rush out of the camper, Stella pauses to get her bearings before descending the metal steps. Her hand grips the side rail for balance.

Corsage still in hand as the dogs pad behind, Stella heads to

THE BACKYARD

where dozens of WEDDING GUESTS wait for the ceremony to begin. Lexie swings open the kitchen screen door, nearly slamming into Stella rushing down the path. Stella's dogs turn and bark at Lexie, circling her feet. She's trapped.

DONNA ROLLINS (early 30s), very much the second-time bride in off-white knee-length linen, rushes over.

DONNA

Mother! Not the dogs, not today. Please?

STELLA

Why not? They love weddings – and they missed your first one.

(when Donna frowns:)

Oh, all right, Trixie, Ollie, come here!

The dogs, still yapping, fall into line beside her. Stella pats Trixie's head.

STELLA

Good girls. Stay with me now.

(to Donna, annoyed)

It's going to rain, you know.

It's a waste of time setting everything up outside.

DONNA

Yes, I know. That's the third time you've told me.

(slides an arm around Lexie's shoulders)

Stella, I want you to meet Greg's daughter, Lexie. I told you about her, remember? Lexie, sweetheart, can you help Stella get the dogs back in the truck?

LEXIE

Do I have to? I really don't like dogs--

One dog (Ollie) jumps up, getting dirt on Lexie's dress.

LEXIE

Dammit! Get off my dress!

STELLA

Don't curse my dogs, child. They're just being friendly.

(to dogs)

Ollie, get down. She's not your type.

(to Lexie)

I've got something in the camper that will clean that spot if you'll help me with this damn corsage.

Stella turns and heads into the camper as Lexie trails very reluctantly behind.

INT. CAMPER – DAY

Lexie looks around the well-packed clutter that fills the compact motorhome. From paintings on the wall and Western-themed knick-knacks, it is clear Stella appreciates American Indian art. Framed photographs bear Stella's signature.

Stella hands her corsage to Lexie who attempts to pin it on Stella without getting close.

STELLA

Your father seems like a nice man. Quite a catch for Donna.

LEXIE

Why? She has such a nice home already. Much nicer than ours.

STELLA

I was looking at the man, not his property.

LEXIE

Is this -- "thing" your home?

STELLA

It's not a "thing" and it's fine for one person -- even though it embarrasses Donna. Seems we're both outsiders, you and me.

LEXIE

If you're asking whether I want to be here, the answer is "no."

Stella inspects the corsage in the mirror.

STELLA

It's a little cockeyed, but then so am I. You should have worn one of these. You wouldn't look so flat-chested... 'Specially in that dress.

LEXIE

Hey!

STELLA
(looks Lexie over)
Don't worry, you'll fill out. God
knows, every flower blooms in its
own time. Me, I bloomed early.

Stella opens a compartment under the sink. One dog sniffs at
a bottle of cleaner as Stella squirts liquid on a washrag.

STELLA
Go 'way, it's not dinnertime.

LEXIE
Formula 409? On my dress?

STELLA
Why not?

LEXIE
It'll ruin it. That stuff's for walls!

STELLA
It won't ruin it, child. And my
God, how many times do you wear
a dress like that? Now really.

LEXIE
I don't know--

STELLA
I had a flapper when I was your
age. Mine was a hand-me-down.
(wipes at spot)
There. Clean. And it's not
ruined... C'mon, we better get
back. I don't want to miss
Donna's wedding, even though
I've been to one of 'em already.

Stella grabs a 35mm camera and a classic Raleigh off the
table. She hangs the newer camera around her neck and carries
the classic with affection.

As they step outside, Stella glances at the darkening sky and
the leaves on the trees.

STELLA
Better get my flash.

INT. FAMILY ROOM – A BIT LATER

A sudden Midwest thunderstorm has forced the wedding guests into the house. Stella uses her elbows to create space among the crowd so her photos will be in focus.

A MINISTER stands in front of a fireplace. He addresses Donna and GREG ANDERSON (late 30s).

As Lexie stands beside her father, she fidget with her wrist corsage, trying to keep the scars covered. Greg glances over at her as the Minister concludes:

MINISTER

--and so by the power vested in me by the State of Illinois and by the Grace of God, I now pronounce you husband and wife. May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his countenance to shine upon you and give you Peace. Amen.

(winks at Donna)

You may kiss the groom.

As friends and family crowd around the newlyweds, everyone laughs -- except for Lexie who stares out the window.

A flashbulb erupts nearby, but Lexie doesn't notice that Stella's camera is focused on her.

EXT. BACK YARD – LATER – SUNSHINE

has returned and the crunch of guests has spilled outside. Lexie searches the yard for her father who is congratulated by his friends.

LEXIE

Dad? I want to leave now. Can I have money for a cab?

GREG

Please stay to the end, Lexie. I really want you here -- it's a happy day for me, for us. Please don't spoil it.

LEXIE

But, Dad--

Greg's attention is captured by another well-wisher. Disappointed, Lexie wanders off.

A BIT LATER - LEXIE

sits alone at a now-damp table. Stella wipes the seat next to her with some tea napkins and sits down. She begins to load more film in her camera.

STELLA

Personally, I like your hair. I think you've got guts.

LEXIE

Personally? Personally, I hate it.

STELLA

Hate's a strong word. Would you look in a mirror and say that word about yourself?

LEXIE

Mind your own business, okay?

DONNA (OS)

Pictures, everyone, it's time to take group pictures! Stella, Lexie, come over here--

SEVERAL WEDDING PARTY PHOTOS

capture Stella being eccentric and Lexie being a martyr.

The final shot is of "The Family" -- Stella and Donna watch Greg give Lexie a big hug. The photo comes to life as Greg hugs Lexie goodbye in

THE DRIVEWAY

GREG

(quietly, to Lexie)
I'll call you in the morning. I want to talk to you before we go to the airport. Okay, punkin?

Lexie nods as she joins Greg's brother HERB (40s) and his wife FLORA waiting in their old Cadillac.

INT. CADILLAC – DUSK – MOVING

Lost in thought, Lexie stares out the window as reflected images change from freeway to surface streets.

The press of traffic, the deteriorating city and Aunt Flora's endless jabber force Lexie to retreat into a corner of the big back seat. As the sun goes down, she hides in the shadow.

Finally, the car stops in front of

EXT. A MODEST CHICAGO TOWNHOUSE - EVENING

Lexie gets out of the car and pauses. The aging brick house is dark and depressing even for this low-income neighborhood.

INT. LIVING ROOM – LEXIE'S HOUSE - EVENING

Lexie's key sticks in the deadbolt. The door finally opens.

Light flickers from the TV as Lexie's mother MARINA (mid-30s) sits curled in a chair, drinking Scotch. She doesn't look up as the front door closes.

MARINA

So did the rat and the shrew tie
the knot?

Lexie doesn't answer. But she notices The Sunday Tribune scattered on the dining table next to a coffee cup, a full ashtray and a box of half-eaten Winchell's donuts. The house is littered with Marina's debris.

MARINA

Lexie? It wasn't an easy day for me,
you know -- How did you get home?

LEXIE

Uncle Herb and Aunt Flora--

MARINA

Oh God, not those two. What did
Flora the Mouth say about your hair?

LEXIE

She didn't say anything, Mother.
Enough on the hair, all right? I
screwed up.

MARINA

Looks like I paid the nuns for eight years for nothing.

LEXIE

Nine years. I wore the uniform for nine years. And you didn't pay for it -- Dad did.

MARINA

Sounds like he wasted his money, but what else is new?

LEXIE

I'm tired, Mother. I'm going to bed.

MARINA

But it's only 8:30--

LEXIE

I said I'm tired, okay?

MARINA

Right. And throw that corsage away. Reminds me of a funeral.

As Lexie goes up the stairs, Marina remains glued to the television, unable to reach out to her own child.

INT. LEXIE'S ROOM – NIGHT

Lexie tosses the wilting corsage into the wastebasket, pulls a large suitcase out of her closet and starts to pack her summer clothes. A book of poetry, a diary and a small radio also wind up in the bag.

As she removes three blue-checked Catholic school uniform dresses from her closet and tosses them in the wastebasket, Lexie glances at a framed photo hanging next to drawings of horses. The photo is of a younger Lexie on a horse in Lincoln Park. Sitting beneath it on the dresser is an expensive china horse.

Lexie wraps the figurine in a long-sleeved sweatshirt and packs it carefully in the suitcase.

She breaks open a piggy bank, counts the coins and bills that spill forth. The door creaks open as Marina enters. She can't help but notice the open suitcase.

LEXIE

You spying on me?

MARINA

Where you going?

LEXIE

I get to spend summers and vacations with Dad. So I thought -- now that he has more room -- I mean he's not in that studio anymore and--

MARINA

Don't be so sure. Just because he got married again doesn't mean he gave up his girlfriends... Aren't they taking a honeymoon?

LEXIE

Yeah, I guess.

MARINA

As if they needed one.

LEXIE

He's gonna call me in the morning. He said I could stay there!

MARINA

Lexie, honey. How many times has he kept his promises to you?

LEXIE

Mother, I'm old enough to decide things for myself, you know?

MARINA

Some things, maybe -- but I need you here.

Marina notices the china horse is missing from the dresser.

MARINA

So you packed the china horse? Aren't you too old for security blankets now? How long have you had that thing?

LEXIE

Nine years.

MARINA

Yeah. Those were happier times--

(after a moment)

I think you'd better reconsider.

Marina rescues the school dresses from the trash and heads out, to Lexie's relief.

MARINA

We can make bathroom curtains
from these... Well, sleep tight,
wake up bright--

The door slams shut behind her.

LEXIE

"Go not softly in that sweet
night" -- Mother dearest.

Lexie gazes at herself in the mirror for a moment, recalls her conversation with Stella:

LEXIE

Hate--

INT. MARINA'S HOUSE – MORNING

Lexie watches from a window as Marina drives off in an old compact two-door. After it turns the corner, she goes into the kitchen. The house is a pigsty.

Disgusted, Lexie starts to clean the dirty dishes. She keeps looking at the telephone, willing it to ring.

MONTAGE:

Lexie cleans the entire house, picks up her mother's clutter, vacuums the living room.

In her bedroom, she locks the heavy suitcase and drags it down the stairs.

In the kitchen, she dials a familiar number and listens as the phone on the other end rings several times.

INT. DONNA'S HOUSE / MARINA'S HOUSE – LATE MORNING – INTERCUT

Stella's hands shake as she lifts a photo of Lexie at the wedding from a pan in a makeshift pantry darkroom. It drips on the floor as she goes to answer the kitchen phone.

STELLA

(into phone)

Hello? -- No, this is Stella --
Oh, Lexie -- Their flight to
Vancouver left at ten... No, he
didn't say anything to me. Guess
it'll have to wait... Two weeks
from yesterday evening--

Lexie quickly covers her disappointment:

LEXIE

(into phone)

Listen, my dad said I could stay
there, watch the house while
they were gone, you know? So
could you leave the key under
the mat? -- Oh yeah, I have a
key but, um, I should have a
spare in case I lose it... Right.
Thanks. Bye.

INT. MARINA'S BEDROOM – A BIT LATER

Lexie searches through Marina's nightstand until she finds a half-full prescription bottle.

LEXIE

Good. What works for you might
work for me.

She tucks the pill bottle into her backpack.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Lexie leafs through taxi ads in the Yellow Pages.

She removes a note her mother left on the refrigerator door:
"Don't forget to clean the house."

LEXIE

I cleaned the house, Mother. I
always do.

Lexie scribbles something on the back of the note: "Mother, I can't live here anymore. I'll call. Lexie."

She starts to secure the note on the refrigerator with a heart-shaped magnet. But second thoughts make Lexie tear it up instead. She tosses the pieces in a nearly-full garbage bag and carries it outside to the trash bins.

EXT. MARINA'S HOUSE – LATER

Lexie piles her overstuffed suitcase and ghetto blaster into the back of a taxi as the DRIVER watches, amused.

LEXIE
How much to Elmhurst?

DRIVER
That's a ways from here, honey.
Twenty-dollar ride. You got the
money for that?

LEXIE
As long as it's only twenty dollars.

EXT. ELMHURST PHARMACY – DAY

Stella's camper is parked in front. The frame around her rear license plate reads: "Don't laugh. At least it's paid for."

INT. PHARMACY – DAY

The PHARMACIST hands Stella a prescription bottle.

STELLA
How long will this last me?

PHARMACIST
A month. You've got sixty pills.

EXT. DONNA'S HOUSE – DAY

Stella parks her camper in the driveway as Lexie's taxi pulls up in front. Lexie hands the Driver \$20, then struggles to maneuver her heavy suitcase, backpack and ghetto blaster to the front steps.

Stella exits the camper and stands in front of Lexie's suitcase as Lexie shoulders the backpack.

STELLA

How 'bout I put on some
strawberry leaf tea while you
tell me what the hell you and
your suitcase are doing here?

LEXIE

I told you on the phone. I'm
watching the house while they're
gone.

STELLA

Like hell you are, child.

Stella opens the front door and goes inside, leaving Lexie to
handle her heavy suitcase alone.

LEXIE

(to herself)

Isn't it a little hot for tea?

INT. DONNA'S KITCHEN

Stella pours tea as Lexie doodles on the table with a spoon.

STELLA

Well, that's crazy. You're not
staying here, Lexie. I'll drop you
at home on my way outta town.

LEXIE

I'll just leave again.

STELLA

What about your mother? What
does she think about you staying
at Greg's while he's off on his
honeymoon? Maybe I should give
her a call--

LEXIE

(covering)

Well, she's very upset about
everything. Right now she wants
me out of the house.

STELLA

I see -- You think you're pulling a fast one here, don't you, child? I have to get on the road today and we can't reach your dad 'til God knows when. But I won't leave you here alone.

(pause)

What do you think I should do?

LEXIE

Nothing. It's not your business.

STELLA

We're not talking "business." You're a human being. And you're related to me now. Get it?

LEXIE

No, I don't. Why didn't Dad call me before he left, like he said he would?

STELLA

I sure don't know. He was real busy this morning.

LEXIE

Just like all those visiting weekends he never showed up.

Lexie's doodling gets more intense. Stella opens her new bottle of pills and makes a face as she swallows one. She takes her teacup to the sink.

STELLA

All right then. We're leaving this afternoon. Let's get my camper ready.

LEXIE

Do I have to?

STELLA

Mae West used to say, "If you have to choose between two evils, choose the one you ain't done yet." Call your mother and tell her what's happening. It's home or me.

Stella hands Lexie the phone. Lexie stares at the receiver as if it will bite her. She shields her dialing from Stella and punches in the number for "Time."

PHONE OPERATOR (VO)
(via phone receiver)
At the tone, the time will be
12:54 and 30 seconds --

LEXIE
(into phone)
Marina Anderson, please -- Mom?
Um, good news. I'm like gonna
take a vacation -- Well, uh,
Donna's stepmother is here and
she has this camper and she's
heading to--

STELLA
Montana. The Snow Goose Ranch. Near
Deer Lodge, not far from Missoula.

LEXIE
--Montana. So we're going
camping until Dad gets back. I
didn't want you to worry--

Stella hears the dogs bark outside and goes to investigate.

Lexie watches as Stella waves her dogs away from the MAILMAN and accepts some mail. With a sigh of relief, Lexie hangs up the phone.

INT. CAMPER – LATER

Stella and Lexie pack the camper. Stella does most of the heavy work, checking items off a list as if doing inventory for a small army.

STELLA
Bedding, canned goods, dog food,
radiator water, oil, laundry
bag, tools--
(to Lexie)
Everything in its place.
Remember that.

She reaches into a toolbox and hands Lexie a tire pressure gauge. To Lexie, it looks like an object from outer space.

STELLA

Check the tire pressure. Sixty-five pounds all around. Check the spare, too.

LEXIE

What do I do with this thing?

STELLA

Take the cap off the valve -- that thing sticking off the tire -- and put this end on it. The rod pushes out on the other end to give you the pressure.

LEXIE

But I'll get my hands dirty!

STELLA

You'd probably break your nails too, 'cept they're all chewed off. Goddamn, child, you whine more'n a hooker on strike. I've got a phone call to make. Then we're ready to shove off.

Intimidated by Stella's bluntness, Lexie goes

OUTSIDE

and kneels to check the tires as Stella goes into

DONNA'S KITCHEN

Glancing at the clock, Stella dials a number.

STELLA

Homer? This is Stell. How are ya?--
(louder)

I said, how are ya? -- Turn your hearing aide up, I don't like to shout. Listen, brother, I'll be home in about two weeks, give or take. And I'm gonna be staying--

She takes a deep breath before continuing:

STELLA

Yeah, well, I saw a doctor on Friday and he claims the ol' drumbeat could stop any time now. Wanted to know if I had Medicare. Guess he wanted to charge the Governor for a heart bypass or some damn thing.

(listens; laughs)

Right, over my dead body.

IN THE HALLWAY

Lexie stands against the wall, eavesdropping through the louvered doors as Stella continues:

STELLA

It's all a trade-off, dear. If I'da took better care of myself, I wouldn't of had any fun. Six of one, half-dozen--

(pause)

Listen, I have a teenager with me. Donna's new husband's girl... It's a long story. I guess I'm baby-sitting her, but if something happens on the road, she'll be there to help--

(pause)

We're gonna stop at Bear Creek. I'll call you from there... A week then... Right, dear, all my love. Bye for now.

LEXIE

(to herself)

Great! Now I have to play nursemaid for two weeks.

EXT. DRIVEWAY – LATER THAT AFTERNOON

The camper pulls out, packed to the roof. The dogs yip through the window.

EXT. FREEWAY TRAFFIC – DAY

The camper crawls through traffic snarled around some highway construction. Stella looks grim.

STELLA

This is why I hate cities.

EXT. TOLL PLAZA – DAY

Road signs indicate the turn-off for Wisconsin. Stella fails to see them as she gives Lexie the camper run-down:

STELLA

Change for the toll road and receipts from the plazas go here. I'm a travel writer, so I wipe these trips out on my taxes. My whole life's in this buggy. Nothin' here that doesn't have a reason for bein' here--

Lexie spots some photo-cards tucked in the sun visor.

LEXIE

Can I have one of those postcards? I want to tell my friend Amy where I am.

STELLA

Just one? You can have as many as you want. Send one to your mom.

LEXIE

One's plenty--
(points)
Don't we want to be over there?

Stella suddenly swerves across two lanes as annoyed drivers honk.

LEXIE

Hey! Watch where you're going!

STELLA

(unperturbed)
Don't worry 'bout me, child. I've driven this road hundreds of times. Alone.
(pause)
So keep everything in order and don't break anything or I'll be sorely irritated. Now, you can drive, can't you?

LEXIE

(shakes head no)
I take buses in the city. And the El.

STELLA

Right. And taxis. How old are you?

LEXIE

Fifteen.

STELLA

Fifteen, huh? I was driving
already at fifteen. Learned on
an old Studebaker, a stick
shift. These days my legs can't
take a clutch, so this rig's
automatic. Automatics aren't
like real driving--
(sighs, remembers)
They don't make 'em like us anymore.

INT. CAMPER – TWILIGHT

Paper sacks indicate a recent stop for fast-food takeout.
Stella licks an ice cream cone as Lexie finishes a chocolate
sundae and lights a cigarette.

STELLA

No smoking in my rig.

LEXIE

Oh, I see. You can eat trash food,
but you won't let me smoke.

STELLA

Cigarette smoke makes me nauseous.

LEXIE

But you have a tin of tobacco
back there!

STELLA

That's a giveaway for someone.

LEXIE

(resentful)

Oh.

STELLA

Remember something, child. I'm
your elder. You owe me respect
just for that.

LEXIE

I thought this was a free
country. Everybody's equal.

STELLA

Not in my rig. It's my home.
Your right to smoke stops where
my nose begins. Get it?

Lexie pulls her ghetto blaster out from behind the seat and
slips in a tape as Stella stops at

THE NORTHWEST TOLLROAD BOOTH

She hands the toll to the ATTENDANT, then reaches over and
turns down the volume on Lexie's ghetto blaster.

STELLA

(nods)

Nanci Griffith, who woulda thunk it?

LEXIE

You know about her?

STELLA

Just 'cause my hair's white doesn't
mean I only like Pat Boone. You can
listen, but not loud. Loud stops
where my ears begin.

LEXIE

Figures.

EXT. HIGHWAY – NIGHT

When big trucks roar past, the little camper sways back and
forth in its lane.

INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

LEXIE

You been traveling around like
this very long?

STELLA

Since the 60's.

LEXIE

You must be lucky.

STELLA

Nope. But I pray a lot.

Lexie sneezes.

STELLA

God bless you.

LEXIE

Thank you.

Lexie sneezes again, hard. Her eyes begin to water.

LEXIE

I think I'm allergic to your dogs.

STELLA

I'm not surprised. If not my dogs, then how 'bout the sheepskin seat covers. Or maybe the whole State of Wisconsin--

LEXIE

Don't make fun of me! It's hereditary.

STELLA

Allergies are in your mind, child. By the time we reach Montana, you'll either be allergic to everything in sight or nothing at all.

LEXIE

You saying I'm a hypochondriac?

STELLA

My, that's a big word! When I was growing up in Montana, the biggest word I learned in high school -- I remember it real well 'cause I won the spelling bee when I was a sophomore -- the biggest word I ever learned was "marmalade."

LEXIE

Marmalade?

STELLA

Marmalade. It's a... like jelly.

LEXIE

I know what it is. I could spell that in fifth grade. What does that have to do with what we were talking about?

STELLA

Fate. Maybe you got a fancier education than me, but here we are anyway, riding together in this camper.

Stella glances at Lexie who sits in silence a few moments. Lexie finally searches in her purse for a decongestant pill. She swallows it with water from a bottle beside her.

STELLA

Taking pills are like adding additives to your engine when you need an overhaul. Get it?

LEXIE

What I get is I'm allergic to your dogs.

EXT./INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Stella hums to Lexie's music as she steers the camper into a rest area near Madison. She parks between two enormous 18-wheel rigs in the "Trucks and Trailers" area.

STELLA

We got a later start than I'd planned, so we'll sleep here tonight. You can go use the facilities while I walk the dogs.

LEXIE

Oh gee, thanks.

STELLA

I'll sleep in the bunk over the cab. You can have the bed in back.

EXT. REST AREA – NIGHT

The two big rigs next to the camper run their engines, engulfing Stella's camper in diesel smoke.

INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Windows are cracked open a bit to cool the camper on this hot summer night. Nauseous from the diesel fumes, Lexie lies awake, listening to Stella snore.

Outside the window by Lexie's bed, a TRUCK DRIVER pauses by a tire and takes a long piss. He follows this with some coughs, belches, and snorts.

Lexie is miserable -- her eyes glisten with tears.

EXT. REST AREA – MORNING

As the dogs play on the lawn, Stella lays out breakfast on a picnic table -- bran flakes in a paper bowl, low-fat milk, two oranges. She tosses a banana peel at a trash container, but it lands on the sidewalk, a few inches short.

Returning from the bathroom, Lexie stoops to pick up the banana skin. She automatically tosses it into the trash.

LEXIE

There's no mail box here.

STELLA

In a rest area? There never is. But I don't usually camp in rest areas.

LEXIE

I've never traveled before -- never been out of Chicago except to go to the Indiana Dunes a few times. So far it's -- different.

STELLA

If we hadn't been so late getting out of Chicago, we would've made it to Prairie Du Chien already. I have a dear friend there I want to see. Not sure when I'll be back this way again--

EXT. HIGHWAY / INT. CAMPER – DAY

The camper passes a "Welcome to Wisconsin" sign.

STELLA

Prairie du Sheen. That means "Prairie Dog." Prairie Dog, Wisconsin, up ahead.

LEXIE

It's pronounced "due Chee-en,"
not "due sheen." It's French.

STELLA

In Wisconsin they pronounce it
Prairie du Sheen. It's just
spelled French. Get it?

LEXIE

(exasperated)
Christ, yeah. I get it.

STELLA

Good. We'll stop there for a bit.
You can mail your postcard.

EXT. FUNERAL HOME – AFTERNOON

A State of Wisconsin van pulls up to a large, funeral home. JOAN (40s), a counselor at a halfway house for retarded adults, alights. KATHY and BILLY, two of her wards, follow, along with Stella and Lexie.

INT. FUNERAL HOME – DAY

Stella joins the short line to view the body of her friend Susan. She is clearly in shock over Susan's death. Joan and her wards follow Stella while Lexie plants herself awkwardly against a wall at the back of the room.

STELLA

(eyes closed in prayer)
Take her soul into your care,
Grandfather. Rekindle her fire.
(looking at her friend)
Oh, Susan, my friend, I hope we
meet again in the next life.

Finally, she moves off the line as Joan leads Billy and Kathy to view their friend.

JOAN

Say goodbye to Miss Susan, Billy.

BILLY

Miss Susan's dead. She loves
Billy. Goodbye, Miss Susan.

KATHY

Can Kathy have a flower, Joan?
Miss Susan would let me have a
flower, wouldn't she? She'd let me
have a flower. It's so beautiful.

Lexie watches, amused, as Kathy lifts a flower off the coffin
and sniffs it.

INT. VAN – DAY

Lexie sits in the back with Billy and Kathy, who cradles her
wilted flower. Stella sits in front beside Joan.

STELLA

I didn't even know she was ill--
(pause)
What will you do now?

JOAN

We'll probably lose the halfway
house. Everybody'll end up back at
the hospital. That's the sad part.
(pause)
No, that's not the sad part. The
last couple of weeks, she just
couldn't take the pain anymore.
And a bottle of sedatives was
missing from the ward the
morning we found her--

STELLA

No, you don't mean that! Susan
loved her life. I can't believe
she would have done anything
like that. Never!

LEXIE

(quietly, to herself)
I can.

EXT. LARGE HOUSE – DUSK

The van pulls up to the halfway house as MR. PRICE (mid-50s)
marches back and forth on the sidewalk carrying picket signs.

As Joan gets out of the van with her wards, he plants his
pickets firmly where she can see them. One reads "SAVE OUR
NEIGHBORHOOD!" -- the other "LOCK UP THE LUNATICS!"

Price spots Lexie's hair as she climbs out of the van. He moves to block her way.

PRICE

This another one? What the hell kinda hairdo is that?

JOAN

Get out of our way, Mr. Price.

PRICE

(to Lexie)

You don't seem like the rest of 'em, girlie. Don't go in there. No tellin' what they'll do to ya. They ain't right in the head, you know.

JOAN

Mr. Price, the law says you have to stand at the corner of the lot. You've been warned. Now get out of our way.

PRICE

The law means nothing. The law's what put you people here in the first place!

STELLA

Move it, you scrawny turkey.
(to Lexie)
C'mon, honey.

She takes Lexie's arm but Price blocks their way to the house. Stella suddenly turns and slams her purse hard into Price's crotch. He winces and stumbles backwards as she hustles an amazed Lexie toward the porch.

STELLA

Consider yourself lucky, you old fart. If you had any balls, that might've hurt!

PRICE

I'm calling the police! You can't do this to me.

STELLA

(quietly to Joan)

We'd better not stay for lunch,
Joan. I don't want to make more
trouble than you've already got.

INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Stella drives in silence, her eyes locked on the road ahead.
Lexie watches her, also silent, until:

LEXIE

You know, you blew my mind back
there with that old redneck.

STELLA

That was nothin'. My husband
taught me that.

LEXIE

Really... You scared of dying,
Stella?

STELLA

Nope. Dyin' makes livin'
worthwhile, know what I mean?
But I intend to die later rather
than sooner, that's for sure.

(mostly to herself)

I don't believe Susan killed
herself, no matter what Joan
says. No matter what--

LEXIE

I can understand why she wanted
to die if she was in pain.

They return to riding in silence for a few moments.

LEXIE

(almost a whisper)

I tried to kill myself a few
weeks ago. Just didn't want to
be here anymore--

Stella glances sideways at Lexie, who absent-mindedly rubs
the scars on her wrist.

STELLA

Well, that's a damn fool thing to do. Talk about bein' scared of dyin' -- seems to me you're scared of livin'.

(pause)

Would you do it again?

LEXIE

(thinks a moment)

Maybe. Depends--

(consults the map)

Slow down. I think we turn here. Campground's down the road on the right.

STELLA

(gruff)

Don't change the subject, child -- and don't you try suicide on my time.

EXT. CAMPGROUND – NIGHT

Stella holds an abalone shell containing sage over a small campfire. She fans the smoldering sage with a turkey feather and blows the smoke over the campsite.

Lexie returns from the outhouse.

LEXIE

This place is awful. There's no shower! And a gigantic black widow's crawling around in there!

STELLA

Smart. It hangs out where the flies are.

(hands shell to Lexie)

Here, take this and smudge yourself. It keeps the bugs away.

Lexie ignores this as she inspects the old pot Stella's placed on the campfire.

LEXIE

You're going to cook in that thing?

STELLA

It's a Dutch oven. Makes great campfire stew.

LEXIE

But it's all crusted over. There's old food in it.

STELLA

The next stew'll taste better if you just wipe out the oven when this one's done.

LEXIE

Doesn't that breed germs?

STELLA

Believe me, honey, when I put this pot in the fire, the germs'll jump on the next wind to Wednesday.

LEXIE

That's gross! I'm not hungry anymore.

Lexie disappears into the camper, slamming the door behind her. The dogs start whimpering. Stella calms them with a look.

A BIT LATER

Firelight illumintes Stella's face as she tends her meal.

INSIDE THE CAMPER

Lexie writes in her diary.

STELLA (OS)

Come on out here, child. I made chicken soup and corn bread. It's good for your allergies.

Lexie shuts her diary and stuffs it in her backpack. She steps cautiously out of the camper, joins Stella at the fire.

EXT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Depositing her backpack nearby, Lexie perches uncomfortably on a rock. One of the dogs sniffs her bag. Lexie shoos him off as she accepts a soup bowl from Stella and starts to eat.

STELLA

Hold on a minute. I say grace first.

Lexie puts her bowl down slowly.

STELLA
(eyes closed)
"Grandfather, Great Spirit.
Thank you. O Mi-tak-we O-ya-sin."

LEXIE
What's mitak'a'sin?

STELLA
Lakota. I'm one-eighth Lakota.

LEXIE
What's Lakota?

STELLA
Sioux Indian to you. "O Mi-tak-we
O-ya-sin" means "All my relatives."
By "relatives" I mean everything
that lives, not just aunts and
uncles and stuff. This food gave
away its life for our benefit, so I
acknowledge it that way.

LEXIE
(pause)
You know what, Stella? You're weird.

STELLA
Maybe so. But it's your backpack
Ollie just pee'd on.

LEXIE
What! Dammit!

STELLA
Shouldn'ta said you were
allergic to him. Hurt his
feelings.

Still angry, Lexie wipes her backpack with a napkin and parks it safely between her legs. She settles back on the rock with her bowl, ignoring the dogs.

STELLA

I relate to you as kin now, ya know. You're my granddaughter in the Lakota way. So I'd appreciate your cleanin' up and dousing the fire since I cooked tonight. Get water by the outhouse and stir the coals to make sure they're out. The Great Spirit judges responsibility by how people treat the fire.

LEXIE

(coldly)

Whoopee.

STELLA

And you don't have to hide your diary from me, child. Write in it whenever you want. I won't look in it.

Lexie ignores this as Stella goes into the camper. The dogs follow, to Lexie's relief.

INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Stella winces as she pulls off her plaid cotton shirt and puts on a summer gown. She rubs her shoulder a bit, then climbs into the upper bunk with effort.

After a few moments, she pulls a book from under the mattress: On Death and Dying by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

EXT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Lexie huddles by the fire. Her eyes water from the thick smoke. Mosquitoes buzz her ears. She backs away from the fire, stumbles over an exposed root in the dark, twisting her ankle.

Hurt and even more angry now, Lexie limps back to her rock and pulls her mother's pills out of the backpack. She swallows one, but it gets stuck in her throat. She coughs, works it down. Then she opens her diary and starts to write.

After a moment, she pauses, goes to the camper door:

LEXIE

(calls inside)

Stella? How do you spell "Odyssey?"

STELLA (OS)
J-O-U-R-N-E-Y.

LEXIE
Sorry I asked.

STELLA (OS)
The dictionary spells it O-D-Y-S-S-E-Y.

LEXIE
Thanks.

STELLA (OS)
De nada.

Lexie goes back to the fire. She quietly reads what she's written:

LEXIE
"If life is a journey, an
odyssey is a metaphor of life.
Like a paragraph in parentheses
on a page"--
(disgusted)
Christ. What bullshit -- What am
I doing here?

She tears the page out of the diary and tosses it into the fire.

EXT. DAIRY QUEEN – NEXT DAY

Stella and Lexie eat lunch outside a fast-food joint. Traffic roars by and a large stand-up fan clatters noisily.

LEXIE
(over noise)
Isn't this food bad for your
heart condition?

STELLA
(over noise)
What heart condition?

LEXIE
I saw your medicine.

STELLA
Oh -- Well, I eat this stuff for
the preservatives. Figure I'll
pickle myself into a nice old age.

LEXIE

That's just a cop-out.

STELLA

Look who's talkin'! You're the one with the scars on your wrists, child.

LEXIE

At least I'm not a hypocrite.

STELLA

Neither am I. There's nothing wrong with my heart. And if there were something wrong, I'd take care of it myself. Surely wouldn't put it in the hands of the goddamn A.M.A. If you don't have insurance, the doctor's the first one who wishes you dead.

LEXIE

So what's with the medicine?

STELLA

(shrugs)

I hedge my bets. Went to a damn doctor and he wanted to cut me open! I settled for the pills.

LEXIE

(smug)

Yeah, right. Like me and my allergy pills.

STELLA

(defensive)

I didn't say doctors don't know anything. They just don't care about people anymore. They're only in it for the money. Get it?

LEXIE

Got it.

INT. CAMPER – DAY

Stella drives as Lexie suffers from the heat and humidity.

They pass a roadside fruit stand advertising “Cold Fresh Juice.” Lexie looks at it with longing. Suddenly, Stella pulls into

AN OLD DESERTED GAS STATION

She gets out to look at her camper, concerned.

STELLA

Engine’s jamming. It’s clogged
somewhere.

(pointing)

Unsnap the hood. Pull the
release by the glove box.

Lexie opens the hood, then joins Stella in front of the camper.

EXT. GAS STATION – MOMENTS LATER

The hood’s propped open. Stella peers into the guts of the engine. Lexie stands next to her, but not too close.

STELLA

You’ll have to crawl underneath.
Can’t get to it from here.

LEXIE

Me? You’re out of your mind!

STELLA

You want me to do it? It’s 95
degrees outside. I thought you
were worried about my old heart.

LEXIE

Get a mechanic to do it.

STELLA

There’s no mechanic here. And we
have to fix this now.

She reaches into the camper behind the driver’s seat and pulls out an auto parts box.

STELLA

Here. I always carry a spare fuel filter.

MOMENTS LATER – LEXIE

is flat on her back in front of the camper, getting greasy and dusty. Stella crouches over her, barking instructions:

STELLA

Pour a little gas in the new one -- There, that's right. Don't spill -- Now slide in there and screw it back on where the old one was -- Careful, don't skin your knuckles--

LEXIE

Dammit!

STELLA

Don't curse my camper, girl. He won't run good.

LEXIE

Your camper's a boy? Gimme a break -- And I'll curse any goddamn thing I want!

STELLA

I haven't kept this camper going for ten whole years by cursing him. Talk to him nice for a change.

LEXIE

Son of a bitch, get in there -- There!

STELLA

That's better. He likes dogs.

Lexie slides out from underneath, glaring at Stella.

LEXIE

This is the worst thing I've ever done in my life. I'll never forgive you.

STELLA

(grins)

I don't expect you to forgive me.
Nothin' to forgive. But thanks
anyway. Didn't think I was gonna
be able to con you into it.

Lexie's furious as she brushes the dirt off her clothes.
Stella gathers up her tools.

INT. CAMPER – LATER THAT DAY

They pass a sign on a bridge: "Welcome to Minnesota."

Lexie holds her hands up as though drying finger-nail polish.
There's still grease under her nails.

LEXIE

Look at my hands! I'll never get
the grease off. And I smell like
gasoline! Can't we stop at a
motel? I have to take a shower.

(no response)

I have to take a shower now!

(still no response)

I hope it falls off.

STELLA

What?

LEXIE

The whatzit. Whatever I put on
the engine.

STELLA

Fuel filter. And it won't. It's
fine. I can feel it.

LEXIE

I need a shower. Can you feel
that too?

STELLA

(giving in)

Look in the campground guide for
directions to the Hardwood
Forest. It's a national park. If
I remember right, they've got
showers.

LEXIE

And a laundry. I've got to wash
these clothes or burn them.

EXT. MINNESOTA TWO-LANE – DAY

From high above, the CAMERA follows the camper as it moves
past old farms bordered by rolling hills and lush forest.

LEXIE (OS)

It's pretty here.

STELLA (OS)

Pretty? Try magnificent -- I
thought you learned all those
big words back in fifth grade?

EXT. HARDWOOD FOREST RANGER STATION – DUSK

Sunlight filters through thick trees as evening shadows start
to gather. The campground is full and a dozen campfires are
already lit.

Stella searches for a campsite near the showers. The camper
lurches forward, sending the dogs skidding backwards onto the
linoleum floor.

Stella starts to turn the camper into an available space, but
Lexie grabs her arm and points at the trees above it.

LEXIE

Not here. Those are elms. We got
'em at home. They'll drop sap
all over the truck and it's hell
to clean off.

STELLA

How 'bout over there, closer to
the laundry?

LEXIE

Sounds good.

STELLA

Hope they don't keep the light
on all night.

EXT. CAMPER – NIGHT

The dogs sniff around as Stella hands Lexie some towels with Holiday Inn logos. Lexie carries a small toilet bag. They head for the showers.

LEXIE

So you do stop at motels.

STELLA

That's how I can tell if I need to diet. If a Holiday Inn towel doesn't fit around my waist, I'm getting fat.

LEXIE

So how'd you ever learn to fix cars, anyway?

STELLA

Hell, I've been fixin' cars since I was your age. Had to. When Frank and me were runnin' from the law, we didn't dare stop for repairs. We did 'em ourselves, and I've been doing it that way ever since.

LEXIE

You were running from the law? When?

STELLA

When I was fifteen, I was in love with a man twice my age. It was right after the war. I lied, told him I was twenty-one. Back then I was "hot" according to your generation.

They enter

THE WOMEN'S SHOWER ROOM

Lexie tests the water -- lukewarm. She adjusts the faucets as they begin showering.

STELLA

They got hot water tonight?

LEXIE

Barely. You gonna tell me your story or not?

STELLA

Where was I? -- Oh, yeah, I was a real looker. Coulda been on the cover of Vogue, 'cept for being poor. I got pregnant by Frank who was having some problems -- like being wanted by U.S. Marshals. He kind "borrowed" some money from a gov'mint payroll. So we ran for Mexico. Remember I said I won the spelling bee as a sophomore? That's about the farthest I got in school.

LEXIE

You were pregnant at fifteen? God, where I go to school, the nuns won't even admit pregnancy exists.

Stella turns off her shower and wraps herself in a towel. She glances at Lexie, still adjusting the hot and cold.

STELLA

Don't waste water, child.

LEXIE

(indignant)

I'm covered with oil from your camper, do you mind?

Stella turns away. She secretly picks up Lexie's toilet bag and moves into

THE DRESSING AREA

Stella quickly pokes through Lexie's bag, looking for razor blades, pills -- anything that could be lethal. She finds Marina's pill bottle and studies the label.

STELLA

(to herself)

Stimulants?

(shakes bottle)

Not enough to even get sick on.

She puts the bottle back in the bag and zips it shut.

STELLA
(calls)
I'll get dressed in the camper.
Can I leave you alone?

LEXIE (OS)
Of course you can leave me alone!

STELLA
Don't drown yourself in there.

LEXIE (OS)
(annoyed)
Just --leave me alone!

INT. CAMPER – EVENING

Stella pours vanilla into a saucepan and warms it over the propane stove. She opens a package of store-bought cookies and arranges them on a plate inside the small propane oven for a few moments, then fans the warm vanilla smell out the window.

EXT. CAMPER – EVENING

Lexie attempts to build a campfire. She looks up when Stella opens the door and the dogs rush out.

LEXIE
(disbelief)
You baked cookies?

Stella grins. She ducks inside the camper and re-emerges with her plate of warm chocolate chip cookies. A camera hangs around her neck.

STELLA
Lexie, after you get the fire going, would you heat a pot of water and wash the pan and baking sheet? I'm gonna follow my dogs, meet some new folks--
(with a sly smile)
I get the best stories this way.

Lexie watches in amazement as Stella wanders after her dogs.

EXT. CAMPGROUND – NIGHT

Stella sits in a lawn chair as her dogs lie on the ground by her feet. She visits with MR. CLARE, an older gentleman: short, fat and bald. A big-eyed chihuahua quakes in his lap, sniffing the “fresh baked” cookie Mr. Clare munches.

STELLA

I studied folk dancing for awhile.
I was going to write a book about
it. Traveled all over the world.
Did you know there's ten thousand
different dances on this earth--

Lexie joins them.

STELLA

There you are. Lexie, this is Mr.
Clare. He's a snowbird like me.
(pets Mr. Clare's dog)
And this is Mr. Peepers.
(to Mr. Clare)
This is my granddaughter, Lexie.

MR. CLARE

A pleasure. I love your hair,
Lexie. I didn't know they made
that color.

LEXIE

A friend did it. She kinda got
carried away.

MR. CLARE

Carried away? She must have been
taking a trip to the moon.

STELLA

(quickly)
Mr. Clare and I are both charter
members of “Loners on Wheels.”
It's a travelers club for
seniors. Every winter we meet up
in Death Valley.

LEXIE

Death Valley? Is that supposed
to be symbolic or something?

STELLA

I guess, since most of us are
hangin' from the drop edge of
yonder.

MR. CLARE

(laughs)

But not ready to go just yet,
eh, Stell?

LEXIE

(annoyed)

When are we gonna eat? I'm
starving.

MR. CLARE

(offers the plate,
laughs)

Want a cookie, little girl?

Lexie turns and storms off.

STELLA

Where you goin', girl?

LEXIE

For a walk.

STELLA

Then take the dogs with you.
They need exercise--
(to her dogs)
Go with Lexie now, go on--

Lexie walks on, Stella's dogs yipping at her heels.

Down the road she approaches

SOME LARGE MOTORHOMES

belonging to big families. They're more expensive and
elaborate than Stella's old-fashioned camper.

FIRST GIRL (OS)

(loud whisper)

Ooooh, catch the do on that one!

Across the way, two TEENAGE GIRLS (17) slouch in lawn chairs
between some fancy campers with Michigan plates. They sneak a
joint as their parents play cards inside.

Lexie flushes with embarrassment. She keeps on walking and tries to ignore them but Trixie trots over to them, sniffing their hand-rolled smoke.

LEXIE
Trixie, come back here!
(to the girls)
Sorry. She's just a curious old dog.

FIRST GIRL
'S okay. She's cool.
(offers the joint)
Want some?

LEXIE
I dunno. I never, uh—

FIRST GIRL
Hey, you owe it to yourself.

The girl hands the joint to Lexie, who takes a drag as if it's a cigarette. She is immediately reduced to coughing and choking, sending the girls into fits of stifled laughter.

FIRST GIRL
Hey, cool it. Your parents'll
hear us.

SECOND GIRL
They're so damn ignorant they
wouldn't know weed from mint
tea. I tell them I'm smoking
clove cigarettes. They think I'm
being organic.

FIRST GIRL
(to Lexie)
You're with that weird old lady,
aren't you? The one with the
cookies. She your mother?

LEXIE
No, my stepmother's mother.
We're just traveling together
for a few weeks. To her ranch in
Montana.

SECOND GIRL
I knew it! She's a cowgirl!
That's like, totally bizarre!
I'm glad she's not my old lady!

LEXIE

Well -- sorry if I messed you
up. See ya.

The giggling becomes stoned laughter. Lexie gathers up the
dogs and moves off quickly.

FIRST GIRL (OS)

What a nerd. Stick with your
cookies, little girl!

EXT. STELLA'S CAMPER – NIGHT

Stella tends the fire as the dogs rush up to greet her.
Lexie arrives moments later.

STELLA

Where've you been? I thought you
were hungry.

LEXIE

Nowhere special. And yeah, I'm
hungry.

(pause)

Sorry about the fire. I guess
I'm not much good at it.

STELLA

That's all right. You'll learn.

LEXIE

That Mr. Clare was a real creep.
Why'd you waste your time with him?

STELLA

Waste my time? He's an old
friend, and he's never done this
planet or anything on it wrong.
Listen here, child, don't
criticize my friends. When I was
fifteen--

LEXIE

When you were fifteen you were
pregnant and running from the law.
Maybe I should get pregnant too--
then I'll be as wise as you are!

Stella doesn't respond to this outburst. She flips over a
steak, the hiss of dripping fat punctuating her words:

STELLA

(quietly)

She was born in Mexico. And died there a month later. It was a hard birth and she was sick from the start. I never got pregnant again. Lord knows I tried.

LEXIE

(pause)

Then who's Donna? Isn't she your daughter?

STELLA

Frank was married when we met. Donna's his daughter.

LEXIE

So you not only ran from the law, you committed adultery too -- at fifteen? Did you really get married, or d'ya lie about that like you did about your age?

STELLA

We got married after his wife divorced him and moved West -- By then, I was legal. Frank always regretted not knowing his only child, so I went looking for her after he died. Donna was fine about it and we sort of adopted each other.

(pause)

You can judge Frank and me if you want. Like you judged Mr. Clare over there. But remember, child, when you point a finger at somebody, you got three fingers pointin' back at yourself.

Stella hands Lexie a plate containing steak and greasy fried potatoes. Lexie looks at it with dismay.

LEXIE

Stella, are there any napkins?

STELLA

In the camper. Above the sink.

INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Lexie grabs a handful of napkins out of the cabinet above the sink. She hears a clunk, peers deeper into the cabinet.

Behind the cans of dog food is a deadly prize -- an old .45 from the 1930s. It has a pearl-white handle and looks as if it could blow a train off its tracks.

Lexie stares at the gun as if it were buried treasure. Then, very carefully, she puts it back and goes outside.

EXT. CAMPER – LATER

By the campfire, Stella feeds bits of cookies to the dogs as Lexie swats mosquitoes.

STELLA

When the divorce and the statue of limitations run out, we settled in San Diego. I got a job with the government -- file clerk. When the Vietnam war came, I was made editor of a government magazine. Frank worked in a naval shipyard. He was a big guy, could lift almost anything. But in '66 an engine they were disassembling fell on him and that was that.

(pause)

When I got the insurance money, I didn't feel right stayin' there. So I quit my job and started traveling around with my dogs. In fact, now I'm what you might call a famous travel writer. I've had articles in 40 or 50 magazines. Even *National Geographic*-- with photos.

LEXIE

I used to want to be a songwriter.

STELLA

Used to? You're too young to give up already. Let me see some of your lyrics. I'll give you some pointers.

LEXIE

It's private. And I don't need your help.

STELLA

(stung)

Well, fine! Consider the offer
withdrawn.

She goes into the camper, leaving Lexie by the fading fire.

INT. CAMPER – NEXT MORNING

Stella fixes coffee as Lexie stirs inside her sleeping bag.
She yawns and scratches several mosquito bites.

LEXIE

Ouch! Goddamn bugs. Why did the
Lord make mosquitoes?

STELLA

To feed frogs.

As Lexie gets up, Stella reaches for a file from a cabinet
over Lexie's bed. She hands Lexie a small publication.

STELLA

That's the "Loners on Wheels"
newsletter. I send them articles
and photos. Stuff the travel
mags don't wanna buy. Thought
you'd find it interesting, if
you wanna be a writer.

LEXIE

I'm not interested in this
stuff. It's not real writing,
just a bunch of old jokes--

She tosses the newsletter on the table.

LEXIE

Listen, I looked at the map last
night. We're real close to
Minneapolis. I want you to drop
me off at the airport. I'm ready
to go home now.

STELLA

I see. And who's going to pay
for your ticket?

LEXIE

I don't know. I'll charge it.

STELLA

With what?

LEXIE

Well, then I'll take the bus.

STELLA

I'll drop you off in the next town. You can call your mother to wire you the money.

LEXIE

My mother won't send me money. She'll say that I made my bed so now I have to lie in it.

STELLA

In other words, you want to go back to Donna's house, not your own, am I right? Each time you sing me a song, you change the tune.

LEXIE

I just don't want to be here anymore. This trip is the worst. Your snoring keeps me awake. The dogs crawl into my sleeping bag and make me sneeze. I'm getting eaten alive by mosquitoes. And you treat me like a jerk! I don't like it here -- and I don't like you!

EXT. HIGHWAY NEAR MANKATO – LATER

Stella eats an apple and drives with intensity. Lexie studies a road atlas as the camper passes an exit ramp.

LEXIE

Why don't you stop? Mankato is a big place. Don't you want to get rid of me?

STELLA

I'll let you out when I let you out.

LEXIE

Just let me out now.

STELLA

Shut your mouth, child. You're stuck
with me until I sort this out.

EXT. TRUCK STOP / INT. CAMPER – DUSK

Stella maneuvers the camper into a parking stall and cuts the
engine.

LEXIE

I don't want truck stop food
again. Even a McDonald's would
be better than this.

STELLA

We're not stopping here for the
food. You're goin' home.

She gets out of the camper and heads for

A LOAD BROKER'S OFFICE

The trailer-office is cluttered with files. Maps and old
Playboy calendars are tacked on the walls. SAWYER (50s), a
hard-bitten, cigar-smoking interstate truckload broker, looks
up from some forms as Stella enters. Lexie trails behind.

SAWYER

Stella Ramsey! My God, it's been
too long. How ya been?

STELLA

Hey, Joe, just fine. Good t'see ya.

SAWYER

(nods toward Lexie)
Who you got here? Refugee from a
hair dye convention?

STELLA

My young friend's been traveling
with me but she wants to go home
to Chicago. I thought maybe you
got a nice Christian trucker
headin' that way. Someone who
won't hassle her.

LEXIE

What?

STELLA
(to Lexie)
Quiet, child. I'm gettin' you a
ride for free.

LEXIE
I'm not riding in a truck! My
God, who do you think I am!

She turns and bolts out the door. Stella smiles at Sawyer,
winks as though to say "it's working."

EXT. TRUCK STOP – DAY

Lexie stands frozen in the diesel-fuel smog as a sudden air-
horn blast startles her. A big-rig pulls up abruptly as she
jumps out of the way. A young hotshot DRIVER leans out.

TRUCK DRIVER
How much, honey?

LEXIE
What?

TRUCK DRIVER
How much? Twenty bucks? You
worth thirty?

LEXIE
Go to hell, asshole.

He drives off laughing as Lexie fishes in her backpack for
her pill bottle. It's empty. She looks around as Stella
appears beside her.

STELLA
You were acting very weird last
night so I took your pills and
threw 'em away. You don't need
'em. They were uppers, anyway.
Thought you wanted something to
put you to sleep.

LEXIE
How dare you take them! They
were mine!
(sarcastic)
Thanks a lot for trusting me.

STELLA
Give me a reason to--

She reaches for Lexie's backpack, but Lexie grabs it tighter.

STELLA

Well, c'mon, I got you a ride to Chicago. Leaves right now.

LEXIE

I don't want to go back.

STELLA

Sure you do.

LEXIE

(in a rush)

I lied to you. I just pretended to call my mother.

STELLA

You mean she doesn't know you're with me? God, you're a sneaky little brat. This is not good. C'mon.

LEXIE

Where we going now?

STELLA

To eat, then the police.

LEXIE

Police? I didn't do anything. I don't want to go.

STELLA

I don't care what you want. Get it?

LEXIE

Don't shout at me. You sound just like her.

STELLA

Seems to me you deserve it.

LEXIE

I don't. And I can't go home.

STELLA
(exasperated)
Lexie, what do you think your
mother will do when she finds
out you're not at Donna's?

LEXIE
(pause)
Probably report me missing.

STELLA
Bingo. You said the magic words.

INT. MINNESOTA HIGHWAY PATROL OFFICE – NIGHT

Stella stands at a counter, her dogs hovering around her feet. The FEMALE CLERK notices them as she brings a long computer printout to Stella.

FEMALE CLERK
We probably have a law against
dogs in here.

STELLA
But no signs.

CLERK
(smiles)
Cute little guys -- Here's
runaways as of this morning.
Check and see if your hitchhiker
fits any descriptions. If she
did, tell us where she is and
we'll pick her up.

STELLA
It's so long.

CLERK
Long? Honey, this is only for the
past week! Something like a
thousand kids a day run away in
this country. But you can narrow
it down. How old was she? Did she
say where she was from?

STELLA

(lying without a
blink)

I left her at that truck stop
east of town. Short brunette
girl, maybe sixteen, big chest
for her age, wearing a ripped
sweatshirt and cutoffs, cheap
glass necklace, heavy makeup.
Green eyes.

CLERK

You left her there? She's gone
by now. Hell, some truck
driver'll be guilty of violatin'
the Mann Act before dawn.

STELLA

Sorry. Guess I should have
stopped earlier. Can I have this
printout? I'm a writer, it
intrigues me.

CLERK

I didn't see you take it--
(pause)

By the way, don't pick up any
more hitchhikers the next few
days. There's a crazy loose in
South Dakota, wanted for
manslaughter. Don't know which
way he's headed.

STELLA

Thanks, I'll remember that.

She takes the printout and notices a COP looking her over.
This makes her uncomfortable as she hurries out the door.

INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Stella opens the camper and looks inside.

STELLA

Lexie?

No response. She notices the cabinet door above the sink is
ajar and closes it. The dogs look at her expectantly.

STELLA

Where is she?

Ollie goes to Lexie's bed and nuzzles a huddled sleeping bag.

STELLA

Lexie!

LEXIE

Yeah, I'm here. A cop was looking at me funny. Thought I'd better hide.

(yawns)

Must've fallen asleep.

Stella hands her the printout.

STELLA

See if you can find yourself in this. If your mother reported you as a runaway, I don't know what I'll do with you.

(to herself)

Try to help people out and this is what I get.

(to Lexie)

Your father didn't happen to tell you where and when their cruise ship docks, did he?

LEXIE

No, he was too busy to call me before he left. Remember?

STELLA

Well, stay back there 'til I get us out of this state. Can't say I liked the way that cop looked at me either.

INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Lexie leafs through the long computer printout by flashlight as Stella drives, looking very tired.

EXT. HIGHWAY – LATER THAT NIGHT

The camper's headlights illuminate a "Welcome to South Dakota" sign in the darkness. It is just as quickly gone.

INT. CAMPER – NIGHT

Lexie is asleep in the back of the camper. Without warning, Stella swerves and just misses a tractor and hay wagon poorly marked in the dark highway night. Lexie jolts awake.

STELLA

Damn!

LEXIE

Watch out! You almost killed us!

STELLA

I should have picked a campground closer to the line. The one I have in mind'll be real private -- if I can stay awake 'til we get there.

EXT. RESERVATION CAMPGROUND – MORNING

The camper is the only vehicle parked in a field. Literally in the middle of nowhere. There are some picnic tables and an outhouse nearby.

The dogs bolt from the camper and chase a family of raccoons scavenging a garbage pail.

INT. CAMPER – MORNING

At the table, Stella is clearly exhausted and in pain. She's still weak, despite a few hours' sleep. Her breathing is shallow and her arm hurts.

She ignores a plate of toast and cup of warm soup as Lexie makes her some tea.

LEXIE

Stella, I think you've had a -- like a stroke.

STELLA

Bull. I'm fine. Just tired.

Lexie washes the dishes as Stella closes her eyes and breathes with effort. The shatter of a coffee mug on the floor breaks the silence.

LEXIE

Damn!

STELLA

What was it?

LEXIE

A coffee mug -- the one with the two parrots, uh--

STELLA

The parrots screwing? Not that one!

LEXIE

It's just a cup.

STELLA

It's not just a cup. Some very dear friends gave it to me. They're both dead now. Every time I look at it, I think of them. Christ, that cup's made me smile for twelve years. How could you be so careless?

LEXIE

Jesus, I'm sorry I broke your precious cup. It was an accident, okay?

STELLA

(pause)

Lexie, what should I do with you?

LEXIE

Nothing.

STELLA

That's the one thing I can't do.

LEXIE

Can't afford to lose your nursemaid, huh?

Stella gives her a long look. If she weren't so tired, she'd throw Lexie out on her ear. Lexie can't meet her eyes.

LEXIE

Listen, I found my name on that stupid printout you gave me. I'm an official runaway.

STELLA

Well, at least we made it to the reservation. There won't be any state cops looking for you here.

LEXIE

Reservation? As in Indians? This place sucks—

Stella closes her eyes as Lexie sweeps up the broken cup.

EXT. CAMPER – LATER

A mix-tape plays on Lexie's ghetto blaster as she throws out the wash water.

Stella unpacks a box containing bags of herbs and tobacco, bolts of cloth, a sack of potatoes, a bag of rice and a sack of beans. She arranges the items on an Indian blanket spread over a picnic table.

Lexie watches curiously as Stella checks everything against a list on her clipboard.

LEXIE

What's this all about?

STELLA

I told you, I'm part Lakota. I know some people on the reservation.

LEXIE

You going to see them?

STELLA

Yeah. These are gifts for a healer. Best advice I can give you for when we get there is "don't speak unless spoken to."

LEXIE

Don't worry, I won't.

Stella disappears into the camper as Lexie sits on a stump by the fire. She turns up the volume on her ghetto blaster. Suddenly, Stella returns, clearly upset.

STELLA

Where's the pistol?

LEXIE
(all innocence)
What?

STELLA
You heard me. The .45 -- the gun
I kept beside the dog food? It
was there last night.

LEXIE
I don't know about any gun.

STELLA
Lexie, I'm warning you -- don't
lie to me! You don't understand
that gun. It's not a toy to play
with. If you pulled the trigger,
you'd likely kill yourself, me,
the dogs and two hundred gophers
with one bullet. Now where is it?

LEXIE
I don't know what you're talking about.

STELLA
(pause)
Okay, if that's the way you want it.

Stella quickly puts her gifts in the camper and whistles for her dogs. She shoos them into the camper, slides in and starts the engine. Lexie remains by the fire, ignoring this as Stella drives off.

Thinking Stella's kidding, Lexie reaches into her backpack for a cigarette -- the pistol is also inside. She lights a smoke and watches the camper drive down the narrow two-lane and over a rise.

DISSOLVE:

LEXIE

lights another cigarette. She's in the same spot as before but the sun is much higher in the sky. The fire has gone out. She licks her lips, getting thirsty.

LEXIE
Not funny, Stella.

DISSOLVE:

LEXIE

stomps out another cigarette next to a small pile of butts beside the now-cold firepit. The sun is directly overhead.

She shouts down the road:

LEXIE

You'd better send somebody to
get me! Soon!

DISSOLVE:

LEXIE

climbs the rise to the top of the ridge where she last saw the camper. It's nowhere in sight. She adjusts her backpack and keeps walking.

FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD – LATER

Lexie drags her feet, parched and near tears. She crests the second hill. Down at the bottom of a small valley she sees a clump of cottonwoods. The camper is parked in the shade.

INT. CAMPER – DAY

The dogs peer out the back window as Lexie reaches the camper. They look at her; she scowls at them, exhausted, hungry and very thirsty.

Stella is asleep inside. Lexie climbs into the camper and taps Stella on the shoulder. When Stella opens her eyes, Lexie hands her the .45.

STELLA

Thanks. It was my husband's.

LEXIE

You took my pills.

STELLA

Do you know what a bullet from
this does to a human being? It
sure ain't pretty.

LEXIE

My pills, Stella.

STELLA

I told you, I threw them away.
You can't kill yourself with
those kind anyway.

LEXIE

(furious)

I didn't take them to kill
myself -- I took them to give me
a lift! God, I hate you! You
treat me like I'm a total jerk.

STELLA

You're not a jerk. I just don't
have time for your bull.

(pause)

We'd better get on the road.

Lexie retreats to her corner of the camper and searches in her suitcase for the china horse. She holds it close, recalling better times. Stella starts the engine and pulls out.

EXT. PINE RIDGE RESERVATION – TWILIGHT

The parked camper is almost as large as the shack next to it. Drumbeats and chanting are heard inside the shack.

Lexie looks around anxiously as she sits outside the camper in the middle of nowhere, wrapped in Stella's warm shawl.

EXT. CAMPER – EVENING

The moon has risen and the high-pitched yipping of coyotes joins the drums and chanting. Frightened, Lexie gets a flashlight from the camper. But before she can turn it on, she notices the brilliant stars lighting up the black sky. Lying down on a patch of dry grass, she gazes at the heavens.

Suddenly, a hand reaches out and touches her shoulder. She bolts upright. VIRGIL KADOKA (18), a Lakota teen, appears beside her.

VIRGIL

Got a cigarette?

LEXIE

Ohmygod, don't do that! I didn't
hear you coming.

VIRGIL

Obviously. I've been sitting over there for an hour and you didn't even notice.

LEXIE

It's so dark here -- Who are you?

VIRGIL

I'm Virgil.

LEXIE

You live here?

VIRGIL

Sometimes. I came to help tonight, but the old man really doesn't need me. I build the fires when they use fire. Got a cigarette?

LEXIE

Yeah, sure.
(finds one in her bag)
It's kinda old.

VIRGIL

That's okay. Thanks.

He lights the cigarette and lifts it toward the sky, making a circle in the air. Lexie watches, curious.

LEXIE

I'm Lexie. I'm waiting for my -- my grandmother. They wouldn't let me go in the house with her.

VIRGIL

Grandfather said you'd learn more out here.

Virgil takes a deep drag on the cigarette and hands it to Lexie. She takes a drag, hands it back.

VIRGIL

You should offer it. To the four winds -- here, here, here and here.

He points to the East, South, West and North.

LEXIE

What do you mean, "offer it"?

VIRGIL

Make a prayer with it. Since old times, way back, our people used tobacco for offerings. To make prayers with. The white man took it and made cancer with it. That's one difference between you guys and us.

Lexie offers the cigarette as Virgil indicated.

VIRGIL

And then once to the Earth, the Sky, and Wakan Tanka. Show respect. 'Specially since they're praying for your grandma in there. Spirits are here.

LEXIE

(alarmed)
What kind of spirits?

VIRGIL

(amused)
Don't worry. It's not like the boogie man. They won't hurt you.

LEXIE

You're a real Indian, aren't you?
(embarrassed)
I've never met one before.

VIRGIL

There are no "real Indians," you know. We're just glad Columbus wasn't sailing to Turkey.

LEXIE

What? Oh, I get it--

INT. SHACK - NIGHT

By dim light from a wood stove, we see Stella lying on a blanket spread over the dirt floor. An OLD WOMAN sits on a rug nearby, beating a drum and singing a Lakota song of renewal.

Stella and an OLD MAN are surrounded by a circle of green tobacco ties. Between Stella and the cross-legged "medicine man" is a coffee can filled with dirt. Tied to a branch stuck in the dirt is a red cloth "spirit robe." Next to the can is a full glass of water, an eagle feather fan and some herbs smoldering in a tin plate.

While the Old Woman sings the sacred song, the Old Man prays aloud in his language. He chews on an herb. At the end of his prayer, he removes the herb from his mouth and places it on Stella's chest, over her heart.

Throughout this ritual, a gourd rattle shakes above Stella's body, moving from her head to her feet. There is no human hand touching the gourd -- a Spirit ally of the medicine man shakes it as Stella prays for herself along with the Old Man and Old Woman.

EXT. HILL – MOONLIGHT

Lexie and Virgil walk together.

LEXIE

This is the first time in my
life I ever saw moon shadows.

VIRGIL

Really? Where do you live?

LEXIE

Chicago.

VIRGIL

Doesn't the moon shine there?

LEXIE

Yeah, but the city lights don't
allow the quality of reflection
or something--

VIRGIL

Shadows are teachers.

LEXIE

What do you mean?

VIRGIL

I like to spend time with my shadow. I learn a lot from it. Your spirit makes your body the same way your body makes its shadow.

LEXIE

(suddenly concerned)

We've walked too far. I can't hear the drums anymore.

As they turn to go back, Lexie searches for her cigarettes. There's one left. She hands it to Virgil, who offers it in a circle and then to the earth and sky.

VIRGIL

For your grandma. For health and help.

They pass the cigarette between them like a bond and continue to walk back down the hill. An OWL HOOTS close by. There's a flutter of wings. Frightened, Lexie takes Virgil's arm.

VIRGIL

That's the night messenger. He was just checking you out.

(pause)

We better get back.

EXT. SHACK - NIGHT

Stella and the Old Man emerge from the shack as Virgil and Lexie return from their walk.

STELLA

(calling)

Lexie? You there? -- Come over here, child. Grandfather's going to clean you off.

LEXIE

But I didn't get dirty. We just went for a walk.

STELLA

Hush. Stand still.

The Old Man holds a pie tin containing smoldering sage. He "cleans" Lexie's body, fanning smoke from the fragrant herb all around her with his hands.

Then he begins to clean her aura with the eagle feather, fanning her from head to toe without touching her. Finally, he raises the eagle feather to heaven and taps it on the top of her head four times.

Satisfied, the Old Man steps back. Looking Lexie over, he nods.

GRANDFATHER

Okay, okay. Good. We scared it away.

STELLA

Grandfather, thank you. Thank him, Lexie.

LEXIE

(bewildered)

Um, thank you, Grandfather.

STELLA

C'mon, dear. We're not staying here tonight.

(to Virgil)

Can you give me directions to the campground east of Paradise?

VIRGIL

No, don't go there. Lotta drunks in that town with nothing better to do than roust cars from out of state. If you got a map, I'll show you a better place--

INT. CAMPER - LATER

Clouds cover the moon now. As they drive along a main road, Stella is deep in thought.

LEXIE

I thought we were staying there tonight.

STELLA

No, we can't.

(takes a deep breath)

Grandfather said someone cold and dark sits on your shoulder. He said it was a pair of black wings with no body.

LEXIE

Oh, great.

STELLA

He said you walk with Death,
Lexie. You walk with Death and
you've talked with Death -- As a
matter of fact, he said that
Death walks with me too.

LEXIE

No kidding.

The camper comes to an intersection. Stella brakes abruptly.

STELLA

I forgot which way to turn.
(pause, looking left)
This way. Toward Kyle.

LEXIE

Why did the old man send us
away? Virgil didn't have any
problem with me.

STELLA

You liked him, didn't ya? Virgil
will be a good man someday.
Maybe even a Medicine Man.
(pause)
Life's not an accident, you
know. Everyone and everything
has a "reason for being."
There's more to the world than
meets your eye, child.

LEXIE

Thank you, Pocahontas.

STELLA

Death sits on everyone's
shoulder. Sometimes it travels
with you for years before it
calls you. But only a warrior
should make friends with Death.

LEXIE

I'm not afraid of death. Does
that make me a warrior?

STELLA

Not necessarily. Warriors are anyone whose light is on all the time.

LEXIE

Whatever.

(after a pause)

So did the old man cure you?

STELLA

Well, I feel better... stronger. But Death isn't an illness to be cured. It's a power -- like Life. She sits on your other shoulder.

Stella brakes sharply and swerves to the side of the road. Lexie gasps, thinking Stella's having another "accident."

STELLA

Quiet, child. You'll scare him.

EXT. CAMPER - NIGHT

Stella climbs out quietly, indicating Lexie should follow.

STELLA

Coyote, a big one. Look at him.

LEXIE

I don't see anything. Did you hit it?

STELLA

(whispering)

No. He's talking to me.

LEXIE

Sure. What's he saying?

STELLA

He asked what will come to get you.

LEXIE

To get me for what?

STELLA

When it's time for you to die.
There's an art to dying, you know?
When I die, a stone spirit will
come to get me. A meteor. And the
coyotes will talk about it. Did you
see what came to get you?

LEXIE

(loud)

This is creepy, Stella. You're
starting to really freak me out.

STELLA

He's gone now. Too bad. He had
something to tell you. Next
time, don't waste an opportunity
like that.

LEXIE

What kind of herbs did that
Medicine Man give you? Whatever
it was put you on another planet!

STELLA

(tired)

You don't understand.

(pause)

Oh well, old jokes and
Studebakers.

She heads back to the camper and gets in, followed by Lexie.

Moments later, the camper heads off down the highway, its red
tail lights dimming in the distance.

EXT. DEADWOOD, SOUTH DAKOTA – DAY

A banner spans an intersection declaring: "Welcome to
Deadwood Days."

INT. CAMPER – DAY

Driving in downtown traffic, Stella looks for direction signs
as the car behind her HONKS loudly. Stella shouts out her
window:

STELLA

Give me a break, you horse's ass!
(to Lexie)
I hate impatience.

LEXIE
Yeah, right. Something you're
never guilty of.

The camper lurches forward as Stella sees a sign for the
Fairgrounds.

STELLA
Here we are.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS – DAY

Cowboys, farmers, partying college students and tourists from
the city crowd the flea market at the Fairgrounds.

Stella and Lexie unroll a canvas canopy hooked to the back of
the camper. It's Stella's travelling photo store.

A BIT LATER – LEXIE

helps Stella arrange dozens of mounted photos under the
canopy. Lexie inspects them, lingering on one of a mare and
colt in a meadow.

LEXIE
How much for this one?

STELLA
Twenty bucks American. But I'd
say you've earned it by helping.

LEXIE
(pleased)
Thanks! You're a really good
photographer, Stella.

Stella smiles as Lexie gently touches the colt in the photo.

Several yards away, a huge woman, HENRIETTA MARTIN, rolls
toward them like an engine looking for a freight car to push.
A little bejeweled pink-eyed poodle follows in her wake.

HENNY
Stella! Stella Ramsey!

STELLA
(under her breath)
Oh shit. It's Henny Martin. Here we go.
(forcing a smile)
Henny! It's been years.

They sort of hug as the dogs check each other's privates.

STELLA

Henny, this is my adopted grand-daughter, Lexie. Henrietta Martin. Professor Henrietta Martin, I should say. Right, Henny?

HENNY

Not any more. I'm an emeritus. They finally got rid of me.
(looks Lexie over)
My God, child, I'm used to college students who want to look special, but I've never seen a hairdo quite like that.

STELLA

(to Lexie)

Here's some money. Go buy two good seats to the rodeo tonight. Take your time. Henny and I have ten years to catch up on.

(to Henny)

So where's Alfred?

Lexie heads off toward the rodeo box office as Henny squeezes herself into one of two folding camp chairs next to Stella's camper. She pulls a lacy handkerchief from her pocket and dabs her forehead as her poodle settles in beside her.

HENNY

Left me six years ago. For a French professor. They deserve each other. She can't cook without putting French wine in everything and he's a recovering alcoholic! You'd better believe I nailed him for every sou I could get--

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

Lexie wanders around, fascinated with the pure Western flavor of the place.

She buys an ice cream cone at the amusement park, then finds herself "backstage" at the rodeo. She is drawn to

A CORRAL

where a bronc comes over to her expectantly, nuzzles her hand. Lexie enjoys the silent communication with the sleek horse.

TINA (OS)
Now ain't that just like
Stampede. Friendly as hell with
women, but he'll throw every man
who tries to ride 'im.

TINA (late 20s), a cowgirl, hefts a bale of hay off the back of a pickup truck and brings it to the corral.

TINA
You're a long way from home,
ain'tcha, kid?

LEXIE
Yeah. Can I help?

TINA
Sure. If you like working for free.

Lexie grabs an end of the hay bale and follows as Tina feeds the animals in the corrals. She enjoys herself thoroughly, until she suddenly realizes:

LEXIE
Oh my God, I was going to get
tickets to the rodeo! I hope
they still have good seats left.
Thanks, Tina. Good luck tonight.

TINA
Thanks, kid. You're welcome to
come back and help again
tomorrow if you like.

EXT. RODEO TICKET BOOTH - DAY

Lexie hands the TICKET TAKER a \$20 bill for front row seats.

LEXIE
Do you have any jobs -- with the
rodeo? I mean, odd jobs I could
do? For pay?

TICKET TAKER

Don't ask me, honey, I'm just a mushroom. They feed me shit and keep me in the dark. Office is in a trailer at the far end of that lane. But there ain't nobody there right now. Rodeo starts in an hour. They're getting things ready -- tying up the bulls' balls, you know?

LEXIE

Huh? Oh -- right.

EXT. RODEO GRANDSTANDS - DUSK

Lexie and Stella watch the rodeo, loving every minute. Lexie stands up and cheers when Stampede throws a male rider in the bucking contest.

LEXIE

All right, Stampede!

STELLA

What are you doin'? Rooting for the horse?

LEXIE

Give him a break. He's got a hard life--

LATER - TINA

competes in the ladies' barrel race. She rides a paint pony that shoots out of the gate as fast as lightning.

LEXIE

God, I'd love to do that.

STELLA

Maybe you will, child.

A BIT LATER - LEXIE

walks with Stella back to the camper.

LEXIE

I never saw riding like that before!

STELLA

Yeah? Folks out here live in the saddle.

Two POLICEMEN are waiting as they reach Stella's camper.

FIRST COP

Evenin', ma'am. You Stella Ramsey? And Lexie Anderson?

STELLA

You got 'em.

FIRST COP

Well, Mrs. Ramsey, I'm real sorry but we have a warrant for your arrest -- says you kidnapped this here girl.

STELLA

(looks at Lexie)

Your momma.

Lexie shrugs "I'm sorry."

STELLA

(to First Cop)

No one's been kidnapped here, Officer. How'd you find us?

FIRST COP

A Minnesota trooper recognized her hair when the call came over the APB wire. He had your license number. So does the Fairground office.

(pause, to Lexie)

Little lady, you don't look bound and gagged or locked in a closet to me. Why don't we just go down to the station and sort it all out?

LEXIE

The station -- you mean the police station?

FIRST COP

Yeah, you can call your mother. She's the one who--

Unable to deal with her mother and the cops, Lexie turns and runs as fast as she can down an aisle of campers. The Second Cop automatically reaches for his gun, but the First Cop stops him.

FIRST COP
(calling to Lexie)
Wait, wait! We won't hurt you!

STELLA
Lexie! That won't help! Oh Lord,
now what?

FIRST COP
She won't get far. I guarantee
she's the only girl in Deadwood
with hair like that. We'll find
her. Meanwhile, why don't you
follow us to the station and tell
the Duty Sergeant your story.

STELLA
Think he'll lock me up?

FIRST COP
Could be. At least until we find
her again.

EXT. RODEO OFFICE TRAILER – MOMENTS LATER

Lexie rests by the trailer steps, winded from her escape. She sees a cute young COWBOY (20s) standing in the doorway, nursing a beer.

LEXIE
Hey, who can I see about a job?
Do you need any kind of help --
like cleaning up or taking care
of horses or whatever?

COWBOY
(amused)
You want a job? How old are you?

LEXIE
Eighteen.

COWBOY

Eighteen, huh? Kinda scrawny for
eighteen.

(sizes her up)

Where you from?

LEXIE

Uh -- California.

COWBOY

Big state. Whereabouts in
California?

LEXIE

Uh, San Fernan-cisco.

COWBOY

San Francisco?

(looks at her hair)

That explains it. Hell yes,
c'mon in.

INT. DEADWOOD JAIL – EVENING

The DUTY SERGEANT locks Stella behind a jail cell door.

STELLA

(angry)

What about my dogs?

DUTY SGT.

We'll keep 'em in the pound.
They'll be just fine.

STELLA

You can't do that! I know Judge
Muncie here. Call him. He'll
help me.

DUTY SGT.

Never heard of 'im. Look, by
morning we'll find the girl and
straighten this all out. Right
now, you're still charged with
kidnapping.

INT. RODEO OFFICE TRAILER – SAME TIME

Lexie sits by a table covered with papers and office supplies.
The Cowboy closes a cash box and puts it out of her reach.

COWBOY

So tell me, San Francisco, who's
your barber? Some dog groomer?

LEXIE

If you got a job for me, I'll
fix my hair.

COWBOY

You're a runaway, ain'tcha?

LEXIE

No, I'm not! I'm just traveling
around. Hitchhiking. Seeing the
country. I like horses. Always
been good with them.

(getting nervous)

Well, if you don't have any
jobs, that's okay. I'll just--

COWBOY

Sit down. I never said that. I
just might have a job for you.

LEXIE

Are you the boss here?

COWBOY

My dad and mom run this rodeo.
They're not here tonight so I'm
in charge. I might be able to
fit you in. See how you work.
But one hand has to help the
other -- understand?

LEXIE

Yeah, well, I don't think--

COWBOY

You rub my back and I'll rub
yours, you know? What have you
got to lose? Don't tell me you're
a virgin, huh, San Francisco?

INT. DEADWOOD POLICE STATION – SAME TIME

Kidnapping arrests are rare in Deadwood and the Duty Sergeant
is gung-ho as he reads an APB over the police band radio:

DUTY SGT. (INTO RADIO)
Attention all units. Be on the alert for a white female, fifteen years old, blue and blonde punk hair, wearing jeans and a T-shirt with a rock and roll logo. Last seen in the vicinity of the Fairgrounds. She's wanted in connection with a kidnapping charge filed by Chicago police.

INT. RODEO OFFICE TRAILER – SAME TIME

The Cowboy has dimmed the lights. He pulls Lexie down beside him on a couch. She's somewhere between willingness and repulsion. He's not bad-looking but is obviously just an inexperienced kid trying to come on like a "king snake."

COWBOY
Why don't we just sit down and talk about the first thing that comes up?

He leans in to kiss her, but Lexie pulls back.

LEXIE
Gross! What's in your mouth?

COWBOY
That's just my chaw.

He extracts a slimy black wad of tobacco from between his cheek and gum, and tosses it into the wastebasket, followed by a stream of spit.

Lexie's now totally on the side of repulsion. She tries to squirm away from him.

LEXIE
Let me go! Leave me alone!

COWBOY
Don't you go jacking me around now, girl. You think you're too good for me -- but you're only a tease!

Her shirt gets torn as she twists away from him. When he grabs at her jeans, she bashes him with the rodeo ledger book. Pissed, the Cowboy slaps Lexie upside the head.

COWBOY

You like to fight, huh? You like to
wrestle? That's fine with me.

They struggle as she tries to reach the door, but he maneuvers her into the kitchen. Determined to get away, she grabs a pancake skillet from the dish rack and swings it against the Cowboy's ear. He steps back, dazed.

Remembering Stella's move against the picketer at the halfway house, Lexie blasts the Cowboy in the crotch with the skillet. He instantly drops to one knee, moaning and crying as she bolts out the door.

INT. POLICE STATION – SAME TIME

The Duty Sergeant hands Stella a glass of water and her pill bottle through the bars of her cell.

STELLA

Thanks. It's for my heart.

DUTY SGT.

My dad took those things. They
didn't do him much good.

STELLA

That's real encouraging.

(pause)

Tell me something, how did the
girl's runaway report become a
kidnapping charge?

DUTY SGT.

Beats me. Someone must've seen
you together in Chicago.

STELLA

Maybe the mailman, or the cab
driver. Must've told her mother.
Well, she better show up soon to
straighten this out. I need a
soak in a hot mineral bath
more'n a night on a jail cell
cot -- and there's no tellin'
where she's sleepin' tonight.

EXT. HIGHWAY – NIGHT

Lexie walks along a two-lane blacktop, her clothes soiled and torn. Tears and dirt streak her face.

A car's headlights illuminate her wild hair. She sticks her thumb out to hitch a ride, but the car passes her by.

DISSOLVE:

LATER - LEXIE

still has her thumb out to hitch a ride. She's more composed.

A police car slows across the road and pulls to a stop. She freezes as the red and blue flashers come alive.

COP (OS)
(loudspeaker)
Halt! Stay where you are.

INT. POLICE STATION – LATER

Lexie sits on a folding chair in a small gray room. The door swings open and Stella enters. She looks pretty mussed up herself.

STELLA
Lexie?
(no response)
Are you all right? You're not hurt?

LEXIE
(too ashamed to look
at Stella)
I'm fine.

STELLA
Where did you go?

LEXIE
Rodeo.

STELLA
What happened?

LEXIE
A guy... he promised me a job.

STELLA
Did he rape you?

LEXIE
No.

STELLA
(pause)
Did you do it?

LEXIE
(glances at Stella)
No! I -- started to, but--

STELLA
Wish you had?

LEXIE
(remembering him,
disgusted)
No, not with him -- he smelled like
tobacco spit! Can we go now?

MOMENTS LATER - STELLA

sits by the Duty Sergeant's desk and receives her personal belongings as Lexie sits nearby.

DUTY SGT.
(to Lexie)
Your mother dropped the charges when
she found out she'd have to pay for
your ticket home. She said you might
as well stay with Stella.

LEXIE
Gee thanks, Mom.

DUTY SGT.
(to Stella)
Sign here, ma'am.

Stella signs a paper as the Sergeant takes her old .45 out of a drawer and hands it over with care.

DUTY SGT.
Found this in your camper. It's
a classic, you know. FBI used
that model in the '30s. How'd
you come by it?

STELLA
My husband "bought" it from a
U.S. Marshal who collected 'em.

DUTY SGT.

Hasn't been cleaned in years.
There's a shell jammed in the
chamber that could blow off the
hand pullin' the trigger. No
telling where that bullet's goin'.
If I were you, I'd get rid of it
just to be safe. You can sign it
over to us for disposal.

STELLA

No, I can't give it away. It
saved our lives once. When I get
to my ranch, I'll bury it at my
husband's grave.

DUTY SGT.

Good idea.

(to Lexie)

Lexie, you want to press charges
against the guy who hassled you?

LEXIE

God no. I just want to get out
of this town.

INT. CAMPER – LATER

Eager to peel off her torn clothes, Lexie rifles through her
bag but can't find a nightshirt. Frustrated, she holds the
bag upside down and shakes it out. Along with her clothes,
the china horse tumbles to the floor. It cracks into pieces.

LEXIE

(stunned)

Son of a bitch, blessed mother!
God dammit!

STELLA

You forgot Joseph.

LEXIE

Shut up!

She sits on the floor and picks up the pieces of her precious
horse, trying to put it back together.

LEXIE

(heartbroken)

This is my favorite thing in the whole world. There were times when it was my whole world.

STELLA

Maybe now you'll realize it wasn't.

LEXIE

Stuff it, Stella! And don't tell me "there's more to the world than meets the eye"? That's bullshit!

Amused, Stella watches her without a word.

LEXIE

(erupting)

My world is just the way it seems. Rotten. Where am I supposed to learn about life -- from fuckin' TV? My mother -- she won't even spend the money to bring me home. She's such a bitch. I hate her!

STELLA

Cut the crap! I'm sick of your whining, child! You sound like a dyin' cat in a hailstorm! You can only blame your problems on other people for so long. Maybe your mother's a loser, you can't change that. So grow up.

LEXIE

I don't want to grow up. Nobody wants me around. Nobody cares about me.

STELLA

(quietly)

I care, Lexie. I would never have brought you with me if I didn't. I knew you couldn't go back home.

Lexie looks at her and starts to cry, unable to hold back her intense emotions any longer. Trixie jumps into Lexie's lap and licks her face, trying to make it better.

LEXIE

Oh God, I'm so stupid.
(hugging the dog)
Don't lick my face, Trixie. I'm
allergic to you, remember? You're
a good dog You too, Ollie.

Ollie jumps onto Lexie who hugs both dogs, ignoring her "allergies." Stella puts an arm around Lexie and the dogs lick her face too. This makes Lexie laugh as she wipes away her tears.

EXT. SOUTHWEST SOUTH DAKOTA ROAD – NEXT MORNING

The camper is parked at a roadside stand. In the distance is the massive, unfinished statue of Crazy Horse.

Stella sets up a tripod to take a picture of it. She calls Lexie over, points to the camera.

STELLA

Have a look -- the Lakota call these mountains "Paha Sapa." Paha means Black, the color of the healing power. Sapa implies the Earth Mother has taken a deep breath, filled up her lungs. These hills are sacred.

Lexie looks through the camera lens, admiring the majesty of the hills for the first time.

INT. CAMPER – WYOMING ROAD – DAY

The camper passes a born-again Christian billboard which proclaims: "He shall not perish but have life everlasting."

LEXIE

Stella, I've got this phrase stuck in my head -- "the elusive world of everlasting emotion." But I don't know how to use it... like in a song?

STELLA

There's a book in the box under your bed. Japanese poetry. Haiku. They're like songs. Read that.

EXT. REST STOP – LATER

Lexie sits at a picnic table, reading a thin book. Finally, she closes the book of Japanese poetry.

LEXIE

This isn't just poetry. It's another way of looking at life, isn't it? Simpler... and bigger.

STELLA

Haiku is like an art photo. Its beauty is in its simplicity.

LEXIE

Can I read you a lyric I wrote?

STELLA

(surprised, pleased)
Why, I'd be honored.

Lexie opens her diary and thumbs to a well-worn page.

LEXIE

"What is it
That wants you to mount
The coal-black stallion?
Why is it
That you know with certainty
You cannot stay astride?"

STELLA

That's beautiful, Lexie. You're a good poet.

Lexie smiles as she closes her diary, proud of this moment.

EXT. TWO-LANE HIGHWAY – THE NEXT DAY

A sign reads "Welcome to Montana." Stella takes a picture of Lexie standing next to the sign.

STELLA

Would you like to stop at Little Big Horn? See where Custer bought the farm? Maybe photograph a few buffalo?

LEXIE

Sure. Why not?

STELLA

You know, the Indians called Custer "Yellow Hair," but they also called him "Iron Ass" 'cause he could sit in the saddle all day long. He was a relentless son-of-a-bitch.

LEXIE

Sounds like you.

STELLA

Thanks.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - DAY

A compact car with South Dakota plates is flipped on its side in a turnout ditch.

Stella's camper rounds the bend and drives past. Then Stella brakes suddenly and backs up to the turnout.

Lexie hops out of the camper and runs over to the overturned car. She's startled to see a cracked windshield, blood on the seat and passenger window. The driver's window is down.

Stella joins her, followed by the dogs who nose around curiously. She examines the blood.

STELLA

Dry. It's been here awhile. Whoever was driving must've got out and started walking. Write down the license number. We'll report it in the next town.

They walk back to the camper.

INT. CAMPER - DAY

Stella lets the dogs in first. They bark and growl, on edge.

STELLA

What's the matter?

IN THE BACK OF THE CAMPER

is a curly-haired, unshaved injured man (THE CONVICT) sitting length-wise on the dining table bench. His feet extend off the end. A blow to his head is caked with blood.

He wears dirty blue jeans and a work shirt with a number stenciled over the pocket. He holds Stella's .45 and grins.

CONVICT

Don't move. Shut up your dogs or I'll shoot them.

STELLA

(calmly, pulling her dogs close)

Trixie, Ollie, quiet. It's all right. Hush...

Lexie pops her head in the door and sees what's happening.

CONVICT

Good. Now very slowly, both of you come back here.

Lexie follows Stella toward the back of the camper. The Convict points at Lexie.

CONVICT

You! Sit down here. Put your legs under mine, feet up against the wall, and don't move.

Frightened, Lexie sits across from him at the table. He waves the .45 at her and she presses her feet to the opposite wall. He covers her legs with his so he'll feel it if she moves.

STELLA

Why the gun? We can't hurt you.

CONVICT

I found it looking for bandages. Figured it would be useful.

STELLA

We'll take you to a hospital.

CONVICT

No! No hospital. No police. You don't talk to anyone about me or she dies!

LEXIE

(pale)

Who are you? Why are you doing this?

CONVICT

Shut up, kid!
(to Stella)
Make me some coffee, Gramma,
real strong. Then clean the
blood off my head and bandage
it. We're driving to Idaho.

STELLA

(stalling)
How'd you wreck the car? Fall
asleep at the wheel?

CONVICT

Just shut up and do what I say!
NOW!

Stella flinches. She reaches for the Sanka tin, blocking the man's view of it with her back. She spoons the decaf instant coffee into a cup and puts water on to boil.

STELLA

Idaho's a two-day trip. I'm not
well -- can't drive nights and
she doesn't have a license.

CONVICT

Then we'll drive while it's
light. Just do what I say and I
won't hurt no one.

INT. CAMPER – LATER

The traffic gets thicker as they pass signs for Little Big Horn. Stella drives, her dogs huddled in their familiar places under her feet and on her lap. They know something's wrong.

Lexie remains frozen with fear at the dining table, her feet still held captive by the Convict. His wound has been cleaned and bandaged. He sips the Sanka as if it were real coffee. He grins at Lexie but there's no warmth in it.

Stella glances back to see what's happening and starts to swerve into the next lane. The dogs whimper loudly as she regains control.

CONVICT

Watch it! You tryin' to get us
killed?

Stella thinks for a moment.

STELLA

You want to talk? I'm a good listener.

CONVICT

I got nothin' to say to you, lady. Same old story, always the same tired old story. Lousy wife, lousy kids, lousy job.

STELLA

So what are you running from? Besides the law?

CONVICT

I'm not running from nothing. I'm just hitching a ride from an old busybody. Now keep your trap shut and your eyes on the road.

Stella exchanges a glance with Lexie, who's terrified.

INT. CAMPER - LATER

The Convict is on the verge of falling asleep at the table. His head slips down as he fights to stay awake. Finally, he starts snoring.

Lexie watches closely to make sure he's really asleep. Then:

LEXIE

(harsh whisper)
Stella!

STELLA

(whisper)
What?

LEXIE

He's asleep.

STELLA

Is his finger on the trigger?

LEXIE

Yeah. Drive carefully, no bumps. I'm going to try and move.

STELLA

Oh Lord, be careful. Help us,
Grandfather.

Stella focuses on the road as Lexie slowly eases her legs a centimeter at a time until she's sure the Convict won't wake up. She slides them under the table without touching him.

The dogs start to get nervous but Stella calms them as Lexie slips into the passenger seat.

STELLA

(quietly)
What should we do?

LEXIE

We've got to stop soon. A
restaurant or gas station.

STELLA

Maybe you should hit him over
the head with something, or tie
him up.

LEXIE

What if the gun goes off, like
the cop said?

STELLA

Oh good Jesus.

A BIT LATER - LEXIE AND STELLA

are still on edge. So are the dogs -- as Lexie intently watches the Convict, who continues to sleep, they whimper.

LEXIE

(whispers, to dogs)
Quiet, you guys!
(to Stella)
If he wakes up, I will hit him
with something.

Stella sees a gas station ahead, an old place on a lightly-traveled two-lane.

STELLA

Thank God.

LEXIE

Coast in, slow down easy on the gravel.

STELLA

I'll stop on the road. Less noise.

The camper glides to a smooth stop in front of the gas station. The women look to each other, take deep breaths. Simultaneously, they open their doors and prepare to run for it.

STELLA

(whispers)

Trixie, Ollie, c'mon!

Her voice is just a bit too loud and the dogs make noise as they jump from the camper. The Convict's eyes flicker open. He struggles to his feet.

CONVICT

Hey! You!

EXT. CAMPER – SAME TIME

Lexie runs for her life behind Stella and the yipping dogs.

A GAS STATION ATTENDANT looks out from the garage, unaware of what's happening.

The Convict appears in the camper doorway. He sights down the barrel of the .45, aiming first at Stella, then at the Gas Station Attendant walking into the light.

The Convict squeezes the trigger. The gun explodes in his hand.

EXT. GAS STATION – LATER

State police cars fill the station lot as PARAMEDICS load the injured man into an ambulance.

A STATE TROOPER talks to Stella and Lexie, who are dazed.

STATE TROOPER

You ladies are real heroes! There's a thousand dollar reward for this guy. Where do we send the money?

LEXIE

A reward! But we didn't--

STELLA

Lexie! Don't be modest, child. You showed a lot of courage there.

LEXIE

Oh yeah, right. We do deserve it.

STELLA

Officer, here's my card. Send it to my post office box in Missoula. Make the check out to Alexis Anderson--

EXT. MONTANA MOUNTAINS – DAY

Stella and Lexie drive through mountains near Yellowstone. Lexie's never seen country like this before -- deer, bear and elk in the meadows, bighorn sheep in the high ranges.

She writes furiously in her diary as Stella pauses the camper at the gate to

BEAR CREEK RANCH

a hot springs spa and backpack ranch that caters to wilderness camp groups and tourists.

STELLA

They have my favorite mineral baths here. I trade 'em my photos which they say the tourists love. Ready to soak in the hot springs and get the blood flowing again?

LEXIE

Sounds good. Can I ride horses here too? I'll pay you back if it costs anything.

STELLA

Sure thing. Why don't you go out backpacking with one of the camp groups?

EXT. MOUNTAINS – DAY

Lexie rides a pinto behind wilderness camp leader GUY LOZEAU (late 20s) and six students (18-22). Happy and laughing for a change, as the group heads up a mountain trail she waves to Stella and the dogs relaxing on the ranch house porch.

EXT. MOUNTAIN CLEARING – LATE AFTERNOON

The students spread out, building temporary shelters. With a forked stick, Lexie rakes leaves into a bed. She makes walls from fir branches to keep out the moisture. Her hands become brown from the pine sap. Guy comes over to check her work.

GUY

That's perfect. Couldn't ask for more.

LEXIE

(embarrassed)

How do I get rid of the pine sap?

GUY

Soap root. C'mon, I'll show you.

They walk down the slope towards a creek.

GUY

Wait...

(pointing)

See that? Poison oak. Three leaves shiny, reddish. In the spring they'll be all green. You allergic to that?

LEXIE

(laughs)

I'm allergic to everything.

GUY

(pointing at another plant)

See this? Mugwort. Grows right next to the poison oak. It's the antidote. Soak in it, drink it as a tea. Too bad it tastes awful.

Lexie and Guy steer clear of the poison oak. Guy stops further along the trail and bends down.

GUY

Here's the soap root. Crush it up and scrub with the pulp like soap. I've got to check on the others now. C'mon back and help with dinner.

Lexie smiles and nods, watches him walk away, enamored.

EXT. CAMPFIRE – NIGHT

Lexie watches Guy singing and laughing with the students. She writes in her journal by firelight.

LATER – GUY

stands by the roaring campfire, addressing the group:

GUY

So, at Bear Creek Ranch, everybody pitches in for the evening's entertainment. You can share a song, a poem, a joke, a story, a dance. Everybody except me, that is!

The group laughs.

GUY

Okay, who's first?
(no volunteers)
How 'bout you, Lexie? You've been writing in your book all day long. Would you read it to us?

Lexie freezes like a deer in headlights.

LEXIE

(squeaky voice)
I -- I can't.

GUY

C'mon. It's part of the program.

She removes her journal from her backpack and flips it open reluctantly.

Guy puts his arm around an attractive GIRL seated beside him. She snuggles against Guy as Lexie looks down at her journal, in shock. She's been writing a poem about Guy.

LEXIE

(looking up, scared)
It's not very -- interesting.

GUY

Sure it is. You can do it.

LEXIE

No -- I can't!

She turns and slips off into the dark.

The others around the campfire watch as Guy calls on someone else to sing a song.

EXT. HOT SPRINGS – MORNING

Stella sits on a deck, reading On Death and Dying. A shadow blocks her light. Lexie stands above her in overalls and a plaid shirt. Stella's grin transforms into a hearty laugh.

LEXIE
(hurt)
What's so funny.

STELLA
Sorry, child. It's your dayglo hair. Looks a bit strange with the cowgirl duds -- Welcome back. How's country life treatin' ya so far?

LEXIE
Well, I had a good horse -- until she got into a patch of wild garlic and then couldn't stop farting.

Stella starts laughing all over again at this, along with Lexie.

STELLA
So did you pass the course? Skin your first buffalo?

LEXIE
(serious)
No. I failed. I really blew it.

She lowers herself into a chair, noticing Stella's book.

STELLA
What happened out there? You weren't s'posed to be back till this afternoon.

LEXIE
(evasive)
Nothing.

STELLA

Don't lie to me again, child.
Your face is like an open page.

LEXIE

Well, Guy, the instructor? When everyone was supposed to perform around the campfire, he asked me to read something I'd written. But I couldn't. It was -- about him--

STELLA

So? What's wrong with takin' a shine to ol' Guy?

LEXIE

He already has a girlfriend.
She's his age, and pretty.

(pause)

Boys don't notice me, Stella.
I'm -- boring.

STELLA

How could they miss you with that hair? You know, every time things start to get tough, you play the almighty martyr. Where's your pride, child?

LEXIE

(whines)

I don't have anything to be proud of. I'm a mistake. My parents don't even want me. My whole life is a mistake.

STELLA

You're no more a mistake than those mountains over there. Everything has a reason for being, Lexie. Inside of you is a spirit that knows why you're here. It knows you're no mistake. You owe it to yourself to get in touch with that spirit.

(pause)

Anyway, I'm sure tired of hearin' you complain. I don't have time for it anymore, Lexie.

LEXIE
(quiet)
Okay. I get it.

STELLA
I called my brother Homer today.
There's money waitin' for you --
from the reward. If you're gonna
fly home, we can put you on a
plane in Spokane.

LEXIE
You still want to get rid of me?
I don't want to go back to
Chicago -- not even to Donna and
my dad's place.

STELLA
Huh... You want to stay with me,
you can stay. But you have to
make that choice, and you have to
deal with your parents. I'm not
running interference for you.

EXT. SNOW GOOSE RANCH, MONTANA – THE NEXT DAY

UNCLE HOMER (70s), sun-wrinkled and smiling, waves from the porch as Stella and Lexie drive up.

They climb out of the camper followed by the excited dogs.

As they get their bags, Stella pulls Lexie aside:

STELLA
Folks think Homer's a little
simple-minded, but he's just
floating more down river than
most. And if you think I snore,
wait'll you hear him! Sounds
like a small plane landing in
the living room.

Lexie drags her heavy bag up the steps to the porch.

INT. RANCH HOUSE – DAY

It's not fancy, but it's comfortable. A big central room,
kitchen, plus a few bedrooms. Lexie peeks into an open room.

LEXIE
This my room?

Stella nods as she watches Lexie. Concerned, Homer looks at Stella.

STELLA

(quietly, to Homer)

You should have seen her a week ago. She's a little lost, that's all. Just give her lots of work to do, she'll snap out of it.

EXT. RANCH -- LATER

Homer shows Lexie how to feed the chickens--

HOMER

Give 'em scraps from the garden. If you catch a cricket or a roach in the house, bring 'em down here. Chickens gobble 'em up like dessert.

--and the pigs--

HOMER

Don't go into that pen. That sow there saw her mother butchered and she's been waitin' to take revenge ever since. We have two buckets up in the kitchen. One's for hog slop. Keep 'em separate.

--and the rabbits--

HOMER

Years ago I'd name all those guys, but that made it harder to eat 'em. So now we just got brown ones and white ones. Rabbits're easy. Just think about killing one and it'll keel over from fright.

INT. BARN – A BIT LATER

Homer shows Lexie the saddles, reins, riding gear.

HOMER

It's all pretty old, but you're welcome to make whatever you can out of it.

She gets excited as they look over the horses. One whinnies at her and she gives it a carrot.

HOMER

(pointing to a horse)
That roan there is the gentlest one -- but for my money I'd take the Appaloosa. She loves the mountains. You can ride her all day and not wear her out.

LEXIE

What's her name?

HOMER

Kola.

LEXIE

(confused)
Like in Pepsi or Coke?

HOMER

(laughs)
No. In Lakota, Kola means "friend."

Lexie grins, then saddles up the Appaloosa.

EXT. CORRAL - LATER

Lexie rides Kola around the corral. She's finally glad to be here.

EXT. PORCH - EVENING

Stella and Homer sit in rockers listening to crickets and coyotes. The screen door creaks open as Lexie comes onto the porch.

LEXIE

(clears her throat)
So listen, you guys. Seems like you got an awful lot of work to do around here. You must get pretty tired.

HOMER

Depends on the work.

LEXIE

I mean -- maybe you could use some help.

HOMER

Depends on the helper.

LEXIE

Well, how 'bout if I stick around here for the rest of the summer? I promise not to bug you.

Stella raises her eyebrows, looks at Homer. After a pause:

HOMER

Okay. You can feed all the animals every morning. You can weed in the garden every day. There won't be no pay, neither.

STELLA

(hesitates, then:)

It's all right with me if it's okay with your mother. You call her tonight and tell her when you're planning to come home.

LEXIE

I'd rather call her tomorrow morning. That way I know she'll be sober. And in a good mood. Maybe.

Homer looks at Stella, raises his eyebrows. Stella nods.

INT. MARINA'S KITCHEN – NEXT MORNING

Dirty dishes are piled up in the water-stained sink. Marina sips a drink as she cradles the phone, shouting at Lexie:

MARINA

(into phone)

No you can't! I need you here!

LEXIE (ON PHONE)

What do you need me for? To clean the house? To cook your supper? You only want me around to be your maid!

MARINA

You got two choices, Lexie: You come home right now or you never come home. Is that clear?

INT. RANCH KITCHEN – INTERCUT LEXIE & MARINA ON PHONES

LEXIE

(livid)

You don't care about me! You never have.

MARINA

Don't you talk to me like that! You've been an insolent little brat since the day you were born!

LEXIE

Jesus, Mother, you are so sick.

MARINA

Now you're all excited about helping some crazy old woman, but you can't even help your own mother -- is that it?

LEXIE

Yeah, I know -- I'm an ungrateful little bitch. Well, I'll just get out of your way -- for good.

MARINA

You shut up and do as I say. Get yourself home now!

LEXIE

(screams into phone)

Goodbye, Mother!

INT. RANCH KICHEN – DAY

Lexie slams down the receiver and runs from the ranch house. Stella and Homer don't stop her.

EXT. CORRAL – DAY

Lexie bridles Kola and takes off into the fields.

FROM THE PORCH

Stella and Homer watch Lexie disappear over a pasture ridge.

STELLA

She'll work it out.

INT. RANCH HOUSE KITCHEN - LATER

Stella washes breakfast dishes, gazes out the window.

EXT. PORCH – AFTERNOON

Stella sorts her photos and arranges them in a scrapbook. She keeps busy to mask her worry.

EXT. RIDGE – LATER

Stella scans the horizon through binoculars, tries to see where Lexie has gone. She spots Homer on his tractor as he cuts hay in an adjoining field. He stands in the tractor and scans the horizon too.

EXT. CORRAL – EARLY EVENING

Stella's 35mm camera is set up on a tripod. She lines up a shot of the corral, horses, an old hayrake, the mountains and some rolling thunderhead clouds coming out of the west. The dogs whimper at her feet.

The sun radiates brightly between gathering clouds. She snaps a few photos, then pauses again to search the ridge for Lexie.

STELLA

(to the dogs)

Think it'll rain? The leaves
haven't turned over yet. Maybe
by tonight -- Hope that girl has
sense enough to come in out of
the storm.

EXT. ROAD – A BIT LATER

Dark storm clouds move in. Searching for Lexie, Stella drives the camper down a rutted road.

Lightning flashes above the mountains. Thunder rolls through.

INT. CAMPER – SAME TIME

Stella peers through the windshield, increasingly concerned. The dogs are in their usual places at her feet.

STELLA

That horse'll either bring her back
or throw her off, that's for sure.

EXT. ROCKY GULLY – SAME TIME

Lightning strikes close, slashes a tall cedar in half. The dark sky turns a brilliant strobe-white. Thunder follows immediately.

EXT. CAMPER – DUSK

The camper rocks from side to side in the thunder roll. It lurches over rocky wagon tracks. Stella guns it to keep on going. It jolts forward, hard.

INT. CAMPER – SAME TIME

Stella bounces in the seat, loses control of the wheel. She hits the gearshift, popping the drive into neutral.

Suddenly, she gasps for breath and somehow pushes down on the brake.

The camper stops abruptly as she clutches her left arm and shoulder, struggles to breathe.

STELLA

Oh dear God, not now, not here.

The storm brews outside. A sudden lightning flash. Thunder is very close.

The dogs whimper and nuzzle at Stella. She's barely conscious, unable to respond. It takes all of her effort to breathe.

EXT. FIELDS NEAR CAMPER – A BIT LATER

Lexie appears, walking through driving rain -- drenched to the skin, hair flattened, leading the Appaloosa by the reins.

EXT./INT. CAMPER – MOMENTS LATER

Lexie presses her face against the driver's window. She swings the door open, catches Stella before she falls out.

LEXIE

Oh my God! Stella! Can you move your legs? Here, let me--

Lexie lifts Stella's legs and swings them over to the passenger side. Stella slides off the seat and slumps onto the floor.

LEXIE

Okay, just relax. I'll get us home.
Don't worry. I'll get us there--

She climbs into the driver's seat, shifts into reverse and guns the accelerator.

The camper lurches backward. Stella groans and the dogs bounce around, yipping in fear.

LEXIE

Oh God, oh Jesus. Please don't
let us get stuck!

She revs the motor again and turns the wheel. The camper spins in the mud but finally lurches back onto the pasture.

Lexie turns the rig around and pulls the gear into low.

With the Appaloosa trailing behind, the camper crawls back along the wagon road. Lexie peers out the window.

LEXIE

I can't see! Lights. Where's the
lights?

She starts pulling knobs. The windshield wipers go on.

LEXIE

Oh, great.

The radio goes on, loud, scares her. Stella lifts her head.

STELLA

Lexie--

LEXIE

Lights, where's the lights!?

STELLA

Left. Your left.

The lights pop on.

LEXIE

Don't worry, we'll make it.
We'll get you to a hospital.
Just hang on--

EXT./INT. CAMPER – DRIVING RAIN

pelts down on the camper. It lurches and sputters in lanes of mud. The engine whines loudly at the top of its lowest automatic gear.

Inside, Lexie is awkward on the accelerator. Stella groans in pain, angry at herself and her impotence.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE – LATER

Lexie jumps from the camper and runs for the front door.

LEXIE
(calls out, scared)
Homer! Uncle Homer! Where are you!?!

Lightning splits the sky, illuminating Homer in the doorway. He rushes toward the camper.

INT. CAMPER – A BIT LATER

Homer drives on a smooth road, straining his eyes. Both hands clutch the wheel. Lexie sits beside him, gripped with worry and fear. Stella lies on the bed in the back.

EXT. MISSOULA – LATER

Homer guides the camper through stop signs and red lights. Its hazard lights are flashing, signaling "emergency."

EXT./INT. HOSPITAL – A BIT LATER

NURSES and ER INTERNS roll Stella through the hospital doors. Lexie races beside them as Homer shuffles behind.

At the inner ER door there's a sign: "hospital staff only past this point." A NURSE gently stops Lexie from following.

NURSE
Sorry, dear, you'll have to wait
out here.

Lexie watches as Stella is rolled through the closing doors.

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING AREA – MOMENTS LATER

Homer sits quietly while Lexie paces, her hair still dripping. An INTERN hands her a towel.

INTERN

Here, you look like you could use this.

LEXIE

Is Stella going to be all right?

INTERN

She's sedated and seems comfortable. You can come back tomorrow and visit her.

LEXIE

Is she going to die?

INTERN

Well, she had a stroke. Not too severe. Apparently she has a heart condition, which doesn't help. But she's a tough lady--

EXT. CAMPER - LATER

Homer and Lexie head back to the ranch. Homer is almost as poor a driver as Stella. The dogs whimper at Lexie's feet.

LEXIE

I knew she wasn't going to die, Uncle Homer. You know why? 'Cause it was raining too hard. We couldn't have seen the meteor.

HOMER

What meteor?

LEXIE

She told you about the spirit that comes to get you when you die, didn't she?

HOMER

(not a believer)

Oh that? Yeah. Stella and her spirits.

INT. STELLA'S HOSPITAL ROOM – NEXT MORNING

Stella sits up in bed reading a magazine as Homer and Lexie arrive.

STELLA

Did you bring my clothes? I'm ready to leave.

HOMER

Now, Stell, Doc says you might be here a week. And you'll have to stay in bed at home for awhile after that.

STELLA

Doctor my ass! That curly-haired one, he's just a kid! Matter of fact, Lexie, you might wanna make a move on him. He's kinda cute.

LEXIE

Stella--

STELLA

I'll be outta here in two days, three at most. How're the dogs? Next time, sneak 'em in with ya.

HOMER

Oh Lord, I was looking forward to a little peace and quiet. The way you're talking--

STELLA

Shut up, Homer. Far as I'm concerned, Lexie's in charge. You do what she says while I'm in here.

LEXIE

Stella! It's his ranch!

STELLA

It's our ranch. By the way, bring me a burger when you come tomorrow. This hospital swill tastes freeze-dried.

INT. RANCH HOUSE – THAT AFTERNOON

Lexie cleans up with a push sweeper. The dogs run underfoot so she takes an allergy pill to stop sneezing from all the dust and dog hairs.

When she puts the sweeper away in the front closet, she discovers a cardboard box full of Stella's photos.

Lexie sits on the floor and opens the box. At the top is an envelope of photos from Greg and Donna's wedding.

Lexie pulls out a photo of herself: she's sitting alone in her father's back yard in her thrift store party dress.

It stops her cold. She is suddenly overwhelmed by the changes she's experienced since that day -- her transition from a lonely girl to a self-sufficient young woman.

INT. HOSPITAL - NEXT DAY

Elevator doors slide open. Lexie and Homer peek out from the elevator to see if the coast is clear.

They emerge, carrying two pillowcases which squirm around as they scurry down the hallway to

STELLA'S ROOM

Lexie and Homer grin as the dogs leap out of the pillowcases. They jump up on Stella's bed. She grins and hugs them as they lick her face and yip, happy to be with her again.

A NURSE enters, drawn by the commotion.

NURSE

What's all this! My goodness,
Stella, you know better--

STELLA

They're the best medicine I've had
since I got here--

The Nurse frowns at Stella, then shoos Lexie and the dogs out of the room, scolding them as she follows.

Homer remains with Stella who watches Lexie with obvious affection.

HOMER

She's a good girl -- cleaned the house!

STELLA

Homer, I want your advice on
something.

HOMER

I say do it.

STELLA

What? You don't even know--

HOMER

Stell, you always lived the way
you wanted to live. I wouldn't
slow down now if I were you.

STELLA

That's not what I'm talking
about. It's about Lexie -- I
want to put her in my will.

HOMER

(nods)

I'll call the lawyer tomorrow.

INT. RANCH HOUSE KITCHEN – EVENING

Lexie serves dinner to Homer, ladling stew out of a dutch
oven. Homer starts to eat until Lexie gives him a stern look.
Bowing her head, she says a prayer:

LEXIE

Grandfather, Great Spirit. Thank
you for this food. Oh Mitak-we
Oyasin.

HOMER

(amused)

And Amen. You know, you're
startin' to sound like Stella.

LEXIE

(laughs)

Oh God! Anything but that!

INT. HOSPITAL GIFT SHOP – NEXT DAY

Stella is in a wheelchair pushed by Lexie. She leafs through
magazines on the newsrack. Lexie spots some animal figurines
on a shelf above – dogs and cats, and some horses made of
clay, wood or china. One horse catches Lexie's eye.

LEXIE

Stella, look! A china horse!

STELLA

It sure is. Looks a lot like yours.

LEXIE

(eyes the price tag)

It's made in England too. "By order of His Majesty, King George IV." Forty-five bucks! That's a lot. Should I buy it?

STELLA

You have enough money – you can get it if you want it.

Lexie holds the china horse for a few moments, thinking.

LEXIE

No -- I don't think so. Too fragile.

Surprised, Stella watches Lexie place it gently back on the shelf next to some carved wooden and clay horses, noticing how much she's changed since they left Chicago.

INT. CAMPER – DAY

Lexie cleans out the camper and puts everything back where it belongs. She vacuums the upholstery and floor, hoses down the outside. She even brushes the dogs and puts bandanas around their necks.

EXT. HOSPITAL – NEXT MORNING

Lexie rolls Stella's wheelchair to the curb. A washed and shiny camper is parked nearby. The dogs jump up and down inside the doorway.

Stella smiles with delight as she stands and walks with some effort from the curb to the camper. She leans on Lexie for support.

INT. STELLA'S BEDROOM / RANCH HOUSE – AFTERNOON

Lexie carries a tray of soup and crackers for Stella who sits in bed, sandwiched by Ollie and Trixie. She looks at slides through a battery-operated viewer.

LEXIE

Stella, I'm working out a new lyric. Would you help with it?

STELLA

Read it to me.

LEXIE

It's called "Mustard Seed." Like
in the Bible.

(pause)

"Within each flower, ten seeds.
Within each seed, ten flowers.
Eureka! I said,
And knelt to plant my
Faith."

STELLA

It's kinda like a haiku. I'm
impressed. Got any more?

LEXIE

Just one. About my mother. But
it's not finished yet. It's
called "Empty Moonlight Night."

STELLA

(pause)

Lexie, I want you to do
something for me.

She reaches into her nightstand and takes out an old photo
album.

STELLA

These are snapshots and photos from
way back. You might call this the
black-and-white part of my life.

(hands Lexie a photo)

This one remind you of anything?

LEXIE

Yeah, the dress I wore to the
wedding! Look at the neckline--

STELLA

I'm showing you these because I
want you to write a story about
me. Something that might end up
in Reader's Digest or one of
those magazines. You can get
inspiration from these photos.

LEXIE

Stella, you should write your own story. I'll just record it for you.

STELLA

No, I want your name on it. My editors will love the human interest hook: "Precocious teen immortalizes pickled grandmother." Now we have to think of a title.

LEXIE

How 'bout -- "Marmalade"?

STELLA

"Marmalade"? Perfect.

They start to look through the photos together.

EXT. PORCH – NIGHT

Crickets chirp out in the field. Lexie sits in Stella's rocker, quietly reading the song lyric she's been writing. She scratches out words as she reads aloud:

LEXIE

"Song for my Mother...
Silence in your ears.
No feeling in your tears.
Empty moonlight night.

Time on your hands.
Pain in your mind.
Empty moonlight night.

Your martyrdom a bitter dream.
Your self-pity an endless refrain.
Just another empty moonlight
Night."

Lexie stops writing and looks up at the moon. It's full as a silver dollar. She swats a mosquito.

Suddenly, Lexie shivers. She reaches up and touches her left shoulder. She listens -- the crickets have stopped chirping.

There is a rush and flutter of wings. An old shadow swings across the silver moon. Lexie tries to follow the light, looks up.

A meteor flashes, suddenly, brilliantly.

Lexie jumps up and runs into the house, the empty rocker continues rocking without her.

INT. HALLWAY / STELLA'S BEDROOM – MOMENTS LATER

Lexie knocks softly on the door. No answer. She opens it anyway. In the stillness, Stella looks right at her.

Lexie approaches the bed. Stella's breathing is labored. Her voice is hoarse, no power left. She points to her dresser.

STELLA

Lexie -- top drawer. Bring it here..

Lexie opens the drawer, frightened. She removes something wrapped in newspaper and tied with string. Stella nods yes.

Lexie unwraps the small package. It is a magnificent hand-carved wooden horse, one of Appaloosas from the shelf in the hospital gift shop. Tears fill Lexie's eyes.

STELLA

This is who you are now. When you look at it, remember... you have a reason for being.

Lexie nods, unable to speak.

In the distance, two coyotes sing at each other. Lexie listens, and hears.

Stella raises her left arm slightly, looks straight ahead, and smiles.

STELLA

He's on my shoulder now.

EXT. RANCH – DAY

Days later, Lexie stands between Donna and Uncle Homer near the head of a casket, surrounded by a large group of Stella's friends and family, including Greg. She wears a dark dress.

In one hand she holds the wooden horse Stella gave her and a slip of paper; in the other is a small bunch of wild flowers.

Lexie is composed despite the warm tears in her eyes. She steps forward in the silence, places the flowers gently on the casket, and looks up at the gathering.

LEXIE

This is an Indian poem. For my
good friend Stella.

As she clears her throat, a tear escapes her eye.

The gathered mourners huddle together, also crying silently.

LEXIE

“Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glint on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning’s hush,
I am the swift uplifting rush
of quiet birds in circled flight.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am not there. I did not die.”

As she holds the wooden horse to her heart, Greg steps
up and takes Lexie’s free hand. She wraps her fingers
around his.

LEXIE

(with a quiet smile)

Thank you, Stella... For everything.
I get it now...

-THE END-