

**THE BARREN**

An original screenplay  
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Draft 1.0

COLD OPEN:

TITLE CARD - **DAY ONE: SUNDAY**

INT. FARM HOUSE, SARAH'S BEDROOM -- DAY

An elderly woman (SARAH Willis) lays weak and dying in an old four-post bed, an oxygen cannula in her nose.

A NURSE stands over her. She holds tight to her rosary and mouths a quick prayer over Sarah, then looks down at Sarah.

NURSE

To hell with this place.

The Nurse leaves her bedridden charge for the last time, and we focus on the POWERLESS HORROR on Sarah's face.

EXT. SOUTH JERSEY RURAL ROAD -- DAY

FOCUS ON: "Love is Love" bumper sticker.

PULL OUT to reveal a Subaru logo.

EVEN WIDER to show New York plates and a trailer hitch.

The Subaru station wagon, U-Haul trailer in tow, passes a bog, an abandoned gas station, and a rusted sign for a summer camp with a name that overpromises.

Yard signs promote gun ownership, that marriage is between a man and a woman, that every fetus is precious to God.

Finally, the Subaru passes a large sign: "Welcome to Estherville, New Jersey: Home of the Jersey Devil."

TITLE CARD - THE BARREN

EXT. PINE BARRENS COMMUNITY COLLEGE -- DAY

As the woods clear, the Subaru slows to a stop in front of a small, modern campus.

INT. SUBARU -- CONTINUOUS

Rhiannon "REE" Willis, early 50's, takes in the campus from the driver's seat. Next to her, equally unenthusiastic, is Daphne "DAPH" Holloway, late 30's.

REE

No more than six months, I promise. The old bat won't make it into the third trimester.

DAPH

Don't talk about your mother like that.

REE

Just you wait. You'll call her worse.

DAPH

I loved my mother.

REE

I know you did, Daph. I'm sorry you'll finally have to meet mine. But once she's dead I swear we'll go wherever you want to go.

DAPH

I have no idea where I want to go.

Ree puts the car in gear and it creeks forward.

Daph watches the college get smaller in the distance.

INT. SUBARU -- DAY

The tension between the two is palpable.

REE

Don't get mad at me Daph, but I have to ask. Have you gotten your period?

DAPH

No.

REE

(excited)

I'll pick up a test. Don't you want to know? I'm dying to know. It's all I think about.

DAPH

Clearly.

REE

I just don't understand why you're not more excited about this. We've worked so hard for it. Spent a ton of money on it, not that that matters.

DAPH

It's just... *my body*. I'm not ready for it to change so dramatically.

REE

You're never ready for any change.

Daph shoots her a harsh look.

REE

C'mon. It's true. I love you. I love you so much Daphne Holloway. But this is the most frustrating

thing about you. I know pregnancy will suck at times, but it's also going to be beautiful. You get to hold a life inside you. We're making a totally new person. It's magic.

DAPH

It's just that everything is changing all at once, Ree. I feel unmoored, unprepared.

The car slows. Ree turns into a driveway.

EXT. FARM HOUSE -- DAY

The car rolls along a gravel drive into a yard overrun by tall switchgrass, scrub oak, and twisted pines.

Beyond the house is an unkept field and a barn that leans to one side. Beyond the barn is a dense forest.

INT. SUBARU -- CONTINUOUS

Daph cranes her neck to take in the house. The paint is mostly peeled off, the shutters askew.

DAPH

Jesus. You lived here?

REE

In between stints with foster parents.

EXT. FARMHOUSE -- CONTINUOUS

The station wagon stops with a flare of dust.

The doors open and the women step out. A DOG begins barking ferociously from the next yard over, obscured by a tall hedge.

DAPH

How are the neighbors?

REE

Shitheads. You ready to meet the  
old witch?

INT. FARMHOUSE -- DAY

Ree barges in like she owns the place. Daph steps in tentatively. The house makes her shiver.

REE

Hello?

To the left is the dining room, to the right the salon. Directly in front of them are stairs to the second floor and a hall to the back of the house.

The Nurse comes down the stairs. She pauses briefly to look at the two women, crosses herself, and leaves the house without a word.

Daph mouths "WTF" to Ree.

REE

I don't think she likes our kind.

Ree charges upstairs.

Daph proceeds down the hall, pausing to examine black and white photos hanging along the wall. Generations of weathered, joyless faces stare back at her.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

Daph enters slowly. The decor is frozen in time, like a museum.

She marvels at the old coal stove, the zinc counters, the refrigerator from the 40's. She opens it, gasps for air, then quickly shuts it with an expletive.

She steps to the window, which looks out to the barn. To her left is another threshold that leads to a small foyer. She steps into it.

INT. FARM HOUSE, REAR FOYER -- CONTINUOUS

On her left is a set of steep stairs going to the second floor. On her right, a screened door to the rear yard. Straight ahead is a knitting room.

*SHRIEKING FROM UPSTAIRS!* Daph runs up the stairs.

INT. FARM HOUSE, SARAH'S BEDROOM -- MOMENTS LATER

Daph rushes in to find Ree suspending Sarah by her pajama collar.

REE

(to Sarah)

You wouldn't know love if it  
landed on you. I've got that now.  
I've got love.

Daph hauls Ree off of Sarah.

DAPH

Ree! Deep breath. Deep breath.

Ree tries to calm herself.

DAPH

Whatever she said, whatever she  
did, it's over. Let it go.

REE

I can't wait till she's dead.

DAPH

Well you can't be the one to kill  
her.

Ree huffs out of the room.

DAPH

You alright, Sarah?

The old woman refuses to look at her.

Daph smooths the sheets and sits on the edge of the bed.

DAPH

Let's start over. Hi, I'm Daphne.  
I'll be helping to take care of  
you.

On the nightstand are a dozen or so prescriptions. Daph  
starts sorting through them.

DAPH

Where to begin?

She finds a list with the times for administering.

DAPH

Haloperidol, ten a.m. Not sure  
what that does. Lorazepam twice a  
day. Nice. Roxanol, aka morphine.  
You want a little morphine? I  
mean, who wouldn't?

The old woman turns her head, meets Daph's eyes, and cracks  
a yellowed, broken smile.

EXT. BARN -- EVENING

Daph carries a bin of tools to the barn.

INT. BARN -- EVENING

A makeshift carpentry shop is taking form. Daph sets the bin on a bench and unpacks.

A RUSTLING SOUND catches her attention. She clicks on a work light.

The barn is divided in two sections: the open space where she is setting up and the half divided into animal stalls.

She flashes the light into the first stall. It's been decades since anything lived here, but a brittle old harness hangs on a peg.

In the second stall, nothing.

In the third, a pile of hay shivers. She takes a breath and edges closer. It stops moving. She moves in. Closer.

She kicks the pile.

A knot of flesh colored things SPASM. She shrieks, jumps back. Whatever it is, it's too small to hurt her.

It's just a LITTER OF MOLES. Their translucent, hairless, eyeless bodies writhe. It disgusts her. She backs away.

She slowly approaches the last stall. When she shines the light, something glimmers.

Hanging from a peg is a RIFLE. She steps into the stall to behold it. She lifts it from the peg.

It's old, maybe from the Civil War, maybe older, with an ornately carved stock and polished hexagonal barrel.

A HOWL echoes through the woods outside. She quickly puts the rifle back on the peg and heads for the exit.

EXT. BARN -- EVENING

The sun is behind the trees, making the hollow of the farm feel quite dark.

Daph exits the barn and jogs to the house.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

Ree removes a TV dinner from a microwave set perched on top of the coal stove. She carries it to the table where Daph is seated.

REE

It's the best I could manage.

(re: coal stove)

I don't know how to use that behemoth.

DAPH

A couple weeks and this room will be unrecognizable.

Daph spreads some drawings out on the table. While they eat-

DAPH

(pointing)

The new stove will go here with counters and cabinets on both sides. Obviously the fridge will get updated. I like that old zinc counter though. Thinking of reusing it.

REE

No. I want it all gone. Nothing from the past. A clean slate.

DAPH

We're not even going to live here.

REE

I don't care. Take it down to the bones. New everything.

Ree takes up one of Daph's sketches.

REE

You keep struggling to find your calling. This is clearly your calling.

Daph

Yeah, because everyone wants to hire a pregnant carpenter.

(catching herself)

Not that I am. I don't know yet.

Ree takes her hand.

REE

I know it's gonna take this time. You're going to be an amazing mother.

Ree pulls her in and kisses her forehead.

INT. FARMHOUSE -- NIGHT

We follow Daph up the stairs and into Sarah's Room.

INT. FARMHOUSE, SARAH'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Sarah is sitting up in bed, staring blankly at nothing.

Daph presents a TV dinner.

DAPH

Salisbury steak. Ree said this was a family staple when she was growing up.

Sarah flicks her arm and knocks the dinner out of Daph's hands. It splatters on the floor. The old woman CACKLES.

Calmly and methodically, Daph cleans up the mess.

DAPH

It's either me or her, and I know you prefer it's not her. So. Let's not do that again or instead of salisbury steak, I'll bring you curried tofu. Or how about vegan shrimp scampi?

Sarah just stares at her. Daph lifts the sheet of instructions.

DAPH

Okay. Looks like your next meds are tylenol PM before bed. We can do that now, I guess.

She preps a dropper. But Sarah won't take it.

DAPH

By god obstinance runs deep in this family. It's Tylenol no matter who gives it to you. Just take it.

Sarah reluctantly opens her mouth like a baby bird. Six clear drops fall into her mouth.

Daph unfurls a freshly laundered nightgown.

DAPH

I promise I won't enjoy this next part.

INT. FARMHOUSE, SALON -- NIGHT

Daph comes down the stairs and turns into the salon where Ree is lounging on the worn old sofa, sipping a whiskey.

The half empty bottle is on the coffee table. Next to it, a small box.

DAPH

(re: the whiskey)

Where'd you get that?

REE

The liquor store.

DAPH

You were four months sober.

REE

I've already got a mom. She's upstairs withering away.

DAPH

Yeah, I just changed her diaper and tucked her into bed.

REE

See, you're going to make a great mother.

Ree hands her the small box. It's a pregnancy test.

DAPH

What kind of mom do you think you're going to make?

REE

Oh here it comes.

DAPH

No, here it doesn't come. You do what you want to, Ree. Just don't expect me to stick around for it.

As she exits the room -

REE

Oh yeah where are you going to go? You can't even get a job.

INT. FARMHOUSE, BATHROOM -- NIGHT

Daph closes the door behind her. She's crying. She looks at the pregnancy test box, then stuffs it in the back of the vanity.

She pulls her pants down and sits on the toilet. In her underwear, a bloody pad. She removes it, rolls it in toilet paper, and stuffs it at the bottom of the trash.

INT. FARMHOUSE, BEDROOM -- MORNING

Daph wakes with the sun in her eyes. She grabs her phone and looks at the time: 9:14 a.m.

INT. FARMHOUSE, SALON -- MORNING

TITLE CARD - **DAY TWO: MONDAY**

Ree is passed out on the sofa. Most of the bottle has been drunk.

Daph nudges her.

DAPH

Ree wake up.

Daph nudges her again. Ree stirs.

DAPH

You're going to be late on your  
first day, Professor Willis.

Ree sits up.

REE

Ah fuck.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN -- MORNING

Ree pulls clothes on while sipping coffee. Daph wraps an egg sandwich in aluminum foil and hands it to Ree as she scoots out.

EXT. FARMHOUSE -- MORNING

Ree waves as she gets in the Subaru. Daph waves back.

The car peels away. Out of its dust emerges a ROTTWEILER. It sees Daph and charges. She slams the door shut.

INT. FARMHOUSE -- CONTINUOUS

The Rottweiler rams into the door with a THUD. Scratching claws, terrifying barks... Then, a VOICE. The dog quiets.

Daph peers through the door window to see BETHANY, a thin, angry woman, approach. She is shouting at the dog, whose name is BURGER.

Bethany gets control, barely, of Burger and hauls him off the porch. Daph opens the door.

DAPH

Hey.

Bethany barely glances back.

DAPH

Maybe keep Burger on a lead or something. That was terr-

BETHANY

Go fuck yourself.

Daph lets out a deep breath as Bethany disappears behind the tall hedge between properties.

INT. FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN -- DAY

Daph pries a cabinet off the wall and sets it in a pile of what has already been demoed. Where it used to be- layers of old wallpapers. And *something scribbled*.

She takes a closer look. It says "Jacob Leeds July 7th, 1824"

DAPH

Damn this house is old.

She fetches a large wrench from a tool bag and bends down to climb into the sink cabinet.

The alarm on her watch goes off. It's ten a.m. She shuts it off and adjusts a wrench.

We now see a **terrifying figure** in the threshold to the rear vestibule. He's a tall, **GAUNT MAN**, dressed in a black suit, white shirt, with a wide brimmed hat. His beard is long and grey.

His mouth moves silently, his gaze fixed where Daph would be if she were standing.

He turns and leaves through the screen door leading to the back yard.

The screen door BANGS shut and Daph jerks up, hitting her head on the cabinet frame.