

IN SEARCH OF TERRA FIRMA

Written by

Original Short Script

Genre: Drama

FADE IN:

EXT. SOUTHWEST BACK COUNTRY GAS STATION - - NIGHT

A Land Rover rolls into an empty gas station. A flickering overhead light illuminates two pumps. A FEMALE driver(our gal) 20's-30's, gets out of the car and hurriedly sticks a credit card in the pump. Hair is a mess. She's wearing a T-shirt under an open flannel shirt, Levis, and scuffed cowboy boots.

Pump won't take her card. She goes into the small concrete building.

INT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

A weather-wrinkled OLD COWBOY (60's) is sipping a beer at the counter, conversing with the CASHIER, a teen version of himself.

Head down, she hands the cashier her card. The old cowboy tips his hat and moves out of her way.

COLLEEN

Twenty dollars on...

She turns to look out the window, allowing the cowboy a quick glimpse of her face.

COLLEEN (CONT'D)

Number two.

She leaves. Ol' Cowboy frowns at the cashier.

COWBOY

See that? Weren't that blood?

The teen shrugs.

CASHIER

Paw Pa, don't get involved.

The cowboy strolls on out.

EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

He stops eight or so feet away from her.

COWBOY

Hey, gal you okay?

She doesn't answer as she puts the gas nozzle in the Land Rover, keeping her back towards him.

COWBOY (CONT'D)
You steal that there Rover?

She shakes her head.

COWBOY (CONT'D)
Didn't think so. Now I know it
ain't none of my business, but I
wouldn't be using credit cards.
Leaves a trail.

She glances over her shoulder at him. He scratches the back of his neck.

COWBOY (CONT'D)
And you best open up your phone and
take that little card thing in the
back out. Flush it down a toilet or
something.

The old gent takes a step closer which makes her spin around. Now she's looking directly at him and he can see her face (but we can't) under the pump lights.

COWBOY (CONT'D)
Jesus, ma'am, you need a doc.

She shakes her head no.

COWBOY (CONT'D)
You got a place to go? Somewheres
safe?

She shrugs, shakes her head, removes the nozzle handle and hooks it back on the pump. He's worried about her.

COWBOY (CONT'D)
Look, I know a place... If you'll
hang on a sec, I'll draw you a map.

Her eyes study him. He's got a kind face. She nods. He indicates the Land Rover.

COWBOY (CONT'D)
Only problem is, I reckon that
vehicle's got that satellite shit
on it.

The realization strikes her as well. He scratches his head, thinking.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Ok, then. How about this? You go on
in,
(indicates the store)

load up on canned goods and water -
don't forget the can opener - while
I fill up Miss Bessy over yonder.

He indicates his old pickup.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Then you take her. She don't look
like much but she's a reliable old
gal. You got any warm clothes? Gets
below zero out here at night.

She shrugs.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

I got some work duds in the truck.
Alrighty then, go on, get movin'.

He indicates for her to go in the store. She frowns, with
questioning eyes, indicates the Land Rover.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

(smiling)
Oh, I'm gonna take that big boy
down in the river bottom and have
some fun afore I shoot the shit out
of them electronics. That okay with
you?

Eyebrows raised, he waits for a response. After a beat, she
nods in agreement, but her eyes still hold a question.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Don't be worryin' about me. I got
me other vehicles of various ages
and my grandson in there can take
me on home.

Indicates the teen cashier.

INT. GAS STATION MINI-STORE - NIGHT

She picks out a bottle of Ibuprofen, drops it in the basket.

Stops in front of geratic items, like adult diapers. Squats
and pulls out from the bottom shelf a couple four packs of
Ensure.

Puts them in the basket, then she throws in a jar of peanut butter. Grabs two one gallon plastic jugs of water and goes to the counter.

After paying, she turns around and goes to an ATM machine. She opens her wallet and proceeds to withdraw the max from every credit card in her wallet. After each withdrawal, she sticks the bills in her purse, then bends the card in half and drops it in a trash can.

EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

The old cowboy is leaning over the front fender of his truck, finishing his map drawing on a brown paper bag. He hands it to the girl.

COWBOY

Its real simple. Just keep
a'headin' thata way.

(points)

Soon as you see the 27 mile marker,
slow down and keep your eyes peeled
for a big ol' Joshua Tree on your
left. Know what one'em looks like?

She nods.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Well make a left on the North side
of that cactus and you'll be on an
old track. Just keep a following it
towards the mountains. You'll head
right into it.

She puts the map in her purse, takes out a wad of cash and hands it to him.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Ah, no. I cain't...

She pulls off his cowboy hat and stuffs the money in it, then pats it down on his head. Climbs in his truck and heads out.

He "hmpfs" with a smile as 'Ol Bessy's taillights disappear.

INT. OLD TRUCK - DAWN

Our gal is tucked in a sleeping bag on the front seat of an old truck, staring at the windshield. The window glass is covered in ice crystals with the colors of dawn radiating through them. She enjoys the beauty of it for a beat before unzipping the sleeping bag and sitting up.

She tries to gather her hair under a cap, pulling a ponytail through the back. She pulls the bill low to block the early sun so we can't get a good look at her face. She emerges from her cocoon in a too large fleece lined rawhide barn jacket and puts on gloves that are in the pockets. She frees her legs from the bag revealing thick canvas over-pants and boots. She gets out of the truck and puts on sunglasses.

PAN of open desert and barren mountains. After looking around for a beat, she focuses on something troubling.

The trouble is: the truck is parked at the edge of a deep wash-out. Beyond extend the beckoning parallel lines of a sand road.

She opens the tailgate and tries to drink from a gallon plastic water jug, but the water is frozen.

Opens the hood of the truck, sets the frozen water on the engine block then gets in the cab and starts the engine.

While the water thaws, back at the tailgate, she studies the meager supply of cans in a plastic market basket. She pulls out a can of Ensure. Determines its also frozen.

Stuffs a jar of peanut butter in a backpack then forces in all the cans of Ensure that will fit. Zips everything up.

Back at the front of the truck, rolls her sleeping bag and ties it under the backpack, then ties on the frozen water jug. Leans against a fender studying the old cowboy's hand drawn map while the other water and the can of Ensure thaw on the running engine block.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

She tucks the map inside her jacket, rubs her hands together, breath clouding in the cold. She works kinks out of her neck and shoulders before pulling on the backpack.

Turns off the engine. Locks the truck, puts the keys in her pocket. Opens the bottle of ibuprofen, mouths a few, pops open the Ensure that's been thawing, tilts back her head and pours it in through barely parted lips. Hooks a finger in the liquid water jug, slams shut the hood and she's off.

She slides down the sandy banks of the gulch then climbs up the other side and follows the tracks.

LATER

The sun is high. She's taken off the heavy jacket, draped it over her backpack.

She stops to take in the open expanse of solitude surrounding her. A desert gust kicks up a whirlwind. Her good eye tells us she enjoys watching it dance around.

LATER

She's taken off the flannel shirt and tied it around her waist. She's also removed the outer canvas barn pants and is in Levis. Her T-shirt shows arm pit sweat stains and there is dried blood on the front.

Up ahead there's another deep arroyo and due to the angle of the sun now, one side has a patch of shade. She slides down and sits leaning back against the shaded sand wall. Pops in a couple more ibuprofen, sips water. Leans her head back and rests.

Sitting so still, desert critters start skirting around her. Sand beetles, prairie dogs, a scorpion. She eyes them all like welcomed visitors. This gal is in-tune with nature. Her eyes close and she falls asleep.

LATER

She climbs out of the ravine and beholds a glorious sunset. She opens her arms to it, as if saying a thank-you prayer, then pops open an Ensure and drains it into barely parted lips.

A full moon rises.

She mentally talks to it while putting back on her layers of clothes and the backpack.

Under the full moon, it's bright as day. Every so often she twirls, arms out, and does a couple dance steps, playing with her crisp moon-shadow. Such openness. Such freedom. A vein of happiness.

LATER - NIGHT

She stops dead in her tracks. Far ahead is the silhouette of a stand of mesquite and pepper trees. Outside the oasis is the outline of a truck. Through the limbs is the glow of a campfire.

She cautiously moves closer until she can hear MEN TALKING. Their voices make her visibly distraught. She backs away a good distance before noticing another smaller dark grouping of trees with no sign of life. She heads for it.

She jumps when the nose of a BIG DOG touches her swinging hand. They communicate a mutual hello as she holds out her hand for it to sniff, then pets it. She walks on, the dog beside her.

EXT. DESERT HOT SPRING - NIGHT

She keeps stopping to listen to her surroundings. Far away COYOTES HOWL. The dog stops every time she does and seems to copy her intent tilt of head.

She enters the dark stand of mesquite trees. There's dappled moonlight on the sandy floor of the grove. A flash of bright light. Its the moon reflecting on ink black water in a stone lined hot spring.

She kneels and feels the steamy water. Its heat makes her smile at the dog. The dog lays on a rock near the water's edge, eyes on her. She sits and pulls off her boots. Feet in the hot water, she drinks the last of the water in one of the jugs.

The temptation is too great. She undresses and silently slips into the warm water, swirls around under its surface then splashes her face. Floating on her back, she rest her head on a low rock and watches the full moon passing across a star studded sky. Her eyes close.

A DARK SHADOW blocks the moonlight. Startled, she darts to the far side of the pool and lowers herself until just her eyes are above water.

The silhouette of a man crouches down across the pool from her. It is FRANZ (20s-30's), full blonde beard and long hair. By lowering himself, the moon shines full on her.

FRANZ

Vat is dis in ma pool?

He looks over and pets the dog.

FRANZ (CONT'D)

(to the dog)

Vhy didn't you varn me?

Looks at the young woman.

FRANZ (CONT'D)

She usually lets me know ven someone is about.

He sits Indian fashion. The moon is really bright and spotlights him.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
How did you come? I heard no auto.

He glances over at her pile of clothes and backpack.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
You valked?!

He rubs his thick blonde beard, scratches his head.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
From vere?

She hasn't moved. He gives her a gentle smile.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
You have no need to fear me. I will not harm you. Please, speak. From vere did you come? Are you okay?

She remains still as a reed.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
Vell den, since dis is my pool, I am going to join you for I am cold.

He stands and takes off his layers of clothes, revealing thick muscles. Totally naked he faces her and slips in the steaming water. He stays on his side of the pool.

She dares not move, as if by not moving she is invisible.

Franz raises a big dripping hand.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
Franz, here.

Her tension is electric. He smiles, lowers his hand.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
But dey sometimes call me Thor because I have a hot air balloon. It is how I get supplies now and den. And I like to throw down rocks at does from city. Sometimes I even shoot at dem with Mike's gun.
(chuckles then sobers)
I think you are not from a city otherwise my dog vould not like you. (beat) How did you find dis place?

She doesn't answer but her face rises up out of the water just enough so she can breathe through her nose.

He points to his mouth, then his ear.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
Can you speak? Hear?

He is studying her face closely in the full moonlight. His look says he is beginning to understand.

She nods. She can.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
Okay, dat is good to know. Do you
have need of food? Vater?

Her eyes dart to the empty plastic water jug, but she doesn't move.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
No harm will come to you. There are
three of us only. I have been here
de longest so dis is now my place.

She tilts her head with a questioning frown.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
Vy did I come here?

She nods.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
Oh, I had cancer - of the prostate.
Now I am like eunuch. But dey say
de cancer is no more. That we will
see.

Silence for several minutes as he soaks up the heat from the water.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
Okay. I am done now. I am varm
again.

He gets out of the water and briefly indicates his limpness, shrugs and starts putting on his clothing. After he has pulled on pants and boots he faces her.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
Mike, he is like you. He does not
speak. He saw too much var - too
much killing, I think.

She blinks at the word killing. He catches the reaction. He puts on his shirt, zips up his coat.

FRANZ (CONT'D)

And der is Jose. He got lost
crossing de border and is illegal.
He has no vhere to go and fears
deportation.

He eyes her for a beat.

FRANZ (CONT'D)

Get dressed and join us - please.
Odder wise your hair will have
icicles. Come varm yourself and eat
by the fire. I promise no one vill
bodher you. And after being in dis
hot pool, you will need to drink
more vater.

She barely nods. He nods back, turns to the dog and makes a
kiss sound for it to follow him. The dog looks at him, but
doesn't move.

FRANZ (CONT'D)

Ah... You have a new friend now, I
see. She vas once treated bad same
as you, but now she is happy here.
(pets the dog)
Yah?

He disappears into the night.

EXT. MEN'S DESERT CAMP - NIGHT

The fire is roaring. A kettle is steaming.

Franz sits Indian fashion sipping from a tin cup.

MIKE (20-30) wears an Army cap and a camo jacket with fur
trim around the face. He has a dark beard and his deep set
eyes seem not to see since his mind is elsewhere.

JOSE is pudgy and middle aged with a mustache. There is a
nervousness to him. His eyes dart about when Colleen
emerges.

Franz indicates for her to take a shredded lawn chair near
the fire and goes about ladling her a plate of stew. The dog
lays at her feet.

Franz hands her the plate and a spoon along with a mug of
water. She nods her thanks. He nods back.

FRANZ
 (to the men)
 See? I was not lying. Der is a girl
 here now.

Mike shrugs, his eyes staying on the stars above.

JOSE
 (constantly shaking his
 head - heavy accent)
 I doon't like it. I doon't like her
 being here. She will bring big
 trouble, like Eve.

Franz laughs.

FRANZ
 Dere are no apples in our Eden
 here, Jose. So dere is no need to
 worry.

Colleen sips the broth while eyeing each man. Both she and they are coming to their own conclusions. She hands Franz her plate that is empty save for pieces of vegetables and meat. He gives the dog the leftovers.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
 You need to move closer to de fire
 to dry your hair.

She digs in her backpack for a brush. Finds one. It takes a while for it to get through all the tangles. Then she sits on the ground, closer to the fire drying her hair.

Franz studies her face in the fire light. CLOSE ON RIGHT SIDE OF HER FACE (which we have not seen): Busted lip, swollen shut black eye and very swollen hanging and crooked broken jaw are now well defined. Along with the bruises on her neck.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
 I dhink you jaw is broken.

She nods.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
 Do you want for me to fly you in my
 balloon to a doctor?

She shakes her head no.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
 Do you fear this man who hurt you
 looks for you?

She shrugs, a vacant look on her face. He frowns, thinking.

FRANZ (CONT'D)

Ok, den. Dhere is a canyon I know
wid its own vater. I will take you
dhere. I have beans in the can you
can take. Maybe you can mash dem,
yah?

She nods a thank-you, reaches in her backpack and pulls out some bills. Hands them to Franz. She writes in the dirt. "For my supplies."

FRANZ (CONT'D)

Yah, okay. I will get you more
things when I go next.

LATER

She feels her hair is nearly dry. She pulls on her backpack, nods to all and disappears into darkness. The men react as if she had never been there.

She stops halfway to her oasis and turns, watching to see if any of them are going to follow her. Nope.

EXT. DESERT HOT SPRINGS - NIGHT

She rolls out her sleeping bag close to the warm pool and lays on it. The dog lays beside her. Tears reflecting moonlight begin to well in her good eye as she thinks.

FLASH BACK

EXT. RITZY RANCH HOUSE - DAY - ESTABLISHING SHOT

Hacienda style home with a pool, several barns, a riding ring, a parked Land Rover, an open jeep, a couple pick-up trucks.

INT. RANCH HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Colleen is cornered in a bedroom, throwing things, screaming. On the bed is an open backpack, clothes hanging out of it.

Her husband, TREY (30's), a hefty big man, faces her with a hand gun. He's been drinking. He sets the gun down on top of a dresser.

TREY

Fucking calm down! *It was just a goddam horse, for christsake!*

COLLEEN

No! Noooo. He was mine. Mine! You had no right to shoot him!

TREY

Might a' been different if you cared half as much for me as you did for that goddamn horse.

COLLEEN

You had no right to shoot him! You're a crazy drunk and I hate you! You had no right to shoot him! You didn't have the right! He wasn't yours. *He was mine!*

TREY

I'm the one paying his board and keep now. So I got all the right in the world, baby. You're the one whose got no say.

She grabs the half full backpack off the bed.

COLLEEN

Move, I'm leaving!

He blocks her.

TREY

Bullshit. Where you gonna go? Daddy's dead. Got no more farm.

COLLEEN

I don't care. You just shot my horse! I'm not staying here!

TREY

No, darlin'. You aren't going anywhere.

He grabs her by the hair and neck, throws her down on the bed. She fights him. He backhands her.

COLLEEN

No!

He punches her. Hard. Mouth bleeding, she spits at him so he punches her in the face again and again. He strangles her.

She passes out but is still breathing. He takes off his clothes.

LATER

He's passed out, snoring. Her eyes open. She pulls herself free from under him.

She grabs her backpack and the gun off the dresser. She turns and points the gun at him.

BOOM.

END FLASHBACK.

EXT. DESERT HOT SPRINGS - DAWN

Colleen walks to the outer edge of the oasis of mesquite trees just as the huge pearl moon sinks behind distant mountains. Its like watching an old friend leave so she gives it a little wave.

She slowly turns and faces the rising sun, absorbing its light and warmth as the dog nuzzles her hand. We now see a look of hope. Crooked smile. She's finally found her corner of peace on earth.

THE END