

THE HEALER

by

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FADE IN:

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY - CLARKSVILLE, TENNESSEE

Sheriff JOE MCNEIL, Black, 70s, grabs a .38 revolver from a gun cabinet. He hums "Jingle Bells" with the composed look of dissatisfaction as if he understands life thoroughly.

He locks the cabinet, holsters the weapon and slaps on a bulletproof vest.

INT. SQUAD CAR - DAY

Joe climbs behind the wheel, closes the door. Opens the glove, counts through a pile of eviction orders.

JOE

Ten, eleven, Jesus, twelve.

Stacks them on the passenger seat, then straps an extra magazine of ammunition to his belt and picks up the radio:

JOE

Heading out, Toby. Gonna be busier than a pup in a room full of rubber balls.

TOBY (V.O.)

Alright then, Joe. Supposed to get up to sixty. They say it'll be like this the rest of December.

JOE

I love me some global warming.

EXT. FARMINGTON ARMS - DAY

Low-income apartment complex. Faded stucco.

INT. FARMINGTON ARMS - LEASING OFFICE - DAY

Christmas carols on the radio. Joe carries some of the eviction orders to MARY, 50s, who wears a Santa hat.

JOE

Looks like you're getting rid of five here today, Mother Mary.

MARY

Moratorium's over, but nobody wants to pay, and I got a list of new new folks ready to write checks.

JOE

I heard that. Merry Christmas.

MARY

Merry Christmas, Joe.

EXT. FARMINGTON ARMS - DAY

Joe consults his clipboard as he makes his way toward a corner unit next to an empty swimming pool.

CORNER UNIT

Joe slaps on a pair of heavy-duty gloves, feels for his holstered firearm and knocks on the door.

JOE

Hello. Christian County peace officer.

Inside, the sounds of a football game, a tiny dog yapping, and then silence.

He leans against the door, listening to whispers and footsteps shuffling across the floor.

Waits a few more seconds. Then he takes out his baton, and bangs on the door, shouting:

JOE

Hello! Christian County peace officer! Open up! Now!

The door swings open. A shirtless middle-aged tenant, DALE, holds a half-eaten bowl of cereal.

DALE

Can I help you?

JOE

Dale Cox?

DALE

Yeah?

JOE

Mornin'. I'm here because I have a court order that says by law I need to evict you out of this here apartment.

Dale glances at Joe's badge and name tag, then his gun.

DALE

Uh-huh. Okay.

He takes a few bites of cereal while Joe waits.

JOE

Sorry, but we don't have much time.

DALE

Oh, you mean I'm getting evicted today? On Christmas Eve?

JOE

You can make an appointment with the property manager to come and get your junk later. I'll give you ten minutes to grab some personal items.

INT. CORNER UNIT - DAY

Dale steps into the living room. Joe follows him inside.

It's dark, cluttered with cardboard boxes, broken furniture and open piles of trash. Plaster walls are pockmarked with holes. A tiny silver tree on the kitchen table.

On one wall, a shiny 50-inch flat screen TV tuned to a sports channel: highlight reel of the Tennessee Titans.

JOE

Titans weren't worth kiss my ass this year.

DALE

COVID.

JOE
Can't blame COVID for everything.

Joe studies the TV, appraising it.

JOE
I sure do like your TV.

DALE
Thanks.

JOE
Where'd you get it?

DALE
Best Buy.

JOE
No kiddin'. I should get
one of those.

Joe walks by the open bathroom door. Dale's middle-aged
WIFE hides behind it. She hugs a tiny mutt.

JOE
Hello, ma'am. That's right,
you're being evicted. So
come on out.

She emerges, wearing an angry frown.

JOE
Just the essentials, y'all.
Meds. Car keys. Change of clothes.

Dale and his Wife stuff clothes into a backpack. STAN,
30s, a locksmith, appears, twirling a drill.

Joe watches with disdain as Stan digs a crumpled paper mask
from his jeans and puts it over his mouth and nose.

JOE
Stan the man, Halloween's in
October.

STAN

Makes me not be so nervous.
I'm getting my booster tomorrow.

Joe rolls his eyes in disbelief. Stan changes the locks.

JOE

(to the tenants)
We about ready? Time to wrap
it up.

EXT. CORNER UNIT - DAY

Dale walks out, lugging the backpack. His Wife follows,
toting the tiny mutt and the little silver tree.

Joe waves good-bye to them.

JOE

Good luck.

Joe closes the door. He locks the deadbolt, shakes the
door handle to test the new lock. Checks his watch.

He turns to Stan, who twirls his drill.

JOE

Okay. One down. Who's next?

INT. UNIT 1A - DAY

A TEENAGE BOY and GIRL sit side by side on a mattress in
the living room, playing video games.

Loud BANGING on the door.

JOE (O.S.)

Christian County peace officer!

EXT. UNIT 1A - DAY

The Teenage Boy and Girl walk out, past Joe and Stan, with
nothing but cell phone chargers and their PlayStation.

INT. UNIT 1B - DAY

An empty apartment strewn with tinsel and ornaments. Door swings inward. Joe enters.

BEDROOM

A fishbowl with one goldfish circling the glass. Joe surveys the space. Stan enters, adjusting his mask.

JOE

All clear. Lock it up. Next.

EXT. UNIT 1C - DAY

Joe bangs on the door with his baton.

JOE

Christian County peace officer!

He pushes on the door.

INT. UNIT 1C - DAY

He steps inside the sparsely furnished space. It's quiet, but there's a TV playing from somewhere. Somebody in a sitcom saying one-liners and canned laughter playing to it.

BEDROOM

Joe enters to find a 90-year-old Mexican GRANNY propped up in a hospital bed with a quilt pulled under her chin.

Her shriveled face looks empty of eyes in the dim inconstant light from the small television set.

Joe stops at the foot of the bed. She cuts her eyes up at him briefly and then looks back at the sitcom.

NOTE: The dialogue in this scene is spoken in Spanish and is subtitled in English.

JOE

Mornin'. How're you feeling today, ma'am?

Her mouth is toothless and dark, working around a plug of tobacco as she speaks:

GRANNY

If somebody would just kill me.

Her gnarled hands pull the blankets down from her chin, her face stark white and without expression.

GRANNY

But you can't ask for death.
Anything else maybe, but not death.

Joe turns down the TV.

JOE

You can't stay here, ma'am.

GRANNY

I'm not hurting nobody.

JOE

You're behind on your rent.

Her eyes go dark and frightened:

GRANNY

You going to make me leave?

JOE

Yes, ma'am. I'm afraid so.

GRANNY

I got the miseries, son.

JOE

Ambulance is on the way.

GRANNY

I got time to use the pot?

JOE

If you make it snappy.

GRANNY

Under the bed.

Joe reaches under the bed. He pulls out a chamber pot full of murky water. Three dark turds float on the surface.

She sits up, pushing the covers back. She wears a dingy cotton gown, her bones brittle under the thin fabric.

GRANNY

I would kill it if I could.

She reaches down, lifts a soggy turd and smears it in her hair. Joe grimaces.

GRANNY

Lord help us. Lord help us all.

END OF SUBTITLES

EXT. FARMINGTON ARMS - LAUNDRY MACHINES - DAY

CHLOE CLARK, a 19-year-old Black girl, belly bulging, six months pregnant, stands before a dryer with a laundry basket and a battered baby stroller by her side.

Chloe stutters, spittle forming at the corner of her lips:

CHLOE

I filed for unemployment,
b-b-back 'round November. B-but
you know how they d-do.

Joe leans on the dryer. He casually chews an energy bar, glancing at the light-skinned, Black BABY in the stroller.

JOE

No. How do they do?

CHLOE

They say a c-c-check
c-c-coming, b-b-b...

JOE

But what?

CHLOE

B-b-but it d-don't never
c-c-come.

JOE

It's always something with y'all.

CHLOE

Y'all?

JOE

We don't have much time.

Chloe's red eyes are downcast, heavy with stress and anxiety. The Baby cries.

CHLOE

But K-Kalisha sick. I think she got C-COVID.

JOE

Take her to the clinic.

The baby, Kalisha, wails, loud and piercing. Joe reaches into his belt and pulls out a bright sheriff-badge sticker and gives it to her. She stops crying.

JOE

(to Chloe)

I'll give you ten minutes to grab what you need, but then it's time to hit the road.

CHLOE

I d-d-done told you: I c-c-an p-pay when they send me my ch-check.

JOE

Rent has to be paid on schedule. I need you to leave, now.

CHLOE

It's C-C-Christmas. C-can't it wait?

JOE

The eviction order has already been filed. The law says I have to carry out this order today.

CHLOE

B-b-but I'm p-p-pregnant.

JOE

You make a hard bed you have to sleep in it.

CHLOE

What that s-supposed t-t-to mean?

Joe finishes the energy bar, licks his fingers.

JOE

It means the law is the law.

She wipes tears away from her face. Joe reluctantly fishes a card from his belt.

JOE

Maybe they can help.

He hands her the card. She reads it.

CHLOE

I d-d-done t-tried this. I d-done t-tried everything.

JOE

Do you have anywhere to go?

CHLOE

D-d-do it m-m-matter?

She points to a small rusty Toyota parked in the lot, then grabs the load from the dryer.

CHLOE

We'll b-be in the c-c-car.

Joe watches. Chloe holds the basket on her hip as she pushes the stroller. Kalisha, the baby, wails.

EXT. FORT CAMPBELL ARMY BASE - PARKING LOT - DAY

A ragged U.S. flag flies at half-staff.

Platoon of SOLDIERS in fatigues march around the lot, where cars form a line at a COVID testing station.

Joe drives up in the squad car. He rolls down his window. A NURSE with a face shield administers a PCR test, sliding a long, flexible swab into Joe's left nostril.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

Joe removes his bulletproof vest. Knock at the door.

Deputy WANDA GATLIN, 50s, enters.

WANDA

Lock 'em out Joe. How goes the battle?

JOE

I swear, the pandemic's made everybody fuckin' mental. Nobody wants to pay rent. Landlords on my back cause they can't pay their bills.

WANDA

Landlords should realize maybe you get more with honey than with vinegar.

JOE

I'll be sure to lay that little bit of wisdom on 'em.

WANDA

Any plans for tonight?

JOE

I promised my cousin Rita I'd spend Christmas Eve with her and the kids, in Memphis.

WANDA

Too bad. I was hoping you could come over and help me trim my tree.

Joe and Wanda exchange smiles.

JOE
Maybe next Christmas.

Mayor FULTON PRICE, 60s, enters.

JOE
Damn, Mister Mayor, don't you
know how to knock?

Fulton knocks on the door.

FULTON
Happy? Merry Christmas, Wanda.

WANDA
Merry Christmas, Fulton.

FULTON
(to Joe)
Vaccination clinic today, downstairs.

JOE
Let me know how that goes.

FULTON
Won't take but two seconds.

JOE
I'm taking my cat to the vet.
Poor thing's got hepatitis.

FULTON
(to Wanda)
He'd rather get tested three
times a week than get vaccinated.

JOE
(to Wanda)
He'd rather I put dangerous
chemicals in my body than deal
with a little head cold.

FULTON
Have it your way.

JOE
Plan to.

FULTON

Need that test result Wednesday.

JOE

Copy.

Fulton leaves. Wanda pulls a small, brightly wrapped gift box from her bag. She gives it to a disappointed Joe.

JOE

What'd we say about presents?

WANDA

We're not supposed to give 'em.
I know. It's just, I saw this,
and knew you'd be tickled by it.

JOE

Know what I say now?

WANDA

You shouldn't have.

He drops the gift on the desk.

WANDA

Hey, you want to come over
tomorrow?

EXT. JOE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Joe drives a truck down a long gravel driveway, toward an isolated two-story ranch.

JOE (V.O)

Can't. I'm working.

WANDA (V.O.)

You try and have a nice Christmas.

INT. JOE'S HOUSE - DAY

Joe opens the front door. Clicks on the lights. He's confronted by the silence of an empty house.

The furniture is covered in plastic. The TV sits in one corner, black and dead.

KITCHEN

He stands, in a robe, eating from a can of black-eyed peas.

BEDROOM

He opens the double doors of a closet. A white dress with blue polka dots hangs inside.

He rubs the dress between his fingers, feels the smoothness of it slide on his fingertips.

Silhouette on the wall where a picture used to hang.

Turns off the lights and lies on the bed. Closes his eyes, in the blackness of the house, with the dark walls around him. Mumbles, dreaming.

EXT. CUL-DE-SAC - DAY

Row of dumpsters positioned off the blacktop on a bed of gravel. An elderly BUM stands inside one of the rusty bins, slitting open a garbage sack with a knife.

A rain of matter cascades onto the ground: tin cans, eggshells; cigarette butts, rancid fruit, lots of cans.

The Bum climbs out, poring through the garbage. He lifts three soda pop cans and drops them in his poke.

Joe drives up in his squad car. He shuts off the motor. Gets out. The Bum stops what he's doing, waiting.

Joe studies the man as if he's an errant child whose unacceptable behavior he has suffered far past reason.

BUM

Hidy. Merry Christmas.

Joe walks over to the dumpster. The Bum steps back a few feet. Joe peers inside the dumpster, shakes his head.

BUM

You don't care for me gettin' these cans, do you? I didn't figger nobody wanted 'em.

Joe kicks at the piles of trash, moving at the mess with his toe like he's lost something in the stinking heap.

JOE

You people are unbelievable. You really are. What do you think these dumpsters are for?

Joe kicks at the trash again.

BUM

I ain't hurting nobody. I'm just after these cans. Who're you anyway?

JOE

My name's Joe McNeil. I'm the sheriff of Christian County. That's who I am. Who in the hell are you?

The Bum toes the mosaic of garbage on the blacktop.

JOE

Did you know I can throw your sorry ass in jail for this?

BUM

Nosir.

JOE

Well, by God, I can. It's a five-hundred dollar fine for littering. Have you got five hundred dollars?

BUM

Nosir. I ain't.

JOE

I didn't think so. That's what it would cost you. It's a state law. You can't do this shit.

Joe looks at the pile of trash again as if he can't believe it's still there.

JOE

Now I want you to pick up every
bit of this mess and put it back
where you got it.

The Bum starts picking up the trash.

JOE

I want it just as clean as before.

Radio SQUAWKS.

TOBY (V.O.)

Got your ears on, breaker one nine?

Joe speaks into the radio:

JOE

Yeah, Toby.

TOBY (V.O.)

Possible one eight seven,
Lincoln Homes Projects.

JOE

Copy. Enroute.

Joe heads for the squad car.

JOE

I don't want to see this happen
anymore. If you want cans you
best get your lazy ass out and pick
'em up off the side of the road.
That's where most of 'em's at anyway.

BUM

Yessir.

Joe opens his door and stands with one hand on it, fixing
the Bum with a cold stare.

JOE

I keep my eye on these things.
I come by here just about every
day. All right, you been told.

Joe gets into the car, cranks it up and pulls away. The Bum waits a few seconds, till the car is out of sight, and then crawls back into the dumpster.

EXT. LINCOLN HOMES PROJECTS - DAY

The blue lights of police cars wash the gray brick walls in sporadic sapphire, while the strobes flash and illuminate junked autos, spilled trash and overflowing dumpsters.

Joe drives into the projects and pulls up short, stopping.

Three patrol cars. Five uniformed COPS, all wearing masks. Fifteen or twenty BLACK PEOPLE stand in a group on the sidewalk, watching.

Most of them wear undershorts and nightgowns. One wears a Santa hat. A COP keeps the crowd herded back.

A thin BLACK YOUTH, in a T-shirt and baggy jeans down around his knees, wanders by. Joe shouts at him:

JOE

Pull up your britches, son!
Nobody wants to see your nasty ass.

The Black Youth hikes up his jeans.

JOE

What happened here?

BLACK YOUTH

Somebody done fucked up.

EXT. LINCOLN HOMES PROJECTS - CRIME SCENE - DAY

Joe saunters up to the Cop in charge.

COP

Mornin', sheriff.

JOE

Mornin'. Fatality?

COP

Looks like a suicide.

Joe walks past the crowd, to a small rusty Toyota -- Chloe's car -- parked behind a tall metal waste bin.

A hose runs from the exhaust pipe into the car, all the windows rolled up.

Joe stands at the Driver's side, peering inside: Chloe, slumped behind the wheel.

Her face has a splotchy, florid hue. Congealed vomit spreads from her chin, past her swollen belly, to her skinny legs.

On the dashboard, a piece of dirty cardboard with a child-like scrawl: Homeless. Hungry. Can you help me?

CROCKETT (O.S.)
Merry Christmas, Joe.

Joe turns to see Detective CROCKETT, 30s, in a sharp suit, and CPD mask, also peering into the car, at the backseat piled with clothes, bottles and cans.

CROCKETT
Crime scene requires a mask.

JOE
Oh, damn, I forgot mine, Crockett.

Crockett pulls a paper mask from his suit pocket.

CROCKETT
Today's your lucky day.

Hands the mask to Joe. He reluctantly puts it on. They both stare at Chloe's body.

CROCKETT
What the hell happened here?

JOE
I know this girl.

CROCKETT
How?

JOE

I evicted her, yesterday.

Crockett breaks out a notepad. Takes notes.

CROCKETT

On Christmas Eve?

JOE

Court order. It's my job.

CROCKETT

I thought there was some type of truce on Christmas, as far as evictions go.

JOE

Landlords don't give two shits about Christmas, not since the moratorium ended.

CROCKETT

No exceptions?

JOE

She was five months behind on her rent.

CROCKETT

What's her name?

JOE

Chloe. Chloe Clark.

CROCKETT

Where was she living?

JOE

Farmington Arms, that dump off 24.

CROCKETT

Any idea on who the next of kin might be?

JOE

No, but she had a baby with her.

CROCKETT

How old?

JOE

I don't know. One, maybe two,
a little baby. A girl. Kalisha.

Crockett snaps on a pair of vinyl gloves. He opens the back door and sifts through it all. Nothing.

Crockett takes the keys from the ignition. He walks to the trunk. Joe follows.

Crockett holds his breath. Pops the trunk. They stare at an empty infant car seat.

A red glow moves behind them. Joe swivels his head to see an ambulance coming slowly with the siren off. Somebody dead, no urgency.

INT. CATFISH HOUSE - NIGHT

Joe, in civvies, nurses a glass of straight whiskey, brooding over his food, barely touched on a plate.

Jukebox blares Country Christmas songs. He rises, none too steady, glass in hand, and goes to stand at the bar.

BAR

FACES surround him, drunk and happy -- wide smiles -- everybody having a good time except him.

Joe drinks some whiskey and watches the second hand on a dusty clock on the wall.

Rain spatters on the windows and the roof. Lightning CRASHES of THUNDER.

The lights dim. Talk wanes. Jukebox skips. Something hums and the bright lights come on and the music returns and the people laugh and talk again.

Joe sips his whiskey, checks his wristwatch.

BRENDA (O.S.)

Merry Christmas, Joe.

He turns his head. BRENDA, 50s, stands beside him. She has red hair, heavy eye shadow and a pair of red lips. Fuzzy Christmas sweater accentuates her perky breasts.

BRENDA

You don't remember me, do you?

He smiles with effort, waves his whiskey at her with a vague motion of both agreement and indifference.

JOE

Not right off. You look a little familiar.

She grins and moves closer, lowering her voice.

BRENDA

Hell, I hope I do. Maybe you just don't remember me with my clothes on.

Joe searches his memory. A light bulb goes off. He points to her.

JOE

Linda?

BRENDA

Brenda. You a little drunk, ain't you?

JOE

I'm not sober, that's for damn sure. Don't wanna be. Come on and let me buy you a drink, girl.

BRENDA

Are you vaccinated?

JOE

Against what?

BRENDA

COVID, silly.

JOE
Do it matter?

She gets up next to him, smiling. Joe signals the BARTENDER for a drink. He comes over.

JOE
Name your poison, Linda.

BRENDA
Brenda.

Joe belches.

BRENDA
Margarita.

JOE
Gimme another one too.

The Bartender turns away to make their drinks. She puts a hand on his forearm.

BRENDA
I missed seeing you.

The Bartender brings their drinks. Joe pulls out some cash and puts it on the bar. Bartender takes it and leaves.

BRENDA
We can catch up where we left off,
if you want to.

She puts one of her knees between his legs as she gazes into his eyes and rubs the side of his waist.

She then moves her hip, shielding her hand as she reaches down and touches the front of him.

He rises against her fingers. She sips her drink, winking at him with a randy smile.

EXT. CATFISH HOUSE - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Joe falls in the rain, shit faced. Brenda laughs about it and gets him into the front seat of her car.

INT. BRENDA'S CAR - NIGHT

He slams the door, pushing her back against the seat, rain pouring down. The heat of their bodies and their breathing fogs up the windows.

He tugs the sweater over her head, jerks her jeans off, drops his pants and pushes her knees up beside her ears.

Her head bumps as they fuck, a cramped, sweaty encounter, their bodies shiny in the weak light from the club.

He finishes and rolls off, resting. They start to get dressed.

BRENDA

You still miss Cynthia?

Joe slumps, descending into an overwhelming sadness.

BRENDA

How long's it been?

He stares at the rain pelting his reflection in the window.

JOE

Long time.

BRENDA

I had a cousin, Jimmy Don.
He killed himself too. Shotgun.
Nobody could figure why.

EXT. CATFISH HOUSE - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Joe falls out of the car, pants around his knees. She hollers after him:

BRENDA

Joe, where you going?

He slips and falls in the mud, tugging his pants up.

BRENDA

Merry Christmas.

The rain pummels him as he struggles to get up.

She starts the car and takes off. He crawls to his truck, the only vehicle left in the lot.

INT. JOE'S TRUCK - NIGHT

He climbs into the cab, lays his heavy head down on the upholstery, speaking an unintelligible plea for something - death, release -- for the rain to stop?

INT. JOE'S TRUCK - DAY

The sun fills the cab with harsh light. His head against the door, Joe awakens, tasting something disagreeable in his mouth. He sits up and rubs his eyes.

INT. SQUAD CAR - DAY

Joe, in uniform, rubs his bloodshot eyes. He's parked adjacent to an upscale apartment complex, Chateau Gardens.

ED, 50s, in a loud sports jacket, along with the masked locksmith Stan, appears at Joe's window. He rolls it down.

ED

Hey, Joe. You here about the eviction?

JOE

Why else would I be here, Ed.
I mean, fuckin' Jesus Christ.

ED

Well excuse me all over the place.

EXT. CHATEAU GARDENS - DAY

Joe gets out, woozy. He shows Ed the court order.

ED

(pointing)
Right over yonder.

Joe and Stan stroll through a courtyard to an apartment with a plastic Christmas reef on the door. Joe looks down at an entry mat: Welcome! Friends Gather Here.

On the porch Joe notices a small collection of toy trucks and a child's fairy garden built from straw dolls and plastic plants.

He shuts his eyes for a few moments, steeling himself, and then knocks. Waits. Knocks again.

RICARDO HERNANDEZ, a young Peruvian man, in a collared shirt, holding a briefcase, answers the door.

JOE

Buenos dias.

RICARDO

I speak English.

JOE

Ricardo Hernandez?

RICARDO

Yes, sir. Can I help you?
I'm just leaving for work.

JOE

I'm sorry to say I have a court order for eviction. I'm here to ask you to leave.

A LITTLE GIRL comes up from behind Ricardo and grabs onto his leg. Joe waves at her.

At the sight of his bulletproof vest and badge, she hides behind her father and starts to cry.

JOE

Oh no. It's okay, sweet pea.

Joe reaches into his pocket. Finds a sheriff-badge sticker; he holds it out toward her. Ricardo glares first at the sticker and then at Joe.

RICARDO

Come on, really?

Joe shrugs.

JOE

Kids love stickers.

The Little Girl takes the sticker and puts it on her dress.
Joe gives her a thumbs-up and turns back to Ricardo.

JOE

I'll give you a few minutes to get
some personal items.

RICARDO

We've got two kids, sir.

JOE

I know this is hard.

RICARDO

Three years -- that's how long
we've been here. Never caused
any trouble. The rent was getting
paid, but I've been behind lately,
cause -- you know -- the pandemic.

Joe looks beyond Ricardo into the home. A BABY rolls
around in a Pack N Play in the living room.

Framed photograph on the wall of a family of three sitting
on a tree branch in matching flannel shirts.

RICARDO

I have the money.

Joe eyes his eviction paperwork.

JOE

Says here the judgement is for
thirty-nine hundred dollars.

RICARDO

I'm telling you -- I have the money.

Joe steps back from the doorway, smiling, relieved.

JOE

Alright then. If the property manager lets you pay up now, I'm good with that. That would be good for everybody.

RICARDO

Thanks.

Ricardo peels his daughter off his leg. Joe nods at Stan, who rolls his eyes: Are you shitting me? Joe and Ricardo walk toward the leasing office.

RICARDO

I lost my job, when the pandemic hit.

JOE

Where at?

RICARDO

Wendy's. I was the general manager. I scrambled to find work, and then the new baby arrived -- and then the property company sent me a letter saying our rent was going up by two hundred bucks a month.

JOE

They give a reason why?

RICARDO

Increased demand. I tried to make money by starting a commercial cleaning company.

JOE

Didn't work out?

RICARDO

Some of my clients were slow to pay. I fell further and and further behind. Seems like it's always something.

JOE

Believe it or not, I've been down that road. I had a side business as an electrician, which went to shit during the collapse of 2008, just as me and my wife were fixin' to adopt a son.

They arrive at the leasing office. Joe opens the door, holds it open for Ricardo.

JOE

I barely scraped together enough money in savings and loans to keep our home.

RICARDO

Did you adopt the son?

JOE

No, we didn't.

INT. CHATEAU GARDENS - LEASING OFFICE - DAY

Christmas decorations adorn the office. Ed sits behind a desk, giggling at something on his cell phone.

Joe and Ricardo enter. They sit down across from Ed.

JOE

Can we talk?

Ed lays the phone aside, ready to listen.

JOE

If Ricardo here is able to pay in full, can he stay?

ED

Is this you talking, Joe?
Or did somebody else just walk in here?

JOE

Trying to work something out.
Face it, we're all just a few bad breaks away.

Ed eyes Ricardo and sighs.

ED

We've been trying to contact
you since October. E-mails.
Knocking on your damn door.
Letters.

RICARDO

I'm always working.

ED

Offers of payment plans.
(to Joe)
We've been more than fair.

JOE

Okay, so there's been some
bad communication. But if he's
still able to take care of it?

ED

At this point, he'd have to pay
late fees and all of January.

Ed punches numbers into a calculator while Ricardo takes
out his phone and sends messages.

RICARDO

I'll contact some clients who owe
me money.

Joe caresses a crease on his pants, glancing up at the
clock on the wall.

ED

All right, here's the total.

He writes it down on a sticky note and holds it up so
Ricardo can see it: \$6,130.17.

ED

It needs to be a cashier's check.

RICARDO

Whoa. Come on.

ED

Come on what?

RICARDO

It's just, it's just...

Ricardo tries to gather himself.

RICARDO

It's just very challenging to get that much money right now.

JOE

(to Ed)

How about 48 hours? I don't have to be the bad guy here. If you want to give him a couple of days, I can be flexible. I'll come back, Friday?

ED

It'll be the same situation.

JOE

Sure. Could be. But who knows? Maybe you get more with honey than with vinegar.

Ed drums a pen against his desk, staring at Ricardo.

ED

Fine. Forty-eight hours. Pay by Friday or your ass is outta here.

Ricardo claps his hands together. He goes outside to make phone calls. Joe gathers up his eviction paperwork.

JOE

Thanks for working with him.

ED

Don't get your hopes up.

Joe stands to leave.

ED

I don't know how you do this
shit every day.

EXT. FARMINGTON ARMS - DAY

Joe unlocks an apartment and enters.

INT. CHLOE'S APARTMENT - DAY

He stands in the living room, scoping the scene: small plastic Santa face down on the dingy carpet. An undecorated tree wilts in the corner.

Cardboard box on the couch. He roots around in the box. Crayons. Coloring books. Finds a large rattle. He examines it. It's a rattlesnake rattle.

He rattles it. Dry, filled with beans. Drops it back in the box. Digs around. Cloth diapers. A pacifier. Pack of condoms. Bottle of hand sanitizer. Paper masks.

KITCHEN

He opens the fridge. Dried hunk of cheese. Slab of rancid bacon. A can of evaporated milk. Closes it.

BEDROOM

A bare, filthy mattress on the floor. On the mattress, a tattered tabloid with a bold headline. He picks it up.

INSERT - THE HEADLINE, which reads:

The Healer Visits Tennessee
To Seek Out Legions
Of Believers

BACK IN THE BEDROOM

He drops the tabloid, moves around. Opens the closet. Empty. Dresser drawer. He opens the top drawer. Nothing but a framed school photograph of Chloe, 13 maybe, smiling.

Mary, the property manager, appears in the doorway.

MARY

When's she coming to get her shit?

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Joe enters to find Detective Crockett at his desk, behind a wall of plexiglass, mask on.

CROCKETT

Sheriff, mask.

Crockett takes a mask from his desk drawer, slides it under the partition to Joe, who reluctantly puts it on.

JOE

Have you found the girl?

CROCKETT

What?

JOE

(louder)

The girl, have you found her?

Joe and Crockett must raise their voices to communicate through the sound barriers of masks and plexiglass.

CROCKETT

Refresh my memory.

JOE

The suicide? Chloe? Christmas?

CROCKETT

What about it?

JOE

Have you had any luck finding her baby girl?

Phone rings. Crockett picks up.

CROCKETT

Homicide. Crockett. You'll have to get vaccinated or show a negative test result within the last 72 hours. That's right.

He hangs up. Squirts hand sanitizer on his palms.

CROCKETT

Chloe didn't have a baby, except
for that bun she had in the oven.

JOE

I told you: I saw her. Kalisha.

CROCKETT

You're the only one who saw her.
I talked to everybody at
Lincoln Homes. None of 'em saw
Chloe with a kid.

JOE

That's cause Chloe dropped her
off somewhere, before she..

CROCKETT

Before she killed herself.

JOE

I'm telling you, she had a little
baby girl. In a stroller. I gave
her one of these..

Joe pulls out a sheriff-badge sticker.

JOE

She was crying, so I gave her one.

CROCKETT

Are you sure it was Chloe's kid?

JOE

Not a hundred percent, no.
Ask Mary, the property manager
at Farmington Arms.

Crockett sifts through the mess on his desk.

CROCKETT

I don't have to.

He finds a rap sheet, slides it under the glass to Joe, who
scans it.

CROCKETT

Chloe Clark, 19, pinched
four times in the last year,
right outside Gate Four,
for solicitation. Seems like
Chloe entertained more soldiers
than Bob Hope. No next of kin
listed on the arrest record.
No record of her ever having a kid.

JOE

Find a cell phone?

CROCKETT

Nope, and she has zero online presence.

JOE

Run the plates?

CROCKETT

Expired. Registered to a Reena Davis.
She lives in Indian Mound, Fantasy
Trailer Park, Lot 13.

JOE

Maybe she knows, this Reena.

CROCKETT

Knows what?

JOE

Knows what Chloe did with the baby.

CROCKETT

Get the wax out of your ears:
there is no baby.

JOE

There's a baby. I saw her.

CROCKETT

Give it a rest, sheriff.

JOE

Her name's Kalisha.

CROCKETT

Okay, okay, I'll ask this Reena
if Little Miss Popular had a kid.

JOE

When?

CROCKETT

I don't know. When I find the time.

JOE

What's wrong with now?

CROCKETT

I've got five -- five open
homicide cases. Seems like every
swinging dick is out with COVID.
Quarantine, I should be so fuckin'
lucky. That's what's wrong with now.

JOE

I'll go talk to her.

Joe rips off his mask. Crockett almost panics.

CROCKETT

Put the mask on, and keep your
nose out of my investigation.

Joe drops the mask on the floor.

JOE

What investigation? Wanna know
what I think?

CROCKETT

Did I ask?

JOE

I think you don't want to
know. You'd make a goddamned
ostrich look curious. If we were
talking about a white baby...

CROCKETT

Oh, here we go.

JOE

Yes! Here we fuckin' go -- if we were talking about a missing white baby, you'd be spread eagle across this desk trying to help me find her.

CROCKETT

Time out. You evicted Chloe, not me, Mister Fucking Compassionate. And there is no baby -- black or white.

JOE

There is a baby, and she's in a bad place.

CROCKETT

How do you know?

JOE

How do I know? I just know. Maybe I have a crystal ball. Maybe I read tarot cards or some shit. Maybe I just foresee things, maybe I have a sixth sense. A whole lot of fuckin' maybes. I don't know how I know, I just know.

EXT. POLICE STATION - PARKING LOT - DAY

Joe weaves his way through the packed lot.

WANDA (O.S.)

Joe.

Joe turns around. It's Wanda, the deputy, wearing a mask.

JOE

Mornin'.

WANDA

How was Memphis?

JOE

Memphis?

WANDA

Christmas, with your cousin?

JOE

Oh, good. It was good.

WANDA

Brenda says she ran into you
at the Catfish House.

JOE

Linda?

WANDA

No, Brenda. Brenda Helfrich.
She says y'all had a real-good time.

JOE

That was just the liquor talking.

WANDA

She did say y'all were pretty drunk.

JOE

Three sheets to the wind more like it.

WANDA

How'd you like my gift?

JOE

Gift?

WANDA

I knew you'd forget about it.

JOE

I didn't forget. Been busy is all.

Joe heads to his squad car.

WANDA

When're you going to open it?

JOE

Tonight.

WANDA

Promise?

JOE (O.S.)

I promise.

EXT. COVID TESTING STATION - DAY

Joe behind the wheel of his squad car. Rolls down the window. A Nurse with a face shield administers a PCR test, sliding a long, flexible swab into Joe's right nostril.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The two-lane laid out straight for miles. Joe drives his truck through hills of barren pine trees.

EXT. FANTASY TRAILER PARK - LOT 13 - INDIAN MOUND - DAY

Joe, in civvies, drives up to an RV, faded red, stringed with soggy lights. Jeep parked in front.

He gets out and goes to the RV's front door. A thin squeaking emanates from the RV.

He sneaks around to the rear of the RV where a narrow, screened hatch is cranked open near the roof.

The RV shakes gently. A man moans inside:

MAN (O.S.)

Oh God, baby, oh fuck, baby.

Joe walks off to one corner of the yard, but he can still hear it, the grunting and panting.

After a while the RV ceases rocking. Moments later, a man emerges, an old guy dressed like a COWBOY.

The Cowboy gets in the jeep and spins out. Joe waits.

Then he approaches the RV -- but stops when a monster truck drives up the street and parks beside the RV.

A 30-year-old man gets out. He's 6'6" and weighs damn near 300 pounds. They call him DK.

DK goes over knocks on the RV's door. He opens the door and goes in, pulling the door closed behind him.

In less than a minute, there's yelling and things FALLING apart and what sounds like a body HITTING the floor.

Then, silence. DK emerges, clutching a wad of bills.

He crams the money in his pocket, gets into the truck and drives off.

Joe goes over and pushes the door open: REENA DAVIS, 20s, pretty in a scary kind of way, lies on the floor in a red halter dress.

JOE

Reena Davis?

Reena shakes her head, yes, coughing and spitting. Joe helps her to her feet.

JOE

Who's the big guy?

REENA

DK, my landlord.

JOE

DK always collect the rent that way?

REENA

Pretty much.

Joe leads her over to a picnic table. He helps her sit; takes a seat across from her.

REENA

Long as he don't evict me.
Know what I'm saying?

There's a splotch of color on Reena's cheek and a knot under her left eye.

She puts her elbows on the table and leans over it with her head hanging down. She raises her face long enough to say:

REENA

I can suck you off for ten dollars.

JOE

Not what I'm looking for.

REENA

Anything else gonna be extra.

JOE

Do you own a 2010 Toyota?

REENA

Yeah, but some asshole stole it.

JOE

Do you know Chloe Clark?

REENA

Who's asking?

JOE

An interested party, I guess
you could say.

Reena gives Joe the once over, weighing her options.

REENA

Be a sweetheart and get me my
cigarettes and matches out of
the bedroom. If you don't mind.

INT. RV - BEDROOM - DAY

Joe enters. The covers are mussed up. Glasses and bottles scattered around. A rattlesnake rattle, exactly like the one he found in Chloe's apartment, on the floor.

He picks up the rattle and rattles the dry beans inside. Snubs of thinly rolled joints lie in an ashtray beside a shiny pamphlet.

INSERT - PAMPHLET TITLE, which reads:

Vaccinations In the Blood of Christ
by
The Healer

BACK IN THE RV BEDROOM

Joe stands, studying the title.

REENA (O.S.)
Bring me one of them joints too.

EXT. RV - DAY

Joe brings everything out to her.

REENA
Thanks.

Reena hangs the roach in her mouth, scratches a match and holds the wavering tip of fire to the joint and lights up.

She takes three hits, offers it to Joe, who shakes his head: No thanks.

Reena sucks the joint down, then drops it on the ground and blows out a big cloud of smoke.

JOE
Chloe, she...

REENA
I still need ten dollars.

Joe pulls some bills from his pocket. Gives her a 10.

REENA
I think Chloe's in Clarksville.

JOE
Chloe killed herself.

REENA
Good Lord.

JOE
In your car.

REENA
Sweet Jesus. Chloe's the one
stole my car?

JOE
I'm looking for...

REENA
Can't hardly believe it.

JOE
She had a baby girl, Kalisha,
with her, the last time I saw her.

REENA
I don't know nothin' about
no baby.

JOE
I get the feeling Chloe dropped
off Kalisha with kin, knowing what
she was fixing to do.

REENA
I don't know none of her kin.
When can I get my car back?

JOE
A few days. When's the last
time you saw Chloe?

REENA
Last summer, July I think it was.
She stayed here for about a month.
We worked in the same place.
That's where I met her, at work.

EXT. LOVE CAGE - DAY

Little brick shack with the cut out of a woman in black
silhouette rising from the roof.

Joe stands near the entrance, peering through the barred
windows at the play of blinking Christmas lights inside.

He opens the door and smoke rolls out as if the Love Cage
is on fire.

INT. LOVE CAGE - DAY

Heavy metal music, thunderous and distorted. Joe's eyes shoot to the stage.

A masked STRIPPER with white hair and wide hips shakes her bare breasts at the MEN gathered around her.

Smoke hangs heavy in the air. Bar off to the right, shadowy figures drinking and talking.

BAR

Joe bellies up. BARKEEP comes over. Joe shouts:

JOE
Is the manager here!

BARKEEP
Two drink minimum!

JOE
Beer! Draft!

Barkeep serves the mug of beer. Joe pays with a 50.

JOE
The manager, need to see him!

Barkeep takes the 50.

BARKEEP
He ain't here!

Joe slides a 100-dollar bill across the bar. Barkeep takes the bill and nods toward a side door exit.

EXT. LOVE CAGE - SIDE LOT - DAY

Joe exits and walks past a row of elaborate booths with sketches and paintings of snakes.

Some have articles made from the skin of diamondbacks: purses, wallets, belts, shoes, hats, cigarette cases.

At the end of the row, an ANCIENT LADY wearing a white bonnet sits in her rocking chair, weaving a mosaic of individual rattles from the tails of diamondbacks.

Joe admires the mosaic, four yards square of a buck stomping a rattlesnake to death.

The Ancient Lady works, fastening rattles to the stretched canvas. Joe picks up a rattle and shakes it. Beans rattle inside. He lays it down.

Joe is taken aback when he sees DK, the gargantuan pimp who abused Reena, taking a burlap sack from the bed of his truck. Joe approaches him.

JOE

Hello. You the manager?

DK holds the burlap sack with both hands, eyeing Joe up and down. No response.

JOE

Did a girl by the name of Chloe
Clark used to work here?

Joe follows DK as he walks out to a fenced-in pen that has a locked gate on it.

Several metal barrels. The tops of the barrels are covered with fine-mesh chicken wire.

DK

You the law?

JOE

Sheriff. Christian County.

DK

You're way out of your
jurisdiction, LeBron.

JOE

Actually, the name's Joe.
Joe McNeil. Or you could just
call me Sheriff. Or sir.

DK chuckles. Enters the pen.

DK

The interestin' thing about snakes -- LeBron -- is you can catch 'em any time you want to.

DK kicks two of the barrels. Immediately the little enclosure is filled with the DRY RATTLE of diamondbacks.

DK

All you need's a little ol' piece of garden hose and a teaspoon of gas.

He takes a stick with a wire hook on it from the corner of the pen, sets the burlap sack down, and waits.

DK

Just stick the hose down her hole and pour the gas in. It runs 'em out every damn time.

JOE

Do you know...?

DK

Shhhhhh. You're gonna make her nervous.

The mouth of the sack moves, and the blunt head of a rattlesnake appears. It seems to grin, waving its forked tongue, testing the air.

There's an undulation and another foot of snake, four inches thick, appears behind the head.

DK rushes until the snake twists slowly on the end of the hooked stick.

DK

Surprise, bitch.

DK drops it into one of the barrels. For a long moment, he stares into the barrel after the snake, writhing in the darkness, an incessant boiling, thick and slow.

DK

There's enough poison in there
to kill half the county.

He puts the chicken wire back in place, throws the hooked
stick in the corner of the pen.

JOE

Chloe, did...?

DK

I never heard of this Chloe.

JOE

Didn't she used to work here?

DK

Did I stutter?

(smiles)

I don't know what the fuck
you're talking about, boy.

JOE

I've got enough hair on my ass
to weave you a blanket, so don't
be calling me no boy.

DK

You sure are sensitive, old timer.
I got plenty of hair on my ass too,
but you don't see me making
a fuss over it.

JOE

I'm guessing that's 'cause you
never had to.

DK

I gotta see a man about a horse,
so why don't you get your black,
hairy ass back to C-C-Christian
C-C-County.

DK, pleased with his imitation of Chloe, flashes a shit-
eating grin at Joe.

INT. LOVE CAGE - DAY

Joe enters from the side door, scanning the joint.

A skinny TEEN STRIPPER prances to a slow song, naked except for panties, where bills poke out in little clusters.

MEN in chairs at the edge of the stage, packed in two deep, yell at her and she leans over as one or another half stands to put more bills in her panties.

BAR

Joe bellies up beside a young B-GIRL, pale face, the blue smear of a bruise running from one corner of her mouth.

JOE

Hello. Have you ever met...?

Barkeep interrupts, sliding a coaster before Joe.

JOE

Whiskey, on the rocks.

Barkeep makes the drink. Joe pays. The B-Girl sparks a smoke. Joe takes a healthy swig of booze.

JOE

Ever met a girl named Chloe?

A giant hand slides over from behind the B-Girl and locks onto Joe's left hand.

Joe squeezes his eyes shut and shows his teeth and drops his drink.

Ice and whiskey spill across the dented wood. The B-Girl moves out from under the huge hand. DK stands there.

DK crushes Joe's hand in his. Joe's knees go out from under him; he shakes his head and grits his teeth, trying to form some words.

The music stops. DK leans in, squeezing the hand. Joe, on his knees now, cannot say a fucking word.

Joe keeps shaking his head. Tears pouch, leaking out between pinched eyelids.

Bones break in Joe's hand, tiny CRACKLINGS, the ends of his fingers turning purple. A dark stain spreads on the front of his pants as he wets himself.

Still DK squeezes, bending lower, going lower and lower until Joe's stretched out on the floor with his hand extended, as if DK is in the act of helping him up.

Patrons go out the door in twos and threes, the door shutting behind them. Some of the lights go on.

DK turns Joe loose. Joe, still crying, holds the broken hand with the unbroken one.

He gets up on his knees with a WAITRESS helping him and wipes his face with the unbroken hand.

On his feet, the Waitress pops her gum as she helps him toward the door.

Joe looks back at DK. He wears that same shit-eating grin, waving good-bye.

EXT. LOVE CAGE - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Patrons gawk at the Black man being helped by the Waitress.

JOE

Right there.

She leads him to his truck.

WAITRESS

You need a doctor bad, mister.

She helps him get behind the wheel. He grimaces.

JOE

Thanks.

INT. JOE'S TRUCK - DAY

With his left hand idle, he uses his right hand to start the engine, put it in gear and drive off.

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT

The truck goes about 20 mph on a narrow two-lane blacktop.

INT. JOE'S TRUCK (MOVING) - NIGHT

Joe, his good hand on the wheel, tries to settle back in his seat.

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD

State Trooper's car parked sideways in the road. TROOPER down across the hood with a shotgun to his cheek.

EXT. TWO-LANE BLACKTOP - NIGHT

Joe tries to steer around the left side. Wheel drops off a culvert and he turns down into a ditch.

He slams into an oak tree -- BREAKING the windshield open with his head.

Far down and away through the black night, the wail of SIRENS, like souls lost in the sky. Through the trees, faint blue flashes of light.

INT. JOE'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Joe plops down on the bed, rolling on his back. Closes his eyes. The walls press around him. He shivers and opens his eyes. A small, rotted BABY sits on his chest.

Its skull is halved and one mad orb leans out, a red strand like the eye of a broken doll.

BABY

No ice cream.

INT. JAIL CELL - DAY

Joe springs awake on a top bunk, huge dark knot on his forehead. Right above him, written in smoke, a slogan.

INSERT - SLOGAN, which reads:

Healer heal my mother

BACK IN THE JAIL CELL

Joe cradles his wounded hand: it's swollen, index finger crooked. He sits on the edge of the cot.

A WHITE MAN in skivvies and shower shoes sits at a table with a BLACK MAN in a rumpled suit, playing cards.

Other MEN sleep on bunks throughout the cell.

Joe touches his scalp with his fingertips. It's tender, sore. The door to the cell is solid steel, with a small rectangular hole.

He drops down and goes over to it, bending down:

JOE
Hey, Jailer.

STEPS sound in the hall. JAILER bends over and looks in.

JAILER
What you want?

JOE
I want to get out of here.

JAILER
No shit. I 'magine everybody in there'd like that.

JOE
I think my goddamn hand is broken.

SOMEBODY yells in another cell.

SOMEBODY (O.S.)
Hey. Hey! Y'all hear me?
I got COVID. I'm sick. I want to
go to the doctor! Open this door!

JAILER
You better shut up!

SOMEBODY (O.S.)
I ain't gonna shut up!

JAILER
I'll get the strap!

SOMEBODY (O.S.)
Well, *get* the fuckin' strap!

The Somebody starts sobbing.

JOE
My name's Joe McNeil.

JAILER
I know who you are, sheriff.

JOE
Then why am I still in here?

JAILER
You made your bed, sleep in it.

JOE
What's that mean?

JAILER
Means the law is the law.

Joe groans and holds his head.

JOE
What they got me charged with?

JAILER
Shit. A heap. DUI, assault.

JOE
Assault?

JAILER
Resistin' arrest. You gonna need
a lawyer.

Jailer walks off.

LATER

Joe reclines on a bunk.

JAILER (O.S.)

Joe McNeil.

HALLWAY

Joe stands, trying to hold his head up, while the Jailer locks the cell behind him.

SOMEBODY (O.S.)

Why's he getting' out? Huh?
How come he's getting' out?

JAILER

Knock it off.
(to Joe)
Walk in front of me.

DAYROOM

A COP and a TRUSTEE lounge with their feet up in chairs watching television. They eye Joe warily.

The Jailer dumps Joe's personal belongings from a manilla envelope onto a cluttered desk. Keys, change, wallet, cell phone, and a pocketknife.

JAILER

Count your money.

Joe opens his wallet, counting with the one good hand.

JOE

It's all here.

JAILER

Sign for it.

Joe slips it into his back pocket, picks up the other stuff and signs.

JOE

Where's my truck?

JAILER

County lot.

There's a water fountain on the other side of the room.
Joe starts walking toward it.

COP

Hey.

Joe stops.

JOE

Yeah?

COP

Ain't nobody said you could
walk over there.

JOE

Ain't nobody said I couldn't
neither.

Joe goes on and bends over the fountain, drinks the cold
water a long time. He finishes, wipes his mouth and turns
around to see Mayor Fulton coming in with a briefcase.

EXT. JAIL HOUSE - DAY

Joe and Fulton exit the jail and head for the parking lot.

FULTON

Goddamn it, Joe.

Joe cradles his broken hand.

JOE

None of this shit is my fault.

FULTON

They're saying you started
a ruckus at the Love Cage.

JOE

I didn't start shit.

FULTON

Said you assaulted a citizen.

Joe holds up the disfigured hand.

JOE

Me? That redneck pimp broke my motherfuckin' hand.

FULTON

Said you was hammered, behind the wheel.

JOE

I was not hammered. They didn't even give me a breathalyzer.

FULTON

I convinced 'em to drop the charges, thank you very much.

JOE

Can't drop no charges cause I didn't do a goddamned thing to be charged with.

FULTON

Crockett tells me you're looking for some kid. You evicted the mother?

JOE

Just want to make sure she's okay, that's all.

FULTON

Crockett says you're chasing smoke, that there never was a kid.

JOE

Her name's Kalisha.

FULTON

Even if there is a K'lisha, you are not going to find her. She could be in another state, hell, another country, for all you know. Besides, that's not your job, searching for missing persons, especially on the County dime.

JOE

When I finish my evictions, it's my dime, not the County's.

FULTON

Speaking of that, what's this I hear about you delaying an eviction?

JOE

All I did was broker a deal.

FULTON

Again, that is not your job. Your job is to execute the order. Are you getting' soft on me?

JOE

No.

FULTON

That's good, because I'd hate to have to replace you on the ticket come next election.

JOE

You don't have to worry about me.

FULTON

Hell, I hope not. I got over a dozen deputies down with that omicron. Cheese and crackers. Broken hand or no broken hand, I need you out there.

JOE

I'm out there. Just take me to a doctor before my hand falls off.

They arrive at Fulton's car.

FULTON

I will, but first we need to talk about something.

JOE

I won't delay anymore evictions.

FULTON
No. Something else.

JOE
I'm waiting.

FULTON
Heard you bumped into Brenda
the other night.

JOE
Linda?

FULTON
No. Brenda. Helfrich. Someone
told me y'all were getting kindly
cozy at the Catfish House.

JOE
Damn liquor is what it was.

FULTON
For future reference, Brenda's
my buttercup.

JOE
Your what?

FULTON
My girl, my snookums, my buttercup.

This news puts a pause in their back and forth.

JOE
Congratulations?

FULTON
And Joe?

JOE
Yes, Mister Mayor.

FULTON
Get vaccinated.

INT. JOE'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

Joe checks his weary reflection in the mirror: bleary eyed, crisp white bandage around his head.

BEDROOM

Joe, left arm in a partial cast, hand to elbow, rips off his shirt, throws it on the floor.

He reaches into the closet and pulls a uniform shirt off the hangar, pulls it on, buttons it with the one good hand.

He stares at the white dress with blue polka dots.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY

Joe, in uniform, moves among the grave headstones in the glare of the morning sun.

He stops and lowers his eyes to a marble headstone, speckled white, reading:

Cynthia McNeil
Gone But Not Forgotten

He kneels before his wife's grave, rocking back and forth on his heels. A little MEXICAN BOY with a thin smile and a bad haircut suddenly appears beside the headstone.

Joe abruptly stops, wiping the wetness from his eyes with his fingers. Joe hardens his face and rises.

JOE
(to the Mexican Boy)
My wife. Cynthia. Don't know why I'm crying. She had hard bones on her feet. Scratched my legs at night when I was trying to sleep. Plus, she stunk up the bathroom something terrible.

Joe wipes away small tears.

JOE

If that's not enough, she
couldn't have kids either.
But I stayed with her. Because
I loved her, and I know that
nobody's perfect, especially
not me.

The Mexican Boy moves his head side to side, quizzical.

MEXICAN BOY

Que?

JOE

Nada.

INT. SQUAD CAR - DAY

Joe drives along. He slows to a stop.

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD

The row of dumpsters positioned off the blacktop on a bed
of gravel. The elderly Bum rummages inside one.

INT. SQUAD CAR - DAY

Joe stares at the Bum in the rusty bin for a few moments.
He puts it in gear and drives off.

INT. CHATEAU GARDENS - LEASING OFFICE - DAY

Ed at his desk, scrolls on his cell phone. Joe enters.
Ed, shocked by Joe's appearance, drops his phone.

ED

Goodness gracious, what in the
tarnation happened to you?

JOE

Hear anything from Mister Hernandez?

ED

Nuh-uh. I imagine he's getting
nowhere fast as he can.

JOE
Tomorrow then.

Joe leaves, Ed shouting after him.

ED
Hasta manana.

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX - DAY

Joe moves along a walkway, past several apartment doors. He arrives at 1G. An eviction notice hangs underneath a bright green Christmas reef. He knocks.

JOE
Christian County peace officer.

DOT Miller, 30s, with a sweet smile, answers the door.

JOE
Good morning. Dot Miller?

She nods her head up and down, yes.

JOE
I'm here because I have a court order to evict you.

DOT
When?

JOE
Today. Now.

DOT
How much do I owe?

JOE
Two thousand dollars.

DOT
Oh, I have that. Please come in.

INT. APARTMENT 1G - DAY

Joe follows her inside. He scans the place. Spic and span. Tidy. A supermarket tabloid on the coffee table.

INSERT - TABLOID HEADLINE, which reads:

The Healer Will Not Break
The Vow He Gave To God

BACK IN THE APARTMENT

He picks up the tabloid. She digs through cabinets.

JOE

What vow did this Healer give
to God?

DOT

To remain pure, a virgin,
in order to do God's work.

JOE

What work is that?

DOT

Why he can cure all sickness.

JOE

That a fact?

DOT

That is a fact. The Healer lives
only to heal. He makes the
blind see, the mute speak.
Doctors from the UN watched him
cure a case of wet leprosy. After
that, Trump invited him to the
White House. But he didn't go.

Joe coughs, drops the tabloid on the coffee table.

JOE

Ma'am, we don't have much time.

Dot goes to a drawer, pulls out some bills. She hands them
to Joe: it's Monopoly money. He gives the fake money back.

JOE

You have to make payment arrangements with the property manager. I'm here to execute the eviction order. Only take your essentials.

DOT

But I have the money, right here in my hand. Take it.

JOE

We don't have much time.

She drops the funny money and lunges at him. He tackles her to the ground and restrains her.

She screams at Joe as he pins her to the floor. She spits at him, shouting, hysterical:

DOT

You're a tool of capitalistic corruption! You're dogging the American people! How do you people sleep?! What do you expect me to do? Pay in blood? I will, I will pay in blood, but not my own!

EXT. APARTMENT 1G - DAY

Joe, dazed, waits as the masked Stan changes the locks.

JOE

The whole damn world's going crazy.

Stan finishes, twirling his drill. Joe, eyes watery, tugs the locks, making sure they're secure.

Joe sneezes, once, twice, three times.

STAN

Coming down with something?

JOE

No.

STAN

Did you get tested?

Joe stifles a sneeze.

JOE

Negative.

STAN

Then you ought to get tested.

JOE

No, I mean my test was negative.

STAN

Are you sure it wasn't a false negative? That means it wasn't really negative.

JOE

I know what it means, Dr. Fauci.
No, it was not a false negative.

Joe turns, bends over and sneezes, one, two, three times.
Then notices Stan staring at him, worried.

JOE

It's just my sinuses.

Joe sneezes. Stan still stares at Joe, concerned.

JOE

Sinuses.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

Joe sneezes into tissue, pops some aspirin. He stares at Wanda's brightly wrapped gift box, her Christmas present to him, still on his desk.

He picks it up, shakes it. Phone rings. He answers it.

JOE
Sheriff McNeil speaking.
(nodding)
Okay. Keep your drawers on.
I'll take care of it.
(nodding)
I said I'll take care of it.

He hangs up, coughing.

JOE
Shit. It's always something.

EXT. CATFISH HOUSE - PARKING LOT - DAY

A junky-ass old Rambler with the paint faded off, and a rag hanging from the grill, parked in one corner.

Joe gets out of his squad car and marches over to it.

VIOLA, a Black woman somewhere between 30 and 50, slumps behind the wheel.

Joe, congested, speaks with a clogged voice:

JOE
Mornin', ma'am.

Joe sneezes, blowing his nose into a moist handkerchief.

VIOLA
Mornin'. Call me Viola.

He peers into the backseat: Quilts and pillows piled up, like she's been camping out.

JOE
I'm sorry, Viola, but you can't stay here. The owner wants you off his property.

VIOLA
I kindly got lost. I'm looking for my daughter.

JOE
Where does she live?

VIOLA
Somewhere 'round here.

JOE
What's your daughter's name?

VIOLA
Chloe. Chloe Clark.

Joe let's this sink in. Takes a few seconds. Then:

JOE
I have some bad news, ma'am,
Viola. Chloe's dead. She died.

Viola's lips quiver.

VIOLA
I had me a terrible feeling.
When? How?

JOE
Christmas. I hate to have
to tell you this, but she
killed herself.

VIOLA
That don't make no sense.

JOE
Nothing seems to these days. I
feel really bad about it.

VIOLA
Ain't like it's your fault.

JOE
I'm trying to find her baby.

VIOLA
Chloe had a baby?

JOE
One or two years old.
Kalisha. When's the last
time you saw Chloe?

VIOLA

Not since she was sixteen.

JOE

Chloe had a little baby girl, and she was pregnant when she died.

Viola weeps. Joe stops to turn away to cough and sneeze.

JOE

Do you have any idea who Chloe might've left her baby with? The father? A boy friend?

VIOLA

You wouldn't buy a lady a nice cold beer would you?

He steps back. She opens the door. She wears a housecoat, dirty slip sticking out from under the edge.

They go inside together.

INT. CATFISH HOUSE - BAR - DAY

The Bartender and Joe watch Viola suck a can of beer dry. A few MEN shoot pool nearby.

VIOLA

I need some cigrets. Marlboro Lights. Not the menthol. Just reglar Lights.

Bartender gets the smokes and some matches. Joe pays.

VIOLA

I'm plumb give out. Been driving all day.

JOE

Where from?

VIOLA

Bean Station. I got a sick headache. It shore is nice to sit down for a minute.

She places a scrawny, gentle hand on Joe's cast.

VIOLA

It's some people in this world
has got things and some that don't.

She lights a cigarette. Puffs away. Long, deep drags.

VIOLA

(loud)

I need another beer!

Everybody stops to watch the scene at the bar. The
Bartender, a little pissed, gets her another beer.

JOE

Ma'am, Viola.

VIOLA

Don't nobody know what I been
through.

She looks at him. Her eyes are hot.

VIOLA

Let me tell you somethin':
People don't give a shit if
you don't got a place to sleep
nor nothin' to eat. Just ask
my poor Chloe.

She slams her face down on the bar, sobbing.

BARTENDER

(to Joe)

Get her out here.

Joe, sneezing, takes her arm.

JOE

Let's go outside.

He tugs on her arm. She glares at the Bartender.

VIOLA

Fuck you. You don't know nothin'
'bout me. You ain't fit to judge.

Bartender points toward the door.

BARTENDER

Out.

JOE

(to Viola)

Let's go.

EXT. CATFISH HOUSE - PARKING LOT - DAY

Joe helps her to the Rambler. She leans against the fender, cigarettes in one hand, beer in the other.

VIOLA

I may just go to Texas.
To Los Vegas.

JOE

Las Vegas isn't in Texas.

VIOLA

What?

She turns the beer up and takes a long drink of it and drops the can at her feet. She wipes her mouth with her hand, and she wipes her eyes.

VIOLA

You might be able to find
that baby at Daryl's house.

JOE

Who's Daryl?

VIOLA

This cracker Chloe used to
stay with. He used to always
make fun of the way she talked.
Knocked her up once, I think.

JOE

What's Daryl's last name?

VIOLA

Lee. Daryl Lee. He used to live in Indian Mound, a trailer, the very end of what some folks call Pig Trail Road.

JOE

Chloe, she's at a funeral home, downtown. Do you want me take you?

VIOLA

I have to be on my way. If you could take care of my girl, I'd shorely appreciate it.

JOE

I'll make all the arrangements.

Joe appraises the Rambler.

JOE

Think this thing will make it to Texas?

VIOLA

I done changed my mind. I'm gonna stay here with you. I love you.

She tears up, tries to kiss him on the lips. He pivots.

She nods toward a motel across the street.

VIOLA

Let's go over there and get us a room. I want to.

Joe shakes his head: No. She turns her face to one side, ashamed. He reaches for his wallet, pulls out some bills and gives them to her.

She eyes what's in her hand, and counts it, jerking the bills from one hand to the other, three fifties, two tens.

She puts them in her pocket, and then limps to the steps of the Catfish House and disappears inside.

EXT. PIG TRAIL ROAD - DAY

More like a path through the woods. Joe drives the squad car past things abandoned by the edge of the road: old fridge, discarded lawn mowers, bedsprings, rotten plywood.

EXT. DARYL'S TRAILER - DAY

Joe pulls up and stops in front of a squalid, abandoned mobile home.

Coughing, eyes watery, Joe climbs out and scans the scene: Overturned chairs and scattered beer cans. Milk crates and soda bottles and wheel rims and blown-out tires.

Broken limbs hang from the roof. Christmas tinsel draped around the door. Panes of glass patched with masking tape.

He steps around the stuff in the yard and walks over to the door. Torn eviction notice taped in the center. He draws his gun, at the ready, tries the knob. It turns stiffly.

INT. DARYL'S TRAILER - DAY

He steps inside. The mildew and rot hit him. Disgusted, he plucks out his cloth mask, puts it on.

The floor is buckled and water stains in strange brown shapes spread across the ceiling.

Furniture piled high with clothes and broken Christmas tree ornaments. Door at the end of the hall.

HALL

His boots press spots of water from the soiled carpet. He stops at the back door. A small pane of glass is set into the door, and he gazes through to a blurry world outside.

BATHROOM

He studies the rusted tub, the torn shower curtain. Beer can on the sink.

Filthy commode leaks, water pooling around it.

BEDROOM

Dark. Windows shuttered against the light with venetian blinds. A rumpled bed dusted with cigarette ashes. Empty drawers hang open on the dresser.

On the floor lies a cardboard flier, printed in thick letters. He picks it up:

INSERT - FLIER, which reads:

THE HEALER
I will take sickness from among you
December 26th thru December 29th
CUMBERLAND FAIRGROUNDS
Donations welcome

LIVING ROOM

Joe holsters his gun, stands in the middle for a moment. He spots something beneath the couch.

Moves closer, kneels; reaches under it. He pulls out an infant's shirt, spotted with blood -- and the sheriff-badge sticker he gave Kalisha clings to it.

EXT. DARYL'S TRAILER - DAY

He steps outside, holding the tiny shirt. Removes the mask. Coughs and gags.

DK (O.S.)
Stop right there!

DK, the gargantuan pimp who broke Joe's hand, stands beside the squad car, pointing a big pistol at him. Joe goes into a low crouch, like he's going to make a break for it.

DK
I wouldn't try that shit, LeBron!
Not 'less you want the undertaker
packin' your asshole full of
cotton 'bout dark. Weapon, in
the bushes.

Joe, hacking, takes his gun, tosses it into the bushes.

DK

Sound sick.

JOE

Sinuses.

DK

How's the hand?

JOE

I can still jerk off.

DK

Well bless your heart.
On the ground.

Joe eases down on the soggy ground. He sits cross-legged watching the red-faced DK hold the hand cannon on him.

DK approaches Joe.

JOE

You can put the gun away. I'm
not going anywhere.

DK

Oh yeah. You goin' somewhere.
On your feet.

DK wears a thin, cruel smile on his lips. Joe stands up slowly and waits, coughing, sneezing. DK walks in a small circle around him.

DK

You scared, boy?

JOE

We already had this conversation.
The name is Joe. Same as my daddy's.

DK

Your daddy a law dog too?

JOE

No, he was a deacon in the church.
Born in Keep Runnin',
Mississippi. That man was scared
his whole life.

DK

Scared of what?

JOE

The white man.

DK

No shit.

Nausea overwhelms Joe. He grows queasy, stifling a sudden urge to vomit. He recovers.

JOE

The uncrossable lines of things
you could do and things you
couldn't. The water fountains,
the bathrooms, places to eat.

DK

Too scared to cross them lines, huh?

JOE

Damn straight. He'd seen
hangings, the corpses of men
burned alive. My daddy was scared
of things like that all his life.

Joe gags and steps a little closer to DK.

JOE

And now, when it looks like
things might change, now when a
Black man was actually elected
president, here I am, still dealing
with peckerwoods like you. But
unlike my daddy, I'm not
scared -- of you or anybody else.

DK

You oughta be, nig...

Joe whirls and throws a fist. DK steps aside, and lets the punch go over his shoulder, bringing the gun barrel down on Joe's skull.

A light FLASHES, Joe's brain shorting out.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

The sun hangs high in the pale blue sky. Joe awakens on mud, his feet bare, chained together, ankles held firmly by a pair of bright chrome shackles.

He jerks the shackles apart, but the cold steel only cuts into the bones of his ankles.

He gets up on both knees, and almost passes out from the intense pain throbbing in his head.

Joe manages to rise to his feet and veer toward a trail, his temples pounding in agony with each step he takes.

DK appears, blocking the trail -- and in his hands he holds an enormous diamond-back rattlesnake.

The serpent's on the end of a stick with a wire loop around its neck. The bulk of its thick body slithers and sways, the forked tongue flickering and testing the air.

Joe freezes where he stands, teetering, confused, dizzy.

DK

They'll probably find your body
come spring.

Joe struggles to move, the pain unbearable. DK laughs as he closes in on him.

Joe hobbles and stumbles and tries to throw his body over clumps of bushes.

DK whoops and chases him like a fun-loving schoolboy after a little girl in pigtails.

Joe risks one glance behind: DK forgets about watching the handle of the stick and it gets tangled between his thighs.

DK trips and lands on his belly. His jowls hang slack with horror as he sits up. Joe ducks behind a tree.

The tremendous snake hangs from DK's right arm, the fangs sinking into the roof of its mouth. DK squeals at the top of his lungs like a stuck pig.

The snake's jaws stretch wide, chewing and working, injecting the venom deep into his bloodstream.

DK screams as he claws for the pistol in his belt with his free hand, blubbering like a baby.

There's a mad panic in DK's eyes as he looks from Joe to the snake.

DK

Oh Jesus God help me! He bit me!
The sonofabitch is in my arm!

DK grabs the pistol, cocks it, sticks the muzzle against the smooth white scales of the snake's belly, and blows it apart with one thunderous BLAST.

Little pink pieces of meat and snake guts splatter against his face and lips.

He drops the pistol. Joe watches from behind the tree as DK grabs the pulpy, twitching body. DK pulls the head and fangs out of his arm with an awful groan.

DK

You gotta help me, you gotta help
me! Please, you gotta cut me!
Oh Lord, you gotta cut me!

His voice trails off to a weak whimper, his head sagging down on his chest.

JOE

You throw me the gun. I got
a knife. I'll cut it, but
you got to throw me the gun.

DK shakes, rigor going through his body. He snatches up the pistol and screams:

DK

You motherfucker!!!

Joe ducks behind the tree as four deafening BLASTS rock the forest around him.

Slugs TEAR into the tree trunk, and Joe presses his face flat to the ground, trembling.

Joe hears the dull CLICK of the hammer striking on spent cartridges.

DK's face is pasty white, drained of blood. He cries. The pistol falls from his hand to the dirt.

Joe gets up and immediately shuffles toward the fallen man.

JOE

Open 'em quick if you want me
to help you.

Joe spreads his legs apart as far as possible, shackles stretched between his ankles.

DK fumbles for the key in his belt. His hands shake but find the tiny hole in the shackles and they CLICK open.

DK

Cut it -- you gotta cut it quick!

Joe kicks the shackles aside.

JOE

Where's Kalisha, the baby?

DK

My brother, Daryl, he took her.
Daryl, he's her, Kalisha's daddy.

JOE

Took her where?

DK

Cut me -- please!

JOE

Where did he take her?

DK

To see, to see the Healer.

JOE

Why'd he do that?

DK

To heal Kalisha; she was bad sick, with the COVID. Hardly breathing. The Healer has the fire of God in his fingers.

JOE

Where is she now?

DK

I don't know.

JOE

Where is she goddammit!

DK

I don't fucking know! Ask the Healer, he'll know.

Joe digs in his pocket and finds his knife. He grabs DK's sweaty arm and makes two deep, slashing cuts across the fang marks.

The skin and meat peel apart. Blood jumps out in two gushing streams. Relief washes over DK's face.

JOE

Okay. That ought to hold you till you can get to a hospital.

DK gets to his feet, swaying dizzily.

DK

Take me with you -- to see the Healer. He can save me.

JOE

Save yourself.

He clutches Joe with his bloody hands, begging:

DK

Least walk me to my truck.
It's parked right up there,
'bout fifty yards.

Joe pushes DK's hands away and backs up.

JOE

No way. I did all I'm gonna
do for your ass.

DK

You can't leave me here, sheriff!
I ain't gonna make it out!
Help me to my truck. Please.

Joe starts to limp away, but DK cries in the most pitiful
voice he's ever heard.

Joe pauses, considering the situation, a little nagging
voice of conscience.

Joe slips DK's arm around his neck.

JOE

Fuck. Come on.

The bitten arm swells rapidly.

DK

Oh sweet Jesus. I'm dying.

JOE

Shut the fuck up. Which way's
your car?

DK

It's a truck.

JOE

Goddamn it, which way?

Joe has a hard time holding the large man. Sweat pours off
them both.

DK

Straight up the hill. Over
to the left. Bunch of pine
trees. Oh dear Lord.

Joe staggers under the dying man's weight and the pounding
pain still racing through his head.

ROAD

Joe carries DK onto the narrow gravel lane. He can barely
stand. DK sinks to his knees. His arm turns purple, every
vein outlined against his skin.

DK

Can't go no farther. You
got to, to drive my truck
down here.

JOE

I ain't got to do shit.

DK

Oh please! Take me to, to
the Healer. Keys under
the visor.

Joe sags against a tree and looks down at DK. He appears
near death.

Joe closes his eyes briefly, then turns and runs in a
stumbling, head-jarring trot.

FURTHER UP THE ROAD

Joe almost runs past the truck parked in a thicket of
loblolly pine trees.

INT. DK'S TRUCK - DAY

He flings open the door, reaches over the visor, grabs the
keys, hops behind the wheel and cranks it, pulls out, backs
down the road till he sees DK lying in the gravel.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Joe jumps out, jerks DK up and helps him under the wheel. Then, with a practiced fluid movement, DK reaches under the seat and pulls out a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun.

Joe stares cross-eyed into the twin black holes. DK's lips and face are swollen. He drools a little, lisping:

DK
I'm sorry.

A great pain seizes DK's chest, causing him to sag back against the seat. The shotgun falls.

Joe staggers away, glancing over his shoulder. It seems the dead man is waving goodbye with his puffy black hand.

EXT. DARYL'S TRAILER - DAY

Joe sits beside the door of his squad car, sliding boots on his sore feet, exhausted.

He stands, groggy. Searches for and finds his gun in the bushes. He kneels on the ground, coughing; heaving, tongue out and curled, hacking, strangling.

JOE
Oh shit. Oh *arrrrrgh*.

He rises but quickly doubles over, coughing, barking, choking, whamming it out between his knees.

JOE
Damn. Godamighty...damn!

INT. SQUAD CAR (MOVING) - DAY

A blood-stained Joe drives, eyes red and ringed, checking his blurry reflection in the rearview.

He turns his eyes to the road ahead.

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD

A billboard, black letters six feet tall proclaiming:

HEALER HEAL MY HUSBAND

EXT. ROAD - DAY

The squad car moves slowly down the two-lane blacktop.

In a field stand three giant wooden crosses, their colors rising in the falling sunlight, red, white, and blue.

Doves cry in the trees.

EXT. CUMBERLAND FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

An enormous revival tent. Paved lot packed with vehicles.

INT. REVIVAL TENT - DAY

A line of people who need healing forms in the center:

A BLIND MAN leans on a cane. The Mexican Granny, the one Joe evicted, uses a walker to drag her withered legs.

A MAN CHILD babbles in tongues as he fervently prays, eyes clenched in a silent scream, clutching a Holy Bible.

A TEEN BOY in a wheelchair, his body twisted and deformed, trembles. His MOTHER, trembling also, stands behind him, hands clasped breast wise to the Holy Father.

MOTHER

Healer heal my child who was
wrong from the womb. Amen.

The Teen Boy writhes in his chair, gazing up at the bright lights, shoes digging for purchase in saw dust.

The crowd waits on all sides, SPECTATORS piled up along the back and sides. Several USHERS move slowly through the crowd with their plates out.

Joe enters an opening in the tent. A stage with a podium. He stumbles toward the stage. Moves behind it.

BEHIND THE STAGE

ABE, a middle-aged little man, about three-feet tall, in a red suit, stands on a pedestal, guarding a dressing room. A silver crucifix hangs on the door.

Joe staggers past Abe, to the dressing room door.

ABE
Hold it, buster.

Joe turns the knob. It's locked.

ABE
Where do you think you're going?

JOE
See the Healer. He back there?

ABE
The boss ain't signing no more autographs

JOE
I'm not here for any fuckin' autograph. This is police business.

Abe lets out a high-pitched cackle.

ABE
Oh. Why didn't you say so?

JOE
Good. Now let me in.

ABE
No. Now amscray.

Joe throws a shoulder into the door, struggling in vain to break it down.

ABE
Hey, cut it out.

Joe kicks the door, again and again.

ABE

Didn't you hear what I just said?

JOE

No.

Abe whips out a derringer, aims at Joe.

ABE

I'll say it a little louder.

Joe sees the gun, backs off.

ABE

Show starts in fifteen minutes.
I suggest you get in line, and
wait your turn, just like every
other Tom, Dick and Mary.

HEALER (O.S.)

Abe! Let him in!

ABE

But boss! This bull's a real
stinkeroo!

HEALER (O.S.)

Let him in!

Abe jumps from the pedestal. He comes to a foot below
Joe's belt. He offers his hand. They shake.

Abe produces a key, unlocks and opens the door. Joe enters.

DRESSING ROOM

The HEALER, 20s, black hair greased into ducktails, wearing
a black suit, sits on a couch, sipping from a silver flask.

He smokes a cigarette while he flips through the pages of a
Penthouse magazine.

HEALER

The little fella takes good
care of me.

Joe, in a precarious state, stands, teetering.

HEALER

You ought to sit down 'fore
you fall down.

Joe plops down in a big comfy chair.

HEALER

Your hands are kindly bloody.

Joe peers at his blood-stained hands.

HEALER

Are you in need of healing?

JOE

I'm in need of some information.

HEALER

I always like to help the law,
long as it don't hurt my friends.

JOE

A man, Daryl Lee, he brought a
a baby to you...

HEALER

Kalisha. On Christmas day.

JOE

I need to find her.

HEALER

Why's that, Joe?

The Healer puts the magazine and flask aside. Then picks up an acoustic guitar and strums a hillbilly tune, part love song, part hymn, cigarette dangling from his lips.

JOE

How'd you know my name was Joe?

HEALER

Didn't you say it when you just
came in?

JOE

No.

HEALER

Hmmm. Well, you sure look like a Joe.

JOE

Kalisha.

HEALER

That poor child was eat up with the COVID. But don't you worry none. I took that sickness from her.

JOE

Do you have any idea where she might be now?

HEALER

Daryl and his old lady, Alma, they're living by the Cumberland River. Under the bridge, just up the road. Like many in this land, they have no roof over their heads. I reckon you know all about that.

JOE

What's that supposed to mean?

HEALER

It means the law is the law.

Their eyes meet.

JOE

You're a lot younger than I expected.

HEALER

Looks can fool you. I'm older at 21 than most folks who've died.

Abe enters.

ABE

They're here, boss.

HEALER

Show 'em in. Excuse me, sheriff.

He lays the guitar aside. A worried MOTHER, rollers in her hair, enters, holding the hand of her pale 10-year-old SON.

MOTHER

He tested positive for COVID.
We just heart sick over it.
Healer, will you heal my son?

HEALER

Come over here, boy.

MOTHER

Go on now.

The Mother nudges the shy boy forward. The Healer touches his clammy forehead.

The Healer closes his eyes, calm and solemn:

HEALER

Lord, heal this boy. Heal him
in whatever needs healing. Heal
his heart, heal his soul.
Lay your hands gently upon this
boy and heal him through your
love for me. Amen.

The Mother weeps with joy. The boy returns to her embrace.

MOTHER

Oh thank you.

HEALER

Don't thank me. Thank Jesus.

She clasps her hands to the heavens.

MOTHER

Oh thank you, sweet Jesus.

Abe stands at the entrance. The Healer nods to him. He enters. The Mother hands Abe a few dollars. Abe escorts the Mother and Son outside.

The Healer grabs his guitar, resumes strumming. Joe shakes his head in disbelief. The Healer notices his skepticism.

HEALER

We live in an age that calls
darkness light. Troubled times.
In a world gone wrong, folks need hope.

JOE

Not false hope.

HEALER

I feel sorry for you, Joe.

JOE

Why's that?

HEALER

You live in a dream state in which
you can run without moving, from
a terror in which you cannot believe,
toward a safety in which you have
no faith.

JOE

Cause I don't buy this mumbo jumbo?

HEALER

What you call mumbo jumbo, I call
faith. The son of a deacon
ought to know that.

A long pregnant pause. Their eyes meet again.

JOE

How'd you know my father was
a deacon?

Joe quivers and shakes and groans.

HEALER

(winking)

I didn't. I just kindly
sensed you had a Christian
upbringing.

They stare at each other. Joe wipes his sweaty brow,
plunges into a violent coughing fit.

After a few moments, Joe stops coughing. His lips are slimy with pink foam and his breath rattles in his chest like dry peas in a pod.

JOE

Heal me.

HEALER

Pardon?

JOE

I'm sick -- sicker than a dog.
So why don't you heal me?

HEALER

No can do, *amigo*.

JOE

Figured as much.

HEALER

Your sickness won't disappear
until you find whatever it
is you're looking for.

Joe moves toward the door.

HEALER

Siempre es algo.

Joe turns. The Healer lays the guitar aside, grabs the *Penthouse* magazine, sips from the flask.

HEALER

When you go down by the river,
remember...

The Healer pulls the centerfold, buries his eyes there.

HEALER

...the world is a strange place and
in it lie things of another nature,
a bent order...

(looks at Joe)

...and beyond a certain point there
are no rules to make a man mind.
Adios.

INT. SQUAD CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Joe behind the wheel; ailing, cruising along about 40mph and scanning fallow fields under the cloudy sky.

He crosses a river bridge, eyes searching down to the right. Slams on the brakes.

EXT. CUMBERLAND RIVER - DAY

A car nosed into a stand of cane at the top of the bank, a man and woman struggling against the hood.

INT. SQUAD CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Joe shoves it in Reverse, squalling a tire and going back across the bridge.

He pulls off down a little dirt road beside the bridge, deeply rutted.

EXT. CUMBERLAND RIVER - DAY

He pulls up beside the man and woman. Leaves the squad car running and gets out.

The woman, ALMA, 30s, cries. The man, DARYL LEE, 40s, stands beside her, weaving unsteadily, in a torn shirt and cutoff jeans.

Beer cans scatter the ground. Two small children squat beside the remains of a fire. Alma stumbles toward Joe.

ALMA

Arrest this motherfucker.

Her hair is in knots and her bare feet are muddy. She wears an elastic top and baggy shorts. Joe can see her discolored tongue and teeth.

DARYL

(to Joe)

This ain't none of your goddamned business. This between me and her.

Daryl puts one hand on the car to steady himself, but it doesn't do much good.

JOE

You best watch your mouth, mister.
Now, what's your name?

Alma comes up close behind Joe and he smells her, one little whiff that almost takes his breath away.

ALMA

His name's Daryl.

DARYL

Shut your hole, you bitch!

ALMA

He's botherin' us.

Alma stumbles and almost falls. She grabs Joe by the arm, but he pushes her away.

DARYL

I ain't bothered nobody. I was mindin' my own business, you fuckin' cunt!

JOE

All right. That's enough of that. What about these kids here?

ALMA

They mine. And his. But he won't help me feed 'em and he comes around botherin' me all the time and I'm sick of it. I want his ass arrested.

Joe looks at them both and then he looks at the kids. Then he looks a little closer.

JOE

Both of you stay right where you are. You hear me? Don't make a move. Freeze.

DARYL

I ain't going nowhere.

Daryl walks toward a cooler next to the car. Joe takes four steps and shoves him hard against the fender.

JOE
 (coughing)
 I said freeze. You know what
freeze means?

Daryl glares at Joe with drunken intensity. Joe takes his hands off Daryl and walks toward the children.

BOY and a GIRL, both about three, four years old. They look like they want to run.

JOE
 It's okay. I'm not going to
 hurt you.

Joe sees their fear, so he moves slowly, watching their lowered faces and sidelong glances.

He kneels next to them. Tin cans in the rubble of the fire, a crude circle of rocks with blackened stubs of sticks, the skeletons of small fish charred with ash.

Joe swoons, almost fainting. He looks back at Daryl and Alma. They watch the sick lawman, poised for flight.

JOE
 Y'all best not move.

ALMA
 Can I set down?

Joe doesn't answer, reaching out for the little Girl's arm. A shriveled stick of flesh in his hand, the nails on the fingers deeply rimmed with dirt.

The two bones that run from elbow to wrist are bowed in an arch, a break that has been set badly or not at all.

Joe turns the arm over, this way and that. He looks into her eyes.

A feral child with bright eyes shining in a bleak face and her hair lying in long ragged waves close to her ears.

JOE

What happened to her arm?

Nobody says anything. Joe gets up and walks behind the Girl and over to the Boy. He kneels again, putting his amazed hand gently on the Boy's naked back.

All his ribs show. His belly is swollen. One of his eyes is almost matted shut.

His right arm and leg are covered with clustered bruises scattered up and down those limbs in blue and yellow hues.

Joe stands up, steps away from them and puts his hand on his gun.

JOE

You people are under arrest.
If you move one step I'll
shoot you where you stand.
If you don't believe me,
just go ahead and try me.

They don't move. Not one muscle. Joe hacks and coughs.

JOE

You sit down right there where
I can watch you. Go on now.

Alma cries, covering her face with her hands. She shakes her head side to side.

She points at Daryl, who's still frozen against the car like the proverbial rabbit caught in the headlights.

ALMA

It's all his fault. He does
it to me, too, comes in drunk
and if supper ain't ready starts
hittin' everybody. I told him
he was gonna get caught you
son of bitch I told you.

JOE

Sit down and shut the fuck up.

She just glares at Joe, not moving. He walks closer and pushes her hard to the ground.

She lands on her ass in the mud and rolls over onto her side, beating at the ground with her fist in her outrage and weeps as if her heart has been broken in half.

JOE
Where's Kalisha?

ALMA
Ask him.

DARYL
I don't know no fuckin' K'lisha?

JOE
(to Daryl)
Turn around.

DARYL
I got rights.

Joe goes to him and gets him by the arm and turns him around and wrenches it up.

Daryl struggles against him. Joe lays the muzzle of the revolver into the soft place behind the lobe of his ear.

Joe leans in close, whispering through gritted teeth:

JOE
You can go easy or you can go
hard. It don't matter to me.
I'd like to shoot your dumb ass
anyway.

Daryl quits moving. Joe holsters the gun, gets his cuffs off his belt and shackles Daryl tight.

INT. WANDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Joe's ragged, wearing a paper mask over his nose and mouth. He watches the Boy and Girl at the table as they gobble hamburger patties and vegetables.

The Boy has a white patch over his bad eye. They're clean now, freshly bathed, giggling and whispering to each other.

Wanda washes dishes in the sink, and she keeps turning to smile at them over her shoulder.

She hangs up her dish towel and motions for Joe to step out on the back porch.

JOE
(to the kids)
I'll be back in a minute.

They keep on eating.

EXT. WANDA'S HOUSE - BACK PORCH - NIGHT

Wanda sits in a chair near the railing. Joe hoists one leg up on it, coughing.

WANDA
Why didn't you tell me about
this baby you've been looking for?

JOE
I didn't want you to think I
was losin' it.

WANDA
I knew you were losing it when
you bumped uglies with Linda.

JOE
Brenda. Mayor's buttercup.

WANDA
Don't remind me. Whose blood
is that?

Joe scans his blood-splattered shirt and pants.

JOE
Nobody you know.

WANDA
You sound awful sick.

JOE

All my tests have been negative.

WANDA

Thanks for wearing the mask.

Joe coughs, shaking his head: no problem.

WANDA

What's gonna happen to them?

JOE

You know the deal. The foster home'll see after them until the court decides what to do.

WANDA

When do you take them?

JOE

After they eat. I have to go to the jail, tell the lowlife father what's goin' on.

WANDA

How'd you like my gift?

Joe slumps, drops his head in embarrassment.

WANDA

I saw it sitting on your desk.

JOE

We said no gifts.

WANDA

Joe.

JOE

I will open it.

INT. WANDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Joe grabs his hat and keys. Wanda herds the Boy and Girl toward the front door.

EXT. WANDA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Wanda guides the children into the front seat of Joe's squad car. She leans in the window, trying not to cry.

WANDA

Y'all come back and see me sometime.

They stare, silent.

JOE

(to Wanda)

I'll keep you posted.

INT. SQUAD CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Joe behind the wheel, the children quiet in the seat beside him. He pulls on the headlights and turns on the scanner so they can listen.

Opens the glove box, finds some gum and gives them each a piece. They move closer to him.

BOY

Can we go get the baby?

Joe pulls to the shoulder of the road.

He turns to the children:

JOE

Where's the baby?

EXT. JAIL - DAY

Joe, in a fresh uniform, drags Daryl, handcuffed, still in his torn shirt and cutoff shorts, to the squad car.

Joe shoves him into the backseat.

EXT. DARYL'S TRAILER - DAY

Joe drives up and stops in front. Nothing has changed: overturned chairs and scattered beer cans in the yard.

Tree limbs hang from the roof. Panes of glass patched with masking tape. Christmas tinsel hangs from the front door.

INT. SQUAD CAR - DAY

Joe shuts the car off and turns to face Daryl.

JOE

Just stay in here. You got that?

Daryl eases himself to rest against the seat, his eyes hooded and dark, mocking Joe.

DARYL

I need to get more clothes.
You said you'd get me my clothes.

Joe gags and coughs.

JOE

I will. I'm gonna have a look
around first. You stay in the car.
You hear?

DARYL

Yeah, man, ain't like I'm deaf.

JOE

I can always handcuff you to
the car if you're thinking about
running.

Daryl looks away. Joe gets out, taking the keys with him.

EXT. DARYL'S TRAILER - DAY

Joe glances up at the gray sky. A small wind whistles through the barren trees.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Joe moves around to the woods behind the trailer. More junk scattered. An old Dodge car rests in the weeds.

Clouds push fast across the sky. A low rumbling. He eases into the woods, along a well-worn path.

Stands of scrubby trees littered with cast-off items of so many households, cardboard boxes of Mason jars and old crates, broken washing machines.

Joe limps past these things, watching the ground for snakes, stepping around holes of water.

He keeps glancing back at the trailer until it's out of sight, going deeper into the woods.

A white stump. A low mound of earth on the other side of a pile of downed timber. Joe stands over it.

He drops to his knees and digs with both hands. The clay sticks to his fingers.

Wetness spreads over his knees, and he begins to breathe a little harder.

His hand strikes something. He leans back on his haunches with the gun heavy at his side, raising his face to the swirling sky. Closes his eyes for a second.

A thunderbolt BARKS far off. A dry RUMBLING headed his way. THUNDER building on THUNDER.

It rains. He takes his hat off and lets the drops pepper his shoulders, his forearms.

He sinks his fingers back into the worthless red dirt and it rises between his knuckles as he paws it back, casting it to one side or the other.

The trees sway hard in the wind. A noise like long SIGHING rises all around him.

Water flows into the shallow depression he makes with his hands, little rivulets of packed dirt shearing away from the edges of the hole.

Little thin arms come yellow into the gray light. Tiny femurs and hips rise out of the sludge.

He rises and staggers through the soggy leaves, going back up the path as the storm moves away, the rumbling fading, a dying message, God uneasy.

INT. SQUAD CAR - DAY

Joe, dripping wet and muddy, climbs behind the wheel. Daryl squirms in the backseat.

Joe turns, brings the heavy revolver up and levels it at Daryl, the moment so quiet and still.

The gun doesn't waver as it moves toward Daryl's face.

Joe cocks the gun, the chamber rotates. Daryl sobs, the sound like an axe chopping pine.

Joe, stunned and disgusted by this sound, lowers the gun, turns around.

He just sits there, listening to Daryl cry -- a heavy, hollow chunking noise, repeating itself without accent.

Between sobs, Daryl asks:

DARYL

Can I get my clothes now?

Joe starts the car.

JOE

You're not gonna need 'em.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

Joe, still in his muddy uniform, his sickness noticeably absent. He grabs a .38 revolver from the gun cabinet.

He locks the cabinet, holsters the weapon, and slaps on a bulletproof vest.

Wanda's Christmas gift rests on Joe's desk. He lifts the small box, shakes it to hear what's inside.

Contemplates the gift for a few moments. Then he shoves it into the desk's bottom drawer.

INT. SQUAD CAR - DAY

Joe settles in behind the wheel. He counts through a stack of eviction orders.

He picks up the radio and speaks in a clear, healthy voice:

JOE

Heading out, Toby. Another busy day.

TOBY (V.O.)
Alright then. Be careful.

JOE
Copy.

He straps an extra magazine of ammo to his belt.

INT. CHATEAU GARDENS - LEASING OFFICE - DAY

Ed, the property manager, and Stan, the locksmith, take down Christmas decorations. Joe enters, clipboard in hand.

JOE
(to Ed)
Did we get a happy ending?

ED
Depends. I haven't received a dime or any more information from Ricardo. So, I rented out his unit. Raised the price from \$1,700 to \$2,200 and a new tenant snapped it up like that.
(snaps his fingers)
Demand right now is off the chain. We need him out. We need to proceed.

Joe checks his clipboard paperwork.

JOE
Plus four more?

ED
That's right. But first, old deadbeat Ricardo there.

Stan grabs his drill from the counter.

STAN
(to Joe)
You don't seem sick no more.

JOE
Everything cleared up.

EXT. CHATEAU GARDENS - DAY

Joe and Stan stroll through the courtyard to Ricardo's apartment. Joe looks down at the entry mat: Welcome! Friends gather here!

On the porch, he notices, again, the collection of toy trucks and the child's fairy garden built from straw dolls and plastic plants.

Joe knocks on the door. Ricardo opens it.

JOE

They're ready to go ahead with the order.

RICARDO

I tried to call them.

NORMA, his young Peruvian wife, joins him in the doorway. Her eyes are wide and the Baby fusses in her arms.

NORMA

We're good for the money. We actually had it, but then somebody hacked into our bank account, so now it's frozen, and they changed the account number, and I'm waiting for the new one, and --

Ricardo cuts in.

RICARDO

Six thousand is a lot. We just need a little more time.

Joe winces and shakes his head.

JOE

Management already rented it out, but we'll give you ten minutes to grab some essentials.

Ricardo stares at the drained Joe for a moment, at his wet, muddy uniform, his bruised face, the dirty cast. Completely different appearance from the first time they met.

RICARDO
Okay. Ten minutes?

JOE
Ten minutes.

INT. RICARDO'S APARTMENT - DAY

Ricardo hurries through the home to find all the essentials necessary for his family.

BEDROOM

He packs diapers, wipes, shoes and toiletries into a bag.

LIVING ROOM/KITCHEN

Joe stands in the corner. Norma straps the baby in a high chair, goes to the fridge for milk, snacks and baby food, throwing open cabinets and slamming them shut.

NORMA
What if the whole kitchen's
essential?

Ricardo emerges from the bedroom with the stuffed bag.

The Little Girl enters the living room carrying two stuffed bears and her roller skates. She goes to Ricardo.

LITTLE GIRL
What about my TV?

Ricardo leans down to squeeze her shoulder.

RICARDO
It's too big. We'll get it later.

She cries. Joe holds out another sticker. She refuses it, glares up at him.

LITTLE GIRL
Don't go in my room. Don't
watch my TV. Don't sleep in
my bed.

Ricardo curses to himself as he rushes around.

RICARDO

We need more time.

Joe admires a floor lamp in the living room. Ricardo comes out of the bathroom with three toothbrushes.

JOE

I like this lamp.

RICARDO

Huh?

JOE

The lamp, I like it.

RICARDO

Oh yeah. Thanks.

JOE

Where'd you get it?

RICARDO

Costco.

Ricardo packs the toothbrushes into a suitcase.

JOE

No kiddin'. I should get one of those.

RICARDO

I'll sell it to you. How about six thousand dollars?

Ricardo yells to Norma:

RICARDO

Shoes! Pajamas! Pack N Play!

Norma moves the crib. Behind it, a pile of crackers on the floor.

She grabs a broom from the kitchen and starts to sweep.

JOE

That's okay. You don't have to do that.

NORMA

I can't help myself.

She breaks down, crying.

Joe stands against the wall, watching her, trying to think of something to say.

Finally:

JOE

You ever hear about those robot vacuums? They just go around and keep the dust out and everything.

NORMA

Uh-huh.

She finishes sweeping, folds the crib and tosses it onto the porch with the rest of the essentials.

EXT. CHATEAU GARDENS - DAY

Ricardo and Norma carry the children outside. Stan changes the locks.

Joe walks the family to their packed truck. They all squeeze into the cab. Ricardo starts the engine.

RICARDO

This is just wrong. It's ridiculous. It's cruel. It's barbaric.

JOE

I'm sorry.

Joe watches them drive away, returns to the apartment, double checks the new locks, consults his clipboard, and strolls to another apartment.

He knocks on the door.

FADE OUT:

THE END