

THE MIRACLE MOMENT

A screenplay
by
Brian Doyle
&
B. E. Marvis

Based on the Novel
Martin Marten
by
Brian Doyle

BLACK SCREEN

DAUGHTER (V.O.)

Daddy?

FATHER (V.O.)

Yes...?

DAUGHTER (V.O.)

Can you tell that story about when
you were a boy, with Martin Marten?

FATHER (V.O.)

Of course, my love... once upon a
mountain...

His voice gives way to the sounds of a forest awakening:
birds chirping, leaves rustling, rivers burbling...

FADE IN:

EXT. PACIFIC NW FOREST ON MT. HOOD (WY'EAST) - SPRING MORNING

The sun rises over a ridge of mountains as ribbons of light
pass through pine tree branches.

A breeze flutters green new growth in an alder grove.

Below: ferns unfold and sway gently on the forest floor.

Creatures tiny and hefty abound: bugs, birds, fish, mammals.

Life -- in all its glory, all its magnificent, miraculous,
ever-transforming diversity -- bursts forth.

And, on one path inside this wonderland of creation:

A teenage boy runs, his expressive face a complex palette of
alert, intense focus -- and joy!

EXT. ZIGZAG, OREGON, CABIN-HOME - MORNING

Nestled in woods, this solitary abode features, on all sides,
vibrant vegetable and flower gardens.

The teenage runner races up the path to the front door.
Stamps and slips off shoes, then enters.

INT. CABIN-HOME - MOMENTS LATER

The teen sits down to breakfast with his family. They are:

DAVE MILLER, rail-thin, pale like his dad seated next to him, 14 -- not far from 15 -- but still displaying a boyish face;

MARIA MILLER, 5 (almost 6), with short dark hair, dark skin, and also -- like her mom -- lively, warm, cocoa brown eyes;

ANTONIA MILLER, 40; with a lovely head of coal-black hair, a strikingly sculpted face, and strong, steady voice; and --

JACK MILLER, 40, wiry, fit, with a gentle demeanor, and a kindly countenance adorned by a beard flecked with grey.

It's a comfy home, with wood-stove, nicknacks on a fireplace mantle, Talavera pottery -- and stacks of books everywhere.

JACK

How was the morning run, Dave?

DAVE

Perfect. Are there more eggs, Mom?

Antonia gets up, grabs a skillet, then gently slides the rest of the scrambles onto his plate. Smiles.

ANTONIA

The amount of food you eat, son -- I swear we could go broke.

MARIA

But how come Dave's so skinny?!

JACK

Teenage metabolic rates are a strange phenomenon, Maria.

DAVE

I'm not skinny. I'm slender. And when I turn 15 in the fall, my appetite's likely to increase.

JACK

Guess I better go out and find another job, Antonia.

The three eldest members laugh, but Maria wears a terribly serious expression as she asks:

MARIA

Mom, before I go to school, can I go play by the river?

ANTONIA

Which river?

MARIA

Our river!

ANTONIA

The Zigzag is not *ours*, Maria. It belongs to every creature of this mountain and forest.

MARIA

I like the name Zigzag.

JACK

Why?

MARIA

That's what it does: zigs one way, zags the other. Can I, Dad?

JACK

Can you what?

MARIA

Go play by the river!

JACK

Only if you stay inside boundary lines, and only if I get a peck.

Maria jumps from her seat and gives him a quick kiss.

MARIA

Why do I *still* have to stay inside Big Hawk Rock and Grandpa Cedar and Baby Beech and Miss Moss's store?

JACK

Because you're five, Maria. Dave didn't go out on his own until he was twelve. Now skedaddle, kiddo. You have ten minutes.

After she scampers out:

DAVE

On my run, I saw signs of an elk herd. Might have been Louis. Ever try to shoot him, Dad?

JACK

As you know, I don't hunt anymore, but I would never shoot Louis.

DAVE

Why not?

JACK

I respect him too much, especially his avoiding those who want nothing more than to kill him. And if Louis ever attacked *them* -- oh, that'd be one fun brouhaha and donnybrook!

DAVE

(chuckles)

Your words --

JACK

What words?

DAVE

"Donnybrook? Brouhaha?" You sure *sound* like you went to college.

JACK

I wanted to, but... there were a few unexpected detours --

ANTONIA

That brought you *here*.

Dave notes his parents exchanging affectionate looks.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - DAY

Inside a deep ravine a dominant Douglas fir stands above all.

Though severed, the broken ramparts of this prodigious tree vault high above boundless columns of fir, cedar, and pine.

A murder of crows and a lone falcon glide on breezes above the ancient monarch's topmost spires.

Most of its former upper half now lies as a decomposing relic around the formidable base.

And there -- barely visible, moving swiftly toward the tree: a sleek, chocolate-colored marten!

It stops. Raises up. Looks around. Gorgeous, glossy fur, with a napkin of gold on its chest, and long, lustrous tail.

Not much bigger than a domestic cat -- but it's muscled, and armed with razor-sharp teeth and claws like knives.

The marten darts across the decaying remnants at the base, scrambles over the bark, and, halfway up...

She stops outside a hole roomy enough for one of her kind.

The marten's alert, dark brown eyes scan the surrounding area, then focus on the portal to the tree's interior.

INT. THE TREE OF LIFE - MOMENTS LATER

She moves forward through the dim chamber. Suddenly, two enormous eyes blink -- and an owl screeches!

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - MOMENTS LATER

The high-pitched peel abruptly ends, leaving a deep silence around and beyond the great tree.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MARTEN HOME - DUSK

The marten finishes lining her new home with bits of moss and owl feathers. Cozy. Warm. A perfect place for...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MARTEN HOME - DAY

Mother Marten gives birth to her first, then another, and one more nearly naked kit, each the size of a thumb.

She licks her offspring. Gently nuzzles them. Makes a soft, slightly chattering vocalization.

Soon, the kits enjoy their first milky meal.

INT. MARTEN HOME (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY/NIGHT

Mother Marten cares for her kits:

-- Her little ones suckle and sleep, sleep and suckle...

-- And the trio snuggle with their maternal life-giver.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - SUNSET

Mother Marten pokes her wary face outside. Surveys the area. Far below, a fox focuses intently on the marten matriarch.

EXT. FOREST NEARBY - MOMENTS LATER

In the distance, the Tree of Life majestically towers above the vast sea of trees surrounding it.

RICHARD DOUGLAS, 38 -- clean-shaven, ruggedly handsome like his surroundings, reaches for a trap.

He places one of his lethal instruments down on the forest floor, carefully unfolds it, then sets it.

Richard surveys his surroundings.

Then, he mounts his horse (Edwin) munching on grass nearby, and they quietly follow a path leading out of the woods.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME, DAVE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dave sits on his bed, the book *Birds, Fish, and Mammals of the Northwest* by his side, gazing at a chart on one wall.

The chart's homemade, with some small photos pasted on it of various animals, as well as a a few skillful sketches.

Maria and Antonia pull back the curtain separating his part of the room from his sister's. Maria proudly holds up a map.

MARIA

Tillamook Bay! Miss Moss gave it to me for three jokes about frogs!

DAVE

You know three jokes about frogs?

MARIA

Why did the frog say meow?
(Dave shrugs)
He was learning a foreign language!

DAVE

That's good. Tell me another.

MARIA

Who's the thirstiest frog of all?
The one who drinks Canada Dry! And here's my favorite: Why did the frog read Sherlock Holmes?
(Dave shrugs again)
He liked croak and dagger stories!

After the three of them share a laugh, Maria tells Dave:

MARIA (CONT'D)

I'm putting the map up on the wall,
next to the map of your brain.

ANTONIA

Which I would still like to frame.

MARIA

No, Mom, I told you: it's just a
map of his brain on that day, so it
can't be accurate, so it's no good.

DAVE

Hey, sis, I have a gift for you.

He reaches over, grabs a feather, hands it to Maria.

DAVE (CONT'D)

I found this in the woods today. An
owl feather. Never know when an owl
feather might come in handy.

MARIA

Like when?

DAVE

Like if you ever meet an owl that's
one feather short. Maybe then, that
owl keeps an eye out for you.

MARIA

Mom and I have a question, Dave.
What's that long word you made up
for the river's songs and stories?

DAVE

Trilltrickleslipwhirltumblerill.

ANTONIA

Sounds Welsh. Like Dylan Thomas.

DAVE

That's exactly what Dad said.

Maria and Mom walk back out. Dave grins as their voices fade.

MARIA

I love my feather! Trilltrickles --
what's the rest, Mom?

ANTONIA

I think it's Trilltriclesslip...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CLEARING IN THE WOODS - DAY

Dave's dad and two other loggers -- all garbed in helmets and muddy clothes -- stand in an open area, surrounded by trees.

It's obvious there's an ongoing, bristling argument taking place. All three men wear clenched expressions.

They speak with snarled mouths, Dave's dad on one side, the other two squaring off with him.

Finally, Jack puts his head down. Shakes it back and forth. Looks up at his fellow loggers.

He walks away from them, climbs into a pick-up, drives off.

INT. CABIN-HOME - EVENING

The family at dinner, all of them somber faced.

JACK

They want to do things that aren't right, and are also illegal. They said, "In or out, Jack," and I told them, "Out." So... I'm out of work.

After a lengthy silence:

ANTONIA

Proud of you, Jack. Like always.

JACK

Thank you, Antonia, but... it's going to be hard supporting our family with only one paycheck.

ANTONIA

I'll see if I can get extra hours --

JACK

But even that won't pay the bills. I need to find a new job.

DAVE

I can work.

JACK

You've got school, son.

DAVE

Not during summer, which is almost here. Then, once school starts up again, I could work part-time.

ANTONIA

Not if it interferes with school.

DAVE

Maybe Miss Moss will give me a job
at the store.

ANTONIA

Ginny's always worked alone, but...
maybe she'd appreciate some help.

Jack nods, but all four of them appear morose, almost grim.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - DAY

Mother Marten leads three miniatures the size of a fist --
one light, one dark, one fat kit -- down the great tree.

She models for her progeny how to grip and move on the bark,
looking back now and then to check their progress.

The chunky one falters, slides a bit, and eventually, is the
only kit who tumbles into the ferns at the base of the tree.

Mother scolds with a brief chitter, followed by a low huff.

Then, off they go -- on their very first adventure!

EXT. FOREST (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

The marten family scamper across and scurry past:

-- Fir, pine, and cedar, rocks large and small;

-- Mud bogs and bushes and joyfully open flowers;

-- The gloriously rotting remnants of fallen trees.

EXT. WOODS BY A STREAM - DAY

The quartet scoot to a stop, then sip from a burbling creek.

The darkest and most curious kit spies, then snaps at a bee,
but it stings the kit's mouth with its dagger and flies off.

The kit winces, then lets out a brief, pitiful cry. Siblings
watch as Mother Marten sniffs, nuzzles, and comforts him.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

A faded, lopsided sign adorns a rustic building with a broad porch that creaks and moans with the touch of a feather.

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - MOMENTS LATER

Dave stands across from GINNY, a/k/a "Miss Moss," 33, who's feisty, fiercely independent, and quite clearly kind.

Dave scrutinizes and scrunches a piece of paper in his hand.

DAVE

I've come to... propose --

GINNY

Propose? I'm honored, Dave, but...

Now he's blushing, flustered. She can't hide a smile.

DAVE

I'm here to propose that you employ me, in any capacity whatsoever, and I have several reasons for this that I'd like to share with you.

GINNY

Ah, a different sort of proposal.

DAVE

Yes, ma'am.
(checks notes once more)
There are, Miss Moss, as I said, several reasons. One pertains to the store enhancing its commercial vistas. Second is the character of... well, me... for employment.

GINNY

"Enhancing its commercial vistas?"

DAVE

Yes, ma'am. Possible areas for... lucrative income growth.

GINNY

Dave --

DAVE

Yes, ma'am?

GINNY

Are you sure you're only fourteen?

DAVE
I start Zigzag High in September.

GINNY
Sure you didn't sneak off to a college and forget to mention it? You sound like your mom and dad.

Dave bows his head.

DAVE
My dad never went to university.

GINNY
Who are your character references?

He looks up at her.

DAVE
My parents. And, a few teachers.

GINNY
What about your sister? Would Maria attest to you being dependable, diligent, trustworthy --

DAVE
Yes, I believe she would.

After a long moment:

GINNY
Anyone whose kid sister thinks the world of her brother must be worthy of employment. The job is yours.

DAVE
Wow! Really?! Thank you, Miss Moss! I figured this was a long shot!

GINNY
Long shots earn the most points in basketball, right? Sometimes, it's the same in life. At this moment, you're my finest staffer of all time. Try to stay in that exalted state. See you tomorrow, 7:00 A.M.

DAVE
Thanks so much!

He runs out the door, leaving Ginny chuckling to herself.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Ginny and Dave (who's taking notes) walk through the store.

DAVE

I used to think there were more things here than stars in the sky.

GINNY

Even before I bought the place, the Robertsons packed it with wonders.

Every wall is crammed to the ceiling with an amazing mishmash of assorted contents.

They pass by: arrows, shoehorns, comic books, kindling, saws, drill bits, shotguns, socks, iPads, dentures, ad infinitum.

DAVE

I never noticed the traps before.

GINNY

Only Mr. Douglas buys those.

DAVE

Wonder why he kills animals.

GINNY

To make a living... other reasons. A most unusual character --

RICHARD (O.S.)

Who is? I like characters.

And in walks Richard Douglas.

GINNY

Good morning, Mr. Douglas. And how may I help you?

RICHARD

Always so formal, Miss Moss. Why not call me Richard?

GINNY

Why not call me Ginny?

RICHARD

Seems disrespectful.

They give each other appreciative smiles.

GINNY

I suppose what's good for a goose --

RICHARD

But a male becomes a gander, while
a female remains a goose. Why?

GINNY

I leave you to ruminate on that
distinction, Mr. Douglas --

RICHARD

Richard --

GINNY

While I show Dave what's outside.

On the way out, to the trapper:

DAVE

Miss Moss gave me a summer job.

GINNY

Maybe longer if his help is needed.

RICHARD

You're a lucky guy, Dave. Everyone
needs a little help, now and then.

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - MOMENTS LATER

Ginny gestures to a vast, incoherent welter of disorganized
odds and ends, including:

Miscellaneous parts belonging to cars, tractors, trucks,
snowmobiles, wagons, bikes, washers, dryers, et al.

GINNY

This is your first challenge, Dave:
to deftly, sensibly organize this.

DAVE

This could take all summer.

GINNY

Still want the job?

He nods. As he examines the sea of junk and gems:

DAVE

Miss Moss --

GINNY

Dave, please. I value good manners.
But we've known each other forever,
and now, work together. It's Ginny.

DAVE
Mr. Douglas calls you Miss Moss.

GINNY
Because he's a courteous fellow,
like you and your father.

DAVE
I thought maybe he did that for
other reasons.

GINNY
Like what?

DAVE
Like... maybe he likes you?

A brief, but slightly uncomfortable silence. Then:

GINNY
He *does* like me, Dave. I like *him*.
As a *friend*.

DAVE
Are you sure?

She appears a bit weary with this discussion.

GINNY
Better get started on all this.

Ginny heads back inside the store. Dave gazes again at the chaotic mountain of human manufacture before him.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Dave wipes sweat and dirt from his brow. Returns to his task.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST AND PATH - DAY

Looking bone-tired but happy, Dave walks along, a well-worn day pack on his back.

Comes to a path. Stops a moment... then suddenly takes off running, grasping the straps.

Finally, he plops down on a tree stump. Pulls a few bills from his pocket. Smiles. Stuffs them back inside. Then --

Takes off his pack. Opens it, and pulls out... a small trap. Regards it. Puffs out a sigh. Puts it back. Looks around.

A squirrel chatters and skitters in the underbrush.

A raven's squawk mixes with the churning river.

Trees sway gently in a brief whisper of wind.

Quiet again. A deep, resonant silence. But then...

A subtle rustling, from up above, in nearby pines.

Dave focuses on the tree tops.

Four sleek, brown animals -- three quite small -- looking like hikers on a narrow trail, move across branches.

DAVE

(mutters)

What the...? That's a bunch of --

(blurts aloud)

Marten!

The last little one, the darkest and most curious, stops. Stares. A long, shared moment for Dave and this marten.

INT. CABIN-HOME - EVENING

With his family at the dinner table, Dave enthusiastically tells of his encounter with the marten family.

DAVE

They were scampering across the branches. And the last one turned, and then... he looked right at me!

ANTONIA

Sounds like you two connected.

MARIA

Do marten have names like we do?

DAVE

Maybe. If I'm lucky enough to see him again, maybe I'll call him...

MARIA

Martin! He's Martin Marten!

Everyone smiles agreeably at that idea.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST NEAR THE TREE OF LIFE - DAY

In the distance, the venerable tree soars above all.

Richard inspects a snapped-shut trap. No animal. He follows a trail of blood for awhile. Stops.

RICHARD
(softly)
Sorry -- whoever you are.

He walks back, picks up the trap, shoves it in a sack, pats Edwin gently, then mounts up, and they ride away.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODED AREA - DAY

Mother stands guard as her kits chase, catch, and devour smaller prey. The curious one pokes his head into a log.

Suddenly -- the family scatters in four different directions as a snapping skunk charges out.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - SUNSET

The family of four re-group and return home, scampering over the rich debris at the base of the tree.

As they begin their single-file scramble up the thick bark...

In an alder tree on the other side of the clearing, the large grey fox watches this processional with unblinking eyes.

EXT. CABIN-HOME - SUNSET

Dave and his dad chop wood and chat.

DAVE
I thought I might do some trapping.

JACK
What gave you that idea?

DAVE
I was hoping I could put more food
on the table.

Jack stops. Dave does, too. They both wipe away sweat.

JACK

Kind of you to think so, son, but you don't need to do that.

DAVE

Good. Because I already decided I can't do it.

His father gives him an inquisitive look.

DAVE (CONT'D)

I looked up the word "murder" in the dictionary --

JACK

Killing with malice aforethought.

DAVE

How'd you know that?!

Jack shrugs, lifts his ax, and splits another chunk in two. They continue to chop and stack wood as they talk.

DAVE (CONT'D)

I also asked Ginny about Mr. Douglas and his work.

JACK

A fine man. No doubt Richard found a way to justify what he does.

DAVE

That's kind of what Ginny said.

JACK

Looking up *murder* in a dictionary -- *that's* what changed your mind?

DAVE

Actually, it was... something else.

They simultaneously stop. Jack looks directly at Dave.

JACK

You don't have to tell me about it. Unless that's what you want to do.

DAVE

Well... I'd kind of like to, Dad.

Father waits for his son to share the story.

DAVE (CONT'D)

Here's what happened.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Not far from his cabin-home, which is visible behind him, Dave carefully sets the small trap.

He stands up. Anxious expression. Looks around him. Quiet.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS - SUNSET

Same spot. But as Dave walks up, he sees something. Stops.

A rabbit lies in the trap, obviously dead.

Dave stands there with a stricken face. Fights back tears. Finally, he moves up to the black vise.

Squats down. Slowly pulls the snare apart and locks it. Extracts the lifeless rabbit away from his lethal trap.

Then... with his bare hands... Dave starts digging.

After a short while, he gently places the rabbit inside its burial chamber. Gulps back more tears.

Dave pushes loose soil over the creature, tamps it down, then scoops up and scatters pine needles across the site.

Finally, he shoves the trap into his day pack and walks away.

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - TWILIGHT

Dave sets the trap down amongst other assorted items. Checks the area. No one around. He walks off, toward home.

From a store window, Ginny, wearing glasses, watches him go.

EXT. CABIN-HOME - SUNSET

Jack listens as Dave finishes the story.

DAVE

I was surprised I felt so bad about
it. I felt... small... and cruel.
Have you ever felt that way?

Jack offers a sympathetic nod. Then, father and son return to splitting and stacking wood.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. TIMBERLAND (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

Mother and her three kits:

- Kill and devour mice, voles, jays, robins, snakes;
- Cower as monstrous cars and trucks roar by on a road;
- And, from the thick branches of pine trees above, watch intently as Richard removes a large marten from a trap.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG COMMUNITY CHURCH - DAY

Another of the town's faded, slightly dilapidated buildings.

Richard carries boxes of canned/package foods and sets them down on the small veranda where Antonia stands.

ANTONIA

How did you get all this for the Food Bank, Richard?

RICHARD

Sold a pelt, a marten, for a goodly price. That's what paid for it.

ANTONIA

Lots of folks in our community will be fed, thanks to you.

RICHARD

They should give thanks to the male marten, a noble creature, who, as Mary Oliver would say, sacrificed his "one wild and precious life."

ANTONIA

I hope he enjoyed a good long life, before he crossed paths with you.

RICHARD

I do, too. And I sincerely hope that he produced progeny.

ANTONIA

So that they, too, can provide?

Silent a moment. Then, he nods, returns to his old, beat-up, dirt-encrusted truck, and Antonia watches him drive off.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG MIDDLE SCHOOL, 8TH GRADE CLASSROOM - DAY

Dave sits with other students -- in between best friend MOON, the only Asian in class, and a girl, CADENCE, the sole Black.

MS. NATALIE SHAPIRO, 38, walks briskly back and forth in front of them, speaking in a lively, captivating voice.

MS. SHAPIRO

You still have a final assignment --

MOON

Ms. Shapiro, it's our last day!

MS. SHAPIRO

Don't worry, Moon. You're all passing. But this *is* graded.

DAVE

And you'll still get straight A's, Moon. You always do.

MOON

So do you, Dave.

DAVE

Only because I copy your homework.

Laughter from everyone, including Ms. Shapiro. Then:

MS. SHAPIRO

Anyway, as I was saying... you have an assignment that *must* be finished before the end of class. This will assure that you get the grade that I currently have on the books, or, perhaps, an even better grade, if that's possible. And I'd like you to write down, briefly, your hopes and dreams for summer, and maybe for high school, as well. Extra points for legible cursive. Any questions? No? Go!

Most kids yank out a sheet of paper and start in. However...

A few give the assignment a moment of quiet contemplation.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG MIDDLE SCHOOL - DAY

Dave and Moon burst out the doors, bantering in quick bursts.

MOON

Yay! We're going to high school!

DAVE

Yeah, but first: summer!

MOON

Should I be "Moon" in high school?

DAVE

Why wouldn't you? It's your name.

MOON

It's my *last* name!

DAVE

Yeah, but it's a cool Korean name.

MOON

Okay. I'll stick with Moon.

DAVE

See you soon in June, Moon!

As Dave runs off and Moon heads in the other direction:

MOON

Training for cross country?!

DAVE

Every day!

MOON

What sport should *I* do?

DAVE

You don't do sports!

MOON

But I want to attract girls!

DAVE

You're tall! Play basketball!

Dave disappears into the woods. A puzzled Moon mutters:

MOON

Basketball? How do I play that?

EXT. FOREST AND PATH - MOMENTS LATER

Dave runs joyfully, his face one big, bright smile. But suddenly, he hears and sees something in the trees --

The same marten, but bigger now, his coat a darker brown, his gold chest more vibrant than any of the other family members.

He's the last one of the group, but they're all going at one hell of a clip, much faster than Dave.

Dave skids to a halt to get a better look.

To his surprise, the marten does the same, perching on a branch just a dozen feet away, staring at him.

A silent, magical moment. Then, very softly:

DAVE
Martin... Martin Marten.

As if in response, Martin chitters for a few seconds. Then -- off he zooms, disappearing into a splash of green beyond.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME - TWILIGHT

Dave shares with the family the tale of his latest encounter.

MARIA
You saw Martin Marten *again*?!

DAVE
And heard him. He talked to me.

MARIA
What does he sound like?

DAVE
Kind of a chitter. And he's bigger.

ANTONIA
Maybe he's a teenager now like you.

DAVE
He actually seems *interested* in me.

JACK
Probably is. Are you friend or foe?

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - TWILIGHT

The family of four return, Mother heading up the tree first. But one of the kits -- the chunkiest -- lingers at the base.

Mom, then the lighter-hued -- and lastly, the dark, curious kit -- all scramble inside their home.

A second later -- the grey fox swoops in, seizes the heedless kit below, and runs off with the plump youngster in its jaws.

High above, Mother Marten appears. Her eyes scan the area.

She whimpers, and continues her vigil.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Ginny's voice can be heard from behind the counter. Richard sits there, contentedly sipping coffee.

GINNY (O.S.)

But what if I gave you some money
not to trap any more animals?

RICHARD

How much money?

She pops up from her work. Frowns at him.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

I'm kidding.

GINNY

I'm not.

RICHARD

We've been down this road before.
You know my philosophy about this
topic. You know I respect animals.

GINNY

But you kill them for profit.

RICHARD

The last one -- that male marten --
I bought some groceries for myself,
and, as you know, donated the rest.

GINNY

I've never seen a marten.

RICHARD

Remarkable member of the mustelids.

GINNY

How so?

RICHARD

Liquid speed, alert to everything, agile, expert assassins, and, one has to admit -- they are a very cute little critter.

GINNY

But you trap them. Not to eat. Not to survive. For a pelt. For money.

RICHARD

I'm on my own. If I was responsible for another person... I might then have to consider changing my ways.

They give each other a long, searching look.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

You're quite pulchritudinous, Miss Moss, even when giving me the long, silent-treatment look.

GINNY

And you, Mr. Douglas --

RICHARD

Richard.

GINNY

You just called *me* "Miss Moss."

RICHARD

Out of respect. *Great* respect.

Ginny appears a bit flustered.

GINNY

You're distracting me from my work.

RICHARD

My apologies. I'll just sit here and give *you* the silent treatment.

She drops down, returns to her tinkering. He smiles and sips.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - DAY

Mother Marten and her two remaining kits leave their home. She punctuates their descent with admonishing squeaks.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN FORESTS - DAY

The Marten family traverse through diverse wooded terrain.

They cautiously inspect a burrow at ground level, a rock outcropping, and a tree snag, but the searchers continue.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RIVER, ROCKS, AND MEADOW - DAY

The three gaze at a small cavern in rocks overlooking a narrow waterway and open field.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CAVERN HOME - NIGHT

After their long journey, the trio sleep soundly.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME, KITCHEN - NIGHT

Antonia, drying dishes, looks over at Jack, on his cell, smiling, though his eyes flood with tears.

JACK

Yes, I will. Thank you. This means so much to me and my family. Bye.

He goes to her, she sets a plate down. He wraps his arms around her and squeezes her tightly against him.

ANTONIA

(laughing)

Jack, you're going to break my ribs! What happened? Tell me!

He unclenches, and shares:

JACK

That was the principal at Zigzag High. The school Board wants to hire me as their person in charge of maintenance. Full-time job.

She grabs him and squeezes. He laughs.

JACK (CONT'D)

Careful! You'll break *my* ribs!

Antonia unwraps her arms. They kiss passionately. Then:

ANTONIA

Oh, Jack! What a great gift for us!
And tomorrow's Maria's birthday!

EXT. FIELD BETWEEN CREEK AND THICKET - DAY

A diverse group of celebrants enjoy a sublime summer day.

DAVE

So whatcha you been up to, Moon?
Haven't seen you all summer.

MOON

I'm studying basketball on TV.

DAVE

Sounds like something you'd do.

MOON

Well, we *are* the smartest kids in
our class. Except maybe Cadence.

DAVE

She *is* smart. Nice looking, too.

MOON

What?! You mean... you *like* her?

DAVE

I barely know her, Moon. She really
keeps to herself.

MOON

Maybe because she's the only Black
kid in the entire school.

DAVE

You're the only one from Korea.

MOON

I'm not from Korea. My dad is.
So... crush on Cadence, huh?

Dave shakes his head at his friend, but grins. Suddenly,
Maria shouts and runs over to hug a new arrival:

MARIA

Emma Jackson! I love you!

EMMA JACKSON, 30, sports a vivid blue Mohawk, a ring in each
eyebrow, several Maori-style tattoos, and carries a ukulele.

EMMA
Love you, too, Maria. And happy
sixth birthday!

MARIA
Where's your wife?

EMMA
She had to work.

MARIA
Do you like being married?

EMMA
Yes, I do. And it's nice not to
wear a mask every day.

MARIA
You wore a mask?

EMMA
In a way. For a long time. Not now.

MARIA
Emma, will you play your...
(tests her pronunciation)
luke-uh-lay-hee?

EMMA
I'll play my ukulele all day for my
sweet, super smart, birthday girl!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FIELD BETWEEN CREEK AND THICKET - SUNSET

The last members of the birthday party walk back from the
meadow to the path along the stream:

Dave and Moon, Maria and Emma -- who plays her ukulele -- and
Jack and Antonia, bringing up the rear, holding hands.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODLAND - DUSK

Martin, atop some pine branches, watches a cougar drag away
the bulk of a deer from the bloody scene of a kill.

Martin waits, scans the area, then scurries down the tree.

He moves toward bits and pieces of carrion. But suddenly --

He's startled by an equally surprised young fox! Instantly, they bare teeth, snarl, spit, hiss.

All of a sudden they lunge at each other, filling the area with a flurry of screeching savagery.

Both latch onto their opponent's shoulder, ripping into flesh and fur and spilling blood.

Fortunately, each steps back from the fray, snags a scrap, and races off -- in the opposite direction.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Dave works on his endless challenge as Richard appears.

RICHARD

Miss Moss tells me you're interested in animals.

DAVE

I am.

RICHARD

When does school start?

DAVE

Couple o' days. Tuesday.

RICHARD

You have Monday off?

DAVE

Yes, sir. Labor Day we're closed.

RICHARD

No labor on Labor Day, huh? Like to join me on your last day of freedom for a walkabout in the woods?

Dave smiles and nods.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WY'EAST WOODS - DAY

Richard leads the way, Dave follows. The trapper seems to know where every path goes.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. GLADE IN THE FOREST - DAY

Richard checks an old wristwatch. Each uses a hushed voice.

RICHARD

I appreciate being with someone who understands the value of silence. But let's chat for a moment.

DAVE

Yes, sir.

RICHARD

Name's Richard. Not sir.

DAVE

Yes, sir -- Richard, I mean.

RICHARD

Sir Richard. I like that. So let's focus on reading animal trails now. Every day, animals create stories.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. PINE GROVE - DAY

Dave peers at a stand and notices a dark brown flash.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ROCK OUTCROPPING IN THE WOODS - DAY

Dave and Richard sit on a slab of stone and munch sandwiches.

RICHARD

There used to be wolverine, badger, fisher up here. But no longer. Too many humans usurped their domain.

DAVE

What about marten?

RICHARD

I rarely see them, or trap them. They're usually too clever for me. But sometimes, one makes a mistake.

Dave wears a troubled expression, noted by Richard.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Something wrong?

Dave shakes his head "no." They resume eating, in silence.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - SUNSET

Richard smiles as he and Dave shake hands.

RICHARD

You're on your own now. Each of us
has to find our own way... but be
ready for some unexpected detours.

Dave watches him go, then sets off, walking toward home.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RIVER, ROCKS, AND MEADOW - TWILIGHT

From a distance, Martin watches his sister go inside their second home. Not long after, Mother Marten returns.

She stops. Mother and son regard each other a few moments. And then... Martin walks away, on his own.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ANOTHER FOREST AND STREAM - NIGHT

Martin stops only to nibble on berries. But then -- he spies a squirrel, midway up a cottonwood, popping out of a hole.

As soon as the squirrel reaches the forest floor, a flash of brown fur with razor-sharp teeth quickly ends its life.

Martin finishes his meal and scurries up the tree. Stops at the squirrel's former abode. Scans the placid area below.

INT. COTTONWOOD HOME - MOMENTS LATER

Martin edges forward. Finds the chamber empty of other life. Curls up, and, moments later, his eyes close.

INT. CABIN-HOME, DAVE'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Dave rests atop his bed. A thoughtful expression. Sighs. But soon... he closes his eyes, too.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL GYM - DAY

Students line up according to grade (9, 10, 11, 12) for schedules, locker assignments, etc.

Upper grade kids regard the frosh with blatantly haughty airs and occasional derisive laughter.

The freshman line, where Dave and Moon stand, is a picture of twitching, nervous anxiety. Voices rise merely above murmurs.

DAVE

Never realized there were so many people around here I don't know.

MOON

Evidence of how many people live out in the wild, wild woods.

DAVE

You mean, like me?

They move up a bit in the line.

DAVE (CONT'D)

Anyway, you and I wouldn't know them, even if we lived in town.

MOON

Is Zigzag a town? I don't think it's big enough to be a town.

DAVE

Maybe it's a village. Or a hamlet.

MOON

Come on, Dave. No one's going to say, "What hamlet are you from?"

DAVE

So, is hoop going to be your sport?

MOON

Not sure. First I'll listen to what the coaches have to say.

DAVE

And how, Moon, did you arrive on this selective methodology?

MOON

Coaches, like teachers and parents, are not all the same, right?

(MORE)

MOON (CONT'D)

So I'm going to find out who sounds like a great coach -- not some guy who's only interested in glorious victories against an evil opponent, but also not somebody who goes on about the team being one, big, happy family, that load of b.s.

DAVE

Happy families are b.s.?

MOON

No. But I need to tread cautiously in this deep water.

DAVE

That's a mixed metaphor, Moon.

MOON

And you're the only one in line who knows that, Dave. Except maybe Cadence, who's up ahead.

DAVE

Yeah, I already saw her.

MOON

Did you say anything to her?

DAVE

Of course not.

Moon rolls his eyes, shakes his head. Dave just smiles back.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODLAND TERRAIN (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

Martin continues to add to his solo explorations:

- Sniffing at the forest floor, he follows a line of tracks;
- Notices gnawed twigs and small piles of grass near a hole;
- Snatches a chipmunk on a branch and scurries away with it.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Dave sits with other boys and a few girls, listening to their Cross Country COACH -- 40 and fit -- as he addresses them:

COACH

Runners are kind of a loose team.
You're on your own -- together. You
try to run faster than others, but
your true goal, each time, should
be to reach a new, personal best.

INT. CABIN-HOME, KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jack and Dave wash and dry dishes.

DAVE

I like the captain, too. He wasn't
trying to show off. He was just...

JACK

Being himself? Good for him. That's
tough work for anyone -- especially
a teenager -- to take off the mask.

DAVE

Also, I have some good teachers --

JACK

Any nice girls in your classes?

Dave smiles, but doesn't respond.

JACK (CONT'D)

None?!

DAVE

Young ladies, Dad, not girls. One --

JACK

What's her name?

DAVE

Can we talk about something else?

JACK

What sport did Moon choose?

DAVE

Basketball.

JACK

Has he ever played basketball?

Dave shakes his head "no."

JACK (CONT'D)

What do his parents think about it?

DAVE

No idea. It's just Moon and their housekeeper, as usual. His mom's in Ukraine, and his dad's in Kuwait.

JACK

Kuwait...? I spent time there... when you were a baby.

They exchange solemn expressions, then resume dish duty.

EXT. NEW FOREST - NIGHT

Beneath the bright light of a full moon, Martin, observant as ever, moves up to a burrow. Sniffs a few moments, and enters.

A second later, he's rocketing out -- with a sinewy, snarling bobcat right behind him.

Barely evading his pursuer, Martin flees up a nearby tree, the bobcat just inches behind him.

Near the top branches, Martin leaps nimbly across the plumage and finally gains a little distance.

The bobcat, too heavy to follow that way, stops to vocalize its rage as Martin moves further away.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. DAVE RUNS (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

Dave, always alone, trains on a variety of pathways:

- Riverside, often casting an eye for a glimpse of Martin;
- Over rugged, rock-strewn, long-abandoned logging roads;
- And finally, around the high school track, at sunset.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Dave and Ginny work while Richard sips coffee at the counter.

DAVE

I'm only here on Saturdays now.

RICHARD

How's school?

Dave gives a non-committal shrug. Richard calls to Ginny, who can be heard working on something in back.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Thank you, Miss Moss, for the best malted milkshake and coffee ever!

Ginny enters.

GINNY

You're welcome. But Dave's the one to thank. They're his creations.

Richard sets his mug down, rises, addresses Dave, then Ginny.

RICHARD

Deftly done, Mr. Miller. Well, I'm heading off to the woods. I hope for a late September return.

Ginny comes around from behind the counter and puts out her hand. She and Richard hold their grasp longer than normal.

GINNY

We will miss the pleasure of your company, Mr. Douglas.

A moment, then Richard turns and walks out. After he leaves, Ginny stands there, looking unsettled and just plain sad.

DAVE

You okay, Miss Moss? I mean, Ginny.

She nods, then moves back to where she was working. Dave appears uncertain what to say or do next.

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE AND NEARBY TREE - MOMENTS LATER

From a beech tree behind the store, Martin watches as Richard walks away, and Dave returns to the jumbled welter in back.

There are signs of progress: car parts sit near more car parts; tools by tools; traps next to traps, and so on.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE AND NEARBY TREE - LATER

Dave wipes beads of sweat from his brow, evidence of his assiduous efforts everywhere. He puffs out a sigh.

In the tree, Martin continues his vigil. But then...

Dave goes to the tree, climbs, finds a sturdy branch, sits.

He takes a few moments to enjoy a light breeze, then notices, no more than six feet away... Martin, staring at him!

Both remain calm, quiet, alert as they study each other for what seems like an impossibly long period of time. Until --

GINNY (O.S.)
Dave?! Where are you?!

He turns on her voice; but when he looks back, Martin's gone.

DAVE
Up here! Be down in a sec!

GINNY (O.S.)
Look at all you've done! It's a miracle!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST AND PATH - LATER

Dave zips along, face aglow, softly expressing his amazement:

DAVE
Wow... wow!

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME, KITCHEN - NIGHT

Dave does dishes. Antonia stands close by, drying.

DAVE
Seeing him that close, I had about a thousand feelings, all at once. It was... a miraculous moment.

ANTONIA
Every moment's a miracle.

He stops washing. She stops drying. He looks directly at her.

ANTONIA (CONT'D)
We're all so busy -- with washing dishes, with our lives -- we don't usually take the time to recognize that it's the small things, which are not really small, that have a lasting impact on our lives.

They share a fleeting smile, then return to their tasks.

ANTONIA (CONT'D)
You tell Ginny about this?

DAVE
I wanted to, but I was afraid she'd
tell Mr. Douglas, and then...

She nods gravely as she dries another bowl.

DAVE (CONT'D)
For now, those... "miracle moments"
I'll keep for myself... and family.

And, at that very moment, Antonia's face appears incandescent with love and gratitude.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST AND CREEK - NIGHT

Martin makes his way back home. Stops to take in the mellow hoot of an owl, then scrambles up to his cottonwood home.

INT. MARTIN'S HOME - LATER

Martin sleeps. But sounds from outside capture his attention.

A gentle thumping continues -- until something clearly massive rumbles along, shaking the earth.

EXT. FOREST AND CREEK - MOMENTS LATER

A herd of elk pass by, lastly the formidably immense male -- more than 1,000 pounds -- the one known by humans as "Louis."

EXT. MARTIN'S HOME - MOMENTS LATER

Martin, at the portal, watches the great Louis pass by.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST AND CREEK - MORNING

Martin scampers across the grounds below, nibbling on a feast of huckleberries that fell after the elk caravan passed by.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MOON'S HOUSE, KITCHEN - DAY

Dave and Moon eat and chat -- and then eat some more.

DAVE

I swear our entire cabin could fit
in this kitchen, Moon.

MOON

Mom and Dad *do* make beaucoup bucks.
But I'd rather be in your family.
You can talk to your mom and dad.

DAVE

Yeah, sometimes. But I still have
to figure things out for myself.

MOON

How come you don't ski, Dave?

Dave seems perplexed by the question.

MOON (CONT'D)

You live on a mountain slathered
with snow every day of the year,
the U.S. Ski Team trains here on
the Miracle Mile glacier. It seems
like every person in Zigzag who's
our age wants to become a pro skier
or snowboarder or something that
has to do with snow. Everybody
around here is in love with snow.

DAVE

I like it, but I don't love it. I
like sliding down a slope on a
trash can lid or rubber tire.

MOON

That's what kids do!

DAVE

I'm a kid. You are, too, Moon.

MOON

Yeah, but... we're in transition.

DAVE

Everything's in transition. What I
like are the woods... the animals.

MOON

You're so weird, Dave. I think you
like animals more than humans!

DAVE
Humans are animals, too, Moon, and
I like lots of human beings.

MOON
Like Cadence?

DAVE
Hey -- let's have some fun.

MOON
Isn't eating massively fun?

Dave gives him a faux-exasperated look.

MOON (CONT'D)
Okay. Movie or video game?

DAVE
Game. I can never pick a movie.

MOON
Understandable, since we have over
5,000 to choose from and you only
have your measly cassette machine.

DAVE
And only a few movies, for kids.

MOON
You know, I love Sundays, freedom --
but I miss seeing kids at school.

DAVE
I just wish I felt more comfortable
around the people there.

MOON
I don't get it. You're a nice guy.
Good looking. Smart. Athletic. Why
don't you feel more confident? Why
hang around with a dork like me?

DAVE
I'm a dork, too! And you're maybe
the best dork in the whole world!

MOON
I think we're both living somewhere
between epic fun and epic failure.

They both crack up over his remark, then return to eating.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST AND PATH - MORNING

Dave runs, glancing up every now and then at his friendly companion in the canopy above.

He charges for the "finish line" near the river. Martin speeds by and easily passes him.

The marten whips around. Looks down as Dave comes to a stop, panting. Dave glances up at him, grins.

DAVE

You beat me every time.

Martin twitches his ears, changes his grip on the branch.

DAVE (CONT'D)

Is this a game for you? Or are you on your own now... like me?

Martin doesn't move, just stares back. Dave starts walking, past vibrant red vine maple.

DAVE (CONT'D)

Gotta go shower, eat, and head to school. See you next time, pal.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Richard walks in with a few furs draped over one arm. Stops.

Ginny's at the counter, talking to an out-of-town CUSTOMER. The customer sees Richard. Her face twists with rage.

CUSTOMER

How can you? How can you slaughter beautiful, innocent animals? What kind of a person are you?!

Richard doesn't move. Remains calm and quiet. Finally:

RICHARD

Ma'am, millions of innocent animals are murdered each day in the woods, so that other animals can survive. And I am well aware that the few who, on occasion, lose their lives for *my* benefit are innocent of any wrongdoing against me, or any other human being.

(MORE)

RICHARD (CONT'D)

But the cold fact is that their deaths help provide me with a very meager living, and, sometimes, with a way for me to contribute to our little community. To do this, I'm mindful, always, of taking the minimal number possible of a population so as not to create an imbalance that might harm their noble species. I say a prayer when I set a trap, hoping that the small creature who enters it will not long suffer, but pass quickly. I say a prayer of gratitude for any animal meat that I consume. I know where that sustenance comes from. I have nothing but respect for these creatures. Now, that is different, in my experience, from most folks, perhaps even someone like yourself, who, in the normal course of their days, eat many animals without a single thought as to their life and death and what that means. One day, I hope to end this work of mine. But I will never halt my daily prayers, nor my profound admiration for the miraculous animals who live around us, many of whom honor us not only with their existence, but many of whom give up their precious life so that we might live. That seems to me a great sacrifice, and one that should never be forgotten, or taken for granted, by anyone.

A long silence as Ginny smiles and fights back tears. The customer walks up to Richard. Offers her hand. They shake.

CUSTOMER

Thank you.

Richard nods to her. She walks out. He looks at Ginny.

GINNY

Welcome back. We've missed you.

RICHARD

I could use a cup of your always-best-ever coffee, Miss Moss.

GINNY

And how about a piece of fresh, huckleberry pie -- on the house?

As he sits, laying the pelts on a chair next to him:

RICHARD

And to what do I owe this
delectable gratuity?

She sets down a plate with a hefty portion of pie before him.

GINNY

Let's just say... I always enjoy a
display of your oratorical skills.

He takes a bite of the pie. After he napkins his mouth:

RICHARD

Let's just say I enjoy your company
almost as much as this pie.

She appears quite pleased as she walks back to brew coffee.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Best pie ever -- though no doubt
tomorrow's will be even better.

GINNY

Forever the optimist.

RICHARD

I agree with Carl Sandburg's words:
"I'm an optimist. Don't know where
I'm going... but I'm on my way."

She laughs, he smiles, and then savors another bite.

INT. CABIN-HOME, KITCHEN AND DINING ROOM - EVENING

Family supper and a lively debate.

MARIA

I think I should be in third grade,
not first. And, if I didn't have to
take the "baby" bus, I could walk
home from school, like Dave.

ANTONIA

Dave's in 9th grade, my love.

MARIA

But what if I *proved* I could be in
third grade?

ANTONIA

How would you do that?

MARIA
Take a test.

DAVE
Which one?

MARIA
They have tests to show how smart you are. I've taken some. They're called... I forget the name.

JACK
I.Q. tests. Intellectual quotient. Not the best measure, in my view. Rather antediluvian.

MARIA
What's that?

JACK
Antediluvian? Look it up.

She runs over to a large, open dictionary sitting on a table.

JACK (CONT'D)
(spelling it out)
A-n-t-e-d-i --

MARIA
I found it! It means older than Noah's Ark!

Maria returns to her seat.

MARIA (CONT'D)
You're anti-buh-loo-vian, Dad!

They all have a laugh over that. But then, her brow furrowed:

MARIA (CONT'D)
And I still say I should be in third grade and be able to walk home on my own, just like Dave!

INT. CABIN-HOME, MARIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

After Antonia gives Maria a kiss:

ANTONIA
Buenas noches, mi amor.

MARIA
Buenas noches, Mama. Te amo.

Antonia pulls the thin curtain closed.

Moments later... Maria rises, tiptoes to a shelf, grabs a compass, two granola bars, an orange, and a baseball cap.

She stuffs it all in the open pockets of a day pack, slips a light red jacket off a hanger, adds that, then last of all...

Gently slides the owl feather inside and zips everything up.

DAVE (V.O.)

... an owl that's one feather short
may... keep an eye out for you.

She returns to bed, and then, closes her eyes.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL MAINTENANCE BUILDING - DAY

Jack works on a bus engine. Steps back. A glowering sky. He tilts his head back. Snowflakes fall gently onto his face.

JACK

September... and it's snowing? Just
another ordinary extraordinary day!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SCHOOL BUS STOP - DAY

In a heavy snowfall, grade school kids get off, Maria last. They all head off in different directions. One GIRL shouts:

GIRL

Hey, Maria, aren't you going home?

MARIA

I'm going a different way!

Maria stops. Opens her pack. Takes out the baseball cap and light jacket, puts both on, zips up the pack, and continues.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS - LATER

Under a steady fall of thick flakes, Maria halts. Looks down. Sees snow piling up fast on her already wet, red Converse.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS - LATER

Martin deftly makes his way across snowy branches.

All of a sudden, he stops, and gazes at a tiny human -- Maria moving slowly, not far up ahead. At that moment...

Maria stops. Listens to the only sound -- the chatter of the creek rushing over rocks. She quietly reassures herself:

MARIA

Maybe that's not Zigzag River.

Maria takes off her pack. Unzips one pocket and pulls out her compass again. Surveys the scene.

Puts the compass back. Takes out a granola bar. Tears it open and munches. Between bites:

MARIA (CONT'D)

Maybe it's Snag Creek.

Startled, she hears another sound, in the trees. Looks up... nothing visible. Turns and looks all around her. Nothing.

Thick tears tumble down her face. She whimpers softly:

MARIA (CONT'D)

Maybe I'm lost.

Maria stands there, utterly alone. But she's not alone.

If she looked up above her at one branch, she might see Martin, peering at her behind a veil of green and white.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - LATER

Richard and Ginny sit across from each other at a rustic table, playing chess in front of a crackling fire.

Each studies the board intently, their voices hushed, with long pauses between comments.

Ginny gently pushes a pawn forward.

GINNY

Your move.

RICHARD

I ever tell you who my favorite chess opponent was?

GINNY

Was it the guy who wandered in the woods naked, playing his oboe?

RICHARD

And never playing it well.

They share a laugh. Then, back to business:

GINNY

Still your move.

RICHARD

My favorite foe was the grand lady who originally owned this store.

GINNY

Mrs. Robertson?

RICHARD

A deft and delightful player.

GINNY

She and Mr. Robertson, such a sweet couple. I learned a lot from them.

He edges a pawn forward. She looks up. He does, too.

GINNY (CONT'D)

All this time, just to do that?

RICHARD

The smallest movements, Ginny, are sometimes the most consequential.

GINNY

Ginny. You so seldom call me Ginny.

RICHARD

Out of respect, Miss Moss.

Her focus returns to the board. His eyes stay on her.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

So...? What did you learn from the esteemed Mr. and Mrs. Robertson?

GINNY

In a community of two, a couple can create a language only the two of them understand. A kind of code.

RICHARD

A code? Isn't that... love?

She suddenly moves one of her knights.

GINNY

Check --

He looks down.

GINNY (CONT'D)

Mate.

RICHARD

Fascinating word and concept.

GINNY

Don't change the subject, *mate*.

RICHARD

See what I mean? Your usage there was quite different from the first.

They listen to a low rumbling and sputtering from a car.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Speaking of the Robertsons... that sounds like their old Ford Falcon.

Richard rises from the table, starts toward the door.

GINNY

Where are you off to?

RICHARD

This is a heavy snow for September. Someone may end up in a ditch, and need Edwin and me to pull them out.

GINNY

I'll keep the store open, if you'd like a hot cup of something later.

RICHARD

(turns, doffs his cap)
Mighty neighborly of you, ma'am.

GINNY

Is that what we are? Neighbors?

RICHARD

Another word and concept to ponder.

He heads out into the blizzard, shuts the door, and leaves Ginny standing by the fire.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS - LATER

Martin follows the little human, but not at his usual speed. He adopts a slow, stealthy cadence, like a cat on the hunt.

Maria stops. So does he. Soon after, she begins crying. He tilts his head. Listens. She continues to shuffle along.

Martin follows, at a safe distance, high in the canopy, as the snow grows thicker and the daylight thinner.

INT. CABIN-HOME - LATER

After taking off his shoes and pounding them free of snow, Dave walks inside. His dad looks concerned.

JACK
Is Maria with you?

DAVE
No.

Now Jack looks distraught.

DAVE (CONT'D)
Was she on the bus?

JACK
She got off, as usual. One of her friends said she was going home, but taking a different path.

Both of them exchange stricken expressions.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - LATER

No traffic -- only Richard, in his saddle atop Edwin, moving slowly on the side of the road.

They stop. Richard's face displays fear as he spies:

Up ahead, around the bend, an old Ford Falcon with one tail light blinking, the back of the car rising out of a ditch.

EXT. WOODS - LATER

Maria trudges slowly along the creek.

Martin follows quietly in the branches above.

Both of them stop simultaneously and gaze at:

Louis, the elk giant, and a herd of cows and youngsters gathered quietly in a thick grove of cedar and pine.

The herd's collective exhalations rise to the interleaved and interwoven branches that sink down, laden with snow.

Only Louis moves his regal head to observe the small human creature. Maria's eyes go wide. She gulps and whispers:

MARIA

That must be Louis! Wait 'til I
tell everyone I saw Louis!

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

Richard approaches the car as Edwin waits nearby.

With the car's engine silent and snow falling thicker every moment, Richard yanks the driver's door open.

The old couple sit motionless. Mr. Robertson, at the wheel, appears to be asleep -- but it's the big sleep.

Mrs. Robertson's head tilts forward, close to the dash, her fragile frame barely in the seatbelt, blood dripping down.

Richard quickly checks Mr. Robertson for a pulse and any sign of the breath of life.

He clomps around to the other side, opens the passenger door, gently moves her back, and does the same with Mrs. Robertson.

Blood from a forehead wound drips. At her feet, a small paper grocery bag is tipped over, spilling a jar of apricot jam.

Richard steps back, puffs out a breath, fights off tears.

EXT. ROADSIDE AND WOODS - MOMENTS LATER

Antonia and Emma walk away from Emma's crappy little car and begin trudging through the snow.

ANTONIA

You're going to leave it there?
What if they plow the road, Emma?

EMMA

Ha! That'll be the day! When was
the last time the county plowed?

ANTONIA

There's Dave. What's he doing out?

She waves to him. Her expression shifts as he gets closer.

ANTONIA (CONT'D)

What's wrong?

DAVE

Maria didn't come home from school.
She got off the bus, but some of
the other kids said she told them
she was going a different way.

Antonia takes off running toward home.

EMMA

Wanna look for her together, Dave?

He battles back his own tears, and nods.

EXT. WOODS - LATER

More and more snow. But even with piles of bright white, the
gathering darkness swiftly descends.

Maria looks so alone, so weary, so scared. She stops. Looks
down at her soaking wet sneakers.

Looks up again. Such a mournful expression. But suddenly --

Martin leaps down from a branch and lands in a puff of snow
not ten feet from her!

Moments pass as each of them examines the other.

Wary looks, yes. But also -- faces filled with wonder.

MARIA

(barely above a whisper)
Martin... Marten!

This produces a small smile of gratitude and relief.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Wait 'til I tell Dave I met you!

They remain cautiously absorbed in each other's presence.

Miracle moments pass by, with only two witnesses present.

INT. CABIN-HOME - MOMENTS LATER

As Jack paces, Antonia opens the door and rushes over to him.
They embrace, then, face to face:

ANTONIA

I'm going to go look for her.

JACK

Better for you to stay here -- in case she finds her way back home.

Antonia wraps arms around him, buries her head in his chest, and sobs. Finally, pulling herself together:

ANTONIA

No. Stay here, Jack. You're strong. You're patient. Wait here for her. Keep the fire going. I'll search with the others. It'll be better for me to stay busy doing that.

JACK

She's going to be fine, Antonia. She knows what to do. She's smart --

ANTONIA

(starts weeping again)
But... she's only six years old!

They hug once more. He quietly reassures her:

JACK

She'll probably walk in that front door any moment now.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Red lights strobe eerily across the banks of snow.

Richard stands by Edwin. They watch as a second body is loaded into an ambulance. Two men close the back door.

They walk up front and enter, one on the driver's side, the other, the passenger, and slowly head off. No siren.

Richard takes the reins and prepares to saddle up.

RICHARD

Let's go back to Ginny's, Edwin.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Emma and Dave shine flashlights as they trudge along, each calling intermittently -- "Maria!" -- followed by silence.

They continue, their calls of "Maria" becoming ever fainter.

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - NIGHT

Ginny stands on the porch, Richard remains atop Edwin.

GINNY

I'll stay here all night if need
be, with the lights on, with hot
soup and a pot of coffee for anyone
who needs it, or if Maria comes by.

Richard nods, grim-faced, then heads back into the woods.

Ginny stands there for a good long while, watching him go.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Maria follows Martin through the snow.

He stops a few feet away from her. She halts.

He glances back, then bounds away. Maria resumes her slog.

She follows as fast as she can, but lags even farther behind.

MARIA

Do you know where you're going?!

Martin leaps onto a tree stump, turns, and faces her.

She finally catches up, then stops a few feet away from him, her puffs of breath visible in the cold night air.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I wish I was as fast as you are.

Suddenly, he jumps down and disappears beneath a snowdrift. Maria steps back, startled.

All of a sudden -- he rockets out of the snow and up a tree, where he perches on a gently bouncing branch. Stares at her.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Are you playing? I'd like to play,
but... I want to go home now, okay?

Martin sails off the branch and charges off again, moving at a clip that keeps at least six feet between the two of them.

At last, she catches up, panting, trembling, close to tears.

Martin vaults onto a low branch of an enormous cedar. Then:

He drops to the base and looks at her, as if to say, "Voilà!"

He zooms back up to his perch on the lowest branch. Stares.

Maria gingerly steps forward toward the base of the tree.

Just below Martin's branch, she sees:

Much of the base is hollow, and, amazingly dry, thanks to the thick overlapping branches of the tree.

Maria takes off her pack, then steps inside.

INT. CEDAR HOLLOW - MOMENTS LATER

She brushes away a few old, vacated cobwebs.

It's remarkably roomy, and tall enough for Maria to stand.

Maria reaches out, grabs her pack, lifts it inside. She zips it open and lifts out a granola bar and the orange.

Munching on both, she looks weary, but calm. Eyelids flutter.

Maria pulls out the owl feather Dave gave her, then sticks it into the bark like a flag at her door.

Then, she takes off her wet sneakers and socks, sets them aside, rubs her feet, covers them with cedar dust, and...

Lays her head on the pack, falling asleep almost instantly.

EXT. CEDAR HOLLOW - MOMENTS LATER

Martin remains on his perch, still as can be, gazing down at the little human creature.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CEDAR HOLLOW HOME - NIGHT

A bobcat moves slowly toward the base of the tree. Sniffs about. Moves close to Maria's sanctuary.

Suddenly -- in a furious whirl of snarls and speed, Martin blasts down from the low branch and attacks the bobcat!

The feline instantly retreats as the marten chases after him.

At last, Martin halts, peering through the falling snow, and baring his razor-sharp teeth.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CEDAR HOLLOW HOME - DAWN

Placid, baby blue skies. Quiet as can be -- until an owl offers a soft series of hoots. And, still on his branch...

Vigilant Martin watches a man on horseback slowly approach.

Richard stops, then moves from saddle to snow-covered ground.

He moves steadily toward the cedar. Reaches the massive base. Steps around. Smiles at the owl feather. Peers inside.

He slowly reaches down, and gently touches Maria's hair.

Her eyes open. Frightened a second, but then -- she smiles. Richard takes off his thick gloves and hands them to her.

RICHARD

Put these on your feet, Maria.

She does so. They gather her things up, and stuff them in the pack. Then, he lifts her out and carries her over to Edwin.

MARIA

Thank you for finding me.

He nods. They reach the horse. Richard raises her up onto the front of the saddle, hands her the pack, and he mounts up.

RICHARD

Let's go home, darlin'.

And off they go, with Martin watching.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME - MORNING

The family reunites, embracing, tears flowing.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MARTIN'S HOME - MORNING

Martin nears his own abode. Scrambles up the trunk. Enters.

INT. MARTIN'S HOME - MOMENTS LATER

He moves to the back, curls up, and moments later, sleeps.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME, MARIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Maria's snuggled in bed, lights off. Dave walks by.

MARIA

Dave...?

He stops. Steps inside. After a few moments:

MARIA (CONT'D)

Martin watched over me last night.

DAVE

You saw him?

MARIA

He was with me. He led me to a safe place. It was warm and dry there.

DAVE

Was this a dream?

MARIA

No! He kept me safe all night. He and Mr. Douglas saved me.

Dave remains silent for a few moments.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Don't you believe me?

DAVE

Of course, I do. It's just that... it almost sounds like... a miracle.

MARIA

I don't know what a miracle is, but I sure am glad Martin was there.

(yawns)

Good night. I love you.

DAVE

Love you, too, sis. I'm really glad you're back home.

MARIA

I'm going to dream about Martin.

Dave smiles, and, as he leaves, whispers:

DAVE

Sweet dreams.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MARTIN'S HOME - DAY

Clear, sunny -- but a wintry landscape with massive mounds of snow. Branches sink under the weight of icy white.

Martin pokes his head out of his home's portal, drifts piled up so high that ground level's not far below.

He surveys the scene, then down he goes.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SNOWY WOODS - DAY

Martin moves dexterously across snow-covered branches, then scoots down one tree to the ice-crusting base.

Eyes instantly focus on a little vole scrambling awkwardly across the surface. The chase is on! It doesn't last long.

Martin snatches his prey and devours it.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MARTIN'S HOME - NIGHT

Curled up, he sleeps inside his tree in the silent woods.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

Dave gets through his student days with a constant frown:

-- Listening to Ms. Shapiro lecture in class;

-- Walking through the hallways as if invisible;

-- Eating in the cafeteria alone, while Moon chatters amiably with others at another table, and a blizzard rages outside;

-- Talking to a girl, who abruptly turns and walks away.

INT. CABIN-HOME, DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The four family members sit in their usual spots -- but without the typically convivial conversation. At last:

JACK
How's school going, Dave?

DAVE
(with a sullen shrug)
Okay.

Jack and Antonia share looks.

ANTONIA
You don't talk about it much.

DAVE
Not much to talk about.

ANTONIA
What about Moon?

DAVE
I don't hang out with him very much
these days.

For a short while, it's quiet again. Then:

ANTONIA
Are you bored with your classes?

He shrugs as an answer.

JACK
Dave... is something wrong?

DAVE
No!

JACK
You sure?

He sets his fork down, glares at his dad.

DAVE
Yeah.

JACK
No need to be rude, son. I was just
asking a simple question.

A few tense moments.

DAVE
May I be excused?

Jack and Antonia again exchange looks. Each nods to Dave.

He rises, quickly exits. The others sit in silence.

Then, with voices lowered:

JACK

Do you know what's bothering your brother, Maria? He's been so...

MARIA

Grumpy?

JACK

All winter, every time we ask him something, all we get are shrugs.

MARIA

For awhile I thought he didn't like me anymore. But then I realized: he acts the same around everybody.

ANTONIA

Do you two still talk at night before you go to sleep?

MARIA

Not for a long time.

Sad faces all around.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME, KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jack does dishes, Antonia dries. They whisper to each other.

ANTONIA

Maybe it's growing pains.

JACK

Maybe.

ANTONIA

Or maybe Dave's taking the first steps away from us, and he's not sure how to do this, because...

JACK

Nobody's ever sure how to do that.

She nods. Then, Jack suggests:

JACK (CONT'D)

Maybe it's just the winter of Dave's discontent.

ANTONIA

Or maybe he's sexually frustrated.

Jack gives her a look of surprise, then smiles, nuzzles her, and whispers in one ear:

JACK
Unlike other males in this
household.

She giggles, almost like a girl. They look at each other, and then... enjoy a nice, long kiss.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN AND FOREST - NIGHT

A full moon. Still many patches of snow on the ground, so it's nearly as bright as a sunny day.

Martin explores a clearing near some slash piles.

Suddenly, without warning or sound, a great horned owl sweeps in behind him and sinks its tremendous talons into his back!

The owl hoists Martin just above the ground, but --

Martin lurches to the side with enough force that the flying predator loses its grip.

Martin and the owl tumble together to the forest floor in a writhing heap of feathers and fur.

Twisting and snarling savagely, Martin counterattacks.

With a burst of speed, he whips around, slashing his assailant with one of his own razor-sharp claws.

The owl's powerful wings beat and hammer, but Martin rips open a bloody chest wound, and --

An instant later, his jaws clench hard onto the bird's neck.

The owl flails and rakes him with its talons. But seconds later, the huge bird's no longer moving.

Martin relinquishes his grip. He appears to be bleeding from every part of his body.

Looks around. Nothing but stillness and deathly silence.

He regards the owl -- then tears into the bird and eats.

At last, he moves off, grunting and huffing in pain.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MARTIN'S COTTONWOOD HOME - LATER

He reaches home, then labors going up the tree.

INT. MARTIN'S COTTONWOOD HOME - MOMENTS LATER

Limps inside. Licks every wound he can reach. Then, obviously weary, he curls up, and closes his eyes.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIZAG HIGH SCHOOL MATH CLASS - DAY

MR. NATHAN RADCLIFFE, 55, a sturdy fellow with a direct, but affable approach, addresses Moon as others exit.

MR. RADCLIFFE

You signed up for basketball, Moon?

MOON

Yes, sir. But I've never played.

Radcliffe appears puzzled.

MOON (CONT'D)

My parents want me to play a sport, and, watching it on TV, I like the flow and spacing of the game.

MR. RADCLIFFE

Moon, I've been coaching for thirty years, and I never had anyone use the words... *flow and spacing*.

Moon offers no response. Radcliffe smiles.

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)

Be at the gym an hour before school starts, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and we'll work on developing your game.

Moon nods to him. After he exits, Radcliffe chuckles:

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)

"Flow and spacing," huh?

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL GYM - MORNING

Radcliffe and Moon enter the gymnasium together.

MR. RADCLIFFE
Have you stretched?

Moon shakes his head "no."

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)
Do that every morning. Your body
will thank you when you're my age.

Moon regards Radcliffe's short, squat form -- and pot belly.

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)
For now, just run a few laps. Not
for speed. To warm up.

Moon trots around the gym.

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)
(calls to him)
How tall are you?!

MOON
Six feet. And I'm still growing!

MR. RADCLIFFE
All right -- pick up the pace!

Moon does so. Radcliffe nods his approval. Finally:

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)
Okay, Moon, that's enough!

Moon sprints over to him, barely puffing.

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)
Lots of stamina. Good. You'll need
that. Now grab a ball, and dribble.

Moon does so, but fails miserably to control the ball.
Painful to watch, but Radcliffe looks on sympathetically.

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)
Okay, that's fine. Now take a few
shots. Close to the basket.

Moon then fails to come close to making even one shot.

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)
All right. That's good for now.

MOON
I know I must look pretty bad. It's
a lot harder than it looked on TV.
(MORE)

MOON (CONT'D)

And I can see now, with shots, you have to estimate the parabola and force and several other factors.

MR. RADCLIFFE

True. But this isn't math, Moon. Have a seat on the bleachers, son.

Moon does so. Quiet for a moment or two, then:

MR. RADCLIFFE (CONT'D)

I admire what you're trying to do. Takes courage to try and do a thing you've never done before. But tell me: are you doing it just for your mom and dad, or for you, as well?

MOON

Partly them, but for me, too.

MR. RADCLIFFE

Excellent. Let's continue to work together this month. When practice begins in October, other guys will probably razz you because they'll be better than you. But you kill the drills -- win the sprints -- that'll shut 'em up fast. They'll respect you, Moon. Just like I do.

MOON

Thanks, Coach. See you on Thursday.

Radcliffe watches, with obvious admiration, Moon exit.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Ms. Shapiro waits in front as students file out during a rain and hail storm that pelts the windows like machine gun fire.

MS. SHAPIRO

Dave --

Dave stops at the door, turns to face her.

MS. SHAPIRO (CONT'D)

Could we chat for a moment?

DAVE

(almost snarling)
About what?

Dave saunters back in.

MS. SHAPIRO
Close the door, please.

He appears irritated, but complies. Once again, he faces her.

DAVE
Am I in trouble?

MS. SHAPIRO
I don't know. Are you? I've been wondering if something's wrong.

DAVE
(glowering)
Whaddya mean?

MS. SHAPIRO
Well, you don't seem like yourself this first year at high school.

DAVE
I'm fine.

MS. SHAPIRO
Are you?

DAVE
I just said I was.

The squall ends, but Dave evinces increased discomfort.

After a few moments, Ms. Shapiro tries another approach:

MS. SHAPIRO
Dave... we've known each other for a few years now. You were one of my favorite students at the junior high. You seemed eager to learn. But now... I can barely get a word out of you. You seem angry. All the time. And -- when you *do speak*, you're often rude. To everyone.

DAVE
I'd just like everyone to stop bothering me and leave me alone.

MS. SHAPIRO
Do you really want to be alone?

DAVE
What's wrong with that?

Dave silently stews. Then:

MS. SHAPIRO

Okay. But I want you to know: you
ever need to talk to someone...

After another sulking silence:

DAVE

Can I go now?

She nods. Dave walks out and shuts the door, hard.

His teacher looks like she's almost ready to cry.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Clear skies, but Dave and Moon leave with stormy expressions.

MOON

I know what your problem is.

DAVE

Jeezus! Now *you*?!

MOON

You don't know how to act around
girls, and that makes you angry.

Dave gives him a fierce glare.

MOON (CONT'D)

Thank god I'm not a girl. If I was,
and got a look like *that* -- wow!

DAVE

Moon, I know you're smart, but you
don't know squat about girls, and
now *you're* giving *me* advice?!

MOON

I've watched you! You've tried to
be flippant and cool. You tried to
be clever and cool. You tried to be
stand-offish and cool. You've tried
everything, and failed, and now no
girl wants anything to do with you!

DAVE

(snapping sardonically)
Thanks! I feel *so* much better now!

Moon fires back:

MOON

Know what? This "thing" of yours
has even messed up you and me!

After a brief, but brittle silence, both of them mumble:

DAVE

How long have we known each other?

MOON

Since Kindergarten. We were the two
youngest kids in class, by far.
Also the smartest. But now...

Dave looks beat. Exhausted. Exhales a long sigh, and then:

DAVE

Okay, Mr. Love Guru, what do I do?

Moon gives him a long look, then offers:

MOON

Just be the real you. The guy I've
known since Kindergarten. That's a
guy people like. A guy people want
to be with. Including girl people.

DAVE

(chuckles)
Girl people?

MOON

You know what I mean.

DAVE

So that's it? Just... be myself?!

MOON

No phony baloney. No mask. Then...
a girl *will* appear. Like magic.

DAVE

That'd be more like a miracle.

MOON

(suddenly somber)
By the way... Mom and Dad split up.

Dave's whole demeanor shifts to genuine concern.

DAVE

Oh, geez... sorry, Moon. You mean --

MOON

Not a divorce. Not yet. But Mom asked Dad, politely, to move out.

DAVE

So it's a... separation?

MOON

They were already separated most of the time, so it's not so different.

DAVE

True, but... how are you doing?

MOON

Okay.

Dave glances at him. Moon looks like he's ready to cry.

DAVE

Hey, you wanna come over, hang out?

Moon blinks back tears.

MOON

That would be great. Been a long time since I was at your place.

DAVE

Of course, Mom will insist that you stay for dinner.

MOON

That would be greater than great.

The two friends continue to walk away from school, both of them still wearing solemn expressions.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME, MARIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dave gently pulls the curtain back. Maria looks up from a book entitled *Otters*. Quiet a moment, then:

DAVE

Hey, sis, I... I want to apologize.

Maria doesn't respond, just continues with her direct gaze.

DAVE (CONT'D)

I've not been... myself lately. Or, maybe just a bad version of myself.

MARIA

Mom and Dad said it was just your hormones, or something like that. You've been like this all winter. And most of the spring, too. That's a long time, Dave.

DAVE

I know. But I'm better now.

MARIA

Why? What happened?

It takes Dave awhile to answer:

DAVE

Not sure. Maybe I'm starting to understand some things a little better than I did before.

MARIA

That's called "learning," Dave.

DAVE

(laughs)
How'd you get to be so smart?

MARIA

Look around! Books! This house has more books than most libraries!

DAVE

You're right. We do. Okay, well... anyway, thanks. And good night.

As he starts to slide the curtains shut:

MARIA

You can leave them open.

He nods, slides them back.

DAVE

Love you, sis.

MARIA

Love you, too -- no matter what's going on with you.

Eyes watering up, he nods, and heads across to his room.

Maria quickly returns to her book about otters.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MARTIN'S COTTONWOOD HOME - A LOVELY, LATE SPRING DAY

Martin pokes his head out, sniffs, and scans the sunny scene.

More slowly than usual, he makes his way down to the forest floor. Again, takes in his surroundings. Then sets off.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Richard and Ginny, the only ones in the place, chat.

RICHARD
Spring has most assertively sprung.

GINNY
It's about time.

RICHARD
Good day for a ride.

GINNY
A ride?

RICHARD
On a horse.

GINNY
As in, Edwin?

RICHARD
Care to join us for a picnic?

She smiles, but looks hesitant.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
It's Monday. You're closed Mondays.

GINNY
I'm not used to having a man ride
up on a horse and sweep me away.

RICHARD
Would that be such a bad thing?

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Dave and Moon walk together through the hallways. Moon heads for the main doors. Dave stops.

DAVE
Hey, where you going?

Moon halts.

MOON
Heading home early.

DAVE
I thought you were going to come over, stay for dinner.

MOON
My mom and dad'll be home soon.

DAVE
Together?

MOON
Yeah, weird, huh? Been awhile.
Maybe I'll make name tags for us.

DAVE
Are they...?

MOON
Back together? I don't know. Maybe they had a talk, worked things out.

EXT. NEAR TIMBERLINE - DAY

Richard, with Ginny behind him, ride atop Edwin on a path that meanders through the forest, up toward the mountain.

GINNY
How did you and Edwin meet?

RICHARD
Blind date.

GINNY
Pardon me?

RICHARD
My blind date and I met her sister, a police officer who rode on Edwin. They planned to "retire" him, so I told them I'd take him up to the mountain for his remaining days, and they accepted my offer.

GINNY
What about your blind date?

RICHARD

She was a disaster. But that's how
I met Edwin. So, a "happy ending."

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN AND FOREST (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

Martin's on the move:

-- Swiftly slipping along past pine and fir and alder;
-- Chasing after and snagging a squirrel in the canopy;
-- Ranging through the sparse wooded area at timberline;
-- Nibbling on currants in a bush abundant with fruit. All of
a sudden, he stops munching. Alert expression. Human voices.

EXT. TIMBERLINE - MOMENTS LATER

Martin quickly slips into the foliage, then peers at:

The arrival, below his hiding spot, of two humans on a horse.

The trio stop. Richard disembarks, then reaches up to help
Ginny down. Next, he removes a well-worn blanket from Edwin.

He shakes it gently, then places it on a slightly sloped area
with a fine view of the forest below and some far-off peaks.

Ginny stands by, smiling, as he then unpacks a duffel bag and
sets the contents on the blanket, revealing:

Two sandwiches, two carrots, two red apples, one enormous
chocolate chip cookie, and a bottle of white wine.

RICHARD

And... voilà! Make yourself comfy.

She sits. He joins her on the other side of the feast.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

I've always enjoyed this place. And
the sandwiches are your favorite.

GINNY

You know my favorite sandwich?

RICHARD

I know more than you think. But no
doubt you'll be a mystery forever.

They share a long look. Then, he holds up two glasses.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
Wooden cups for wine.

Richard places one by her. Pours. Then pours some for himself. Raises his glass. She raises hers.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
Here's to...

Ginny smiles. Waits. Finally, he offers a rather lackluster --

RICHARD (CONT'D)
Cheers.

They touch glasses, take sips. He's clearly uncomfortable.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
I'm like a stammering teenage boy.
Can't seem to get my words right.

GINNY
Unusual for someone so articulate.
Was there something you wanted to
tell me? One of your stories?

Richard still appears flustered.

RICHARD
Ah, Ginny, I'm hopeless.

GINNY
You are?

RICHARD
Hopelessly in love with you.

He polishes off the rest of his glass. Sets it down.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
That's the truest thing I can say.
And I wonder... will you marry me?

She sets her own glass down. Gives him a direct look.

GINNY
Richard, I love you. I love having
you in my life. But I don't want to
get married. Not to anyone. Not
even to you, the most wonderful man
I have ever met. The one I'd like
to spend the rest of my days with.
But marriage? Where's the benefit?
(MORE)

GINNY (CONT'D)

A tax break? I don't need a tax break. Just you. Why can't we be married without all the foolish, archaic, superfluous rigamarole?

Richard seems crestfallen. A lengthy silence. Finally:

RICHARD

I guess I'm... a bit old-fashioned about marriage. To me, it's sacred. I know it doesn't always work out. I know it's not about tax breaks. But I am sorry to hear you do not feel the same way as I do about it.

Each wears an expression of troubled emotions. She offers him a sandwich. He shakes his head "no." Rises up.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

I've sort of lost my appetite. Maybe we should head back now.

They gather everything, re-mount Edwin, and then... slowly and silently ride away.

Back in the currant bush, Martin watches and listens. But suddenly -- looking up at a nearby pine, he sees...

Another marten, looking directly at him!

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL, HALLWAY - DAY

Students move through the corridors.

CADENCE (O.S.)

Hey, Dave...?

Dave turns. Cadence stands close by.

CADENCE (CONT'D)

Could we talk for a minute?

DAVE

Sure.

CADENCE

You heading home?

DAVE

Yeah.

CADENCE

Could I walk with you for a bit?

DAVE
Absolutely!

They head for the door, side by side.

EXT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL - MOMENTS LATER

Dave and Cadence step out into the bright, beautiful day.

CADENCE
Only a few more days left.

DAVE
I'm looking forward to being a
sophomore. Time to move on.

CADENCE
What are you doing this summer?

DAVE
Working at the store. And running.

CADENCE
That's what I wanted to talk with
you about -- running.

Dave gives her a quizzical look.

CADENCE (CONT'D)
I want to get in shape this summer.
Also... lose a few pounds.

DAVE
I think you look... fine.

CADENCE
Thank you. Anyway, I'm wondering...
could I join you for some running?

DAVE
Of course!

CADENCE
I don't want to hold you back --

DAVE
Oh, you wouldn't be --

CADENCE
You could still train on your own --

DAVE
Sure, yeah, I know, but --

CADENCE
I would *really* appreciate it.

DAVE
Oh, believe me, it would be great.
Just... great. I would love it.

She stops. He does the same.

CADENCE
I just want to make sure I'm not
messing up your summer plans.

DAVE
Oh, no! No, I have... nothing --

CADENCE
Nothing?

They laugh.

DAVE
You know what I mean.

CADENCE
I do.

They smile, sharing a sweet moment, then:

CADENCE (CONT'D)
Okay! I'm going to head home. Let's
exchange contact info tomorrow at
school. Also, we can talk about a
summer schedule. You'll sort of be
my very own... personal trainer.

DAVE
Thank you.

CADENCE
Thank you! See you tomorrow.

DAVE
Okay!

They head off in opposite directions. Dave looks back, sees
that she's out of sight, and suddenly...

He leaps into the air with a raised arm and shouts:

DAVE (CONT'D)
Yes!

Then he runs home, faster than ever, grinning exultantly.

EXT. TIMBERLINE AREA - DAY

Martin steps warily out from the berry bush.

Looks up at the pine tree. The other marten stares at him. They exchange mutually intense appraisals.

He tilts his head. Waits. The other, lighter-colored, smaller marten creeps down the tree.

Maintaining distance, both of their noses raise, sniffing at the scents carried by the breeze.

Each of them appears to be profoundly intrigued by the other.

Cautiously, they move in a circle, slowly edging closer.

With eyes, ears, and noses on alert, Martin moves too near too fast, and she snarls lightly at him, baring her teeth.

He reverses. Leans back. Then, their mutually absorbed examination continues, with soft chittering and chuffing.

Finally, she turns and slowly begins heading down the ravine. She stops. Looks back.

Martin remains still a few moments, then moves toward her.

They keep some distance as they go down the mountain... but they already look like a couple.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MOON'S HOUSE, KITCHEN - DAY

Moon and Dave chat as they stuff their mouths full of food.

MOON

Great. But a run's not a date.

DAVE

What do you mean?

MOON

A date has to have food.

DAVE

Why?

MOON

Food's sexy.

Dave considers the limp, shredded sandwich in his hand.

MOON (CONT'D)

No food -- it's a business meeting.

DAVE

Where'd you get all this, Moon?

MOON

Prepping for when I make *my* move.

DAVE

I'm not making a "move" --

MOON

Sure you are. You like her. She likes you. That's how it starts.

DAVE

Anyway, this isn't a date. It's...

MOON

What...?

DAVE

Okay, it's a date. Without food.

MOON

Get some food *after* you run.

DAVE

She's trying to lose weight.

MOON

Girls *do* eat. I've seen them.

DAVE

Maybe we'll just have water.

MOON

Wow. That sounds *really* romantic!

Dave laughs and throws a pickle at him.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST AND PATH - DAY

Dave and Cadence jog on a narrow path, talking back and forth, occasionally close enough to touch shoulders.

Above and alongside them, though apparently unseen, Martin and his female friend sprint across the canopy of trees.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS NEAR ROAD - DAY

Dave and Cadence jog side by side.

DAVE

Why did you ask *me* to run with you?
I'm not the team's best runner.

CADENCE

You were ranked third behind that
sophomore sensation and the senior
captain. That's pretty darn good
for a freshman.

DAVE

How'd you know all that?

CADENCE

I pay attention. Anyway, I don't
know anyone else on the team.

They run without chatting for a few moments.

CADENCE (CONT'D)

So, why do you run?

DAVE

I like it.

CADENCE

Any other reasons?

Dave glances over at her, clearly perplexed.

CADENCE (CONT'D)

You're not doing it to lose weight.
And you like it -- great. But...

She glances over at him, then asks:

CADENCE (CONT'D)

Would you say that you're running
to move *toward* something, or *away*
from something?

Dave checks his watch.

DAVE

Time for us to slow down again.

As they shift to a brisk walk, Cadence pursues her query:

CADENCE

Maybe you don't know yet. Or...?

DAVE

Or maybe it's both. I'm running toward something, *and* away.

She gives him a measured look. He returns her gaze.

CADENCE

Still the mystery man.

DAVE

What do you mean?

CADENCE

Everybody knows you're smart. But no one in our class is more shy.

DAVE

I'm not shy around Moon.

CADENCE

He's your best friend, Dave. That's completely different.

DAVE

What about you? You're shy, too.

CADENCE

It's a whole lot different with me, and for obvious reasons.

DAVE

Yeah. Must be hard, being the only Black person in the whole school.

CADENCE

It can be challenging. Fortunately, I have a very supportive family.

DAVE

Me, too.

CADENCE

Aren't we the lucky ones?

He nods. After a brief quiet:

DAVE

I guess, with me... I still don't feel very sure of myself at school. I'm more comfortable on my own, in the woods, at home. And with Moon.

CADENCE

What about when you're with me?

DAVE
(smiles)
I'm getting there.

CADENCE
Getting where?

DAVE
Comfortable.

CADENCE
(smiles)
Good.

Dave looks down, checks his watch.

DAVE
Time for us to run again.

They return to jogging, both of them looking pleased.

CADENCE
Are we running... *toward* something?

He doesn't reply, just keeps running, and smiling.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

Dave works inside at various tasks:

- Serving chocolate malted milkshakes to Emma and her wife;
- Making grilled cheese sandwiches on an ancient griddle;
- Handling the cash register and running credit cards.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ANOTHER PATH IN THE FOREST - ANOTHER DAY

Dave and Cadence run hard, side by side, sweating profusely.

CADENCE
You know, like that TV show --

DAVE
We don't have TV.

CADENCE
What do you do for entertainment?

DAVE

Read.

CADENCE

No wonder you're so smart.

DAVE

We *do* have a VCR, video-cassettes --

CADENCE

You are so old school! I love it!
Helps make you different.

After a brief silence:

DAVE

Hey, maybe sometime... we could do something together. Other than run.

CADENCE

Like watch old video-cassettes? Or maybe we can read.

He rolls his eyes.

CADENCE (CONT'D)

You don't talk during a movie, do you? That's a rule in our house.

DAVE

Same with us.

CADENCE

Then how is reading different?

Dave appears genuinely perplexed. She chuckles.

CADENCE (CONT'D)

Hey... I'm jus' messin' with ya.

DAVE

Oh. Sometimes I'm not too sharp.

CADENCE

Can't be smart about everything,
Dave. Life's for learning. Right?

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Ginny stands on the porch, her expression sorrowful, and watches Richard in the distance ride past, atop Edwin.

INT. MOON'S HOUSE, KITCHEN - DAY

Dave and Moon eat and get in a few words between bites.

MOON
You guys make out yet?

DAVE
No.

MOON
You haven't kissed her at all?

DAVE
No!

MOON
Why not?

DAVE
She's not my girlfriend.

MOON
So what is she?

DAVE
A friend.

MOON
That's it?! So, what do you two do?

DAVE
We run, we talk --

MOON
I thought you liked her!

DAVE
I do!

MOON
I mean *like* her like her!

DAVE
Moon, eat -- and cease and desist.

He ceases and desists for only a moment.

MOON
(muttering while eating)
Can't believe you haven't kissed.
What's wrong with the two of you?

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST AND PATH - DAY

Dave runs -- and keeps an eye on his frequent jogging partner and another, smaller marten as they race through the canopy.

Dave charges for the river's "finish line" -- but as usual, Martin speeds up and easily passes him, as does his mate.

Dave halts, catches his breath. Looks up and grins.

DAVE

Is she your girlfriend?

Martin and mate sit close to each other on the branch, gazing at Dave with similar, sweetly curious expressions.

DAVE (CONT'D)

She's cute. Cuter than you.

Dave begins his walk back.

DAVE (CONT'D)

See you next time... heading home.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Richard stands alone near Edwin, taking in his surroundings, and not looking at all happy.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL, TRACK AND FIELD - DAY

Frowning, Dave waits for Cadence as he watches her talk with and smile at an obviously older student.

She waves goodbye to him, then joins Dave. As they walk:

DAVE

What was that about?

CADENCE

What?

DAVE

That senior you were talking to.

CADENCE

He wanted to know if I'd like to go out with him.

DAVE
You mean... on a date?

CADENCE
Yes.

DAVE
What did you say?

CADENCE
Yes.

She notes his stricken expression.

CADENCE (CONT'D)
What's wrong with that?

He struggles to respond.

DAVE
I... I was under the impression
that we... that we had a... a --

CADENCE
A what?

DAVE
I don't know. Special relationship.

CADENCE
We do.

DAVE
We do? Then -- how can you --

CADENCE
How can I what?

DAVE
Go on a date with someone else?!

CADENCE
Have we been on a date together?

He remains quiet.

CADENCE (CONT'D)
Right. That's why I was under the
impression that I could go on a
date with whomever I wanted.

DAVE
All right. Then, I guess we -- we
won't be running together anymore.

CADENCE

Why not?

DAVE

Well, you've got a new... a new --

CADENCE

Dave. It's a date. I'm not sleeping with him. I'm not marrying him. It's high school. It's a date.

DAVE

But, I was going to ask you out --

CADENCE

Then why didn't you?!

DAVE

I was afraid you'd say "no." Guess I should have said something.

CADENCE

Yes. You should have.

She stops. So does he.

CADENCE (CONT'D)

Maybe we *do* need to take a break from running together.

DAVE

Why?

CADENCE

Because right now, Dave, it really feels like we're going nowhere.

Cadence walks off in another direction.

Dave watches her go, then, head down, continues toward home.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - DUSK

Martin and his mate explore territory familiar to Martin: the same woods where he was born and grew up.

His companion leads the way, her nose constantly sniffing, her eyes darting in every direction. At the same time...

The same gray fox that killed Martin's brother remains hidden in the exact spot it used more than a year ago.

Absolutely still, the fox watches the two marten pass by.

They stop, simultaneously, picking up its scent. They turn, but when they look directly at the killer's hiding place --

The fox attacks!

Swift as the marten, but much bigger, it lunges for Martin.

But Martin deftly evades the snap of its jaws, spins around, and then --

Martin attacks, instantaneously biting onto its snout and slashing one eye with a claw.

The fox snarls in pain and rage. Blood pours from its eye, nose, and mouth.

For a moment, it staggers, then howls as it's attacked from behind by Martin's mate, who shreds and tears at a hind leg.

Before the fox can recover, Martin flies at its throat, and, despite swipes from its claws, clamps down hard.

The fox desperately tries to shake the two assailants off, clawing up front and kicking from behind.

It wounds both marten, each of whom lets out cat-like screeches. But they hang on, tenacious as ever.

Losing too much blood to continue, breathing only in choking spurts, the fox finally slumps to the ground.

Martin's bloody mouth opens only for an instant, then he lunges for the throat and finishes the kill.

After all this mayhem... there's nothing but silence for a short while, as though the entire world holds its breath.

Martin finally relinquishes his death grip. Steps back. Blinks. His partner joins him.

They look at each other a moment. Then, she licks his wounds. A moment later, he does the same for her.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. THE TREE OF LIFE - NIGHT

Martin rests in his first home -- but this time, it's with his mate, and they're snuggled together, sound asleep.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN-HOME, KITCHEN - NIGHT

Dave washes dishes, his mom dries.

ANTONIA

School starts up again soon. Are you looking forward to it?

No response. His mom notes his face, full of sorrow.

ANTONIA (CONT'D)

Dave... did you and Cadence...?

He looks over at her, then quickly back at the dishes.

DAVE

Stop running together? Yeah.

After a moment:

ANTONIA

I thought... maybe there was a bit more to it than that.

Silence. Then:

DAVE

So did I.

She sets a dish down. Stands there, looking at him. He stops his work. Eyes flood with tears.

ANTONIA

(softly)
Come here, son.

He takes a step toward her. She puts hands on his shoulders.

He wraps arms around her, buries his head, and quietly cries.

A few moments later:

ANTONIA (CONT'D)

I know it hurts.

He steps back, wipes away tears.

DAVE

I didn't know it would hurt *this* much. Why's it so tough, Mom?

ANTONIA

One of the ways we feel love... it's when life's really tough.

DAVE

I don't know if I'm *in love*, but...
I sure do like her. A lot. And I
think I screwed things up.

ANTONIA

It's your first time. I didn't even
get my first two *marriages* right.
Wasn't until I met your dad that I
finally figured things out.

DAVE

You know, Cadence's father, he's a
veteran, like dad. Also never talks
about it. The same kind of... wall.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. THE TREE OF LIFE - DAY

Martin's mate is noticeably rounder at her midsection. She
lies down. Puffs out a barely audible breath.

Martin stands back, apart from her.

The two share a long look.

Then, he turns, and moves toward the opening of the chamber.

Martin takes a fleeting last look back. And then --

EXT. THE TREE OF LIFE - MOMENTS LATER

Martin scurries down the mottled bark of the ancient tree,
all the way to the forest floor.

He sniffs at and scans his surroundings. Then, off he goes.

EXT. WY'EAST WOODS (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

Martin roams on his own. He examines:

- Huckleberry bushes, full of ripe berries;
- A black trap with its deadly steel teeth clenched shut;
- A cavern with an enormous skeleton of a long-dead bear;
- A remote field where a woman, on her knees, weeps.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Dave and Ginny work behind the counter. Richard walks in.

Ginny sees him, comes around to the front, strides up to him, takes his hand, and tells Dave:

GINNY

You're in charge for awhile.

She leads Richard out the front door.

EXT. WOODS AND RIVER - MOMENTS LATER

Ginny and Richard walk hand in hand without exchanging a word, though Richard glances at her now and then.

She leads him down to the banks of the river.

There, she relinquishes her hand, and, without removing her shoes or a stitch of clothing, moves into the shallows.

Ginny selects a spot in the middle, then looks over at Richard, who steps into the river and joins her.

She takes his hands. They stand face to face. And then, she stretches up, leans in, and kisses him. A good, long kiss.

Afterwards, they gaze at each other, and she declares:

GINNY

Richard David Douglas, I love you.
I want to wake up in the morning
and find you there like a large,
handsome miracle. I want to talk
with you every night over dinner. I
want us to make love, to share our
ideas, play chess, and maybe raise
children together if it's not too
late. I want to be with you until
both of us move on to do other work
in this universe. So I am here now,
on these rocks in the Zigzag River,
asking you to be with me for good.
And, if you, too, want that --

RICHARD

I do, Virginia Mary Moss. I would
say "yes" in every language ever
invented if I could -- even if it
means I *non*-marry you. So I hereby
propose that we do *not* marry, but
live happily ever after together.

GINNY

And I hereby, with all my heart,
accept your non-marriage proposal.

And they seal the deal with a kiss -- and what a kiss it is!

A hummingbird interrupts them. They watch it for a moment,
hovering before their faces, then it zooms off.

RICHARD

Early Spanish explorers called them
joyas volardores -- flying jewels.

GINNY

"Flying jewels" -- I love that!

RICHARD

Did you know a hummingbird's heart
is the size of a pebble, and beats
ten times a second?

GINNY

How do you know this?

RICHARD

I've read about hearts. The wet
engine. A miraculous invention.

She regards him now with a sweet, penetrating gaze.

GINNY

I heart you. But right now -- my
toes are freezing!

Holding hands, they walk together from the river to the path.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL MAINTENANCE BUILDING - DAY

Ms. Shapiro talks to Jack. He nods a few times, but doesn't
look too happy.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Ms. Shapiro stands before Dave, Moon, Cadence, and other 15-
16 year old sophomores.

MS. SHAPIRO

It's early in the year, I know, but

MS. SHAPIRO (CONT'D)

I've asked a guest speaker to come in today and share his story, which relates to some of the more recent history that we'll be studying.

Her class looks relieved -- no work today! She smiles.

MS. SHAPIRO (CONT'D)

The "guest speaker" is an ancient and mostly awful tradition. It's nearly always some "expert" who ends up being a pompous blowhard who lectures and sermonizes and blathers on while students try not to nod off and drool on themselves.

They laugh, nod. Their teacher returns to a serious tone:

MS. SHAPIRO (CONT'D)

But that's not the kind of guest speaker I asked to join us today. He was very, very reluctant to come here, but I convinced him that he could speak honestly and openly about his experiences, and that he might, perhaps, make a difference.

At that moment, Jack steps inside and waits by the door.

MS. SHAPIRO (CONT'D)

Ah -- here he is.

Kids turn around. Dave looks more alarmed than surprised.

Jack walks up to the front of the class.

MS. SHAPIRO (CONT'D)

Would you like a chair, Mr. Miller?

JACK

No, thanks. I'll stand. Maybe pace a little. I told Ms. Shapiro I'm not much of a public speaker.

Jack waits a moment, then begins, very quietly:

JACK (CONT'D)

My son, Dave, knows that I like to talk. About lots of things. But... something I don't talk about is my time serving in the armed forces.

Students appear a bit wary, almost on edge. He continues:

JACK (CONT'D)

I served in Iraq and Afghanistan, with a short stint in Kuwait. My son had just been born. But after the attacks of 9/11, I felt it was my duty to serve. I wasn't much older than you. Most soldiers are young. And everyone who goes to war has stories. Some of those stories are about brave, noble acts. But some are horror stories. Not like a scary movie. These are about real life. And death. And pain. They are not stories for children. Some may look at you, your faces, and see kids. I see people closing in fast on adulthood. So, I'll share a few of my horror stories, with you.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - LATER

Every youthful face is a portrait of intensely serious focus.

JACK

As I said, these are not children's stories. But to close... I'd like to share a few thoughts. We know animals kill other animals, every day. But we humans are the only animal that plans and wages war -- against our own species. One of our first war stories is Homer's *Iliad*, created 2,000 years ago. There have been lots of wars since. Our great Oregon poet, Mr. William Stafford, wrote: "Violence is a failure of the imagination." Think about that. We are clever, creative creatures. So why haven't we devoted ourselves to using these vast imaginations to resolve our conflicts peaceably, to end all wars? Why isn't that one of our loftiest goals? And don't think for a moment that one person can't change this. Would you have told Rosa Parks to stop trying to make a change? How about Gandhi? Or Nelson Mandela. Or untold others who spoke out and refused to accept the way things have been for far too long.

(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)

Each one of us changes the world in countless unseen ways, every day of our existence. Most of the changes are small. But those small actions and words add up. So, I ask all of you: can't we all do better? I have faith that you will say "yes." And maybe this faith means "yes" when a whole lot of things look like "no." But I hope you'll give it a try.

(a brief pause, then:)

I wish you well on your journey. And I humbly thank all of you for giving me this time to share some of my thoughts, and a few stories.

Silence. Jack moves over to Ms. Shapiro. They shake hands. Then, he walks toward the door.

Dave suddenly stands and runs over to him before he exits.

Jack turns. Dave embraces him. They hug each other tightly, eyes closed, teardrops tumbling.

It's quiet -- except for a few openly weeping. And there's not a single person without tears.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SOCCER FIELD - A CRISP, CLEAR AUTUMN DAY

Two teams of 6-8 year old kids -- one team in blue shirts and socks, the other in red -- get ready to play a game.

Upon the blowing of a whistle by a teenage referee garbed in black-and-white, the teams scamper back and forth.

Another teen referee follows the "action" from one sideline. Coaches encourage players: "Pass the ball!" "Don't bunch up!"

Maria shines as the obvious star of the game -- with Antonia, Jack, and Dave beaming at her artistry on the pitch.

All of a sudden, Maria stops. A circle of kids on both teams form around her. The game comes to a halt.

Referees and coaches run toward them. They, too, gather into the circle and look down.

Parents and a handful of other spectators wonder aloud, "Somebody get hurt?"

And then...

The circle on the pitch becomes a processional, as Maria -- hands cupped -- leads everyone off the field.

In a spot away from the "crowd," Maria gently sets down... a praying mantis.

It rests atop the grass a moment -- then suddenly flies off.

Maria turns to others gathered behind her and tells them:

MARIA

She was there before us. Maybe it's her home. Now we won't squish her.

She marches out to the field, the other kids behind her, with spectators looking on in smiling, joyful wonder.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WY'EAST WOODS (SERIES OF SHOTS) - DAY

Martin ranges far and wide:

- Nose working as he passes by richly red vine maple;
- Nibbling on berries from bushes with browning leaves;
- As he rambles over pine branches, geese croak overhead;
- And below, King Louis walks behind his herd of elk cows.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS NEAR ROAD - DAY

Dave and Maria walk home from school, side by side.

MARIA

Why didn't you have running today?

DAVE

It's not "running," Maria. It's cross country. Our coach had some business to attend to and gave us Friday off. How was school today?

MARIA

My teacher said I'd be doing a lot of independence study this year.

DAVE

You mean *independent* study?

MARIA

Yes. Studying on my own.

DAVE

What will you study?

MARIA

Otters! Otters rule!

DAVE

What about marten? Same family.

MARIA

I like otters best of all. They play more than anyone!

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG GENERAL STORE - DAY

Dave does prep for a soup as Richard sits at the counter.

RICHARD

Otters, huh? Well, they truly are a delightful, enchanting creature.

DAVE

I'd study marten.

RICHARD

Any particular reason?

DAVE

Nobody seems to know much about them. I'd like to know more... before we wipe them out.

RICHARD

They're not an endangered species --

DAVE

Not yet. But if we keep on doing what we've been doing...

Richard gives him a studious regard. Then:

RICHARD

Are you... suggesting something?

Dave stops, looks up from his work, and states:

DAVE

I wish you wouldn't trap marten.

RICHARD
Why just marten?

DAVE
Like I said: they interest me. And,
I'm afraid they may not make it.

He returns to his task as Richard weighs his words. Then:

RICHARD
I don't earn much money, Dave. How
would I make up the lost revenue?

Once again, Dave halts, and addresses Richard directly:

DAVE
How about this? Give marten a year
of no trapping. Don't tell anyone.
Not even Ginny. And, the money you
lose not trapping marten, I'll make
it up to you with what I earn here.

RICHARD
But school started up again, and
you only work Saturdays now.

DAVE
I'll keep saving whatever I earn.

RICHARD
So, in a way, Ginny will be the one
paying me *not* to trap marten.

DAVE
I promise you won't lose a dollar,
and she won't know about this. It's
an agreement between the two of us.

RICHARD
I still don't quite understand your
passion for this particular animal.

Dave doesn't provide an answer regarding that, but tells him:

DAVE
My mom says the best gifts are the
unexpected ones that change a life.
The marten won't know, but you'd be
giving the gift of life. Wouldn't
that be the right thing to do?

Richard doesn't nod, doesn't smile... just takes it all in.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODED AREA - DAY

Martin watches as Richard removes a fox from a trap, then places it in a sack.

Richard looks around. Stares at the spot where Martin hides. Maybe he doesn't see him.

He re-sets the trap, then puts his sack behind the saddle and mounts up on Edwin. Martin observes their leave-taking.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZIGZAG HIGH SCHOOL GYM - DAY

Dave, sweaty from cross country practice, walks inside.

On the court, Moon plays in a scrimmage, scooping up rebounds like a vacuum. Dave grins as he watches his pal.

A whistle blows. Members of both teams shake and high-five.

Moon runs off the court to greet Dave.

DAVE

Wow! You're a beast on the boards!

MOON

Hoop's the best. I'm beginning to understand the language of the game. I love how fluid it is.

As the two friends walk out:

DAVE

The most analytical player ever.

MOON

Nah. It's just fun to play!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CABIN-HOME, DINING ROOM - EVENING

The family eat supper.

MARIA

I'm going to write and paint about otters on the last day of summer.

DAVE

Why the last day of summer?

MARIA

Because that's tomorrow! Sunday.

DAVE

I forgot about that. And next week,
Ginny and Richard's non-wedding.

ANTONIA

And then, a week later --

JACK

Our son turns 16.

DAVE

Can't believe tomorrow's the last
day of summer.

JACK

Supposed to be an absolutely
perfect late September day.

After a moment:

DAVE

Think I'll go off tomorrow, on my
own, for a long hike in the woods.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CABIN-HOME - DAY

Dave goes down the front steps and sets off.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS AND RIVER - DAY

He walks at a brisk pace. An intent, focused expression.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. TREE-COVERED HILLS - DAY

Dave heads through thinning forest toward a pillar of rock.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. REMOTE ROCK AND FOREST - DAY

He reaches the top of the rocks and a flat slab of stone.

A magnificent view, all around: boundless forest, and the mountain behind him in all its majestic glory.

Not a creature in sight. Dave takes off shoes, socks, shirt.

Sits there, taking it all in.

Closes his eyes. Lets the warm sun lap at his young pelt.

A moment later... there's a quick scabble on the rock.

Dave opens his eyes. Slowly turns his head.

Not more than six inches away...

Martin stares at him.

He displays his most common expression: focused, alert, and fascinated by what he's observing.

For many moments, both animals contemplate each other with the most complete, piercing attention.

Their mutually calm gaze continues in this quiet realm.

Martin's fur flutters in a light breeze. So does Dave's hair.

Then, they turn from regarding one another and simply sit and take in the views of their shared homeland.

Two different species, only inches apart.

The sun slowly shifts its place in the sky.

Time passes, with neither of them stirring.

But there seems to be no sense of time.

They're in a perfect place.

A perfect time.

The peaceable kingdom.

Maybe a version of Heaven.

One long, steady, flowing river of ordinary, extraordinary, unrepeatable moments.

Miracle moments, shared only by the two of them.

At last... Dave smiles.

But when he looks over...

Martin's not there.

Dave's smile slowly vanishes.

He surveys the surrounding beauty once more.

Takes in the clear, clean air, then exhales.

Smiles again, and then, to himself, but also, surely, to this infinitesimally tiny and miraculous part of the universe:

DAVE
(whispers)
Thank you.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS AND RIVER - LATER

Dave walks back home, a lone traveler.

RICHARD (V.O.)
Each of us has to find our own way.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS AND MEADOW - DAY

A glorious fall day for any event, even a non-wedding.

Moon and members of the basketball team transport folding chairs and tables, which they set down across the field.

The four members of the Miller family set out colorful tablecloths, napkins, plates, etc.

Emma and her wife, among many others, carry platters of food. Ms. Shapiro delivers an abundance of flowers.

Pies, cakes, and cookies end up on tables. So does a lot of wine, beer, and booze. It's a banquet of epic proportions.

Finally... Ginny rides on Edwin up the trail to the meadow, where everyone waits.

Richard stands alone, beaming, holding back a cascade of tears. Edwin moves right up alongside him.

Richard then helps Ginny down, and pats Edwin.

RICHARD
Thanks, old pal. Deftly done.

Richard takes Ginny's hand, and they walk to the center of three roughly concentric circles of people.

Moon stands between his mom and dad. Cadence arrives, and takes a place next to Dave. They exchange a quick smile.

Antonia moves to the center and stands before the couple.

ANTONIA

People build their lives through stories. Stories bind us together. To witness may well be one of our greatest stories. We are all here today to witness *this* event -- or, if one chooses, this... *non*-event.

Chuckles from many.

ANTONIA (CONT'D)

A wise man -- the estimable Albert Einstein said, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though *everything* is a miracle." Today, we are gathered here, in a fellowship of love and community, to celebrate one of those miracles: the union, in a designated *non*-marriage, of our beloved friends, Richard and Ginny.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS AND MEADOW - LATER

The couple seal their partnership with a splendid kiss, and, following a burst of applause, cheers, and joyful noise:

Music! Down-home bluegrass from several community members playing fiddle, penny-whistle, clarinet, guitar, and banjo.

People dance, drink, and feast like there's no tomorrow!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS AND MEADOW - EARLY EVENING

Richard shares a slow dance with Maria as the first stars appear and the sky shifts from blue and purple to black.

MARIA

Mr. Douglas...?

RICHARD

Please call me Richard, Maria.

MARIA

Okay. Richard, why are a bunch of stars named after animals?

RICHARD

Not sure. But there's a swan, crab, bull, bear, fish, scorpion --

MARIA

What about marten?

RICHARD

What is it with you and your brother and marten?

MARIA

We like the mustelid family a lot. My favorite's the otters.

RICHARD

Me, too. But... marten?

MARIA

We're friends with one. We call him Martin Marten. He helped save me, before you did.

RICHARD

He did, huh? Well... I think I'm beginning to understand now.

He gives her a little twirl. She curtsies before him. Richard laughs and swoops her up in his arms.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

You're a fascinating person, Maria.

MARIA

Thanks for saving me. I love you, Mr. Douglas -- I mean, Richard.

RICHARD

I love you, too, Maria.

MARIA

Can we get more food now?

He sets her back down, and they walk, hand in hand, toward tables still laden with goodies.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS AND MEADOW - NIGHT

The wedding party heads back along the path, flashlights and headlamps shining.

Richard walks alongside Dave, a distance behind the others. They speak quietly to each other.

RICHARD

I wanted to let you know... I decided I like your idea.

Dave gives him a questioning look.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

No traps for marten this year. It's a wedding gift, from me to them.

DAVE

Thanks, Richard.

RICHARD

First time you ever called me that.

DAVE

First time for everything, right? Even... not trapping marten.

RICHARD

Well, fact is, Ginny has this idea that I should stop doing that work altogether and come work for her. She seems to think you might be going off to college in a few years, and I might be useful to have around as your replacement.

DAVE

Sounds like a great idea to me. And thanks for being a good teacher. I learned a lot from you. And also -- congratulations, on your marriage.

RICHARD

My *non*-marriage.

DAVE

Oh, right.

RICHARD

And thank you -- for letting your guard down, and saying what you needed to say about marten. And now, I need to join my *non*-bride.

Richard walks ahead to accompany Ginny, who holds Edwin's reins in her right hand, and Richard's hand with her left.

Dave walks on his own, and leaves behind:

The quiet meadow, surrounded by trees, and the sparkle of a glittering canopy of stars.

In one tree, on one branch, sits one marten -- Martin -- watching the procession, and its last person: Dave.

DAUGHTER (V.O.)

And Daddy, that last day of summer,
up on that rock... was that really
the last time you saw Martin?

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A COZY CABIN-HOME IN A PACIFIC NORTHWEST FOREST - NIGHT

Smoke rises from the stone fireplace.

DAVE/FATHER (V.O.)

Yes. And I remember every moment.

INT. COZY CABIN-HOME, CHILD'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The girl, 7, blanket up to her chin, looks a little sleepy.

Dad -- Dave, now 35 -- sits next to her. He leans forward, kisses her forehead.

A woman -- Cadence, now 35 -- walks in. She's fully pregnant. She stands next to Dave. Puts an arm around his shoulders.

DAUGHTER

Mommy, Daddy just told me the
Martin Marten story.

CADENCE

Your dad loves to tell stories.

DAUGHTER

Is that why you love him, Mom?

CADENCE

That's one reason. I have several
other pretty good reasons.

DAUGHTER

Martin Marten saved Aunt Maria.
That's one reason I love him.

CADENCE

And that's when your dad and I
started running together.

DAUGHTER

But you told me you didn't fall in
love until after college. How come
it took you so long?

Her parents smile at each other.

CADENCE

Some things in life take time. And
now... it's time for you to sleep.

DAUGHTER

I want to see my baby brother.

CADENCE

He'll be here soon. Any day now.

She moves over, gives their daughter a kiss, and walks out
with her husband.

DAUGHTER

Tonight, I'm going to dream about
Martin Marten.

DAVE

Sweet dreams.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A COZY CABIN-HOME IN A PACIFIC NW FOREST - MOMENTS LATER

Dave and Cadence walk out onto the veranda.

They sit right next to each other on the wooden steps.

Quiet for a few moments. Taking it all in.

DAVE

Full moon, lots of stars...

CADENCE

And the star storyteller sitting
next to me.

They share a kiss. He touches her tummy. Then --

A rustle in the pine trees nearby.

Both peer up at the branches.

EXT. PINE BRANCH - MOMENTS LATER

A marten looks down at the two humans below.

CADENCE (O.S.)
Are we seeing what I think we are?

DAVE (O.S.)
That's a marten!

CADENCE (O.S.)
Feels like it's a --

DAVE (O.S.)
Miracle moment!

And off it goes!

EXT. FOREST - MOMENTS LATER

The marten runs and scampers and glides and frolics...

One sleek flash of golden brown deftly cavorting in the long green splash of trees, as though it could keep going...

And going... and going... forever.

But all of a sudden, it stops on a pine branch.

Then, slowly turning its head...

Its dark, dancing eyes stare, right at --

Each one of us.

THE END