

Draft Radio Script:

A LIMITLESS SKY

By Ree Davis

Adapted for radio by Harold O. Wilson

NARRATOR: Rick Dobbs burst into the kitchen carrying with him a blast of hot, dusty wind. Sharp, plastered strands of dyed black hair lay against his pale face.

RICK: Absalon's busted into the old Peterson place, Ben... He's gonna kill himself.

BEN: No horse'll kill itself. Close that door, boy.

NARRATOR: Rick had been at the fringes of Lucy's group since God knows when. He looked like a ghost compared to her pretty girlfriends and the clean-cut boys who seemed to follow them.

They'd all crowded her room right after the accident, but when weeks in that hospital turned to months in rehab, and it looked like Lucy would never walk again, Rick was the only one who still showed up.

BEN: Horses do get loose now and again.

LUCY: Daddy, don't.

NARRATOR: Lucy wheeled her chair to Rick and grabbed his hand. The three of them—Alice, Lucy, and Ben—had been talking over breakfast about how Absalon couldn't understand why Lucy didn't jump on and ride him anymore. Calvin Olsen had offered to buy him. The news seemed to shrink Lucy into her chair and drove Alice out into the dry morning air. Ben had been watching

Alice standing in the yard, her arms outstretched. The air of the plains moved around her, and Ben thought she looked lighter, as if it could lift her up and away. He scraped the eggs and toast from Alice's plate. He prided himself in knowing how things work, how the tractor key needed two turns because the starter was weak, and how lift, weight, thrust, and drag had to be balanced to get the crop duster off the ground, but what he couldn't figure out was how a one hundred-pound woman had almost doubled in size without eating.

BEN: Horse needs to be ridden.

RICK: Needs to be exercised. We did plenty yesterday.

BEN: Horse barn needs to be latched, too... You check that you've latched it. Then you check again.

LUCY: Stop it, you two. Just stop it.

NARRATOR: From the first moment Ben had held Lucy, pink and blue from a difficult birth, he'd felt awe that the generations of his family—as ordinary as cornhusks and diesel oil—and the generations of Alice's people, who were made for bow hunting and harvesting, had come together to create this one perfect child. Like an alien landed from another world. And that perfect child, now seventeen, would never walk again.

RICK: That horse flew right over the hood of my car...whoosh, just like that.

NARRATOR: One of Rick's eyelids was pierced, and he raised it, making Ben feel the acid in his own gut.

RICK: I followed him to the old Peterson place. He went right up on the porch and in the front door. He's upstairs now.

NARRATOR: Rick pointed at the ceiling. He was wired all wrong, this boy, as if anxiousness filled his veins. Anxiousness just didn't seem right in a boy with dyed hair, tattoos, and pierced eyebrows.

RICK: Couple other folks saw too. Now everyone's there.

BEN: Ain't possible for a horse to climb stairs.

NARRATOR: Ben's body felt heavy. He'd been moving breakfast dishes to the sink, but pulled out a chair. A fly crawled across the remnants of eggs on his plate.

Alice came through the doorway. Her face round like a wheel. Her skin taut like a kid. She held the door open. Outside air flooded in, arid but alive, sucking the room dry as it lifted curtains and rustled the newspaper.

ALICE: Who says? I've seen horses climb steeper hillsides than the stairs in that old house.

NARRATOR: Ben wanted to say, now my wife's against me. He wanted a cigarette, though he'd convinced Alice and Lucy he'd given them up months ago. He went to the window, as if it was possible to see the old Peterson place. Alice's grandmother had stood in the same yard with a staff in her hand and feathers in her hair. Alice and he stood at that same window, laughing at what a crazy, old bat she was.

The wind picked up and blew dirt and dead leaves across the

yard. The sun rose above land that had been in their families since before the Dust Bowl drove everyone else away. The sky had always seemed limitless. This time of year, it would be lavender at day's end.

RICK: It's a traffic jam over there now.

LUCY: We'd better go, daddy.

NARRATOR: Alice turned in the open doorway and Ben pulled at her arm.

BEN: Look now, Alice, you ain't worked a horse in years.

NARRATOR: Alice leaned against the back window of the car. The air washed over her face and sent her dark straight hair across the seat. Ben sat on the opposite side with an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth. He stared at his daughter sitting close to Rick. The urge to tell her to buckle her seat belt rolled around in the acid pool of his gut. They passed the makeshift shrine that marked the accident. No one looked but him. Faded plastic flowers tumbled across the intersection. Washed out pinks and blues scattered in the nearby grass, null relics of the days immediately after, when they thought Lucy wouldn't live. A few stands of trees broke the rhythm of farmland. Their leaves curled back from the dry earth. Trucks and cars lined the sides of the dirt drive that led to the Peterson house. A group of men near the porch turned and looked as the car pulled up.

Something about Rick and his daughter sitting up front in Rick's old Plymouth Valiant—with a backdrop of every farmer this side of Route 2—made Ben realize he might be looking at those tattoos and that damn hair forever. But Rick lifted Lucy in and out

of that chair like he was born to it.

When she was finally able to get out of rehab, Rick took her to Main Street and they'd lie on the sidewalks and draw cartoons in chalk on the squares of pavement. Lucy'd come home beaming and chattering away like the chair wasn't even there. But Ben and Alice had had hopes for their daughter. Her ballet teacher had come to the house and said Lucy could dance her way right off that farm and into a big city ballet company if she had a mind too. Now she wasn't even walking, loved by a strange-looking boy who drew in chalk.

Dust covered the windshield in a beige film, like a screen against the eyes of the crowd. Calvin, a big man with hips wider than his shoulders, stepped to the car. Lucy looked away as Rick helped her into the chair. Ben prayed Calvin didn't mention buying Absalon.

CALVIN: It's the damnedest thing I ever seen.

NARRATOR: Calvin and Ben made their way to the porch now with Calvin tapping his fingers against his speckled scalp. Alice followed beside him. Ben felt everyone's eyes on them. Maybe they'd also looked before Jerold Page'd had too much to drink, blown through that stop sign, and sent Lucy's Blazer tumbling. If they had, the stares hadn't felt the same. Now...

CALVIN: Must be the storm coming scared him... That barn of yours shoulda come down long ago, Ben.

BEN: Nothing wrong with my barn, Calvin.

NARRATOR: The crowd didn't know where to look now between

seeing Alice Anderson, doubled in size since wheeling her daughter home a year ago, or the sight of that horse moving behind the windows above.

A VOICE: I wouldn't be going in there, Ben, that place'll come down around you.

BEN: I'm going. That's my horse in there.

NARRATOR: As Ben's boots echoed hollow on the porch's wood, Calvin shoved the butt of a pistol against Ben's arm.

CALVIN: That horse ain't gonna make it outta there, Ben. You know, it'd be the right thing to do.

NARRATOR: Ben hesitated, then took the pistol and shoved it into the back of his belt. He glanced over at Lucy. Her lips moved silently, no.

A VOICE: Don't think the place'll hold that horse for long. A horse and man together, Ben? Even worse.

BEN: What I don't need is a peanut gallery.

NARRATOR: The entry filled two stories; the house had been finer than most. Ben had last been in it as a teenager. Breaking in was a rite of passage. He couldn't remember if lore had the family leaving with everyone else in the 1930s or if they'd died, but either way it'd been before he was born. Ben, Calvin, Horace, and a few others used to light a fire in the fireplace of the upstairs ballroom and smoke cigarettes rolled from cornhusks. Once they'd spent the night on blankets carried in rolls on their shoulders and drank a bottle of whiskey they'd mixed together

from shots collected from their fathers' stashes over months. They were just shy of graduation, and all that lay ahead was the same thing their stubborn fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had been doing since coming to this place in wagons and on horseback.

Blood streaked along the strips of torn wallpaper. The faded fleur-de-lis emblems had seemed grand as a kid. Now the graying peels brought a sad taste to Ben's throat. Absalon had probably got cut busting out of the barn or during his flight across the fields. On a straight path, the horse would've had to jump at least three fences. Blood drops speckled the stairs like rain drops., which were still solid despite breaks in the banister. The railing had once been smooth and polished, but now it snagged against Ben's palm. The second-floor landing was over a dozen feet wide. A massive window smeared with dust let in faint patches of light where the panes were gone. Flies moved in the corners, slow and nearly dead, or in vibrating piles beneath.

Absalon's breathy snort resonated in the vacant house. His hooves clomped against wood like the roll of close thunder. Or maybe a storm really was coming.

Ben hadn't ever seen a horse climb stairs, but Alice was right—horse paths to the west were steeper. Still, Absalon had to be pretty scared to make the climb. The double doors to the front room stood wide open, revealing oak plank flooring, plaster walls, mullioned windows, and the horse's hind end. Ben inched his way toward the room—the same ballroom he and his friends had sat in, throwing cigarette butts into the majestic fireplace, and talking like they might one day get away.

BEN: Hey, boy. Easy now. Easy there. You got yourself in quite a

pickle, don't you? There, there.

NARRATOR: Absalon had worked himself into the back corner. He was opposite the fireplace, with his tail toward the center of the room like he'd been stuck there by an irritated school marm. The room's tall windows had lost their glass long ago. It seemed strange that someone hadn't stolen the room's massive chandelier. Where in hell would anyone around here put it? Alice had asked when he mentioned it. Ben put his hand on the pistol and pulled it closer to his right hip. Thunder clapped above them.

BEN: How about that, boy, we just might end this drought tonight.

NARRATOR: The sky grew darker beyond the windows. If he looked down, he knew he'd see the crowd's faces turned up. He thought of the dry-rotted floorboards and how they might splinter when he got closer to the horse. His hand rested on the pistol stock.

BEN: You picked a fine time to take a run, didn't you? Easy now, you know I ain't interested in getting kicked in the head anytime soon.

NARRATOR: The horse snorted and lifted its head, its eye an enormous black marble.

BEN: You see me now, don't you, boy? Gonna just slide along the wall, here. Look at that blood on the floor...You're cut on the other side, ain't you? Maybe the shoulder.

CALVIN: Damn it, Ben, Get this over with. We all're about to get electrocuted out here.

BEN: They should all want to dance if it rains, shouldn't they boy. Ain't had any all summer.

NARRATOR: The eye stayed on him. Finally, Ben was able to put a hand on Absalon's rump. He ran his fingers along the horse's back and up its neck. It didn't flinch.

BEN: We've had a tough year, boy, ain't we, but you're gonna be fine. No need for this gun. I always try to do the right thing. You know that. But right don't always work, does it boy.

NARRATOR: Ben pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around Absalon's eyes, holding the shirt tight beneath the horse's cheeks, he gave Absalon a gentle push on the shoulder. The horse took a few steps back. Ben worked his way around to his other side. A six-inch gash went from chest to elbow, with another smaller one to the forearm. The bleeding had stopped.

BEN: You're gonna need some stitches, boy. Come on now. Easy does it. (*click, click*)

NARRATOR: Ben turned Absalon around. The horse leaned slightly against him. As Ben led him under the great chandelier and past the windows, Ben thought he heard the crowd gasp. Maybe Calvin saying he was a fool.

BEN: One thing I can promise is, you ain't going to Calvin anytime soon. Come on, now, easy there, through these big doors and into the second-floor hall. Don't know how or why in hell you got up here anyhow. I came here when I was a boy. Thought maybe I was meant to live in a different time, maybe a time when they still had parties in that very ballroom, and I could

dance with every girl in the county. Wait a minute; see the front door there? It's open but we got to go down these stairs first. Bright out there, damn rain passed again.

NARRATOR: Ben pushed the shirt off the horse's eyes but kept his grip. He stepped down two stairs, which had been designed for women in full skirts to descend on a man's arm or to stand in groups and greet partygoers on their way to the ballroom.

Absalon took the first step, then brought his other front hoof onto it. They went down together, man and horse, hoof by hoof, step by step, all the while Ben clicked in Absalon's ear. The steps popped and cracked beneath them. At the bottom, on the porch now, Ben paused with his grip still on the shirt harness and let out a long breath.

BEN: Good boy, Absalon, good boy.

NARRATOR: Rick had brought Lucy to the side of the porch. Alice stood beside them. Ben walked Absalon down the porch steps, past Calvin who stood with his hands on his hips and his stomach stuck forward. Ben noticed for the first time that a horse trailer was hitched to Calvin's truck.

BEN: This horse isn't for sale, Calvin.

NARRATOR: He walked Absalon so Lucy could reach up and run her hands along his neck. Alice rested her head against the horse's cheek.

CALVIN: Well, I ain't interested anymore. Gotta be something wrong with that horse anyway.

ALICE: Poor boy, Absalon, how'd you ever get out?"

NARRATOR: It had been hot the day before even with the sun going down. Ben had stood outside the barn watching the last of the day disappear as purple light filled the sky. The door'd been latched when Ben first went in. Absalon's tack had been hung as it should. His brush upright in the nook above his stall, which was filled with fresh hay. As always over the last year, Ben avoided looking up to the loft. After the dance teacher's visit, Ben and Alice had converted the barn's loft into a dance studio, layering so much lavender paint onto its ancient boards that if they cut through the wood, the color would be soaked clear through. Ben didn't paint the loft because of what that teacher said. He painted it because of the look on Lucy's face when she'd danced her first recital. Her expression didn't so much say she was happy, but that he was. He and Alice would climb the ladder together and peek across the floor to watch Lucy dance, and in those moments it seemed like they all danced.

BEN: I think you should ride him home, Alice.

ALICE: You said I hadn't worked a horse in years.

Ben: But you're our bareback rider, and we haven't got a saddle.

LUCY: Mama, please.

NARRATOR: Lucy's face was as full as the moon staring up at them.

BEN: Come on, Alice, take my hand. Use these steps. This horse's hankering for a rider like you.

ALICE: Ben, I'm too heavy.

BEN: You ain't. And besides, he's a horse. Don't know what heavy means.

NARRATOR: Alice mounted Absalon from the porch and walked him around in small circles. Then she grasped his dark mane and dug in her heels. Absalon jerked to attention with a flick of his head. He gamboled forward and the two flew off down the dirt drive. The crowd broke into slow-moving groups that alternately stared at Absalon's trail of dust and the varying sky above. They climbed into vehicles and pulled down the rutted drive.

CALVIN: That woman still looks good on a horse, don't she?

BEN: Yessir to that, Calvin, yessir.

NARRATOR: Ben pressed his back into the seat on the ride home. He felt sore and tired, though the day was young. He twirled a cigarette in and out of the pack, which held only three. Lucy leaned against Rick. He couldn't hear their voices against the roar of the air through the open windows, but he could see smiles at the corners of their mouths. All around the sky turned a thick, purplish-gray.

When they pulled up to the house, it looked older than just hours before. Dust flew in swirling clouds peppered with leaves. Great slabs of paint peeled from the siding. The dry cracks that spread across the yard like chicken wire yawned wider. Behind the house the barn door banged in the wind. Last night as he'd watched the sky, Ben hadn't thought to turn back like he normally did to double- and triple-check the barn door.

In the yard, Rick patted the hood of his car as he circled to the passenger side.

RICK: I'll get you inside, Lucy. Looks like it might rain after all.

NARRATOR: Ben went to close the door and heard something beneath the moaning wind. He leaned into the barn and could barely make out scraping and dragging in the loft. It'd been a year since he'd heard those sounds, and now they wrenched at his gut. Streams of light filtered through the planks and picked up specks of dust. Absalon was in his stall, bent over feed. The wind beat against the barn in slow, hard bursts. Despite the muffled sounds of Absalon and from above, the barn felt empty. Ben thought about standing in that same barn as a boy, how it had looked much larger and smelled of life and belonging.

Rick's car started up. Ben glanced outside to see it pull away. A kitchen light had been turned on.

On that day, Ben had put down his crop duster in a patch of field near the house not meant for landing, but he could put that thing down anywhere. He'd jumped into his pickup and raced past the crash site. He'd run past Alice in the hospital waiting room, pushed aside ER nurses who tried to restrain him. He'd gotten to Lucy's bed, to the tubes, wires, and stitches that held her together. The earth fell away and spun like a siphon beneath him. Alice's hand on his arm was barely enough to keep him standing.

He'd visited Lucy every day, and when she finally came home, he carried her up the ramp they'd built. She'd laughed at him. What am I, your bride? she'd said. They'd turned the dining room into a bedroom. Bumped out the back wall and added a bath big enough for the chair. She had adapted too quickly, like it was always part

of her. Those moments gathered steam and velocity, and now they tumbled across the loft floor above him like a wash over the cracked earth. He struggled up the ladder and peered across the studio floor.

Alice never had Lucy's grace, but she had her own way—the purposeful, rhythmic steps of her ancestors. Ben leaned against the ladder, the rough wood in his hands, the soft scrape of feet, an undercurrent to her twists and turns. Wind buffeted the barn as if wanting to lift structure from its foundation. The door rattled with anger. Then a second of calm. Alice stopped and saw Ben standing there. Her eyes said he was at once both stranger and family. Then, as if from nowhere, a gentle spatter of rain burst around them.