

Excerpt from "The Tree" (feature film)

written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The outskirts of an industrial town with houses scattered across a semi-rural neighborhood.

This is where civilization fades into open land, forgotten train tracks, and rusty silos.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

At the end of a narrow road is an old house. Despite the recently painted facade, subtle signs of decay can be noticed.

The sound of a shovel digging through dirt echoes from the back.

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

A shovel stabs the ground.

EMILE, 70s, tough as nails, digs a hole beside a row of newly planted rosebushes. He looks like he hasn't smiled in a decade.

The garden is flawless with beautiful flowerbeds, a healthy lawn, and colorful shrubs.

A modest wood workshop stands in a corner beside a potager.

Colette, also in her 70s, wrapped in a gardening apron, pours seeds into a handcrafted birdhouse hanging from a peculiar tree.

Black sap oozes from the tree's bark. There is hardly any green leaves left on the gnarled branches and the roots are twisted and knotted. The grass has receded around the base.

Colette touches the dark sap running down the trunk. It sticks to her fingers.

Emile finishes digging the hole and leans on the shovel to catch his breath. He plants the last rosebush and glances at Colette as she uses the hose to fill up a bucket with water.

Colette cleans the tree trunk with a wet cloth. Her hands and apron are blackened by the inky sap. She wrings out the cloth and scrubs.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

A modest living room with a cupboard filled with baubles and pictures of younger Emile, Colette, and their son Tom when he was a kid.

Emile and Colette eat in silence at a dining table.

A clock ticks monotonously somewhere in the house.

Emile finishes his plate. He spots black stains on Colette's fingernails.

EMILE

You're wasting your time with the tree.

Colette clears the table to avoid the conversation.

EMILE (CONT'D)

We have to cut it.

Colette disappears into the kitchen and comes back with a large bowl of wild strawberries.

EMILE (CONT'D)

It's going to contaminate the garden and--

Colette takes off her hearing aid. She serves some strawberries in two ramekins and takes one for herself.

Emile glares at her while she shovels strawberries into her mouth.

INT. WOOD WORKSHOP - DAY

The tip of a chisel digs into a piece of wood.

Emile carves the edge of what seems to be a picture frame. He pushes too hard and the wood cracks. He chucks the broken frame, grabs a fresh piece of wood and starts over.

Under the workbench, just beside where the broken frame landed, is a wooden box filled with child's drawings and keepsakes.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Colette vacuums.

The vacuum cleaner's head hits something under the kitchen table and smears a dark trail on the floor.

Colette kneels. She finds a cracked tile with something protruding underneath. She pulls out tile fragments and uncovers a dark root glazed in black sap.

Uneasy, she glances at the living room. Emile is nowhere in sight. She cleans the sap with a kitchen cloth, digs an old doormat out of a cupboard and throws it on the root.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Colette scrubs her hands with soap. She rinses and grabs a towel. She inspects her fingernails, they are still blackened by the tree's inky sap.

In the sink the grey water stagnates for a bit before going down the drain.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

A digital clock displays 1:13 AM.

A distant street light casts twisted shadows of the tree's branches in the bedroom.

The phone RINGS in the living room.

Colette sleeps through it, her hearing aid scattered on the bedside table.

Emile closes his eyes. He tries to ignore the phone but it RINGS again. And again.

EMILE
(under his breath)
Fuck.

He gets up.

INT/EXT. CAR - NIGHT

Emile drives into town, passing buildings with boarded windows, permanently closed stores, and houses with sun-peeled facades. He pulls up in front of a bar.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Emile walks into a grim neighborhood bar.

There's blood on the jukebox and glass shards scattered on the floor. Remnants of a vicious fight.

A group of REGULARS struggles to hold a very drunk CHRIS, late 60s, banged-up.

The bartender, LEIGH, 50s, fierce, slides a bunch of keys on the counter toward Emile.

LEIGH
(to Emile)
Next time I'll call the cops first.

Emile acknowledges her and takes the keys. He grabs Chris' arm.

EMILE
Let's go.

Chris resists.

CHRIS
(out of it)
Fuck off.

Emile glances at the Regulars standing by, waiting for an excuse to swarm Chris again.

EMILE

Hey. It's me.

Chris looks at Emile with bloodshot eyes.

EMILE (CONT'D)

Come on, let's go home.

Emile pulls Chris out of his chair and drags him towards the exit under the Regulars' baleful glares.

EXT. BAR - NIGHT

Emile struggles to push Chris into the back seat of his car.

EMILE

Just get in, for Christ's sake!

CHRIS

(mumbles)

... my truck...

EMILE

Tomorrow. You can't drive now.

Chris finally crawls inside the car.

Emile SLAMS the door shut.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Emile drives out of town.

Chris GROANS in the back seat.

Emile turns on the RADIO, cranks up the volume, and focuses on the road.

INT/EXT. CAR - NIGHT

Headlights pierce the darkness as Emile's car moves up a dirt road.

They drive past rusty carcasses of farm machinery rotting on the side.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

The car's headlights illuminate a squalid farmhouse. The second floor windows are boarded up. An empty doghouse stands near the main door. Weeds everywhere.

Emile drags Chris out of the car.

EMILE

C'mon.

They take a few steps towards the house. Chris falls on his knees and throws up. Emile helps him up.

INT. LIVING ROOM, FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

The lights flicker on revealing the dingy living room of someone who's given up.

WOOF!

EMILE

Hey Phyllis.

PHYLLIS, an old Labrador, emerges from under the staircase, tail wagging. She demands pats.

Emile guides a barely conscious Chris to a dusty armchair. He pets Phyllis and takes in the overwhelming mess.

INT. BEDROOM, FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Light spills from the corridor into a dark and cluttered bedroom.

Emile grabs a blanket and a pillow from an unmade bed. He catches a glimpse of an old black and white family picture on the wall of a farmer, his wife, and two little boys.

INT. LIVING ROOM, FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Emile slides the pillow under Chris' head and covers him with the blanket. He disappears into the kitchen and comes back with a jug of water, a trash can and a bag of frozen fries.

EMILE

Hold this.

Emile sticks the bag of fries on Chris' bruised eye and leaves the trash can and the water beside the armchair.

Chris winces in pain and mumbles something while adjusting the fries on his face.

EMILE (CONT'D)

What?

CHRIS

(out of it)

If Dad sees us... we'll get whipped.

EMILE

Dad's gone. No one's getting whipped. Give me your feet.

Emile removes Chris' boots and tosses them aside. He pushes a stack of old magazines off a chair, sits down on it, and watches his little brother fall asleep.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Colette sits at the table with TOM, 40s, cradling a cup of tea. She's happy to see him.

Tom scans the living room.

TOM

You haven't changed a thing.

Emile walks in from the kitchen, drops a box of biscuits on the table and sits down.

EMILE

What for? Everything works.

TOM

We talked about you getting a new TV and also a phone.

EMILE

We have a phone.

TOM

I'm talking about a smartphone,
Dad.

EMILE

We're fine.

TOM

What if you get lost, or something
happens, and you end up at the
hospital?

EMILE

Don't they have phones at the
hospital?

TOM

Yes but--

EMILE

So what's the point?

TOM

(frustrated)

Why are you so against this?

EMILE

Frauds.

TOM

Frauds? What do you mean frauds?

EMILE

People get their identities and
bank accounts stolen because of
their smartphones.

TOM

That's not how it works.

EMILE

I don't care how it works. No
smartphones, no frauds.

Tom gives up and grabs a biscuit.

COLETTE

How's Jacqueline?

TOM

She's ok. Her morning sickness is better, and the doctor says she can be more active now, but she still needs to be careful

Tom sips his tea.

TOM (CONT'D)

We're moving out.

COLETTE

What?

TOM

The company offered me a job at the head office. With the baby coming, we need the money, and Jacqueline would have more opportunities to find work in the city. They want me to start as soon as possible.

Colette and Emile process the news.

Tom shifts in his chair, uneasy.

TOM (CONT'D)

I wanted to ask... have you thought about what you're going to do with the house?

EMILE

What do you mean?

TOM

What are you planning to do on the long term?

EMILE

The long term? What are you talking about?

Tom fiddles with his cup, not knowing how to say this.

TOM

There's a place not too far from where we'd live, it's a bit pricey, but the staff seems friendly, and they have a great park. I thought it'd be good to have you closer to us for when the baby comes.

Emile stares at Tom, incredulous.

EMILE

We're not moving to a home! Why the hell would you think that?

TOM

Dad, you have to look at reality, this house is not worth much, and soon you won't be able to maintain it. I think it's time to start thinking about your options.

EMILE

Not worth much? You grew up here! And it's none of your goddamn business what we do with our house!

TOM

Yes, it is. I'm your son. What do you think will happen when you can't handle living here just by yourselves anymore? I'll be the one dealing with it. And getting assistance all the way here is going to cost a fortune. All I'm saying is you don't need to wait--

EMILE

What the hell do you know about what we need? Since when do you give a shit?!

COLETTE

Emile!

EMILE

(turns to Colette)

Did you know about this? Is that
what you want? Go to a home?

COLETTE

Please stop.

TOM

Dad I didn't mean--

Emile storms out.

A door SLAMS somewhere in the house.

After an uncomfortable silence Tom downs his tea.

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