**TITLE**: GREAT FALLS

**WRITER**: Andrew Friedhof

**FORM**: Feature

**PAGES**: 116

**GENRE**: Crime drama

**SUB TO:** Rachel Traub

**READER:** Rebecca Ben-David

**CIRCA:** Present Day

**DATE:** 12/7/16

**LOGLINE**: When two small-town cops cover up a hit and run on their way to deliver a death row inmate to his execution, the view from the other side of the law unhinges darker natures as they grapple with questions of accountability, loyalty, justice, and freedom.

**MATERIAL**: Pass

**WRITER**: Recommend

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| CONCEPT |  | X | X |  |  |
| CLEAR RELATIONSHIP  (btwn main character and central character) |  |  |  | X |  |
| DRAMATIC CONFLICT (clear story goal and action goal with obstacles) | X (clear action goals w/ obstacles) |  |  | X (unclear story goal) |  |
| HOPE AND FEAR (for main character’s goals) |  | X |  |  |  |
| CINEMATIC QUALITIES |  | X |  |  |  |
| COMMERCIAL VIABILITY |  | X | X |  |  |

**SYNOPSIS**:

Deputy officer JOSIE DEUMANN, early 30s and police sergeant STAN GITTANY, 50s, are en route to Cascade County’s execution site to deliver death row inmate BERNIE HOULE, 40s, who will finally face justice for the murder of the Toohey family twenty years prior. When an argument causes Stan to lose control of the car and run over one CHARLIE CAMERON, Stan blackmails Josie into taking the fall and covering up the murder as a deer accident. With no choice but to run and take Bernie with them, the two hide the body and smuggle Bernie out to Josie’s brother’s auto shop. KYLE DEUMANN, 30s, reluctantly agrees to help them perform the execution themselves off-site at Stan’s cabin.

This task proves more difficult when the sheriff TOM DOCHERTY, early 30s, investigates the homicide-turned-deer-accident. He coaxes the half-truth out of Josie, and suspends Stan for his recklessness and lying to a senior officer. Enraged but with time on his hands, Stan steals medical supplies from the clinic where his wife JUNE works as a nurse. June begins to suspect Stan of cheating due to his odd behavior and spending increased time away from home with Josie. Docherty follows Stan out to the cabin, where Josie pretends she and Stan are lovers to head Docherty off. Docherty, who is in love with Josie himself, relays this development to June, while trying to reassure the sole survivor of the murders, LIZA TOOHEY, 27, that he will soon catch Bernie and she will have justice for her parents’ deaths.

At home, Josie deals with her mentally unstable mother, PAULA, who suffers from destructive fugue-like states. Buckling under the pressure of the hit and run, the Bernie scheme, and feeling trapped by familial obligation, Josie nearly suffocates her mother during one of her episodes. Paula does not remember this the following day. Meanwhile, Kyle bonds with Bernie back at the cabin, and realizes he does not want to take part in the execution, having already served jail-time once before. Liza undergoes an emergency C-section as the news goes public of Bernie’s escape from custody. Stan, Josie, and Kyle gather at the cabin to perform the execution. Drunk, Stan botches it, and Kyle and Josie use the opportunity to try to convince him to stand down. A scuffle ensues, causing Stan to fall into the fireplace and suffer horrible facial burns. Josie and Kyle leave him for dead, and escape with Bernie.

Pinning their hope on a loophole in the law, Josie hatches a plan to help Bernie across the border into Canada. June finds Stan half-dead at the cabin, and finishes the job in her rage at his perceived infidelity, bashing in his head with a radio. Docherty puts together the pieces on the hit and run, and sends his team out to search for Stan’s truck, which Josie and Kyle have commandeered to get to the border. Abandoning the car as they reach the mountains, the three are caught by officers with dogs. Kyle is severely wounded in the chase, halting their progress to the border. Bernie sacrifices himself to get help, but is captured and unable to explain the situation. He is taken immediately to his execution, where Liza bears witness with her fiance JOSH and their newborn son. Docherty rescues Josie and Kyle from the mountainside, confirms Bernie’s death, and confesses his feelings to Josie. She rejects him, but he offers her forgiveness as they fly back home.

**COMMENTS**:

From a purely technical standpoint, this script is very well-written. The action is tight but vivid, and really helps to set the tone of the piece. There’s plenty of local color in the dialogue to give it a more distinct flavor, and help build a believable story world as far as the setting is concerned. Scene-to-scene, there is a fairly solid flow, and the use of sound bridging is an effective choice to guide us from place to place emotionally as well as physically. While certain beats or lines could be cut down to improve pacing, overall, the script at a structural level feels strong. However, missing substance in a few key places and the lack of commitment where intent is concerned weakens the story’s potential. A crime drama reminiscent of *Twin Peaks*, *True Detective*, and *Sharp Objects*, *Great Falls* does not quite succeed, but strong action and visuals provide a promising foundation that may benefit from further exploration.

Even for a plot-driven script, characterization as it stands is a bit shaky. There are a lot of characters, but the fast pace of the script doesn’t quite settle into the groove needed to fully support an ensemble cast. While some characters like Stan are meant to be unlikeable, and others evoke more sympathy, their motives often remain unclear, even as the psychology unravels to the extent that it does. This undercuts believability, making dramatic moments sometimes feel somewhat contrived or not tightly linked to the main plot early or consistently enough to build resonance. Perhaps stronger connections in general could be established through casting, visuals, and blocking, but given that the preexisting action is well done in its pithy description, it feels as though those details\* should already be present and are missing.

There is room to grow. If we look to the setting for context, one might argue that if everyone has something to hide and it’s much harder to do so in a small, rural, Christian area, repression of sin or guilt will inevitably come out in distorted, unhealthy or unbalanced ways. This perspective also accounts for the problematic treatment of female characters, though it does not necessarily excuse it, especially when no time period is given. If the intent is to indirectly satirize or subvert the aforementioned trope, the narrative must commit to that to at least qualify harmful stereotyping and avoid an incohesive message that may otherwise jeopardize commercial viability as the market becomes more saturated with successful works which are more inclusive, progressive, and complex in terms of representations of moral ambiguity, autonomy, accountability, nature/nurture, etc. (ex: *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Preacher*, *Shameless US*, the recent *Westworld* remake, the upcoming *Sharp Objects* adaptation, to name a few).

Great Falls works as a plot-driven story to the extent that the structure and pacing are very strong. There is understandably less emphasis on characterization and motive, but for a crime drama where motive remains an important facet of the genre, the script could benefit from added depth. This will help make the characters that bit more compelling to maintain emotional engagement as the action builds, and give more power to shock value moments. The story has incredibly strong visuals that would still work on a more moderate budget, which adds to its producibility. A rewrite to give more tonal clarity and overall polish would help propel this script to the next level, at which point I would reconsider Warrior Poets’ involvement in producing, as the writer clearly has immense talent.

\*Details:

* Liza and Josh’s characters come in and out of the narrative to remind us of the unforgivable nature of Bernie’s past, but we never actually learn why Bernie targeted the Tooheys in the first place
* Bernie’s Chippewan heritage feels rather arbitrary/tokenized, and the juxtaposition of his former violence with his current passivity and self-sacrificing final moments do not sell the “changed man” narrative strongly enough to provide substantial commentary, essentially relegating him to a plot device by the end
* Paula’s non-descript mental illness is typified as either burdensome or convenient, and we never learn how/why/when her condition developed
  + As a more overt parallel, it does help tonally fuel and foreshadow the unhinged deeper nature of many of the other characters, including her deceased husband, June, and especially the line her children straddle
* Docherty is painted as a savior/protector figure, but is predatory and manipulative, especially to other female characters who are punished or forgotten by the narrative while he still gets his moment in the sun
* Josie’s Adderall addiction disappears in the second half - yes, she flushes her stash, but she would still have to go through a detox period; in the Black List draft, the logline describes her as an alcoholic - when Stan drunkenly botches the “execution,” this detail would immediately inform Josie’s reaction as a more unwilling participant to begin with, link her cutting herself off after attacking her mother, and then even a suggestion of withdrawal symptoms could substantiate her position in the climax/final scene
* June kills Stan in this amazingly horrific moment that encapsulates the roiling underbelly of this isolated, small town bursting with so much grief and guilt/sin - and then she is completely forgotten as we escalate into the big climax...you could practically just cut the pair of them from the narrative altogether except that Stan’s demise is pretty satisfying