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THE BOOK OF ELI

by

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A civilization is destroyed only when its gods are destroyed.

- Emil Cioran

EXT. FOREST - DAWN

Bare as all hell. The trees stripped of their bark and white like ghosts. Some torn violently from their roots and felled.

STARK GRAY SUNLIGHT shafts between the trees, clouded by a creeping fog that obscures the true color of everything. A LIGHT SNOW flutters. The world monochrome, lifeless and cold.

A CAT prowls across the dead earth. Barely recognizable as the domestic breed it might once have been. Its fur mangy and rank, body rib-thin from starvation. Entirely feral.

It moves slowly, cautiously. Sniffing the air, scanning the forest, alert. Trusting nothing of its surroundings. It paces across a leaf-strewn clearing, closing stealthily on:

A DEAD MAN, splayed face-down in the earth. His feet bare. Face frozen in a grim death mask. A GAPING GUNSHOT WOUND in his head, the dried blood caked around it matting his hair.

As the cat moves closer, approaching warily:

P.O.V. FROM ACROSS THE CLEARING

About thirty yards away. Someone is watching. Waiting. SLOW, DEEP BREATHS, heard through a GASMASK RESPIRATOR.

CLOSE ON A PAIR OF INDUSTRIAL GOGGLES

The MIRRORED LENSES reflecting the forest clearing, locked onto the cat. The slow, metered breathing continues.

THE CAT slows, but continues pacing toward the corpse. More cautious than ever. It inches forward, sniffing at the body.

ON THE WATCHER. Crouched behind the mangled stump of a felled tree. Concealed beneath a camouflaging mesh of leaves, twigs and bracken. A "ghillie suit" of the kind used by snipers.

THE CAT sniffs at the dead man's hand, frozen by death in a grotesquely contorted claw. The animal still unsure. Looks around again, checking its surroundings for predators.

THE WATCHER moves almost imperceptibly. The leaves covering him rustle ever so slightly as we hear - just barely - the familiar creaking sound of a BOW STRING BEING DRAWN TAUT.

THE CAT hears it. Looks up, alert. Staring right at the watcher, but he is too well camouflaged to be seen. An interminable, tense BEAT - is the prey going to flee?

Finally, the cat turns its attention back to the carcass, nibbling gingerly at the flesh of the man's fingers.

THE WATCHER looses the arrow. It sails across the clearing and SKEWERS THE CAT clean through. It drops to the ground.

THE WATCHER STANDS, shaking off the ghillie suit, revealing him to us for the first time.

He wears a weather-beaten knee-length duster. Hooded sweater with more layers beneath that. Torn pants and scuffed work boots. Everything filthy and battered from years of wear.

Along with the goggles, his face remains obscured by a DISPOSABLE PAPER DUST MASK and a CRUDELY-FASHIONED FUR HAT with dangling ear flaps that may once itself have been a cat.

Around his neck he wears a silver SAINT CHRISTOPHER PENDANT hanging from a frayed twine cord.

His name is ELI.

He shoulders the bow and walks across the clearing. Crouches beside the dead cat and pulls out the arrow. Wipes the blood from the shaft, then reaches down to collect the body.

Suddenly the cat SCREECHES AND FLAILS WILDLY! Eli recoils, falling backward, stunned, as the cat - MORTALLY WOUNDED BUT FIGHTING TO THE DEATH - bites and claws desperately at him.

Eli struggles violently with the cat, wrestling it to the ground and grabbing up a HUNK OF FALLEN BRANCH. He holds the writhing animal down and CLUBS IT until it lays still.

He sits back, breathing harder than the dustmask will allow. He yanks it down, revealing the dirty, unshaven face beneath. Impossible to tell his age, but certainly not a young man.

For a moment he just sits there. Then bundles up the dead cat and returns to the mangled tree stump. Folds away his ghillie suit into a nearby RUCKSACK which he hauls up onto his back.

A canteen dangles from the backpack, a SHOTGUN strapped to its side. Eli reaches down for his final possession - an old SAMURAI SWORD in a scabbard which he slings across his back.

He gazes up at the sky. A snowflake drifts down and lands on his cheek. He reaches up and brushes it away, leaving a BLACK SMEAR on his face. Not snow after all, but some kind of ASH.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - DAY

Eli emerges from the treeline onto the cracked and ruptured asphalt. Lined by more of those ghostly, stripped-bare trees.

He sniffs the air, breathing it in. Checks the road in both directions. Deserted. A few yards away is the rusted, burned-out chassis of a CAR. He heads toward it.

The car rests half on the road, half in the adjacent ditch. Stripped of its tires and engine. In the driver's seat is a MUMMIFIED BODY. A BULLET HOLE piercing its forehead.

Eli regards the body dispassionately. Tries the door handle but it's jammed. He yanks on it harder and eventually wrenches it open. He leans in and checks the man's feet.

They're bare. No shoes or socks. Eli curses under his breath.

He leaves the car behind and heads on down the road. As he walks away, we see that the sole of one of his boots has worn loose, held in place now only by a rubber band.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Eli continues down the road. He ambles along slowly, a man in no hurry. A man who has been walking a long time.

The road has since emerged from the forest. Passing now through a wasteland of dead scrub brush and urban junk.

The sun beats down from directly overhead. The sky has no color to it, paper-white. The unfiltered sun's stark light leaves everything seeming bleached-out, over-exposed.

CRANE UP as Eli walks on. On the horizon is the silhouette of a CITY. Or what was once a city. Columns of BLACK SMOKE rise from within, casting a deathly pall over the skyline. BURNED AND BROKEN SKYSCRAPERS jut out like tombstones.

Eli reaches a fork in the road and stops. The road he's on appears to wind off in the direction of the ruined city on the horizon. The other fork continues on into the wasteland.

After a brief pause, Eli changes direction and heads off down the other fork, away from the city.

EXT. ABANDONED TOWN - DAY

Little more than a main street lined with storefronts. Eli walks steadily along, side-stepping rubble and debris. Ignoring the petrified corpses lying in the street.

He passes by abandoned stores, every one picked clean. Empty shelves, smashed windows. Looted and burned. He doesn't even look inside, knowing already that he will find nothing.

Until he comes to a store that does cause him to stop. An old-fashioned sign squeaks on rusted hinges in the breeze.

ED'S SHOES - GENTLEMEN'S AND LADIES' FOOTWEAR

He steps into the doorway and pushes open the door. It swings open on its one remaining hinge before splintering away from the frame and crashing to the floor in a cloud of dust.

INT. SHOE STORE - CONTINUOUS

Eli steps inside. Like all the others, the store has been cleaned out. Shoe racks and empty boxes strewn over the floor. The whole place reeking of dead, musty air.

Eli looks around, just to be sure. Drags his sheathed sword idly along the empty racks as he checks them. Nothing.

As he turns back for the door, his foot nudges against a shoe box. It's not empty. He crouches down, flips the lid off hopefully... and pulls out a LADY'S HIGH-HEELED SHOE.

He strokes the shoe leather with his hand. Shakes his head grimly, then tosses the shoe back into the box and leaves.

EXT. ABANDONED HOUSE - DAY

On the outskirts of town. In disrepair - peeling paint, broken windows, damp-stained walls - but habitable.

Eli stands in the front yard, surrounded by brownish, overgrown weeds. Thinking it over. Turns to face the setting sun. It will be dark soon. He turns back toward the house.

INT. ABANDONED HOUSE - DAY

The front door is sent CRASHING OPEN with a hard kick, revealing Eli silhouetted in the fading sunlight. The shotgun unhitched from his pack and held ready. He moves inside.

Another dead place. Flies buzzing in the still, dank air. Everything covered in a thick layer of dust but otherwise largely preserved. An eerie snapshot of a world long gone.

KITCHEN

Every cupboard empty. Eli checks each one, poking around in the dark corners with his sword, but finds nothing but dust.

He opens the freezer, checks inside. Empty save for a small ICEBOX. The lid stuck fast with mildew and gunk. Eli digs at it with his grimy fingernails and manages to pry it open.

Inside are the wizened, petrified remains of a HUMAN HAND. Floating in slimy, discolored water. The smell vile and thick enough to make Eli retch. He quickly jams the lid back on.

BEDROOM

A wooden bedframe stripped clean. The dresser drawers have been emptied and lie strewn across the floor. Eli moves toward a large walk-in closet and opens the door.

No clothes inside - just the near-fossilized corpse of a MAN HANGING BY A NOOSE. Twisting gently back and forth.

Unfazed, Eli crouches down and checks the man's feet. An old pair of Converse All-Stars hang limp from the man's skeletal ankles. Eli calmly sets about unlacing them.

He checks the size; they're a fit. He upturns each shoe and shakes the old flakes of mummified flesh from them. Discards his ruined boots and puts on the sneakers, laces them up.

He walks around, pacing up and down, getting a feel for the new shoes. They feel good. For the first time, he smiles.

LATER

Eli sits in the corner, roasting the carcass of the dead cat over a small CAMPFIRE. He cleans the animal's pelts as he watches it cook. Pokes at the meat with a pen-knife, checking it for done-ness. It appears ready to eat.

He clasps his hands together in prayer.

ELI

Dear Lord, thank you for your
generosity in providing us today
with this bountiful feast.

He speaks with a RASPY, OLD-WORLD MIDWEST DRAWL, like John Wayne or some other long-forgotten western icon.

ELI

Thank you for the many gifts that
you have given me. Thank you for
your protection and your guidance.
Thank you for bringing me this far.
I know my long journey's end is
near. I ask now only for the
strength and the courage to
complete the task that you in your
infinite wisdom saw fit to bestow
upon me over all men. I won't let
you down. Amen.

He signs a cross over himself, then uses the knife to saw off a chunk of meat. Takes a bite, savoring the taste with great relish. To him, it's grade-A filet mignon.

ELI

Hey. What about you? You hungry?

It appears as though he is talking to himself... until a RAT emerges from his coat pocket, whiskers twitching keenly. Eli offers it some meat. The rat gnaws enthusiastically at it.

SUNDOWN

The last of the waning sunlight shafts through the bedroom's broken window. Eli rummages through his backpack, pulls out a SMALL PACKAGE wrapped in cloth and tied fast with string.

He sits back in his corner and carefully unwraps it. It's a BIBLE. Faded and cracked leather cover, the pages dog-eared, their gilded edging long since worn away by use.

Eli gazes lovingly at it. Lets his fingers play across the embossed gold cross on its cover. A cherished thing.

He begins to read, half-hidden in the shadows of the fading sunlight. Silently mouthing the words as he reads them.

MANY PAGES LATER

Eli closes the bible and parcels it back up as before. Replaces it in his pack, then reaches in for something else.

A CAR BATTERY. Old and streaked with acid stains. Attached to a tangled bunch of ELECTRICAL WIRING and JUMPER CABLES. Eli reaches into his pocket and produces:

AN IPOD. Badly beat-up, the case pretty much held together with duct tape. But functional. Eli attaches the battery cable to the iPod and places the headphones in his ears.

The music plays. Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor*. Eli rests back against the wall and pushes the volume way up.

THE MUSIC SWELLS. Eli's fingers dance and swoop in the air, as though conducting an orchestra, as he is transported by the music to another world, a world far from this one.

MORNING

Sunlight shafts through the window. Eli sits slumped in the exact same position, headphones still in his ears. Asleep.

The rat scurries up Eli's chest and licks his face. Slowly, he wakes, realizing he fell asleep with his music still on. Checks the battery. It's dead, drained overnight. He frowns.

He gets to his feet, moves to the window and checks outside. All seems quiet. He loads up his backpack and weapons.

ELI

Come on.

The rat scurries up his leg, onto his duster and disappears into the breast pocket. Eli turns and moves out.

EXT. ABANDONED HOUSE - MORNING

The gate squeaks shut behind Eli as he exits the front yard.

He breathes in the air, turns to feel the warm morning sun on his face. Then turns away from it and walks on down the road.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

The landscape barren and featureless, road lined with dead trees. Eli walks along the warped and broken asphalt.

Up ahead is a HUNCHED FIGURE by the side of the road. Eli arrives to see that it's a YOUNG WOMAN. Bone-thin, dressed in filthy rags. Skin plagued by an unpleasant rash.

The SHOPPING CART she was pushing has overturned into a roadside ditch, spilling its contents. Blankets, tins of food, old clothes. She's on her knees trying to gather it up.

She looks up as she sees Eli approaching. Instantly cowers from him, raising her hands to protect herself. Terrified.

YOUNG WOMAN

Oh. Please don't hurt me. Here, take anything you want. You want some food? Take it.

She offers him a can of pet food with a trembling hand. Eli stands there looking at her. His expression impossible to read behind the mirrored goggles.

ELI

I'm not going to hurt you.

YOUNG WOMAN

That's what the last guys said.

Eli bends down and picks up a couple of the cart's spilled contents. Steps forward and offers them to her.

ELI

Here.

She blinks. Unsure. Cautiously she reaches out and takes it.

YOUNG WOMAN

Could you help me? The wheel came off. I can't fix it. Maybe if I could get it out of the ditch. But I can't.

Eli looks at the cart. It has come to rest in the ditch just inches from a THICK BRACKEN HEDGEROW that lines the road.

He looks again at the girl. Her faded blouse is unbuttoned, revealing a little cleavage. Her skirt torn along the leg, showing more than a little thigh. Almost deliberate.

He sniffs the air. Watches the hedgerow warily. Just like the cat he hunted, his senses heightened and on alert.

BEHIND THE HEDGE

THREE ROADSIDE BANDITS are crouched, waiting to pounce. Each armed with a crude blunt weapon. They exchange anxious looks.

ELI sniffs the air again - then backs away from the girl.

ELI

One good thing about no soap any more. You can smell the road agents a mile off.

The girl's face falls as Eli backs up. The three bandits EMERGE FROM THE HEDGEROW, brandishing their weapons. A couple of them wear old sunglasses and goggles similar to Eli's.

The BANDIT LEADER grabs the girl by a fistful of hair as he passes, yanking her painfully to her feet.

BANDIT LEADER

Dumb bitch. What did we tell you?

He pushes her away, she crumples to the road in a heap.

Eli backs away, but TWO MORE ARMED BANDITS drop from hiding in the trees behind, cutting off his escape, surrounding him.

BANDIT LEADER

What you got there in the pack?

ELI

Nothing.

BANDIT LEADER

Yeah, that's what they all say. How about you take it off real slow and tip it out so's we can take a look?

BANDIT #2 notices the shotgun strapped to the pack.

BANDIT #2

He's got a gun.

BANDIT LEADER

Shit, it ain't loaded. They never are. Ain't that right, old man?

(beat)

Open the fucking pack or die.

ELI

I can't do that.

The bandit leader steps forward aggressively. Now within striking distance of Eli. He grins, teeth filthy and rotten.

BANDIT LEADER

Want us to do it for you? We can get it off real easy after we've hacked your fucking arms off.

ELI

No. I mean I can't die. I'm on a mission from God, and under his divine protection. You stand in my way, you stand in his. And he will strike you down, through me, his faithful instrument.

BEAT. The bandit leader looks at Eli incredulously... and then LAUGHS. The other bandits laugh along nervously.

BANDIT LEADER

God, huh? Haven't heard that one in a long time. What are you, some kinda preacher?

ELI

Something like that.

BANDIT LEADER

Well, I got news for you, preacher man. God left these parts a long time ago. He ain't here to protect your ass. Now take off the pack and set it on the ground.

Eli doesn't move, doesn't say a word. The bandit leader takes another step forward and shoves him in the shoulder.

BANDIT LEADER

Are you fucking listening to me?

ELI

I hear you. You lay that hand on me again and you will not get it back.

The other bandits exchange nervous looks. This is not how it's supposed to go.

BANDIT LEADER

All right, I had just about enough of this shit...

He lunges forward, grabs the shoulder strap of Eli's pack.

If you blinked, you missed it. But somehow Eli has now drawn his sword. A RIVULET OF BLOOD snakes down along the blade and drips onto the asphalt.

Bandit leader's hand is still gripped firmly around Eli's shoulder strap. But it's no longer connected to his arm. The SEVERED HAND hangs there from the strap, dripping blood.

Bandit leader staggers backward and raises the bloody stump where his hand once was. Looks at it in shock and horror.

BANDIT LEADER

What... you just... he just cut my fucking hand off! My fucking hand!

Eli pries the hand loose from the strap and tosses it onto the road as bandit leader's legs give out and he slumps to the asphalt. His eyes dart around, as though confused.

BANDIT LEADER

What you standin' around for? Kiss him!

BANDIT #3

What's he talkin' about, kiss him?

ELI

He's in shock. He means "kill him".

A tense BEAT. And then the four remaining bandits ATTACK ELI ALL AT ONCE, weapons flailing.

Eli flourishes the sword. A BLUR, TOO FAST TO FOLLOW. But it's clear he is possessed of an inhuman level of skill.

It is over in moments. The four bandits LAY SLAIN IN THE ROAD, blood pooling out onto the asphalt.

The bandit leader crawls toward his severed hand, a few yards away. Eli steps in and kicks it out of his reach.

ELI

I told you you wouldn't be getting that back.

Bandit leader looks up to see the figure of Eli bearing down on him, silhouetted ominously against the sun. He looks for a moment like an avenging angel, something not of this world.

BANDIT LEADER

Who are you?

ELI

My name is Eli.

And with that, Eli runs him through with his sword.

He turns to see the young woman slumped in the road, sobbing. She cowers again as he approaches, certain that she is next.

He WALKS PAST HER. Sheathes his sword, then pulls out the shopping cart from the ditch and rights it. The woman watches incredulously as he gathers up her supplies into the cart.

ELI

Take it and go on your way. And don't fall in with men like these again. No good can come.

She looks at him, puzzled.

YOUNG WOMAN

Why are you doing this?

Eli says nothing. Walks back to the slain bandits, crouches beside them and begins searching their bodies.

He takes a scarf from around the neck of one. Finds a Zippo lighter on another, checks that it works and pockets it.

LATER

The five bodies are lined neatly in the ditch, half-covered with dirt. The best burial they are going to get.

Eli stands before them, head bowed in prayer. He speaks quietly and quickly, a speech he has given many times.

ELI

God, the father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the holy spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins.

The young woman stands a few yards away, watching him, transfixed. She has never seen anyone like him.

ELI

Through the ministry of the church may he give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit. Amen.

He turns and walks away down the road, passing the woman.

YOUNG WOMAN

Thank you. You're... a good man.

ELI

There are no good men on the road.

YOUNG WOMAN

Where are you going?

ELI

West.

YOUNG WOMAN

Can... can I come with you?

He doesn't even turn back to look at her.

ELI

No.

He walks on, into the horizon.

EXT. FREEWAY OVERPASS - DAY

Straddling the desert like a giant, crumbling monument to a long-dead civilization. Eli steadily climbs his way up.

He comes to an abrupt stop as we realize suddenly that the overpass has COLLAPSED at mid-point. RUSTED IRON RODS jut out from where the roadway has been severed.

Eli just stands there at the edge for a moment, feeling the wind whip around him, his coat fluttering in the breeze.

The overpass's collapsed section is now just a MOUNTAINOUS PILE OF RUBBLE that leads down to the road below.

Eli steps onto the rubble. About to make his way down when he FREEZES. He hears something. The faintest of sounds. He takes cover, peering down at the road beneath the overpass to see:

TWO PEOPLE walking together on the road. We see everything from ELI'S P.O.V. - too far to make out much detail, but apparently it is a MIDDLE-AGED COUPLE.

The man pushes along an OLD WHEELBARROW covered by a tarp as the woman, seemingly his wife, walks alongside. The barrow's rusted wheel gives out a plaintive, rhythmic SQUEAK.

Eli ducks down again as he hears something else. This time much louder. The menacing growl of MOTORCYCLE ENGINES.

FOUR BIKES IN TOTAL. Riding out of the horizon, closing in on the couple. They see the bikes coming and panic. Try desperately to steer the barrow off the road.

The bikes screech to a halt and the FOUR RIDERS dismount. Brandishing a variety of weapons. The couple make a run for it but they're quickly chased down and tackled to the ground.

The woman SCREAMS and struggles helplessly as the bikers swarm over the man like a pack of predatory animals.

The woman is pulled to the ground and the clothes stripped from her. Eli turns away. He knows what comes next.

Eli listens as the woman screams and screams. He reaches for his shotgun... hesitates... then withdraws his hand.

ELI

It ain't your concern. Stay on the path. It ain't your concern. Stay on the path.

Eli repeats it like a mantra. He clearly wants to intervene, but will not permit himself to. Instead, he simply sits and waits grimly as the woman continues to scream for help. And then finally, suddenly, is silenced.

Down below, the bodies of the man and woman lay dead and bloodied in the dirt. The bikers tear the tarp from the wheelbarrow, spilling its contents onto the asphalt.

They ferret through the items, scavenging a few items - we don't see what - and stuffing them into an old cloth satchel. They leave the rest strewn in the road and ride off in the direction they came, dust pluming in their wake.

Eli waits until the sound of the motorcycles has receded into the far distance before emerging from his hiding place.

EXT. ROAD BENEATH OVERPASS - DAY

Eli crouches on one knee before the murdered couple. He signs a cross over their ravaged bodies as he mutters a prayer under his breath. Then stands and continues on down the road.

EXT. ROAD FORK - DAY

More desolate wasteland as far as the eye can see. The road forks again here. Eli arrives at the junction and stops.

The road Eli is on leads further into the west. The other fork heads toward a SMALL TOWN just visible on the horizon.

A HAND-PAINTED SIGN has been driven into the dirt nearby. No words, just a series of CRUDE PICTOGRAMS. A BED. A PLATE OF FOOD. A WATER FAUCET. AN ARROW points toward the town.

Eli pauses, thinking it over. Retrieves the iPod from his pocket. Clicks the button, but no response. He sighs.

ELI

Shit.

He turns and heads down the other fork, toward town.

EXT. DESERT TOWN - MAIN STREET - DAY

Some might call it a town. Others might see it as little more than a refugee camp. But it's the closest thing to civilization we've seen so far in this desolate world.

A central "street" is surrounded by a sprawling village of tents, clay-walled adobes and barn-like structures. Built from corrugated iron, rotted wood, molded plastic, sheets of tarpaulin - all materials scavenged from the old world.

The overall feel is akin to an impoverished frontier town - Deadwood filtered through the eye of an apocalypse.

HUDDLED RESIDENTS are dressed in little more than rags, many wearing goggles like Eli's to shield their eyes from the sun.

Eli stands at the edge of town. Reluctant to enter, but he braces himself and walks on in. Stops by a BLACKSMITH hammering out a metal plate over an anvil.

ELI

You got an engineer or a fuelman around here?

The blacksmith doesn't look up from his work but motions toward a stable-like structure at the far end of the street.

ELI

Thank you.

Eli heads down the street. Stopping when he comes across a STATUE erected in the center of the road. A TALL MAN crudely fashioned in clay. One hand placed paternally on the head of a SMALL CHILD, the other outstretched toward the sun.

As he observes the statue, Eli notices that passing residents take a moment to PAUSE AND GENUFLECT before it. Worshipping.

Curious, Eli reaches up and runs his hand over the statue's face. Then hears SHUFFLING FEET behind him and turns as a PARADE OF EMACIATED MEN AND WOMEN trudges past. Roped together at the waist, each man leading the one behind.

Heads shaved, thin from malnutrition. And each one BLIND. They gaze at the ground with pale, dead eyes. They carry picks, shovels and other tools - a sightless CHAIN GANG.

Eli watches as the pathetic parade shuffles past, herded like cattle by a brutish CHAIN GANG BOSS who swats at them with a stick to keep them moving and indicate direction.

CHAIN GANG BOSS

Come on, move it!

The gang boss glares at Eli as he passes by. Eli doesn't return the look, just continues crossing the street as the blind are herded away. Headed toward a wooden building with a pictogram of a LIGHTNING BOLT suspended above the door.

INT. ENGINEER WORKSHOP - CONTINUOUS

Eli enters and looks around. Long counter-tops with shelves behind, displaying an eclectic variety of goods. Scavenged engine parts. Old electrical wiring. Small appliances.

An old ELECTRIC GENERATOR rumbles noisily, powering strings of multi-colored CHRISTMAS LIGHTS that hang all around.

Behind the main counter a convoluted Rube Goldberg-esque STILL is running. An ENGINEER in a leather apron pours the remnants of a can of motor oil into the still's funnel.

Attached to the still is an old MOTORCYCLE MIRROR. In its reflection the engineer sees Eli checking out the store.

Without turning around, he reaches surreptitiously behind the counter for something.

Eli turns toward the counter - to find the engineer training a PUMP-ACTION SHOTGUN right at him.

ENGINEER
I don't know you.

Eli slowly raises his hands.

ELI
I'm not from around here.

ENGINEER
No shit. Who are you?

ELI
I'm just a customer.

ENGINEER
A customer with a shotgun?

He nods toward the shotgun visible on Eli's backpack.

ENGINEER
You come in here to rip me off?

The engineer's hands tremble, his finger tight on the trigger. This man needs to be talked down carefully.

ELI
No. I'll set it down. Okay?

ENGINEER
Slowly!

Eli nods. Unhitches the pack and sets it down, steps away.

ENGINEER
You carry a gun in the outland, you don't bring one into town less you live there. Don't you know that?

ELI
I'm sorry, I forgot. I've been on the road a long time.

This seems to make the engineer more suspicious of Eli.

ENGINEER
Show me your hand.

ELI
I'm not a-

The engineer jerks the shotgun at Eli nervously.

ENGINEER

I said show me your fucking hand!

Eli raises his hand and holds it outstretched, palm faced downward. The engineer watches it closely for any sign of ticks or tremors, but Eli's hand stays steady as a rock.

ELI

I'm not one of them.

The sight of the steady hand seems to reassure the engineer a little. Finally, he lowers the shotgun.

ENGINEER

What do you want?

ELI

I'm just passing through. I need some help. I can pay.

ENGINEER

What kinda help? And what kinda pay?

ELI

I'm going to get something out of my pack. Okay?

The engineer raises the shotgun nervously again.

ELI

I know, I know. Slowly.

The engineer watches him like a hawk as Eli opens up his pack and pulls out the car battery. When he sees it, he gasps.

ENGINEER

Holy shit.

Eli places it on the counter. The engineer looks it over with awe, like it's a priceless historical artifact.

ENGINEER

Where'd you find this?

ELI

Years ago, in the outland back east
aways.

ENGINEER

Does it work?

ELI
Yeah, it just needs a charge. Can you do it? I got the cables.

ENGINEER
Depends if you also got the coin.

Eli pulls the Zippo lighter from his pocket. The engineer picks it up, sparks the flint, watches the flame flicker.

ENGINEER
It'll take a couple hours. There's a bar across the street you can wait, they just opened up.

ELI
I'll wait here.

ENGINEER
You don't trust me?

ELI
(smiles)
I don't know you.

EXT. DESERT TOWN - MAIN STREET - DAY

FOUR MOTORCYCLES roar into town and pull up outside a LARGE BARN. As the riders dismount, one detaches a CLOTH SATCHEL from his bike's cargo rack.

The four riders head inside. They each have long, straggly hair and brutish expressions. We recognize them now as the BIKER BANDITS who killed the couple on the road.

EXT. BARN - OFFICE - DAY

A large part of the barn's upper floor has been converted into an OFFICE. Or what barely passes for one. A TATTERED RUG lines the floor. FADED, DISTRESSED PAINTINGS of questionable taste on the walls. A BARE LIGHT BULB buzzes overhead.

The centerpiece is a simple WOODEN DESK, the kind that might have once been used by a schoolteacher. Downright opulent by the standards of this indigent world.

A TALL FIGURE is seated in a battered LEATHER ARMCHAIR. Feet up on the desk, face hidden behind an OPEN PAPERBACK BOOK.

The book's cover is faded, wrinkled and water-stained, as though recovered from an ancient flood. But the bold title is still just visible: 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE.

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR causes him to lower the book. Unlike everyone else we've seen, he appears healthy and well-groomed. A rich mane of hair, full set of teeth.

He's OLDER than most we've seen, too. Close to Eli's age. His skin weathered. More than a little Tommy Lee Jones in him.

He wears a tattered SUIT AND TIE. None of it matches, everything scavenged from different outfits and eras. But he looks almost civilized. Respectable. His name is CARNEGIE.

CARNEGIE

Come.

His accent is like caramel. A rich, deep-south drawl.

The door opens and REDRIDGE enters. Tall, powerfully built.

REDRIDGE

One of the road crews just rolled into town.

Carnegie looks nonchalantly at his cracked old wristwatch.

CARNEGIE

Of course they did, the bar's open. Outlanders, always looking for answers at the bottom of a bottle.

REDRIDGE

Not these guys.

Carnegie glances back up at Redridge, intrigued.

REDRIDGE

These guys say they got something.

Carnegie whips his feet off the table and stands.

CARNEGIE

Get them up here.

INT. BARN/SALOON - DAY

A simple bar, tables and chairs. A FIREPLACE sputters dimly. WOODEN STEPS lead to an UPSTAIRS LANDING. Vaguely reminiscent of an old west saloon but far more primitive.

A MANGY TABBY CAT walks across the straw-laden floor. A dozen or so CUSTOMERS in the place, a mixed, rough-looking bunch.

Redridge emerges from an upstairs room and nods to a group of his MEN who are holding the bikers at the foot of the stairs.

INT. BARN/SALOON - CARNEGIE'S OFFICE - DAY

Carnegie checks his reflection in a CRACKED HAND MIRROR, licks his palm and slicks his hair back. He adjusts his tie as the door opens and Redridge's men usher the bikers inside.

Carnegie wheels around and flashes a smile at them. Suddenly he is every bit the showman, charismatic and slick.

CARNEGIE

Gentlemen! It's truly a delight to see you again! I understand your latest excursion in the outland has been a profitable one?

Along with his cultivated image, his accent, cadence and delivery remind us of an old-time Southern TV evangelist.

The bikers exchange looks. They understood maybe half the words in that sentence. The lead biker - named HOG - speaks.

HOG

We did good.

CARNEGIE

Well, let's see, shall we?

Hog tips the satchel's contents out onto Carnegie's desk.

BOOKS. About a dozen different volumes of all shapes and sizes. Carnegie rifles excitedly through the collection.

We see various titles as he sorts through them. Treasure Island. The Da Vinci Code. A volume of encyclopedia. The Diary of Anne Frank. Tuesdays with Morrie.

CARNEGIE

No. No. No. No. No.

As Carnegie rejects each one with growing disappointment and frustration, it's clear he's looking for a specific book.

CARNEGIE

It's not here.

HOG

These ain't worth nothin'?

CARNEGIE

When you bring me the book I asked you for, it'll be worth something.

The bikers exchange more looks. An unspoken conversation.

HOG

We been doin' this a long time now.
Had to make a whole lotta corpses
to bring you all these books. You
want us to keep at it, reckon it's
worth more than a few free glasses
of that swill you call liquor.

Carnegie's guards bristle, ready for a confrontation.
Carnegie just smiles, always ready to smooth things over.

CARNEGIE

Gentlemen, gentlemen. I urge you
once again to take the long view
here. When we find this book - and
believe me, we will find it - we
are going to build a new world. A
world far greater, far more
righteous than this one. And you
and I are going to be perched right
on top of it, looking down upon it,
masters of all creation!

His carefully stage-managed rhetoric is delivered with the
utmost conviction, every word dripping with passion and
persuasion. He's a master salesman, a true huckster.

CARNEGIE

And you know, I think you're
absolutely right. That is worth
more than a few glasses of liquor.
A whole lot more.

He steps forward and looks Hog right in the eye. His gaze
like a laser beam, utterly disarming.

CARNEGIE

The book I want is out there
somewhere, just waiting to be
found. Once there were millions of
copies - you only need to find one!
Find it and bring it here. And I
promise you, you will be rewarded
beyond anything you can imagine.

It's impossible not to be swayed by this guy. He's just so
full of fiery passion and infectious belief, you almost want
to reach into your pocket and hand over your wallet.

Hog snatches up his empty satchel.

HOG

This better not be bullshit.

He turns and marches to the door, the other bikers following. The guards escort them out, only Redridge remains.

Carnegie slumps back into his chair, frustrated, pissed off.

REDRIDGE

Might help if they knew just what they were looking for.

CARNEGIE

Not one of them can read. How would they even know when they found it?

REDRIDGE

So how's about you just tell me?

Carnegie and Redridge lock eyes. BEAT.

REDRIDGE

Two years now you been sending these crews into the outland. Burning up gas we can barely spare. For a goddamn book? What the hell kinda book can be worth all this?

Carnegie ignores him. Stands, walks toward the door. Redridge sighs, gestures toward the books piled on Carnegie's desk.

REDRIDGE

What about these?

CARNEGIE

Put them with the others.

INT. SALOON - DAY

Redridge stands by the stone fireplace, tossing the books one by one into the fire. The flames flicker and leap around the books as their pages blacken and are consumed by the fire.

INT. ENGINEER WORKSHOP - DAY

Eli watches as the engineer hooks up the battery to the generator. He licks his lips, dry as sand. Unscrews his canteen to take a drink, but it's down to its last few drips.

ELI

What's this place across the street? They got any water?

ENGINEER

Only water in a hundred miles. They got their own still over there.

Eli thinks a while longer. Then stands and stuffs his shotgun inside his pack, shoulders his gear and makes for the door.

ELI
I'll be back.

Eli stops in the doorway and turns back to the engineer.

ELI
If that battery ain't here when I get back, I will use this gun on your kneecaps and I will put this building to the torch and I will watch it burn to the ground with you alive inside it. So help me God.

And with that he turns and leaves. The engineer gulps. Not a hint in Eli's voice that he didn't mean every word.

INT. SALOON - CARNEGIE'S BEDROOM - DAY

Simply furnished. A WOMAN stands by an old Victorian wash-stand, washing her hands and face in the porcelain bowl.

Her name is CLAUDIA. Early 30s, pretty. She gazes into the wash-stand's mirror as she dries her hands, but it's so cracked and warped it's near impossible to see a reflection.

The door opens and Carnegie enters. He still looks steamed. Claudia doesn't turn to look at him, keeps facing the mirror.

CLAUDIA
Is that you, honey?

Carnegie says nothing. Just paces angrily up and down. Finally Claudia turns to face him.

CLAUDIA
Something wrong?

CARNEGIE
More books came in from the road today.

CLAUDIA
Oh? It's been a while.

CARNEGIE
And it'll be a while longer. Just another pile of useless junk.

She adopts a sympathetic expression, tries to be supportive.

CLAUDIA

You'll find what you're looking for. It's out there somewhere. You just have to have faith.

This seems to anger Carnegie. He wheels on her.

CARNEGIE

Faith? Is that what you think we're missing around here?

She detects the aggressive tone in his voice and goes quiet, head bowed. Carnegie moves toward her angrily.

CARNEGIE

My old man used to have faith. He had it in spades. My mother, too. You know where it got them? You know where it got me?

He's in her face now. Claudia avoids eye contact, submissive.

CARNEGIE

Faith is for the weak. It's for them out there, the sheep. This world is what you can see and touch and taste. It's what we make it. You think I built this town on faith? Is that what you think?

He's shouting now, and she's trembling, afraid to speak.

CLAUDIA

I'm sorry.

Carnegie realizes he's frightened her. He softens.

CARNEGIE

No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Hey. You okay?

He lifts her chin up, wipes away a tear.

CARNEGIE

You just get me all riled up with that kind of talk. It's not what I need from you right now.

(smiles)

You know what I need right now?

He puts his hands on her lustfully. It's clear she's not in the mood, but she halfheartedly responds anyway. More out of a sense of wifely duty than reciprocated passion.

As they kiss, Carnegie pushes her excitedly against the wall and feverishly begins unbuckling his pants.

INT. SALOON - DAY

The original customers have now been joined by the four bikers, who sit at their own table drinking a clear and pungent moonshine-type liquor from a shared jar.

Eli enters. All eyes are on him immediately, regarding him with guarded interest as he pulls up a stool at the bar.

The BARTENDER approaches, looks him up and down. Suspicious.

BARTENDER
Outlander? Let me see-

Eli raises his hand as before. Holds it outstretched, steady.

BARTENDER
What'll it be?

Eli places the canteen on the bar.

ELI
Water.

BARTENDER
That's the good stuff. It don't
come cheap.

Eli takes off his scarf and puts it on the bar. The bartender takes it and looks it over.

BARTENDER
That'll get you half-way.

The bartender spies Eli's silver Saint Christopher pendant.

BARTENDER
What about that?

Eli stuffs the pendant inside his shirt. No way that's for sale. Instead, he reaches into his coat and pulls out the pelts he skinned from the dead cat, lays them out on the bar.

ELI
That's the best I got.

The bartender takes a pelt and examines it. The mangy cat leaps up onto the bar and approaches. Sniffs at the pelts with suspicion and HISSES at Eli.

