

"NORTH STAR"

A short film

Written by
P.J. Palmer

June 22, 2019

pjpalmer@twenty2films.com

www.NorthStar-theFilm.com

(310) 663-3931

7 CONTINUED:

JAMES
(kind, but firm)
Shut it.

Tails wag.

8 **EXT. RANCH - MORNING** 8

James examines the sky to check for weather. He lights a blunt - his breath white against the dark air. A faint meteor skims across the blue-black sky. Venus burns brightly in protest as the other stars dim for the coming light.

9 **INT. BARN - MORNING** 9

A HAWK, perched high in the rafters, watches James shoulder alfalfa past empty stalls where neglected saddles collect dust. James drops the bale in front of the horse - a beautiful, Palomino with large, kind eyes and a white star-patch.

JAMES
There you go, North Star.

NORTH STAR NICKERS as James drapes his arm around her neck and rubs her ear.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Cold one this morning, girl.

10 **EXT. MEADOW - MORNING** 10

The first MORNING BIRD CHIRPS. Soon ANSWERED by another. James opens the gate and lets North Star graze the meadow - the doe and their stag retreat. James gathers firewood into a heavy arm-load. Another MORNING BIRD WAKES. Venus holds on.

11 **INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING** 11

The aging dryer TUMBLES while James folds bed sheets. Laundry is stacked in awkward piles on the sagging couch. James' homemaking skills are inelegant - the outdoors are his true domain - nevertheless, he's diligent. He carefully dusts the mantel packed with framed photos of milestones: Children. Military. Weddings. The story of his family. There are several photos a happy, HANDSOME BLONDE MAN, in his 40's, proudly riding North Star. The morning weather report MUMBLES low on the old TV:

(CONTINUED)

11 CONTINUED:

METEOROLOGIST

(on the TV)
-- and it's going to be nice out
today with little bit of a nip in
the air --

The clock CHIMES. It's 7:30am

12 **EXT. MEADOW - DAY** 12

The bright sun breaks over the mountains to thaw the
frozen meadow as North Star grazes.

13 **INT. BATHROOM - DAY** 13

James runs hot water in the rust-stained tub.

14 **INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS** 14

James strips down, revealing his muscled torso covered in
faded tattoos including a Marine Corps emblem, a rosary
and the name "Craig" written in cursive across his ribs.
He opens the curtains to fill the room with light. BIRDS
SING outside.

JAMES

Morning.

He approaches the bed where CRAIG, frail and thin, in his
50's, lays awake connected to an oxygen tube. He is now
only a shadow of the handsome man he was in the photos
with North Star.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Get any sleep? Sure sounded like
you did.

James laughs a little at the jab. Craig looks at him, his
jaw slacked to the side. An indented tracheostomy scar on
Craig's throat is bruised again from recent use. James
wipes Craig's chin.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Alright, up and at 'em.

He removes the oxygen cannula from Craig's nose,
undresses him. Throws soiled clothes into the hamper.
Craig's stiff legs and contorted arms make it awkward for
James to pick him up. James carries Craig into the:

15 **INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS**

15

Slowly, James lowers himself with Craig into the hot bathwater, wrapping his legs around from behind to hold him up. James re-lights the blunt, takes a deep hit and exhales into Craig's mouth. Craig becomes less stiff, relaxes. He watches as his partner thoroughly cleans his entire body for him with the steamed water. James moves Craig's limbs in physical therapy movements. Craig MOANS in pain. James whispers in his ear:

JAMES

(gently)

I know, I know.

James takes another hit from the blunt, shares his breath with Craig. He gently shaves the Craig's jawline.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I've got you.

James interlocks their fingers so wedding bands touch.

JAMES (CONT'D)

And you've got me.

Craig exhales, closes his eyes: content. James rinses Craig clean. Drains the tub.

16 **INT. BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

16

James places a towel-wrapped Craig on the bed, holds up two shirts:

JAMES

It's going be nice out today.
Still a little bit of a nip in the
air.

Craig looks at his choice. James dresses his partner.

17 **INT. KITCHEN - DAY**

17

James carries Craig to the kitchen table and secures him into a tall wheelchair, adjusts the oxygen, then grinds up pills over:

JAMES

Eggs? Hot cereal? Fruit cup?

Craig gives a look. James nods:

(CONTINUED)

JAMES (CONT'D)

Alright. Bacon and eggs it is
then. Cheese?

James fires up the stove. Scrambles an egg. Sets the tea
kettle. Shoos the cat off the table:

JAMES (CONT'D)

Dammit, Stripes. Git down!

James feeds Craig his breakfast. It isn't pretty. Craig
COUGHS and GAGS. James uses his fingers to clear his
partner's mouth and continues to help him eat over:

JAMES (CONT'D)

Mike ought to be over pretty early
this morning. Wants to get the
trailer down to town and back
before dark. He's damn near late.

He cleans Craig up. Puts the dishes in the washer.

James props Craig's frail body up with pillows on the
couch and places a faded quilt over his legs. Craig looks
out to the meadow where North Star grazes in the
sunlight. James rests his hand on Craig's shoulder.

JAMES

She'll be alright.

He tosses another log into the wood stove. The old TV
MUMBLES on:

NEWS ANCHOR

(on the TV)

...thirty four shootings in
schools and counting...

James turns the channel.

TALKING HEAD

(on the TV)

...with blatant racism at the
highest levels of this
administration...

He turns the channel again, searching:

GAME SHOW HOST

(on the TV)

...it's a BRAND NEW CAR!

James settles on this and sets the VOLUME LOWER. The dogs KINDLY BARK the announcement of visitors. In the distance, a mini-van pulls up the gravel driveway.

JAMES

What's your sister doing here?

James heads out the back door.

The excited dogs BARK and nip at the tires of the van - its bumper stickers announce religious alliances. James waves a greeting and shouts at the dogs:

JAMES

Daisy! Cooper! Shut the hell up!

ERIN, a large woman in her 40's, dressed in layers of coats and scarves, steps out of the van. Her blonde highlights in a classic mom cut. She carries a foiled-wrapped casserole dish and bags.

ERIN

Mornin', Jimmy.

JAMES

Erin. Morning. Need a hand?

ERIN

Oh, thanks. Made up a chicken casserole for lunch. I always forget how cold it gets up here in the morning.

JAMES

Didn't expect we'd see you up here for another few weeks.

ERIN

Oh, well, we got back from our trip early. Thought I'd pop on up here and check in.

JAMES

Didn't bring the boys?

ERIN

Tom's got 'em in bible camp this week. Craig up?

James nods to the picture window where Craig sits on the couch. Erin waves and smiles.

ERIN (CONT'D)
(a subtle accusation)
He's lost more weight.

Erin and James make their way inside.

James unloads the bags. Erin heads to Craig.

ERIN
There he is. You look so nice!

Erin kisses him on the cheek. Craig's eyes glow. She sits next to him on the couch.

ERIN (CONT'D)
You been getting your rest?

JAMES
Slept through the last couple of
nights with no fits.

ERIN
Stayin' up on your therapy?

JAMES
Already did our arm rotations this
morning.

With casual discretion, James places the stack of foreclosure notices in a drawer. The BUZZER on the dryer goes off.

ERIN
I'll get started on the laundry.

JAMES
That's the last of it. Wood box is
loaded up. Tea's on.

ERIN
(to Craig)
Never knew he had a domestic bone
in his body. Now look at him.
You've taught him well.

JAMES
Work's work. Indoors, outdoors.
Don't matter.

Erin pulls out prescription bottles and IV bags.

ERIN

I brought the good stuff.
Fentanyl, meperidine, hydrocodone,
and some lamotrigine - just in
case any of those seizures come
back.

She pulls on latex gloves and SNAPS a tight tourniquet on
Craig's arm. He winces.

JAMES

How much?

ERIN

Came to about twelve hundred
Canadian. So, we're lookin' at
about nine hundred dollars total.

JAMES

What about travel?

Erin pinches up and down Craig's arm in her search for a
vein. Craig shuts his eyes tight, endures.

ERIN

Don't worry about that. Tom was
preachin' up there and guess what?
They blessed us with an extended
stay at the neatest lil' resort so
me and Tom could invest in our
marriage. Anyways - you can just
get me back when you can. No
hurry.

(to Craig)

Oh, guess who I saw at church the
other day? Janis and Norm. They
asked all about you.

JAMES

We've still got the same number.

ERIN

(for the zillionth
time)

If you let us move him back to
civilization, where people
actually are, they'd have a better
chance of seein' him.

Erin SNAPS the tourniquet on Craig's other arm. Craig
sighs hard - this hurts.

(CONTINUED)

ERIN (CONT'D)
(to Craig)
You'd be closer to doctors, can
come back to church...

JAMES
We're fine here.

Erin inserts a large needle. Craig tries to relax.

ERIN
...see the boys more often.

JAMES
(tense)
So that's it. Keeping our nephews
away to make some sort of point.

ERIN
Just sayin' it would be easier on
everyone if he came to stay with
us.

James is quiet. Erin finishes the IV.

ERIN (CONT'D)
You could build up the livestock
again. Such a big ranch for just
one last horse. That's all.

JAMES
It's home.

ERIN
Home is where the heart is, Jimmy.
It can be anywhere.

James lets out an incredulous short breath.

JAMES
Christ. I've got shit to do.

He walks out. The screen door SLAMS behind him.

Sunlight streaks through the openings of the barn walls where James muscles down the last of the saddles and tosses them into a dusty pile, disturbing the hawk, which flies out the open doors. James grabs a halter. Fills a pail with oats. Walks out to the meadow. COOPER and DAISY follow, sensing his sour mood - they keep a safe distance.

22 **INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY**

22

Erin sits with Craig. Game-show music plays low on the TV. She softly brushes Craigs hair back with her fingers and gives him a smile. She kneels down to tie his shoe.

ERIN

Surprised I ever learned to tie my
own shoe, you always doing them
for me. Always lookin' out for me.

She kisses him on the forehead as she grasps at her composure. Craig's eyes glow softly. Erin moves on to the kitchen to busy herself. Craig watches James approach North Star in the meadow with the halter behind his back, offering the oats.

23 **EXT. MEADOW - SAME**

23

North Star keeps a wary eye on James. Although she can see the dreaded halter, he does have a bucket of delicious oats. He knows her too well. She resigns, as always, and walks forward with a SNORT to accept both. James attaches the halter and rope while she eats.

JAMES

Alright, girl. Here we go.

He leads her. Cooper and Daisy follow.

24 **INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY**

24

From his post, Craig keeps a close eye on James. Erin re-folds the laundry while she chatters on the phone. The long cord stretches from the wall.

ERIN

(into phone)

... no, up here with my brother
today. Still don't have cell
service yet, can you believe it?
Feels like winter already. Brought
lunch, cleanin'. Heaven knows
these two could use the help,
whether they'll admit it or not.

Erin flips through the channels on the TV. She settles on a Televangelist morning talk-show, "OWEN & JESS", with ever-happy hosts, DR. OWEN BRODERICK (50's) and JESS BRODERICK (50's), who sit on a TV studio couch with oversized coffee mugs riffing together to their at-home audience. Craig looks at Erin disapprovingly, she doesn't notice.

(CONTINUED)

DR. OWEN BRODERICK

(on TV)

...in my ear as clear as day and he said, "Owen, do you fully trust me?" And I said, "Why yes, Lord. Of course I do."

JESS BRODERICK

(on TV)

And we've been burnin' bright for the Lord Jesus Christ ever since...

Erin eclipses Craig's view of the window as she moves in close to give him some of tea.

ERIN

(into phone)

... well, Hon, what can you do? Just pray for strength and mercy, especially now. -

-- Well, no, can't get real care out here. -- We've offered for Craig to come stay with us so Jimmy can keep workin' the ranch.

ERIN

(into phone)

-- Yep, that's exactly what family's for. -- Nope. Jimmy will not hear of it. Just stubborn as a mule. Both of 'em are.

(to CRAIG)

Aren't you?

JESS BRODERICK (CONT'D)

(on the TV)

...so you no longer have to be ensnared in the deadly grip of immoral behavior. The healin' mercy of the gospel has one simple truth: Repent to Jesus and he will make you whole. Spiritually whole. Physically whole.

DR. OWEN BRODERICK

(on the TV)

Amen. And financially whole. It really is that simple. Don't fail the Lord and he will not fail you.

JESS BRODERICK

(on the TV)

...amen to that...

Erin wipes Craig's chin, finally moves out of his view. His eyes search the window for his partner, finding he has moved to the gravel yard, closer to the house.

INTERCUT:

James ties North Star to the fence. Cooper and Daisy bark at the DISTANT SOUND OF A TRUCK coming up the long drive to the ranch.

(CONTINUED)

JAMES

Daisy! Cooper! Shut it!

But the dogs know their canine duty to bark at visitors. They ignore James' commands and EXCITEDLY BARK LOUDER at a shiny, clean truck pulling a long horse trailer. MIKE, a fresh-faced rancher in his 30's, dressed in jeans and a ball-cap, hops out and greets Cooper and Daisy.

MIKE

Hey there pups.

James scolds:

JAMES

Cooper! Git down! - God-damn dogs.

MIKE

Mornin', James. Sorry I'm late.

JAMES

Mike. How you been.

Stripes PURRS and curls up on Craig's lap. The Owen & Jess show plays as Erin continues with her phone conversation.

JESS BRODERICK

(on the TV)

...they have declared war with a constant erosion of your liberties. War on your values. On your family. Your faith...

ERIN

(quietly, into phone)

... and it's been so hard. But we only have just the one guest room. Well, no. Not in front of the boys. I mean, look, they can decide to live their lifestyle just as they please in their own home. They've got to work that out with God. But that doesn't mean we gotta have them co-habitate under our roof. Just cause it's ok with them don't change the Lord's truth.

DR. OWEN BRODERICK

(on the TV)

Not just your values, your very freedom is under attack. All manner of evil is now being spewed out on our nation. The general public and the church are now being forced by our very own government to provide abortions to their workers, they impose same-sex marriage on the American people...

JESS BRODERICK
(on the TV)
Those are not marriages. Not in
the eye of God.

DR. OWEN BRODERICK
(on the TV)
No. They most certainly are not.

JESS BRODERICK
(on the TV)
I didn't mean to cut you off, hon.

Craig concentrates on the window, watches as Mike
examines North Star's hooves.

EXT. GRAVEL YARD - DAY

James loads the saddles into the back of Mike's truck.

JAMES
Don't think Craig ever got to
using this one, still brand new.

The men are respectfully silent for a moment. North Star
shifts her weight. Mike pats her.

MIKE
She sure is a beauty.

JAMES
(matter-of-fact)
Yeah. She is.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Owen & Jess still on the TV. The long phone cord
stretches across the mantel, knocking the horse figurines
into the framed photos. Erin puts away dishes and speaks
in a lower, more private voice:

ERIN
(into phone)
They chose their lifestyle
and we just gotta deal with
it.

JESS BRODERICK
(on the TV, promoting
their new book)
...we are in the soul-
business...

Erin rummages through drawers trying to find where the
silverware goes.

ERIN
 (into phone)
 -- Thank you. Yes. I'm just
 doin' what the Lord has
 called on me to do.

DR. OWEN BRODERICK
 (on TV)
 ...amen. God left us here
 as His witnesses and He
 commanded us to love those
 who are held captive by
 unwholesome desires. Those
 of us who really love God,
 who know Him, will become
 the most persecuted people
 on the planet --

Erin comes across the foreclosure notices.

ERIN
 Hey, Hon, can I call you back?

James hands paperwork over to Mike.

JAMES
 That ought to be everything.

Mike gives James a stack of cash. James throws a blanket
 over North Star. Mike opens the trailer with its emblem:

"MILLER LIVESTOCK EXCHANGE & AUCTIONS"

JAMES (CONT'D)
 Alright, North Star, let's go.

The screen door SLAMS. James stops with North Star.
 Erin approaches.

ERIN
 You kiddin' me?

JAMES
 Erin.

ERIN
 No. You can't do this to her.

JAMES
 She'll be alright.

ERIN
 You know that ain't likely.

JAMES
 Erin. Please.

ERIN

You do this to her, then what excuse you gonna have left for hidin' him out here on this God-forsaken mountain?

James begins to speak - then stops. North Star twitches her tail. After a moment, James pulls some hundreds from the cash and holds it out for Erin.

JAMES

We'll figure out the rest soon.

Erin shakes her head in disbelief and glances to the window where Craig watches the scene unfold...

ERIN

Oh, no. You're not puttin' this on me.

Erin refuses his money, holds out the foreclosure notice.

ERIN (CONT'D)

I don't get it, Jimmy. I'm tryin'. We keep offerin' to take him. But you're just hell-bent on throwin' it all away like some sort of lone martyr.

JAMES

This isn't the time, Erin.

ERIN

Well, sacrificing your one last good horse ain't gonna change a damn thing around here.

JAMES

We'll figure something out.

ERIN

Dammit, Jimmy. Why you doin' this?

James looks at Mike who keeps his head down, staying out of it. James speaks quietly.

JAMES

It's what we decided.

ERIN

Oh? Craig write that down, did he? Signed somthin' legal sayin' he decided this?

(CONTINUED)

JAMES

He's my husband.

ERIN

He's my brother. And you ain't never changin' that.

JAMES

Not trying to fight with you, Erin.

ERIN

You owe me, Jimmy. For years, we ain't said hardly nothin'. Kept our mouths shut. Jus' to keep the peace. Extended an olive branch - but you refuse me. In his last days, you won't even give an inch. He deserves to be with his family. While he can be.

JAMES

He is.

Frustrated tears fall from Erin's face.

ERIN

This ain't right. In the eyes of God, it just ain't right.

JAMES

Erin.

ERIN

You two hidin' up on this stubborn mountain. Just to be right? No matter how far you run, Jimmy, no matter how much you sacrifice, it ain't never gonna be right.

Erin walks back to the house. Stops and turns:

ERIN (CONT'D)

I'm called to love you. But not your sin. For that, you're gonna have to answer to the Lord.

The screen door SLAMS shut. James looks to Craig, catches his gaze. After a moment, James lets out a breath and walks North Star into the horse trailer. James ties North Star's rope in this tight space. He adjusts her blanket. Rubs her ear. She NICKERS. James hangs both his arms around North Star - leans into her and buries his face against her neck, holds tight.

(CONTINUED)

17.
29

29 CONTINUED: (3)

FLASH BACK MONTAGE:

30 **EXT. RODEO TAIL-GATE PARTY - DAY** 30

Craig, healthy and vibrant, filthy from riding, holds up new his trophy buckle, celebrates with friends. He catches James' stare. Smiles.

31 **INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY** 31

James with his head in Craigs lap, on the couch, laugh hard over tea.

32 **INT. COVERED PORCH - NIGHT** 32

James and Craig hold each other close in a slow dance on a warm, rainy night.

33 **EXT. MEADOW - DAY** 33

ECU: Craig slips a ring onto James finger.

34 **I/E. BARN - DAY** 34

We follow Craig and James as they walk to the barn. Craig puts his arm around James shoulder. Inside, Craig reveals North Star, as a gift to James.

35 **INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT** 35

Craig and James in the heat of a terrible fight. Craig violently pushes all the porcelain horse figurine off the mantel, they break on the floor.

36 **EXT. GRAVEL YARD - DAY** 36

Craig chops firewood. James watching him from the window.

37 **INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT** 37

Craig holds James in the tub, his fingers trace over the tattoo of his name on James' ribs.

38 INT. BEDROOM - DAY

38

Craig wipes tears from James face as they lay under bedsheets, covered in morning light.

BACK TO SCENE:

39 EXT. GRAVEL YARD - DAY

39

Inside the trailer, James' shoulders heave as a torrent of emotions churn through the cracks of his battle tested armor. North Star leans in as he holds onto her.

JAMES

(whispers)

It'll be alright, girl. It'll be alright.

He finally lets go, wipes tears from his eyes and works to push the emotion back down.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Alright -

He pats her one last time and then shuts the trailer door, leaving North Star inside. James keeps his head down and Mike averts his eyes.

JAMES (CONT'D)

(fights for
composure)

Best be getting this rig down the road.

MIKE

A'right, James. You guys need anything, you give Cheryl and I a holler.

James and Mike exchange a handshake goodbye without looking at each other.

JAMES

(tight)

Will do.

40 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

40

On the couch, Erin holds onto Craig, whispering to him through tears as Owen & Jess talk on the TV.

(CONTINUED)

ERIN
Jesus loves you, Hon. You
just, you just gotta
repent. Turn your life over
to God.

JESS BRODERICK
(on TV)
You know what? I just feel
the Lord has something he
needs me to say. Is that
ok?

DR. OWEN BRODERICK
(on TV)
Why yes, that's ok, Jess.

JESS BRODERICK
(on tv)
I know we have a commercial break
coming up but..

ERIN
(to Craig)
It doesn't have to be this
way, Craig. It just
doesn't.

DR. OWEN BRODERICK
(on TV)
No, that can wait. The
spirit is calling on you,
everything else can wait.
What's on your heart?

JESS BRODERICK
(on TV)
"Whoever lives in love, lives in
God."

At this, Erin looks to the TV.

JESS BRODERICK (CONT'D)
(on the TV)
John 4:16. That means anyone who
leads a life of love is joined to
God. Remember that.

Erin breaks down. Craig watches James closely.

EXT. GRAVEL YARD - DAY

The shiny truck pulls away with North Star, kicking up a
thin cloud of dust down the drive. Cooper and Daisy give
chase. James and the ranch house become smaller in the
expanding distance.

EXT. BARN - DAY

James closes up the hollow barn. His shoulders sloped
under the heavy weight of this latest loss. Over at the
house, Erin climbs into her mini-van and slams the door.
She won't look at him. James watches as she drives off.
And lets out a breath.

43 **EXT. MEADOW / GRAVEL YARD - DAY**

43

James closes the gate to the empty meadow. The ranch is quiet. All the plans and dreams fought so hard for, gone. Cooper and Daisy lean in close, sensing his pain. James kneels and gives their ears a deep rub. Tails wag. He heads to the house.

44 **INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY (MOMENTS LATER)**

44

James places the stack of cash on top of the foreclosure statements on the counter. He then approaches Craig. OWEN & JESS pray on the TV.

DR. OWEN BRODERICK
(on TV)
... show your faith in the
Lord and be healed. Right
now. Healers are standing
by to take your pledge,
toll-free --

JESS BRODERICK
(on TV)
...Yes, Jesus. Thank you,
Jesus...

JAMES

Jesus.

Annoyed, James turns the TV off.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Make some room there, Stripes.

James sets Stripes on floor and leans in next to Craig. He gently wipes the tears from Craig's face, then places his hand over his, interlocking their fingers with their rings touching.

JAMES (CONT'D)
I've got you.

Craig lets out a breath, looks at James: content.

JAMES (CONT'D)
And you've got me.
(then)
She's going to be alright.

He gives him a kiss. Wipes away more tears. The hall-clock TICKS in the quiet. James gets up and attempts to get life back to normal:

JAMES (CONT'D)
Come on, Stripes. Let's see about
this lunch.

(CONTINUED)

44 CONTINUED: 21.
44

Craig watches Stripes follow James to the kitchen. Then,
he looks out at the hawk riding the wind.

45 **EXT. RANCH - DAY** 45

The hawk glides above the trees that RUSTLE around the
ranch house. Above the doe with their stag as they
reclaim the meadow. Above the shiny truck that pulls the
horse trailer down the winding mountain road.

FADE OUT