

BITTER FRUIT

by
Thomas Hill

(256) 998-2347
thill70@yahoo.com

FADE IN:

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAY

In the fading light, a ragged 1940s model pickup truck rounds a curve.

In a corner of the truck bed, we see an ax, upright and held in place by a load of firewood.

INT. TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

HAROLD and DOYLE LITTREL, while not twins, look very much alike. In their late 20s, both wear overalls, covered in dirt and grime from chopping wood all day, and both sport tobacco-juice stained whiskers from being filthy bastards.

Harold drives as Doyle spits a stream of tobacco juice into a stained coffee can.

DOYLE

Then this gal takes her --

Doyle sets the spit can on the dash between them.

HAROLD

Gimme some of that.

Doyle pulls a pouch of Red Man from his bib pocket and holds it out for his brother to pinch off a chew.

DOYLE

Anyway, she -- Shit, Harold, don't take it all.

Harold crams the tobacco into his mouth.

Working the wad into place, Harold suddenly jerks the steering wheel to one side and spews bits of tobacco onto the dash as he --

HAROLD

Shit!

His feet slam down on the brake and clutch.

Tobacco spit sloshes onto the windshield and dash.

Doyle lurches forward.

DOYLE

Jesus!

EXT. TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

The wheels lock, throwing dirt and gravel into the air.

A tire BLOWS.

The truck skids sideways, spilling logs before coming to a stop in a cloud of dust.

The door creaks open.

Harold gets out. His eyes scan the roadside for whatever he almost hit.

HAROLD

Goddamn!

Doyle, rubbing his head, gets out on the other side.

DOYLE

What the hell'd you do that for?

Harold still scans the roadside.

HAROLD

Somethin' ran out.

DOYLE

What the hell was it? A deer?

HAROLD

Don't know. It was kinda little and dark.

DOYLE

Dark? A nigger?

HAROLD

Don't know.

DOYLE

Shit. Shoulda hit it. Been
good eatin' if it was a deer.

Harold, giving up on seeing anything, turns to inspect the
blown tire.

Doyle hovers over him.

DOYLE

That's a big-ass hole.

Harold glares at his brother.

HAROLD

Go on and gather up that wood.

DOYLE

Hell, you dumped it.

HAROLD

Doyle, goddammit, I ain't in the
mood!

Doyle ambles away toward the scattered firewood.

DOYLE

Shoulda hit whatever it was. No
busted tire. No spilt wood.

Harold squats, inspecting the tire.
Untouched, the ax rises begins to rise.

Doyle picks up one stick, then another.

Harold gets up from checking the tire and turns around.
His eyes bug as he sees --

The ax blade, above him, poised to strike.

The ax arcs downward.

HAROLD

Je --

The blade sinks into the center of his forehead.

He falls back against the truck and slides down, the ax lodged in his skull.

TITLE SEQUENCE

EXT. CHICAGO SKYLINE - NIGHT - ESTABLISHING

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Stretched out in an uncomfortable chair with a blanket thrown mostly off of him, SAM RAINEY, white and about 70, tosses about in a restless sleep.

His wife, ANN, sleeps in the hospital bed next to his chair. Hooked to IVs and various monitors, she, of course, does not look as healthy as her husband.

Sam becomes still, but his closed eyes begin to twitch.

DREAM SEQUENCE

INT. OLD COUNTRY CHURCH - DAY

Ages ranging from newborn to ancient, the all white CONGREGATION, including the Littrel brothers, sings "There's Power in the Blood." The PREACHER, in the pulpit, leads them.

The Rainey family takes up a good portion of the third row. THE MOTHER has the end next to JACKSON, the mid-40s father, towering above YOUNG SAM, 9, who stands next to LAUREN, who's the oldest at 15, and his TWO MIDDLE SISTERS.

Young Sam looks down at the words in his hymnal then up at his father.

Jackson, singing loudly, looks down at his son.

Their eyes meet.

Young Sam sees flames reflected in Jackson's eyes.

Those flames grow and morph into --

TORCHES

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

The torches bounce and jostle about.

The indistinct BARBERS, several white men, run through the woods.

The BAYING of hounds echoes around them.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

A TREE appears against a blood-red horizon -- a solitary gnarled oak tree with a single thick limb pointing outward.

Lightning flashes in the background.

The tree, scarred and leafless, seems to dare the lightning to strike it.

Another flash of lightning.

END DREAM

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Now sweating, Sam awakes with a start and looks around the room, getting his bearings, "just a dream."

He wipes the sweat from his face and looks over at Ann, still asleep.

Getting up, he stretches and reaches for a glass of water. Then he moves nearer to his wife's bed, looks down at her, and strokes her hair.

He walks to the window.

Looking out at the night, his blank expression shows that his mind is not on the view.

ANN (O.S.)

Sam?

He turns.

SAM

Right here, honey.

ANN
Can't you sleep?

SAM
Chair's not very comfortable.

ANN
Is that all?

Sam takes her hand in his.

SAM
Yeah.

Ann looks at Sam's hand, holding hers, and then up at his still damp face.

ANN
Samuel Rainey, you have got to
be one of the shittiest liars of
all time.

SAM
Don't worry about me. I'll
sleep once we're both back home.

ANN
The nightmares again?

Surprised at his wife's perceptiveness, though he shouldn't be, Sam leans down and kisses her.

SAM
Go back to sleep, beautiful.

INT. SAM'S DEN - DAY

Old newspapers, magazines, and take-out boxes clutter the middle-class dwelling. The owner has lost all motivation to clean, but we can tell that the change came about recently. Otherwise, the place would be even more filthy.

Sam, rumped and haggard, shambles in, followed by his son and daughter-in-law, ADAM and ELLEN, both in their late 30s, attractive, and neatly dressed.

They sit in silence.

SAM

I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking,
want anything to drink?

ADAM

No, thanks, Dad.

SAM

Ellen?

ELLEN

No, that's okay.

They fall back into silence.

Adam looks to his wife and then at his distant father.
Clearing his throat, he takes his wife's hand.

ADAM

Dad, I, um, I really hate the
timing of this. So soon after
Mom. . .

SAM

What is it, Adam?

ADAM

Well, I've gotten a promotion.
I'll have my own branch.

Sam brightens just a bit.

SAM

Congratulations.

ADAM

The bad part is that we have to
move.

SAM

Where to?

ADAM

It's actually kinda funny --
back home.

Adam now has his father's complete attention, dour as it may be.

SAM

Athens?

ADAM

Yeah. And we've --

SAM

That's not home.

ADAM

Jesus, I guess I should just spit it out -- Dad, we're buying back Granddad's old place.

SAM

The hell. . . ?

ADAM

It's on the market and it's a great deal. Plus, we're hoping that the kids won't feel so out of whack if they know they're living where their Gramps grew up. Like having roots there.

Sam's face floods with anger.

SAM

If I'd wanted my family to be rooted there, I wouldn't have sold it the second the old bastard died!

Taken aback, Adam doesn't know what to say to his father's anger.

ELLEN

We didn't mean to upset you.

ADAM

Yeah, dad, I'm sorry. I should've mentioned it to you before we made up our minds.

Sam glares.

SAM
(muttering)
I'll never be free of it.

ADAM
What?

Sam dismisses the question with a wave of his hand.

INT. SAM'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sam sleeps, arms and legs fidgeting.

A look at his face shows the rapid-eye-movements indicative of a dream.

A RIFLE SHOT echoes from nowhere and everywhere.

His eyes snap open.

INT. DINER - DAY

Sam eats lunch alone.

INT. SAM'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sam, in bed, sweats in his sleep.

INT. SUBWAY TRAIN - DAY

Sam sits slumped on the hard subway bench, his head bobbing as sleep attempts to overtake him.

EXT. RAINEY HOME - DAY

Alternating cotton fields and patches of woods surround the nearly one-hundred-year-old house on three sides.

In one field, beyond a patch of woods, stands the solitary oak tree from Sam's dream.

In the driveway, MOVERS unload furniture and boxes from their truck.

INT. CORY'S ROOM - DAY

In the midst of unopened boxes, CORY, 11, lays on his stomach, doing the only thing that interests him at all, playing the latest Grand Theft Auto.

BETHANY, 5, his much livelier sister, enters.

BETHANY

Cory, let's go outside and play.

Cory ignores her.

She walks over next to him and watches the game for a moment.

BETHANY

Can I play?

CORY

You don't know how.

BETHANY

Teach me.

CORY

Leave me alone.

Bethany shoots daggers at her big brother.

She darts to the TV and turns it off.

CORY

Hey!

Just eluding Cory's lunging grasp, Bethany flies out the door into the --

HALLWAY

Fearing that her brother is close behind her, Bethany runs as fast as she can and skids around a corner, finding --

A STAIRWAY

INT. ATTIC - DAY

Through filthy windows, sunlight struggles to illuminate the dank room.

The door creaks open.

Bethany sticks her head inside. The rest of her follows.

Leaving the door open behind her, she investigates the nearly empty room -- a few boxes, lots of cobwebs.

She grins at her discovery.

BETHANY

Cool.

In the corner, a box WHISPERS against the hardwood floor as it shifts.

Bethany, minus the grin, looks in that direction.

Behind her, the door SLAMS.

She screams, runs to the door, and jerks on the knob to no avail.

BETHANY

Cory! Let me out! Cory!

She pounds on the door and begins to cry.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ellen unpacks dishes and arranges them in the cabinets.

Bethany bursts through the swinging door and flings herself at her mother.

ELLEN

Hey, slow down. What's wrong?

BETHANY

(sobbing)

Cory -- Cory--

Cory comes through the door.

CORY
What's she crying about?

ELLEN
(to Cory)
What did you do?

CORY
Nothing.

BETHANY
He-he locked me in and wouldn't
let me out!

CORY
I did not!

ELLEN
Cory!

CORY
She's lying!

BETHANY
He did, too!

ELLEN
Cory, go to your room!

CORY
Fine!

He stomps out.

Ellen kneels down.

ELLEN
Calm down, now, it's okay.

Bethany wipes at her nose.

BETHANY
Why'd we have to move here?

ELLEN
We talked about Daddy's job.
Now, calm down. Cory won't--

BETHANY

He's mean!

ELLEN

Big brothers can be that way.

BETHANY

I miss my friends.

ELLEN

I bet I know someone who would
love nothing in the world more
than to play with you.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

A reluctant Bethany climbs down the back steps and walks toward PEPPER, straining at her leash.

Ellen sticks her head out of the door.

ELLEN

Keep her in the backyard until
the movers are gone.

BETHANY

Okay.

Bethany drops to her knees, letting her excited puppy lick her face.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Adam enters and sneaks up behind his wife, who has gone back to unpacking.

As he puts his arms around her, Ellen stiffens.

ELLEN

Jesus, Adam, you scared me.

From behind, Adam rests his chin on her shoulder.

ADAM

(chuckles)

How are things in here?

ELLEN

Just fine.

ADAM

It's going to be great here,
you'll see.

Ellen puts a hand to his cheek and leans her head against his.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Bethany, on the ground, pets and plays with Pepper, who is now untied.

A ball rolls against Bethany's leg.

She looks up.

We see no one.

Bethany grabs the ball and waggles it in front of Pepper, who excitedly goes after it, eliciting giggles from Bethany.

BETHANY

(looking up)

How'd you know?

INT. SAM'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Sam picks up a prescription bottle and studies it. Then he shakes a pill into his hand.

He shakes out another.

INT. ADAM AND ELLEN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Amidst a few as yet unpacked boxes, Adam gets ready for bed, as Ellen reads, propped up on pillows.

ADAM

We got a lot finished today.

ELLEN

Mm-hmm.

Several cars ROAR past the house.

ADAM
Didn't think that road would be
so busy at night.

Ellen looks up from her book, then back down.

Adam climbs into bed and gently takes Ellen's book from her hands, marking her place.

He puts his arms around her and pulls her close.

He kisses her cheek, then her lips.

A car horn BLARES in the distance, followed by another.

ADAM
What the hell?

Distant but loud MUSIC replaces the blaring horns.

Ellen looks on as Adam scrambles from beneath the covers and gets to the window.

INT./EXT. BEDROOM - HORIZON - CONTINUOUS

Adam sees the glow of lights beyond the field and trees surrounding the house.

He pushes the window up, allowing the sounds of YOUTHFUL VOICES to make their way inside.

ADAM
Jesus, sounds like a party.

He closes the window and turns back toward the bed.

ADAM
I'm calling the police.

ELLEN
I'm sure it's just teenagers.
Why ruin their fun?

ADAM
Supposed to be quiet out here.

ELLEN

You were young once, remember?

Adam glares through the window toward the festivities before turning back to his wife.

INT. SAM'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sam appears to be sound asleep.

DREAM SEQUENCE

INT. BETHANY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Bethany sleeps with a teddy bear cradled in her arms.

A rocking chair beside her bed begins to rock back and forth.

The tempo increases.

Suddenly, Bethany bolts upright and screams.

YOUNG MALE VOICE (O.S.)

Help! Sam, help me!

END DREAM

INT. SAM'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sam awakens with a start. His eyes dart about the room, and then he looks to the bedside table.

A picture of Ann.

SAM

Jesus, baby, why'd you have to
leave me?

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

The tree does not look quite as menacing in the early light of morning and consciousness as it had in Sam's dream, but it possesses the potential.

Tire tracks mar the dirt around it and at least three cases worth of beer cans litter the ground.

Adam surveys the mess.

INT. ADAM AND ELLEN'S BATHROOM - DAY

The hot water steams up the sliding shower door.

Ellen checks the temperature of the water, adjusts it a bit, and steps inside.

Leaning back, she enjoys the water soaking her hair and running down her body.

As she bends to get the soap, a shadow passes across the opaque shower door.

It hesitates and then seems to hurry away when she straightens up.

She reacts to the water suddenly becoming too hot.

She adjusts the knob.

Nothing.

She twists it all the way off.

It continues to run.

Still too hot, she swears as she jumps to the far end. The spray still hits her shins and feet.

Dancing to avoid the water, she turns the other knobs.

No help.

She goes to get out of the shower, but the door sticks.

ELLEN

Dammit!

She tries to keep her feet from the hot spray.

She bangs on the door.

Tugs harder.

The door gives and she nearly falls.

EXT. TREE - DAY

From the periphery, Adam and a DEPUTY survey the tree and the surrounding debris.

DEPUTY

You know how kids are about latching onto wild-ass stories and such.

ADAM

Wild tales?

DEPUTY

Yeah, ain't your father the one sold the place to John Delaney?

ADAM

Yeah, how did you know?

DEPUTY

Small town.

Adam nods and shrugs.

ADAM

He just inherited it and sold it. Never came back.

DEPUTY

So why'd you?

ADAM

What are these wild stories about?

DEPUTY

There's a few. This here tree's just one of them places that attracts that sort of thing. Like a place across the Tennessee line everybody calls Cry Baby Hollow on account of the way the wind sounds like a baby crying some nights.

ADAM

What about this place?

Not understanding Adam's lack of patience, the Deputy picks at an embedded rock with the toe of his shoe.

DEPUTY

Well, there's a few, but with that big branch sticking out, they're mostly about hangings. One about a gal they say hanged herself. Another has it a black boy got lynched here.

ADAM

Damn.

DEPUTY

Oh, yeah, there's another about a baby being left to die under them thick roots.

Shocked, Adam looks at the tree.

The Deputy, having marked Adam as a city-boy, grins at the side of his head.

DEPUTY

Doubt any of 'ems true though. Except one.

ADAM

Which?

DEPUTY

Back in the fifties, man blew his brains out. He was sitting down against the trunk. Bullet went clean through his head and on into the tree.

ADAM

Jesus.

DEPUTY

But I wouldn't worry too much about them kids. They mainly

just head out here when they run across somebody that ain't heard the stories.

ADAM

Good. Thanks for coming out.

DEPUTY

(walking away)

No problem, you just give us a holler if things get too loud.

About to get in his patrol car, the Deputy stops.

DEPUTY

Course they could be true.

ADAM

What's that?

DEPUTY

(grinning)

The ghost stories. You never know 'round here, they could all be true.

Laughing, the Deputy drops inside his car and pulls away.

Adam watches the car disappear, shakes his head, and, with a last look at the tree, begins picking up beer cans.

INT. SAM'S KITCHEN - DAY

Sitting at the counter, Sam, reading glasses on, dials the phone.

INT. RAINEY DEN - DAY

On the second RING, Bethany answers.

INTERCUT - TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

BETHANY

Hello.

SAM

Hey, sweetheart.

BETHANY
Grampa! Guess what.

SAM
Did you have a bad dream last night?

BETHANY
Nope. But guess what. I made a new friend yesterday. He knows lots about puppies like Pepper and his name is Lester and he said to tell you "hi."

Sam's mouth drops open and the phone falls from his hand.

Bethany still has the phone to her ear.

BETHANY
Grampa?
(looks at the receiver)
Grampa?

Silence.

Bethany shrugs and hangs up the phone.

BETHANY
Damn cell phones.

She goes toward the --

KITCHEN

Ellen sits at the table with a cup of coffee and Adam, at the counter, pours himself one as Bethany enters.

ADAM
. . . these stories.

ELLEN
(to Bethany)
Good morning, sweetness.

Ellen gets a glass of milk for Bethany.

ELLEN

(to Adam)

Your dad never talked about anything like that?

ADAM

He never talks about much of anything.

Adam musses Bethany's hair.

ELLEN

So, what do you think the chances are of him even coming to visit?

ADAM

(to Bethany)

Toast?

Bethany flops her head up and down.

BETHANY

With grape jelly.

ADAM

(to Ellen)

After his reaction? Zilch.

The telephone RINGS.

ELLEN

We need to get someone to check the shower.

Adam nods to her as he answers the phone.

ADAM

Rainey residence.

His eyes blink with surprise.

ADAM

Uh, sure, Dad, next week would be great.

He shoots Ellen a "you're not going to believe this" look.

ADAM

See you then.

He shakes his head in wonder as he hangs up the phone.

ELLEN

Sam?

ADAM

Yeah, he's coming to visit.

ELLEN

Weird.

Bethany bounces in her seat and CLAPS her hands.

BETHANY

Oh, goodie!