

BLACK RIVER

Written by

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FADE IN:

We're UNDERWATER.

*It's black and cold. Moonlight filters down. Fish flit by.
All is still.*

Seconds pass. Silence presses in.

*There's a rush of whitewater. Something silver flashes by. A
KNIFE. Being swept through the current. Cleaned.*

A sound goes shhk shhk shhk.

EXT. STEPPE. NIGHT

NOTE: the year is somewhere between 1860 and 1880.

The BAGGART RANCH HOUSE sits squat and lonely on the empty flatland. Stock pens flank the house. Cattle sleep.

PARNELL SNIPS (PRE-LAP)
Mr. Baggart, I can't reckon a thing
out there except cattle and quiet.

INT. BAGGART RANCH HOUSE. PARLOR. NIGHT

PARNELL SNIPS (42) steps back from a window, his brow creased with confusion.

PARNELL SNIPS (CONT'D)
We been at this weeks now. Sure
would help we knew what we was
expectin.

His eyes turn to GRANT BAGGART (55)--a swarthy lump of a man--who at present stares beyond the paunch of his stomach at something clutched in his hand.

PARNELL SNIPS (CONT'D)
Mr. Baggart, sir?

Sweat drips down Grant's face. He wipes it away.

GRANT BAGGART
Parnell, rouse the men. I'm not
paying them for their slumber.

Parnell sighs and gives a sharp whistle. The rest of the room stirs, a groggy mix of DIRTY COWPUNCHERS and HIRED HANDS.

Parnell gestures to a group of them. They slink from the parlor, passing SARAH BAGGART (25), who pouts in a doorway.

SARAH

Papaw, what's going on? Why won't you tell me? I can help.

Grant gives her a weak smile.

GRANT BAGGART

Tomorrow, dear, tomorrow. Hamlin, would you escort her to her room, please?

HAMLIN (22) detaches himself from a wall and waves Sarah before him. She huffs at her grandfather and stomps away.

Grant waits for their footsteps to recede up the stairs. He checks his pocket watch. It's almost two.

GRANT BAGGART (CONT'D)

Soon now. I can feel it.

PARNELL

Soon now for what, Mr. Baggart?

But Grant doesn't reply. He's perspiring more than ever.

EXT. STEPPE. NIGHT

The moon emerges from behind dark clouds. A COLD WIND begins to blow. In their pens, the sleeping cattle wake and groan.

TWO SHADOWS appear. They cut across the steppe, bringing the wind with them.

INT. PARLOR. NIGHT

The bitter wind howls against the windowpanes, rattling them in their frames. Grant quakes.

GRANT BAGGART

It's here.

His eyes find Parnell. Parnell gives another whistle.

THROUGHOUT THE ROOMS OF THE RANCH HOUSE

The men take up their rifles and smash out the window glass and level their weapons out into the night.

They shiver, breath smoking, and wait.

INT. BEDROOM. NIGHT

Sarah's eyes dart from a closet to Hamlin at the window.

SARAH

Well? What is *it*? What's out there?

But Hamlin doesn't respond.

EXT. STEPPE. LOW RISE. NIGHT

The shadows come to a halt. They are no "it." They are two men.

JAKE (21)--slight and pale--crouches down and stares at the YELLOW LIGHT of the ranch below. His lips twist into a grimace. The expression is cold and indifferent and insincere. As if the best Jake can do is to mimic this affectation. Mimic being human in all its various forms. He takes out a FLASK and tugs from it. The grimace fades.

His partner, GILCHRIST (42), towers over him. He's missing some teeth and his right ear. He shrugs off a grizzly-skin coat and pulls a COMPASS from his pocket. Its dial swivels to the ranch house. A small ticker reads "VIII." He spits.

GILCHRIST

We still got us a week. We oughta figger the artillery down there first.

Jake's head jerks to him. His voice is icy.

JAKE

No. Tonight.

Gilchrist scowls.

GILCHRIST

You'll still have your fun we wait.

JAKE

No, I ain't waitin, Gilchrist.
Tonight.

GILCHRIST

Git on your feet, boy.

Jake stands.

JAKE

I ain't waitin.

GILCHRIST
You *ain't* waitin. There might could
be fifty hands down there.

JAKE
There ain't fifty.

GILCHRIST
No? And how come you to know that?
Jake shifts. *He doesn't know.*

JAKE
I'm tellin you there ain't.
Gilchrist grins. He's been having fun with Jake.

GILCHRIST
Boy, I didn't allow there was.
He steps forward. The wind dies down and the night is quiet.
Then he tears it apart, his voice BOOMING over the flatland.

GILCHRIST (CONT'D)
Grant Baggart, you was a two-bit
cardsharp sold his soul to the
Devil in exchnange for prosperity!
Well, you got it! But now the sands
done run out, Baggart, and what's
been promised is due. You can come
out peaceful or you can fix to
fight! Don't make a speck of
difference to us! And Baggart, I
tell you, it won't make a speck of
difference for you. Them's the
terms. You've a minute.

INT. PARLOR. NIGHT

The men share looks. A few of them back from the windows.
Grant jumps forward.

GRANT BAGGART
Triple pay to those remain. And a
hundred dollar bounty to each scalp
presented me. I swear it!

It's a lucrative offer. The men return to their posts.

EXT. LOW RISE. NIGHT

Gilchrist smirks.

GILCHRIST
He ain't comin out.

Jake is crouching again. He stares at the men's silhouettes below. He GROANS. Gilchrist kicks at him.

GILCHRIST (CONT'D)
What'd I tell you, boy? Git up. You
aim to leave it til tomorrow?

Jake leaps away. He stares at Gilchrist. Then he pads off.

EXT. STOCK PENS. NIGHT

Snow's begun to fall. Jake slips along the far fences, using the cattle as cover.

EXT. LOW RISE. NIGHT

Gilchrist peers through the thickening flurry and spits.

GILCHRIST
C'mon, boy.

EXT. STOCK PENS. NIGHT

Jake reaches the far end of the enclosures and stops.

He pulls a GLEAMING REVOLVER from his holster. The revolver is wrought silver, patterned with a DEMON'S LEERING FACE.

He raises it above his head and fires. The gunfire, a fiery red, punches a hole through the clouds.

EXT. LOW RISE. NIGHT

Gilchrist grins and hefts an identical REVOLVER from his belt. He fires it into the air as well.

INT. PARLOR. NIGHT

The gunfire echoes about the room. Grant gawks at the backs of his men.

GRANT BAGGART
Well, what are you waiting for?!
Blast them, goddamnit!

The barrage begins.

IN ALL ROOMS

The men discharge in the direction of the red revolver fire. Smoke singes the air. Grant hops up and down amongst it.

GRANT BAGGART (CONT'D)

Kill them! Kill them!

LOW RISE

Gunfire zips past Gilchrist. He howls with delight and charges the ranch, his revolver cartridge spinning endlessly.

PARLOR

His first shots blow men clean across the room. Detach limbs from bodies. A COWPUNCHER throws down his weapon.

COWPUNCHER

I ain't with Baggart no more! I-

He's shot through the chest, launched backwards to where Grant huddles behind a snooker table. Grant chokes back a scream and crawls from the room.

STOCK PENS

Jake fires through the fencing at the MEN lining the back windows. One dead. Two. Three. Four. Five. The speed and accuracy with which he shoots incredible. No joy in it like Gilchrist, just an emotionless nothing.

KITCHEN

Four of the men take shelter. Grant scampers in. He spots Jake barring his way out the back.

GRANT BAGGART

Why aren't you returning fire?!

HIRED HAND

Sir, the livestock.

GRANT BAGGART

Hang the livestock! Shoot him!

The men heave up and commence to emptying their barrels.

STOCK PENS

The cattle are blown to pieces. Jake drops to the ground and looks to his stomach. He's been hit.

BEDROOM

Hamlin is struck. Killed. His rifle clatters across the floor, coming to a rest at the edge of Sarah's bed.

STOCK PENS

The cattle have been driven into a frenzy. They surge against the wooden railings and split them, stampeding out into the night. Jake ducks as horns slice overhead. He sits there, shirt soaking with snow and blood. Then he rises up.

KITCHEN

COWPUNCHER

I think we got hi-

A HOLE EXPLODES in the cowpuncher's chest.

His companions spin to the windows, just in time to be cut down. Grant watches walleyed and stumbles back out of the room, down a hallway, and back into the...

PARLOR

Where a single ranch hand remains. But then he's hit.

Grant twists, searching for another exit. But there is none. He crumples back behind the snooker table.

And just like that, it's over. Nothing left but the sound of wind and Grant's frightened panting.

IN ALL ROOMS

Flurries of snow melt in warm pools of blood. Bodies are splayed across the floor. It's a gruesome slaughter.

EXT. CATTLE PENS. NIGHT

Jake rises unsteadily, silhouetted by the kitchen's yellow light. In this moment, we realize how small he is. Just an adolescent in stature. He stares at the oil lamps within and he groans. Then he groans louder. Then he stops.

The snow whorls about his head, but still he doesn't move.

Finally, a gust of wind extinguishes the lamps. Yellow light fades to black. Jake re-grips his revolver. He climbs through the windows.

INT. KITCHEN. NIGHT

Jake stumbles down from the sill. A DYING MAN twitches.

DYING MAN

Hel-

Jake shoots him through the head. He looks over the fallen bodies. Then he continues on.

INT. HALL. NIGHT

Jake drags himself past framed paintings and stern faces in inky daguerrotypes.

He passes the staircase. A weapon is cocked. He dives forward as a tintype beside his head explodes.

AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRCASE

Sarah fumbles to reload Hamlin's rifle, but she can't seem to do it, and as Jake rights himself, she flees down a hall.

Jake looks to the parlor ahead. He can hear Grant's panting. *It could all be over in a second.* Beat. He turns and climbs the stairs.

INT. BEDROOM. NIGHT

Sarah is rotated to the closet as Jake enters. She spins to him, but his revolver is drawn, and she drops her rifle.

SARAH

Please. I- I have no quarrel with you. You can just let me go.

Jake considers her. The blonde rings of her hair. THE LIGHT POOLED IN HER EYES. He shoots her.

She's slammed back against the closet, sliding to the ground with a whimper. Jake's face is blank. He watches the blood blossom from her. There's a muffled cry from the closet.

He frowns. He steps forward and kicks over Sarah's body, knocking away her arm as she reaches for him with her last breath. He opens the closet door.

There's a BOY (8) inside. The child's face is rigid with fear. Jake freezes. He looks to Sarah. Then back to the boy. There's a kitchen knife in the child's hand. It shakes.

Jake's face clouds. For a second, his trigger hand wavers. His weapon drops to his side.

Then the child begins to cry. An INHUMAN RAGE surges across Jake. He raises the revolver and fires.

INT. PARLOR. NIGHT

Gilchrist squats before Grant, his revolver shoved beneath Grant's chin.

GILCHRIST

You should've come out. But not the one of you ever do.

Jake staggers into the room. Gilchrist grins.

GILCHRIST (CONT'D)

You have your fun, boy?

Jake ignores him. A GOLD AURA comes from Grant's pocket and TEARS run down Grant's cheeks. Jake studies them then looks away.

JAKE

Finish it.

Grant begins to pray. Gilchrist takes Grant's cheek in his hand.

GILCHRIST

Hush now. You made your choice in this world. Ain't no takin it back.

JAKE

Finish it, Gilchrist.

Gilchrist glowers.

GILCHRIST

Don't tell me what to do, boy.

But he stands and brings the revolver to Grant's forehead. Grant's prayers quicken.

In a mirror, there's movement. Parnell. He creeps into the room. Jake spots him, but he's too weak to react, and Parnell swings behind him and presses a revolver to Jake's temple.

PARNELL SNIPS

Al-alright. No one moves. Except you, Mr. Baggart. You come with me.

Grant gasps relief. He makes to stand, but Gilchrist pushes him back down.

PARNELL SNIPS (CONT'D)

What'd I say? Don't you move.

Gilchrist ignores Parnell. He gives Jake a once over, noting his wound and his blood-soaked clothing. He chuckles.

GILCHRIST

Boy, I do believe you're gonna die.

Jake closes his eyes. Beat. He takes a deep breath.

JAKE

Finish it. I want it over.

Then he reaches up to Parnell's revolver and pulls the trigger, and with a bright flash, BLOWS OFF HIS OWN HEAD.

CUT TO:

INT. CABIN. BEDROOM. NIGHT

JOSIE (35) wakes with a jolt. She stays there a moment, tensely upright in her bed, heart thumping. But there's nothing out of the ordinary in the small room, and after a second she exhales and relaxes back into her pillow.

Her hand traces up her body, past her bruised arms to the JAGGED SCAR below her collarbone.

She looks to the window. A lock keeps it in place. She slips out of bed and lifts up a floorboard, removing a knife.

She goes to the window and jimmies the knife in the lock. It clicks open. She slips out into the night.

EXT. CABIN. PORCH. NIGHT

DEPUTY BILLY RUPP (23) sleeps in a rocking chair, blissfully unaware as Josie slinks past him and off into the woods.

EXT. FOREST. NIGHT

Josie slides beneath jagged trees, her footsteps muffled.

EXT. RIVER. NIGHT

She breaks from the forest and moves along the riverbank, stopping at a pine with a hollow in its trunk.

She looks about her and reaches into the hollow and removes a handful of BIRCH BARK FIGURES. She lays them carefully on the ground and reaches in again and removes a DRAWSTRING POUCH.