

"THE REASON"

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FADE IN:

EXT. OSCEOLA, ARKANSAS -- DIRT FARM ROAD -- AFTERNOON

A typical hot, sun baked late afternoon in the country. The area is spotted with small farms and many of the fields are being worked, throwing clouds of dust into the wind. The breeze stirs small eddies of dust in the road. In the distance a few cumulus clouds roll and tumble.

A school bus approaches. BOUNCING AND BANGING through the potholes, it leaves a plume of dust behind it.

The brakes SQUEAL and SHRIEK as the yellow behemoth grinds to a halt. The door opens with a HISS.

RUTH JASPERSON(17) steps off the bus. Her sister, EMMA (16) jumps to the ground, dropping her backpack. The clasp breaks. J.J. ROGERS (16) follows, hands Emma a note and smiles. She tucks it into a book in her backpack.

RUTH

(waves)

Bye. See you tomorrow.

EMMA

Bye.

J.J.

Bye... see you later.

EMMA

Okay.

BUS DRIVER

You kids git home before the storm hits.

The door HISSES closed and the empty bus RUMBLES off. J.J.smiles at Emma and walks away.

RUTH

You're lucky.

EMMA

Why?

RUTH

J.J. ... You have a boyfriend.

EMMA

Don't tell father.

RUTH

Never.

The girls look up the long drive to a dilapidated farmhouse and barn. Behind them, the dark clouds move steadily closer. The wind whips and twists around their feet.

They look at each other; resignation. They do not want to move. Something is wrong. You can see it in their eyes.

EMMA

Want to take the long way home?

RUTH

I don't know. Father will get mad if we're late.

Emma stoops and picks some dandelions that have gone to seed. She BLOWS and the round ball of seeds disintegrates into a cloud that is quickly dispersed by the winds.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Where do you think they're going?

EMMA

Some place happy... They're so lucky. They can go wherever they want...wherever the wind wants to take them.

RUTH

I wish I was one of them.

EMMA

...Me too.

The wind picks up. The sky darkens. Distant THUNDER ROARS.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Storm's coming. We should head home.

RUTH

The long way?

EMMA

No... Look at the sky. Besides, you said so. Father will be mad.

RUTH

I changed my mind. The long way...Let's go.

Emma sees the fear in Ruth's eyes. She looks at the gathering clouds.

EMMA

Okay. But we should still hurry before the rains come.

Both girls shoulder their backpacks.

They walk in silence, heads down, eyes focused on the ground just a few yards in front of their feet. Emma stops. There, in the dirt, a PENNY. Emma picks it up and hands it to Ruth.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Here. It's good luck to find a penny.

RUTH

(skeptical)

You found it.

EMMA

But if I give it to you, the good luck will go with it... Here, take it.

Ruth fingers close tightly around the coin.

They walk. The wind picks up.

CUT TO:

INT. FARM HOUSE - LATER

The back door opens. WIND accelerates its movement. The door CRASHES against the wall.

Ruth enters, followed by Emma.

A WOMAN, ESTER (mid 50s) average looking, slightly overweight, wearing an apron and flowery print dress, sews a quilt. The wind blows it to the floor.

RUTH

Sorry, mother.

Ester is the epitome of a farmer's wife. Her pretty days are well behind her and the rough life shows on her face. Her warm smile belies the terror she endures.

ESTER

You girls are late! Where have you been? You're lucky your Father isn't in yet.

Ester's smile is short lived.

ESTER (CONT'D)

Never you mind. Both of you, get upstairs get started on your homework. Supper will be ready soon.

The girls race to the wooden stairs and disappear.

UPSTAIRS

EMMA (O.S.)

I win...again.

RUTH (O.S.)

No fair...my backpack is heavier.

KITCHEN

Ester peeks out the window, side to side. The gathering storm clouds worsen.

She prepares supper, interrupting herself periodically to return to her sentry duty.

GIRL'S BEDROOM

The room of two teenage girls. A few tasteful posters adorn the wall, simple furnishings; two small desks and two twin beds.

Emma and Ruth at their desks, still hard at their studies.

The small digital clock reads 6:45. Emma looks up.

EMMA

(yells)

Mom, we're hungry.

ESTER (O.S.)

You know we don't eat without him.

EMMA

But mom...

LIVINGROOM

The front door CRASHES OPEN. A MAN in the doorway.

GIRL'S BEDROOM

Ruth turns to Emma. The look on their faces says everything. They move toward their door.

LIVING ROOM

Ester, watching the Weather Channel startles, jumps, rushes to the kitchen.

HANK JASPERSON, (mid 50s, carrying a tattered bible, wearing dirty farm coveralls) is blown in by the wind. He stumbles, barely able to keep his balance, turns, leans

against a wall and fights the wind to CLOSE the door. He tries to focus his wind-dried eyes.

CLOSE ON TV SCREEN: A moving banner across the bottom of the TV screen alerts viewers. "TORNADO ALERT 7:00 - 8:30 PM"

HANK
Damned tornados!

The WINDOWS RATTLE in the wind.

KITCHEN

Hank drops into his chair. He slams the bible on the table; folds open the cover to a printed name.

CLOSE ON: "Emma Jaspersen"

HANK
(fuming)
Emma! Where's that harlot daughter
of mine?

ESTER
Hank! Stop it!

Hank picks up the bible.

HANK
(loud, angry)
This was in the dirt! I bring the
word of God into this house and she
treats His words like trash!

Hank removes J.J.'s note from the bible and waves it wildly in the air.

HANK (CONT'D)
Here!

He opens the paper and begins to read aloud a hand written note.

HANK (CONT'D)
'Emma, sneak out and meet me at
Beeker's Creek. 10 PM J.J.'.

He wrinkles the note in his fist.

HANK (CONT'D)
Sneaking out to meet that boy! I'll
teach her something about boys! And
God's will too! Where is she?...And
where's my supper?

Ester rushes to serve him. It's too late. His anger explodes.

Hank stands, grabs her left arm, pulls her around, his right hand, a fist, raised and poised to yield a striking blow to her face.

CLOSE ON: Emma and Ruth arriving at the kitchen entrance.

A fry pan of stew drops to the floor as Hank's fist STRIKES Ester. She FALLS to her knees.

HANK (CONT'D)
Damn you, woman! Clean up your mess
and fix me some supper!

Ester, dazed, hesitates. Hank stares at her and quotes scripture.

HANK (CONT'D)
As the church is subject unto
Christ, so let the wives be to
their own husbands...Do you hear me!

Hank notices the girls. They stand in fear in the doorway. He picks up the BIBLE from the table, SHAKES IT in a threatening manner.

HANK (CONT'D)
(yells angrily)

Emma! When you disparage the word of God you disparage your father...In the dirt! HIS words were in the dirt!

EMMA
I'm sorry, father. The bible must
have fallen...

HANK
Fallen!...Fallen!... I'll teach you
the meaning of fallen...I'll teach
you about a fallen woman. That's
what you want to be, is it?

He throws the wrinkled note at Emma.

HANK (CONT'D)
And this...what is this? A note
from that boy. You hide your
concubinal plans in the bible. Go
up to your room!

EMMA
(terror)
No father, please, no!

Hank raises his fist again.

HANK
Maybe you want some of this, you
whore?

Ruth steps forward.

RUTH
Mother, stop him!

Ester remains cowered on the floor. She's paralyzed with fear.

RUTH (CONT'D)
Father, I'll go. Leave her alone.
I've learned your ways...your
wisdom. You are my King. Do not
take her purity too.

HANK
Emma must learn on her own.

Hank glares at Emma.

HANK (CONT'D)
I said go to your room!

RUTH
(crying)
Father, please don't. Let her learn
by example.

Hank holds the bible high in the air and quotes the scripture.

HANK
And the daughter of any priest, if
she profanes herself by whoring,
profanes her father; she shall be
burned with fire.

Ruth points to the bible.

RUTH
But if you do not forgive others
their trespasses, neither will your
Father forgive your trespasses.

Hank grabs for her wrist. Ruth collapses to her knees and picks up the fry pan for defense. A short struggle. The pan DROPS with a LOUD CLANG. He drags her out of the kitchen.

Ester, on her knees, embraces Emma.

Ruth's SCREAMS penetrate the ceiling. Then silence.

TV NEWS CASTER (V.O.)
 ...and the National Weather Service
 has just upgraded the area
 surrounding Osceola to tornado
 warning. Several funnel clouds have
 been spotted touching down in the
 area of Hicksford School...

Ester rises, pushes Emma toward the door.

ESTER
 (frantic)
 Get to the storm cellar...quickly.

EMMA
 What about...

ESTER
 I'll get them. You go now. Hurry.
 Seal the door until you hear us
 knock, you hear me?

EMMA
 Yes, mother.

Emma opens the back door. The WIND RUSHES into the house.
 She's thrown back a few steps, then exits, unable to close
 the door behind her. Lightning FLASHES. Thunder ROLLS.

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY-- MOMENTS LATER

HOWLING WIND increases intensity. Windows RATTLE and their
 coverings SWAY, as the winds find their way thru small gaps.

An indecisive Ester stands at Ruth's door. CRYING AND
 SCREAMING from inside.

Ester opens on the door.

ESTER
 We have to get to the shelter! The
 tornados have touched...

From inside the bedroom

HANK (O.S.)
 Shut up woman. She must learn...Get
 back here.

Ruth emerges, clothes ripped, collapses in the hall.

Ester makes the sign of the Holy Cross on her chest, closes
 her eyes, pulls and holds the door shut with all her

strength. The lock breaks. Ester falls back, the door knob and shaft in her hand. POUNDING from inside the bedroom.

HANK (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Ester! Open the door!...Ester!

Emma appears in the hallway. Ester sees her. The winds silence momentarily.

ESTER

Emma, get to the shelter, quickly.
I have to end this... For you...Go!
Now! Remember the old trunk.

CUT TO:

INT. STORM SHELTER -- NIGHT

Silence. Emma, alone in the shelter. A small battery lantern casts faint shadows on the wall. She's been crying. She creeps up the steps and slowly opens the storm door. A sliver of dim light. The tornados have passed.

CUT TO:

EXT. STORM SHELTER - CONTINUOUS

Steady rain falls. A small glow on the horizon from distant town lights reflects off the low clouds. Against the glow, an outline of a rubble home. The RAIN BEATS on her.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESTROYED FARM HOUSE - DAWN

CLOSE ON: Two occupied body bags lay on the ground.

Neighbors, serving as rescue workers and the local sheriff continue to search the remains of the home.

An African-American NEIGHBOR LADY, mid 50s, heavy set, consoles Emma who's wrapped in an oversized jacket.

Emma is wide-eyed, in shock. She looks around. Other farms within view are unscathed. Only her home was hit. Debris is scattered everywhere.

In B.G., a Mississippi County Child Protective Services vehicle crawls to a stop.

EMMA

He did this.

NEIGHBOR LADY
 (not paying
 attention)
 What did you say, dear.

EMMA
 He did this. My father. He brought
 this on us.

NEIGHBOR LADY
 Heavens, girl, what are you talking
 about? Did you hit your head? Your
 Father had nothing to do with this.
 This was God. And why God chose to
 strike here and only here, well, no
 one will ever know the answer to
 that question.

EMMA
 (blank facial
 expression)
 I know... I know why.

NEIGHBOR LADY
 Lordy, girl. I think you did hit
 your head.

One of the men searching the rubble waves his arms and
 calls out.

RESCUE WORKER
 Over here. I found her.

Emma runs into the debris pile. The rescue worker tries to
 intercept her but fails. Emma stops and looks.

CLOSE ON: Ruth's TWISTED BODY partly buried among the
 rubble.

Emma SCREAMS. The rescue worker scoops Emma away, carries
 her back down the mound of rubble. She tries in vain to
 free herself.

EDNA HARBOR, 40s, petit, exits the CPS car, shoulders an
 oversized black leather bag and approaches Emma, who
 continues to try to free herself.

EDNA
 You must be Emma.

Emma stops struggling. Her emotions overcome her. She
 cries.

EMMA
 They're not dead...They can't be
 dead.