

HEART IN THE GROUND

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CHARACTERS

KAREN: A young wife and farmer

LEE: A young husband and farmer

SETTING

The dining room and back porch of a house on a corn farm in the Mid-West

TIME

A summer evening.

(Lights up on a small table in the dining room of an old farmhouse. It is modestly set for the evening meal. KAREN ENTERS with a plate of sliced bread in one hand and the butter dish in the other. LEE ENTERS behind her. He seats himself at one end of the table and she crosses to the other end. There is black dirt under her fingernails.)

LEE

Your brother will be out here as soon as he sees that hole. You hear me—about Bill?

(KAREN doesn't look at him and remains still for a moment. He picks up his cup to take a drink and then realizes it's empty. KAREN puts the food on the table and EXITS back to the kitchen. LEE watches her go.)

And this is gonna be the last time, right? You're not planning to keep this up all summer, are you?

(Silence.)

I've got a meeting with my...you remember my meeting next week, don't you?

(Silence.)

You know, I tore the pocket out of my shirt climbing over that fence.

(LEE takes a slice of bread, cuts a square of butter, and starts to butter the bread. He keeps watching the kitchen doorway. The butter is hard and it tears the bread. Finally, the bread is destroyed and he tosses it to the table, rises, and crosses to the doorway. Immediately KAREN ENTERS with a pitcher of iced tea. They almost collide. She says nothing and crosses past him to the table. She pours his glass and then sits down at her spot. LEE sits down again and drinks half of his glass.)

I was hoping you might be able to sew up the pocket on my shirt.

(Beat. No response from her.)

I saw that the kitchen needs to be swept. The laundry did get folded but it didn't get put away—

KAREN

I know. I'll take care—

LEE

And you forgot to take the butter out again.

KAREN

I didn't forget.

LEE

The point is, you're needed here at the house of an evening. It's your responsibility, Karen, and I'm not going to—

KAREN

I know, but right now—

LEE

I'm not gonna try and run this farm all by myself. I can't drop everything to pick up after you and I can't keep chasing you all over God's green earth. Just stay away from the cemetery and take care of things here. All right? Leave her alone. From now on. Take care of things here.

KAREN

Lee, I'm trying but I can't concentrate—

LEE

Please, just stay home and do your chores. That's all.

KAREN

I can't think—I'm restless when I'm here and all the time I'm doing chores—

LEE

Well, that's just fine. Huh? I'm exhausted from burying her twice already this week. And now I get to do it again because you were restless.

(Pause.)

KAREN

My baby belongs here—I don't care what Bill—

LEE

Karen—Karen! They got laws, okay? Codes and things. I don't know what all, but my hands are tied. They're not gonna let us bury her on land this close to the river. I talked with Bill yesterday, and he says there's not a blessed thing we can do. And he's not trying to pick on us. Those laws are for everyone in the county.

(Beat.)

I tried, all right? I really tried.

(Pause.)

So let's just eat. Can we do that?

(KAREN takes a slice of bread and scrapes her knife across the top of the butter and begins buttering the bread. It does not tear. After a moment:)

KAREN

Lee, can I ask you a question?

(She hands the buttered bread to LEE.)

LEE

You might want to wash your hands again before Bill gets here. It doesn't look too good, you know?

(Pause.)

KAREN

Have you ever stood out there? In the early part of the season, on a full moon?

LEE

Out back? Sometimes. Why?

KAREN

I used to, every so often. Back when Momma had the farm. Sometimes when I couldn't sleep.

(Beat.)

How long have you been farming, Lee?

LEE

What are you getting at?

KAREN

I was just wondering.

(Beat.)

Maybe you've seen . . . Have you . . . Have you ever seen the moon when it . . . would do things?

LEE

I don't know what you're talking about.

KAREN

Sometimes . . . you know . . . it'll make the corn grow out there or . . . tell the clouds how much it needs to rain around here . . . so things could grow.

LEE

No. Never seen it do that.

KAREN

It does. I've seen it happen out there. In the middle of the night. It starts pulling rain out of the clouds or pulling the corn . . . Have you ever seen the moon pull the corn right on up out of the ground?

LEE

I think you might have been dreaming.

KAREN

No, I was awake. I saw it. I know about farming. I've been doing it since I was twelve. Except for those two years. But I know about putting seeds in the ground. You put a seed in good, rich dirt, you can grow anything.

LEE

Hmm. Your food's getting cold.

KAREN

It's what I'm best at. Farming.

LEE

All right. Why don't you be quiet and eat, now?

KAREN

Momma used to tell Bill and I this story about a man who planted a single brick and he grew a house. It was silly. . .

LEE:

Would you pass the beans, please?

(She does. She kicks off her shoes underneath the table. LEE notices and looks at her.)

KAREN

I can't feel anything with these shoes on. It's hard to know what to do sometimes when you can't feel what's beneath you. It's like having your shoes get in the way of your thinking. But Momma . . . What were we just talking about?

LEE

Listen. When Bill gets here, I think it might be best if you stayed upstairs.

KAREN

Why?

LEE

Just until he's gone. It shouldn't take too long.

(Beat.)

If we need you, we'll call you.

KAREN

I'll be quiet. I promise. I won't say anything. I won't talk.

LEE

I'd just rather not have a scene like last time, okay? Then maybe you and I could . . . do something. Maybe take a walk.

(Pause.)

KAREN

This is my house. And he's gonna have to look me in the eye before he walks out of here with her.

LEE

Karen, let me handle it. All you have to do is finish your supper and go upstairs for awhile.

KAREN

What are you gonna do—Invite him in? Let him walk all over us and take whatever he wants? Is that how you'll—

LEE

Karen, I'll handle it.

KAREN

I know, but he's got no right to tell us how to—

LEE

I SAID. . .!

(Beat.)

We're not gonna break the law. I won't do it.

KAREN

You're not going to fight him for—

LEE

We won't win. And you know it.

KAREN

I saw the devil break his back to save a demon once.

LEE

Karen, my hands are tied.

KAREN

That must be some kind of demon, hmm?

LEE

Look, if I were the sheriff, I'd say go ahead. I know you're crazy but I don't care. All right? If I had the law in my hands, you could break the rules and no one would say a word. And the farm would be safe, and you could have everything just the way you want it. But you know something? For the past couple of days you've done nothing but run around acting stupid and backing us into a corner until we've got no other choice and now we're stuck! I'm stuck! And so are you! And we can't do anything about it! Because I'm not the sheriff, your brother is. And I don't have the law in my hands—he does. Hell, I don't even have it on my side right now, thanks to you! So if you really care about this house and the farm and your family, you'll finish your supper, go upstairs, and stop the goddamn digging!

(After a moment, KAREN looks down at her untouched food and stands up. She gathers her silverware in one hand and her plate in the other. She EXITS into the kitchen. LEE stands up and crosses to the kitchen doorway.)

LEE

(cont.)

I don't mean you have to go now.

(Beat.)

You're not throwing that food away, are you? We don't got the money to waste it.

(KAREN ENTERS again and takes her glass in her hand as she starts to EXIT to the living room.)

KAREN

No, I ain't wasting it.

LEE

(Stopping her.)

I mean, you can put it all back in the pans, or something, right?

KAREN

That's a good idea.

LEE

Karen, all I'm saying is that we can't—

KAREN

(Beginning to tremble)

I know well enough how to take care of my house and I know what to do with my food when I'm not hungry anymore. And I know what goes on out there in that field better than you do. Don't think you have to give me any advice in those areas.

LEE

Don't take that tone of voice with me. I'm not the one—

KAREN

Oh good. One more thing to do. Fix your shirt, take the butter out before supper, and change my tone of voice. I believe that's the list as it stands, ain't it?

(Again, she starts to EXIT.)

LEE

Karen, stop!

(Beat.)

I didn't say you had to go up right this minute.

KAREN

I'm going to sit outside.

LEE

Would you sit here with me? Please?

KAREN

I need some fresh air.

LEE

If Bill finds you out back, he's not going to—

(KAREN savagely picks up his knife and slams it down on the table. She slams it down again. LEE grabs her hand and forces it to the table to stop her.)

Bill wants to take you back to Marshall Valley again. Did you know that?

(She wrenches her hand away.)

KAREN

Why are you so afraid of him?

LEE

He thinks you need to see a doctor anyway. And if you keep acting like this, he'll take you for sure.

KAREN

It don't matter what I act like. Lee, I could be as sane as day and that wouldn't stop him from trying. He wants all of us out of here. I know that. You, me—one by one if he has to.

LEE

He's doing his job, for crying out loud, and you're provoking him.

KAREN

He wants this farm. It doesn't have anything to do with my sanity or an empty grave. That's the only reason he's coming here tonight. So he can start kicking us out.

LEE

If you would just stay home, he wouldn't have a reason to come out here at all. But you keep breaking the law and acting like this and you're pulling him out here. That's what scares me. All he has to do is get one doctor to sign an order and you're back in the hospital. And the farm goes right to him, like it or not.

KAREN

He'll have to fight a lot harder for it. Momma left it to me.

LEE

Why do you have to fight him at all?

KAREN

Catherine belongs here.

LEE

That doesn't make any sense to anyone but you.

KAREN

There are weeds all over that cemetery. Weeds and stones. It's on the north side of the hill. And I've seen every possible rodent there is crawling along that road. When have you seen that cemetery with the gate shut? Lee, there's a million reasons. You can't even see it from our back porch. Godahmighty, what's wrong with you? I just think about it and my legs, my wrists, my jaw, every part of me starts hurting. How can you sit down to eat—she belongs here! Not with a bunch . . . a bunch of stones and strangers, I swear, I don't even know that part of the earth. God don't even go there.

LEE

You act like this in front of Bill and he'll have you—

LEE

I can't do anything about Bill.
I'm not on his side, Karen. I just want to know why you think you can break the law and nobody should care whether you do or not. All that does is get your brother's attention and put more pressure on us.
No I don't.

I'm not ganging up on you. I'm trying to be—Karen, I'm trying to be on your side!

KAREN

Bill just wants to take the farm.
And if you take his side, it's gonna be that much easier for him to come and steal it from us. You can't be on his side and expect him to leave us alone.

You think that what I'm doing is wrong because Bill says it is.

You think that everything that comes out of his mouth is gospel law. But for your information, my brother is wrong, and you're wrong, and the whole county is wrong.

And if it takes all of you to gang up on me
It still doesn't prove that I'm not right.

KAREN

If you don't fight him, Lee, then you're not on my side. If you're going to be partners with Bill, then you're not good enough to be my husband or Catherine's father and you deserve everything that you get from Bill instead! And I hope all that dirt from Catherine's grave gets caught in your throat and you both choke to death on it!

LEE

Get out.

(She turns around, surprised.)

I said, get out! Go on. You're not going to blame me for this.

(Lee throws a handful of food at her.)

What kind of mother are you that you don't even wake up—

(KAREN ducks and EXITS into the living room. LEE throws another handful of food.)

—to check on a baby not even three weeks old!

(He collapses into his chair. He stares at his food for a moment and then takes a tentative bite. He swallows and then folds his hands and bows his head for a moment. He is taking a drink when KAREN ENTERS with a shotgun. She does not have the gun pointed at him.)

KAREN

I'd forgotten that you get scared sometimes too. Just like everyone else does. Except you don't run. You stand still and wait for something to hit you. I guess you figure you can live through anything. I don't know if I can anymore.

LEE

Karen, I'm sorry. I'm just tired, I think. And it's hard for me to understand sometimes that you're . . . you're going through it, too. The same way I am. And I want to understand, but sometimes—

KAREN

It could have been you, Lee. If I had gone to Pettiston after those parts, it could have been you with her. You could've woke up next to her in bed.

LEE

I'm sorry.

(Beat.)

KAREN

And with that sunrise coming in through the curtains, you would have sworn she was a sleeping angel. Wrapped up in a white sheet. Her face just—

(She draws a breath.)

LEE

Why don't you go put up the gun. It's not loaded.

KAREN

I've got to do something now or I really will go crazy. And since Bill's coming over, I'm going to need it.

LEE

Karen, it's not loaded. And I hid the shells.

KAREN

(Nodding her head.)

In with the Christmas decorations. I know.

(Pause.)

Remember last March? Around Easter time? When the ground was soft and starting to warm up? It rained so much there at the end that everything was just soaked through with water? Seemed like we were there in the mud with everything else. Just heavy and wet. Waiting for Catherine to be born. I walked around barefoot outside in the mud and I remember the earth grabbing my feet and not wanting to let go.

(Beat.)

Right now I feel like a bone the wind's blown across the yard and no one even notices. Don't you feel like that?

(Beat.)

Maybe you don't. If you could feel the earth underneath you, you'd see what I'm saying.

LEE

Maybe we should . . . Wouldn't it be enough to go visit every day? We could both go. Whenever you needed. I'd go with you. If you want.

KAREN

But how long would you let me stay?

LEE

As long as you want.

KAREN

No you wouldn't.

LEE

(The faintest smile.)

You could teach me how to sew my shirts. That'd keep me there awhile.

KAREN

Why don't you want her here with us?

LEE

It's not that I don't want her. I just don't want your brother and his deputies out here every other night. I don't need the law on my back, right now. There's a lot more at stake for me in this than you. I've got that meeting next week and if—

KAREN

So it's all about your parole? That's why you're scared of him?

LEE

No—

KAREN

That's why you're letting Bill do this? Lee . . . Shame on you.

(LEE is silent. KAREN EXITS into the kitchen. Quietly he follows her out. Lights down on the dining room and lights up on the back porch. It's made of wood and raised up off the ground by a step or two. One windowpane on the outside of the house is broken. KAREN ENTERS onto the porch. There is a crude and dirty box waiting there. In the background is the sound of crickets and cicadas. KAREN begins dragging the box away from the porch with one hand and holds the shotgun in the other. LEE ENTERS onto the porch.)

LEE

We can't go breaking the law.

KAREN

You aren't. I'm the only one doing anything.

LEE

If I let you go out there with her, Bill's gonna think I'm part of it.

KAREN

Tell Bill to mind his own business. Give him ten dollars see what he does.

LEE

We don't have ten dollars. We spent everything on tractor parts and burial plots.

(Beat.)

Karen, if you get put in jail or if they take you back to Marshall Valley, this farm becomes his business. And if Bill gets this farm, you don't think he's really gonna give it back to you, do you?

KAREN

He'll have to get past the shotgun first.

LEE

What are you gonna do—shoot out the window again?

KAREN

I won't be aiming at the window.

LEE

What you're doing is wrong. The courts aren't gonna—

KAREN

What I'm doing is not wrong. I know the difference, Lee.

LEE

But you're still breaking the law.

KAREN

Then the law is wrong. So throw the law in jail. But stay out of my way.

(LEE takes a breath and spits it out.)

LEE

You're gonna make me tie you up in your room so we can at least look like a decent family out here?

KAREN

You do and I'll scream loud enough—I swear it—the floor will just rip open beneath your feet.

(He crosses down to KAREN.)

LEE

Give me the gun.

KAREN

You stay away from me. I'll shoot.

LEE

Don't be stupid. Let me have it.

(She lowers the box to the ground.)

KAREN

I mean it. You're not gonna stop me.

(LEE picks up the box and carries it back to the porch.)

Lee, don't! Please don't do this.

LEE

Catherine gets buried wherever they want her to be buried.

KAREN

She belongs here.

(KAREN puts the shotgun down and runs to the box.)

Please, Lee, I'm not crazy. You can't let him take us away.

(LEE crosses down to get the shotgun. KAREN picks up the box and starts to EXIT with it.)

I am a good mother!

LEE

The world is full of good mothers. Nobody cares.

KAREN

The world is full of criminals, Lee!

LEE

Put her down, Karen! I mean it.

(LEE aims away from her and fires a shot. She instinctively drops the box to the ground and covers it with her body. There is a sudden silence.)

You want Bill to find us like this? You want him to see you . . . Just go inside where you belong. Bill and I are going to take care of it. We don't need your help—you've got no reason to be out here like this.

(Beat.)

Get inside before Bill gets here.

KAREN

Bill is not your family—I am. And Catherine is. And this farm. This is where we—We don't belong in there. We're out here. In the ground. We're out here eating away at all your time and attention. And you don't even want to touch us. Lee this is your family. We're swallowing up all your prayers and begging you to come out here and dance barefoot with us in the dirt and watch the moon take care of everything! And don't you look at me like I'm stupid! I'm not. I know how lucky I am to be here! And you better not forget how lucky you are too!

(Beat.)

KAREN

(cont.)

I got a second chance after Marshall Valley to come back here. Because this is where I belong. And you got a second chance after your parole because you belong here too. And so does Catherine. There are all those traps out there but they can't keep us away. They can't tie us down anywhere else. That moon keeps pulling us back to this place. All of us. We belong here watching the moon raise that corn right out of the ground. And if the moon can pull me up out of the hospital and pull you out of prison, then it's gotta be able to pull Catherine right up out of the ground, too. And I'm not fourteen anymore, and you're not gonna give my child away like Momma did. I'm old enough to be having children of my own now. I'm twenty-two and I'm married, so Catherine is legitimate this time, and I know a lot more than I did back then. She's not going to anyone else. She's staying with me and the moon is on our side.

(Pause.)

If you have to send something out to that graveyard, send flowers, or a promise, or an IOU. I don't care. But don't take away my baby. I just want her back. That's all. Send someone else to the cemetery, I want my little girl.

(LEE lowers his shotgun and leaves it standing by the door.)

LEE

You had a baby before Catherine?

(Beat.)

Why didn't you... You never—

KAREN

That's why Momma gave the farm to me. After Marshall Valley.

(Silence.)

Please don't leave me.

LEE

No.

(Pause. LEE nervously looks around himself and then up at the sky. Finally, he crosses down the steps and pulls a toolbox out from underneath. He motions for her to come to him as he kneels down.)

I promise. Catherine won't leave here. Ever.

(She crosses toward him.)

I need you to go pick as many ears of corn as you can carry.

KAREN

It's not ripe yet.

LEE

I know. I promise. She'll stay here with us.

(KAREN leaves the box beside LEE and quickly EXITS into the cornfield. LEE begins prying the top of the box with a curved claw hammer. Suddenly he stops. He puts down the hammer and sits down on the steps. He takes a breath and begins removing his boots. And then his socks. He smoothes a little dirt over his feet and then returns to the box and finishes opening it. KAREN ENTERS with her arms full of corn. She leaves them in a pile next to LEE. LEE takes the top off the box and lays it aside. Gingerly, he pulls out a small bundle wrapped in several pastel blankets and hands it to KAREN. He takes off his shirt and wraps several ears of corn in it. He places the bundle of corn into the box and begins nailing the lid back on. When he finishes, there is the sound of a knock on the front door. LEE places the box on the top step of the porch. He pulls a shovel out from underneath the steps and stands up. There is another knock at the front door. LEE and KAREN EXIT into the field. The lights fade.)

BLACKOUT