

BUFFALO

by

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EXT. FULL-SCREEN OF A BLACK MAN'S EYES - DAY

staring at us, face hewed by hard, long years. MOSES (50s). His gaze bores into us, or rather, straight through us, searching a

GREAT PLAIN

of infinite, unspoiled wilderness baking in the heat of

WEST TEXAS, SUMMER 1879

The soft drawl of a GIRL (8) local to these barren parts pipes up, staccato, as if reciting unfamiliar text:

GIRL (V.O.)

"Come here, come here, you sons
of--

(how to pronounce? Beat)

Bitches. You sons of bitches. We
don't want to fight the niggers.
We want to fight you white sons of
bitches."

EXT. FULL-SCREEN OF A WHITE GIRL'S EYES - DAY

looking into her lap, brow furrowed in concentration. A long, deep scar divides her grimy face. She gently sways as if sat in moving transport.

GIRL (V.O.)

"In plain English they spoke..."

ECU: FLY-RIDDEN, WEEK-OLD CARCASS OF A HORSE - DAY

jostling ever so gently.

GIRL (V.O.)

"Seven feet tall with burning eyes
and bursting hearts. Waving a red
flag, yelling unearthly cries..."

ANOTHER ANGLE

A WOOL COAT ARM rummaging elbow-deep inside a cavity gaping the mare's sagged haunch. It slowly withdraws, blackened and wet.

The wool coat leans back against the carcass. Its US cavalry-issue blue is stained and caked in sand. It RISES AND FALLS with every labored breath.

GIRL (V.O.)
 "We are alive to the task and
 await... Succor-- await succor
 from the fort..."

A YOUNG BLACK MALE HAND lifts a bowie knife with a MOIST MORSEL OF RAW HORSEMEAT clinging to the greasy blade. Too weak to chew, BLISTERED LIPS sup at the putrid flesh whole.

GIRL (V.O.)
 "Tho, such is our fix, we are but
 grass before the scythe."

YOUNG HOLLOW EYES look out. His supping stops at what they see:
 THE BEADY EYES OF A LARGE BIRD leering back at him.

GIRL (V.O.)
 "Major Barnum and Lieutenant Hovey
 both cut down on the third day..."

It's a hungry turkey vulture standing ten feet away on a

RIVER SANDBAR

GIRL (V.O.)
 "But that was six days ago..."

The young Black trooper wearily flings a fist of sand at the vulture, but it dissipates in the air, feckless. The vulture's attention shifts. It takes off--

GIRL (V.O.)
 "We have not seen the red devils
 since."

--but the bird barely reaches the height of a man, before it's
 SPEARED MID-AIR BY AN ARROW--

THE YOUNG TROOPER'S HOLLOW EYES

soberly track the bird fall offscreen - THUD! They gaze listlessly at where it must've landed.

GIRL (V.O.)
 "Tho they are there..."

EXT. TALL BULLRUSHES - DAY

swaying in the wind, thick and impenetrable.

GIRL (V.O.)
 "...Ghosts. Raining fire upon any
 man compelled to move by his
 restless anxiety."

Someone may be in there, but the complicit reeds sway silent.

ECU: SMALL OPEN BIBLE

The young Black trooper's weak soiled fingers steer a cedar pencil scratching words across printed text.

GIRL (V.O.)
 "But we now dwindle not on account
 of their arrows--"

THE WHITE GIRL'S FACE

looking down into her lap as we PULL OUT...

GIRL (V.O.)
 "but from their cruel patience.
 This is our greatest fear. They
 are starving us."

...to reveal animal skulls piled high in the cart behind her. Bleach-white skulls and bones of the buffalo.

ECU: OPEN SMALL BIBLE IN THE WHITE GIRL'S HANDS

and her grubby finger tracing a handwritten scrawl across a dirty, blood-smearred page.

GIRL (V.O.)
 "We are looking anxiously for
 relief. My God. Have you deserted
 us?"

The White girl turns a leaf, but no more handwriting. She turns page after page, but nothing. Just the clean printed Word of God and

A PHOTO tucked inside.

The White girl slides it out and rests it on a page: a portrait of a Black family: the young trooper (who we've been watching), a woman and a young Black girl about the White girl's age.

The White girl stares at the Black girl's face. Suddenly, a gust of wind whips the photo from the page and away. The girl raises herself up for a higher vantage of the

GREAT PLAIN

where the photo must have fallen. But then the cart jolts to a halt, half capsizes and crash lands the girl back down onto the

BONE PILE

FATHER (O.S.)
Ah, hell.

The girl grimaces, hurt. We hear her HOMESTEADER FATHER jump down from the front seat.

FATHER (O.S.)
Stand to, Eve.

A rifle lands on the girl, EVE. As she gathers herself to comply, bones shift beneath her exposing a stash of boots and rifles.

A LONG STICK SPEARS DOWN

at a CART WHEEL half-sunk in a grassy hole. The father (50s) levers the stick. Eve, sore, stands to with the rifle.

EXT. GREAT PLAIN - DAY (PANORAMA)

The smallness of father and daughter dominated by the vast, open land.

ECU: OLD HORSE'S HOOF - LATE AFTERNOON

being assessed by a familiar Black face - Moses. The diagnosis isn't good. He rises--

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS - LATE AFTERNOON

--and affectionately strokes the mane of his old white, wind-blown, cripple of a nag. Moses is wearing a blue US cavalry uniform, yellow sergeant chevrons.

FLOYD (O.S.)
She done served her time, Moses.

Another Black trooper, FLOYD (30s), looks on astride his old brown horse.

FLOYD
Can't ask no more. Only warmth she needs now is mercy.

A rueful Moses cups his hands to his horse's face and privately addresses him.

MOSES
You hear that Dixie? It's a poor
bargain when no man wins.

EXT. GREAT PLAIN - LATE AFTERNOON

Moses on foot wading poor Dixie through tall grass. Floyd also on foot leading his old brown horse along.

EXT. RIVER SANDBAR - DAY (FLASHBACK)

ARROWS WHIZZ BY -- THUD SAND -- THUD THE HORSE CARCASS
shielding the ALERT YOUNG BLACK TROOPER -- UNTOLD SPENT BULLET
CASINGS in the sand -- BLOODY BOOTS -- THE TROOPER'S GUN
CLICKING BACK EMPTY -- AND CUT TO--

A CRACKLING CAMPFIRE

Eve sat, rifle in her lap, reading the bible, unaware of

MOSES AND FLOYD APPROACHING

Startled, Eve drops the bible, swings the heavy rifle up and cocks the trigger. The men freeze. Eve's Father continues spearing the stick at the hole as if they weren't there.

Moses' eyes are locked with Eve's. She grips her rifle, but its weight is telling. We hear the stick still spearing the hole.

MOSES
Hold your girl, sir.

The fire CRACKLES.

Eve's Father finally stops spearing to catch his breath. He blithely judges Moses' poor Dixie.

EVE'S FATHER
Fifty cents and she can put a
bullet in your horse.

Moses cocks his head at the father.

EVE'S FATHER
If you want.

Floyd remains laser-focused on Eve's rifle.

MOSES

You seen cavalry out there?

EVE'S FATHER

Just saying. Beast is lame. Why waste a good steak?

MOSES

Ninth dispatch out of Fort Bayard. They're overdue.

FLOYD

Six days now. Twelve men.

Hearing this, Eve's resolve thaws. Her rifle dips. Her father resumes stabbing the stick at the sunken cart wheel.

EVE'S FATHER

You ask me, you boys be better off getting to work back here.

FLOYD

Sir, we more than three-fifths for some years now.

Amused by the notion, Eve's Father smirks and boards the cart.

TIME CUT TO:

MOSES AND FLOYD heaving the cart's rear -- Eve's Father whipping the reins -- Eve levering the stick at the sunken wheel. They work, but the full load is simply too heavy.

Spent, Moses and Floyd quit. Eve's Father halts the horse. Eve eases up. Floyd, breathless, spots something in the cart.

FLOYD

Moses.

The boots and rifles stash now more exposed. Moses dislodges a boot. We hear Eve's Father jump down.

EVE'S FATHER (O.S.)

Comanche savages. Sure done cut those negroes down.

Floyd watches Moses looking over the dirty boot.

Eve's Father yanks the stick from Eve--

EVE'S FATHER

Mmm-hmm. One problem solving another though, I s'ppose.

--and spears the stubborn hole hard.

Moses dabs a finger on DRIED BLOOD. His jaw tightens. He spots the bible splayed open at Eve's feet.

MOSES

That yours?

Eve shifts, ashamed.

EVE'S FATHER (O.S.)

There a difference? Dead or alive
you mokes can't read no how.

Eve looks up and watches Moses and Floyd exchange irked looks.

EVE

I didn't steal it.

FLOYD

No?

Eve's Father stops spearing.

EVE'S FATHER

Watch your tone, boy. My Evie's no
thief. Was freely gave to her.

EXT. RIVER SANDBAR - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Our POV looking up at the blinding sun eclipsed by the silhouette of EVE leaning in and--

BACK TO SCENE

EVE, unnerved by Moses' gaze, looks to her father for help.

FATHER

Don't look at me, girl. Defend
your honor, now. The Lord be a
shield to those whose walk be
blameless.

Jilted, Eve picks up the bible, opens it, and murmurs the handwritten inscription:

EVE

"Corporal Eugene Clay Owlsey.
Company F, Ninth Cavalry, Fort
Bayard, New Mexico."

Floyd throws a hopeful look at Moses, but Moses' gaze is fixed on Eve. Eve's eyes cast down, sheepishly avoiding it. The bible is suddenly snatched from her hands by her father.

EVE'S FATHER (O.S.)
 Now can we get this god damn cart
 out of here?

He drops the bible into the cart and begins rocking it side to side to free it up some. Moses speaks gently to Eve.

MOSES
 Young lady. The corporal, Eugene.
 He alive?

Eve raises her eyes and looks to her father.

MOSES
 Hey. Miss Eve. Look at me. He
 alive?

EVE
 ...He was.... Two days ago.

Floyd's head bows, heart sunk.

MOSES
 Where?

Eve turns to the open plain, but her testy father ignites.

FATHER
 Where we found him!

FLOYD
 Where you found him?

EVE (O.S.)
 Pa?

Eve's Father grabs a bone from the cart and brandishes it at Floyd.

FATHER
 See this, boy? Seven dollars a
 ton. Bone train leaves outta
 Tulsarosa first thing and goddamn
 if we don't make it. We gotta eat
 and nigger don't taste good.

POW! -- the Father takes a sucker punch to the face that puts him down. Moses stands over him.

ON EVE, squinting into the distance. She's oblivious to what's just happened--

EVE
 Pa...

--because she's frozen by a sight out on the

WESTWARD HORIZON

Two, possibly three horses with riders headed our way.

BACK TO:

EVE'S FATHER who dare not stand, Moses glaring down at him.

MOSES

Floyd.

Floyd whips out a pair of brass binoculars and spies Westward.

FLOYD

They Comanche alright.

MOSES

How many in the saddle?

FLOYD

....Four.

FLOYD'S POV: The riders fan out. A fluttering RED FLAG becomes visible.

ON FLOYD, face falling.

FLOYD

Lord Jesus. Fifteen, maybe twenty.

MOSES snaps to and looks out to verify.

ON EVE, dread at recognizing the red flag per Eugene's words. She makes to retreat but is stopped by the sight of her father hurt on the ground before Moses.

FLOYD mounts his horse.

EVE'S FATHER

What're you doing?

FLOYD

Moses, come on.

Moses walks over to the cart, retrieves Eugene's bible and turns to find a rifle barrel square in his chest -- it's Eve, terrified. Nobody blinks.

Moses makes to speak but Eve pulls the trigger -- CLICK. Chamber's empty.

Panicked, Eve drops the rifle, turns and runs.

FATHER

Eve. What in God's name-- Evie!

But Eve is fleeing towards the riders. Her father now begins to panic and testify.

EVE'S FATHER (O.S.)

Listen, I'm just talking on my own behalf. Ain't nothing personal.

BACK TO MOSES watching Eve go.

FATHER (O.S.)

We don't make the train then all we got to suck on is them bones.

(off no response)

The negro was halfway gone anyhow!

MOSES stalks back to Eve's Father and raises his gun at him.

MOSES

His name, was Eugene.

Eve's Father cowers. Beyond him, Floyd holds out Dixie's reins for Moses and pleads with him to flee.

FLOYD

They're coming.

Suddenly, Eve has returned, out of breath. She offers up a photo to Moses. He takes it -- EUGENE'S FAMILY PORTRAIT.

Anguish turns Moses' stomach, but his gun doesn't waver.

EVE'S FATHER

...He was half gone.

ON MOSES, desperate to pull the trigger.

FLOYD (O.S.)

Leave him! Let's go!

A horse whinnies.

FLOYD (O.S.)

Moses!

Finally, Moses blinks and lowers his gun. He turns to the incoming Comanche. Thinks. Considers Eve. Then resolved, he makes for Eve's Father, raises his gun and fires as we SMASH TO

EXT. GREAT PLAIN - LATE AFTERNOON

and the gunshot echoing the infinity, the majesty, the silence.

FADE TO:

FULL-SCREEN OF MOSES' EYES

staring calm. Hewed by another hard, long day. On the move with FLOYD astride his horse climbing a mountain trail.

CUT TO:

--A GRASSY HOLE IN THE GROUND scarred with wheel tracks.

--A PILE OF BUFFALO BONES in the grass.

--A DEAD WHITE HORSE -- Moses' Dixie, gunshot to the head.

BACK TO:

MOSES

PULL OUT to reveal he is steering the bone cart... with Eve sitting next to him. Eve turns behind at the wilderness in their wake: prairie, sky, mountains, empty....

She glances down at her father slumped in the empty cart gazing at the same wilderness. Eve turns face forward.

ON MOSES AND EVE SIDE BY SIDE, both with eyes fixed ahead. We linger on them as they ease up the mountain pass.