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FOREWORD

BY RABBI ALLEN SECHER

I'd like to suggest a movie scenario to the Coen brothers. It is the story of a young arrogant boy who insists he can single-handedly defeat his country's greatest terrorist. He's called on his boast. He approaches the enemy's weapon of mass destruction with a laser beam of his own invention, and with a few blasts it is vaporized. Frightened at the prospect of imminent defeat, the enemy retreats back behind its own boundaries.

The kid is a national hero. He's welcomed to the home of the president. Soon after, his friendship with the president's son blossoms into an intimate (some say homosexual) relationship. Countless of the country's rock stars compose tributes to the young hero, and cable channels praise the boy on 24-7 news cycles. He marries the president's daughter. His popularity ratings far exceed the president's own, and soon the president's jealousy builds to homicidal so that the boy must flee. The president takes out a contract on the boy's life. The plot is foiled, and in the gun battle, the president's son is slain. And the president has a heart attack and dies.

The popularity of the boy is so great that he replaces the president. The boy has a guitar talent and appears constantly on nighttime TV playing his own compositions. One day, while sunning himself on

the roof of the presidential palace, he gazes down at the mansion's pool and spots an intern lounging poolside. The boy's chief of staff informs him that the beauty is married to one of his generals. The boy immediately dispatches the general to the front lines, where he is quickly killed. Because his country permits multiple marriages, the intern and the boy are soon wed. Their first child dies. When the boy laments, "Why? Why?" his attorney general points out his lust and his role in the death of the general. Fast-forward. Eventually the boy will be challenged for his office unsuccessfully by one of his own sons, and upon his death, another of his sons succeeds him.

Sound like a good plot, right?

Nah, nobody would believe it.

But our biblical ancestors did. It's the story of King David, the man said to have been the apple of God's eye. While most of us cannot imagine a world without cell phones, emails, iPods, and DVDs, our biblical ancestors had none of the above. Their mass communication was through spoken stories and pageantry. The early tales were broadcast via fireside chats while tending sheep, conversations while on pilgrimage, or parents at the bedtime hour. By the time of Moses in the Old Testament, we are introduced to thunder and lightning, the sound of the shofar, and Ten Commandments on a stone slab. Subsequently, we added the role of the *Kohen* (also called the Cohen, Cohn, and Coen) to dramatize the points being made. The high priest surrounded himself with stage props such as fancy clothing, frankincense, burnt offerings, elaborate music, and fiery sacrifices—all to make a moral point.

The historian Josephus informs us that in the post-Maccabean period the high priest was seen as exercising authority in all things—political, legal, and sacerdotal. He was the supreme power. The high

priest of the Sanhedrin was also chief judge and president. The *Kohen* became producer extraordinaire. As time went by, the community added the role of the *Darshan*—the storyteller—interpreter of the legends. His job was to make the moral high road come alive to even the mostly ignorant listeners. A musical score was also added to the weekly scriptural reading to enhance its exposition.

Joel and Ethan Coen have become part of the same progression from priest to judge to storyteller to producer extraordinaire. Cathleen calls them secular theologians.

A careful reading of Scripture finds our fathers and mothers dealing with family, love, and marriage; revenge, faith, and fear; rehabilitation, consequences, and commitment; fantasy, sexuality, and violence; dreams, visions, and betrayal; lust, gluttony, and ego; kindness, the unknowable, and respect; compassion, pride, and adultery; murder, idolatry, and double-cross; choices, threats, and doubt. And this list is only a partial one. It's all there in our Sacred Works. Or as Casey Stengel (a.k.a. "The Old Perfessor") would say, "You could look it up."

My guess is that the Coens would deny any message to their medium or that they were theologians at all (secular or otherwise.) Still, the long list of biblical plot points in the above paragraph resonates through each of their films.

Danny Siegel in his book *And God Braided Eve's Hair* sets up one significant Coenesque spiritual message: "If you always assume the person sitting next to you is the Messiah waiting for some simple human kindness, you will soon come to weigh your words and watch your hands. And if he chooses not to be revealed in your time, it will not matter." A messiah yet to be revealed in the world of the Coen brothers could be Barton Fink or Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski;

Marge Gunderson, Sheriff Bell, or Chad Feldheimer. The chosen one could be located in the Ukraine, Washington, D.C., Arizona, or Los Angeles. But most likely, he or she is sitting right next to the Coens (and you) at this very moment.

In *The Dude Abides*, Cathleen refers to the commentator Rashi (an acronym for Rabbi Solomon bar Isaac), who commented on every biblical and Talmudic nuance. Cathleen has become the Rashi to the Coens' scripture. The brothers' cinematic oeuvre is filled with lessons learned, morals attended, and complex characters straight out of the biblical playbook. If it was only by osmosis that they incorporated their theology while daydreaming in Hebrew school in Minneapolis, we still are grateful for their training. If Joel and Ethan ever decide on pursuing second careers in theology, there are a few rabbinic schools I would like to recommend.

Rabbi Allen Secher is presently serving as rabbi for Bet Harim Jewish Community of the Flathead Valley, Montana. Ordained in 1961, Rabbi Secher has served congregations in Chicago, Los Angeles, Mexico City, New York, and Bozeman, Montana. In addition to his rabbinic work, he has been an actor, television producer, documentary filmmaker, and radio commentator.

THE COEN BROTHERS

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

JOEL COEN

The older of the two Coen boys, Joel Coen was born on November 29, 1954, in St. Louis Park, Minnesota (a suburb of Minneapolis), to Edward and Rena Coen. Edward was a professor of economics at the University of Minnesota and Rena a professor of fine arts at St. Cloud State University. The family is Jewish, and Joel and his siblings (the brothers have an older sister, Debbie, who became a doctor and moved to Israel) grew up attending synagogue and Hebrew school. After spending his last year of high school at Simon's Rock in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a uniquely progressive school that allowed its students to take college classes during what would have been their high school years, Joel attended New York University's undergraduate film program. After graduating from NYU, Joel worked as a production assistant for industrial films and music videos, before landing his first feature film gig as an assistant editor on his friend Sam Raimi's 1981 horror flick, *The Evil Dead*. In 1984, Joel wrote and directed his first feature film, *Blood Simple*, with his brother, Ethan. The film starred the young actress Frances McDormand, who married Joel after the film's release in 1984 and went on to appear in six more Coen brothers' films. With Ethan, Joel has been nominated for nine Academy Awards (including two under the name Roderick Jaynes, the alias the duo uses for its film editing credits). The Coens have won two screenwriting Oscars, for

Fargo and *No Country for Old Men*, and received their first Oscars for Best Achievement in Directing and Best Picture in 2008 for *No Country for Old Men*.

ETHAN COEN

Three years his brother's junior, Ethan Coen was born on September 21, 1957, in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. After following in his brother's footsteps at Simon's Rock, Ethan, always the more conscientious student, enrolled at Princeton University, where he studied philosophy. In his senior university thesis, "Two Views of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," he wrote that he thought it "the height of stupidity" to believe in God. Despite his claims of disbelief, spiritual themes recur often in Ethan's extra-cinematic writings, including his 1998 short story collection, *Gates of Eden*, and an off-Broadway production of three one-act plays, 2008's *Almost an Evening* (in which Oscar winner F. Murray Abraham was cast as an angry God). Since the brothers' feature-film debut in 1984, Ethan has been listed as producer to Joel's director in their film credits, though the brothers say they share equally in both endeavors. Ethan has been married to film editor Tricia Cooke since 1992.

THE COEN BROTHERS

FILMOGRAPHY

Blood Simple (1984)

Raising Arizona (1987)

Miller's Crossing (1990)

Barton Fink (1991)

The Hudsucker Proxy (1993)

Fargo (1996)

The Big Lebowski (1997)

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000)

The Man Who Wasn't There (2001)

Intolerable Cruelty (2003)

The Ladykillers (2004)

No Country for Old Men (2007)

Burn After Reading (2008)

A Serious Man (2009)

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the question now. Perhaps then, some day far in the future, you will gradually without even noticing it, live your way to the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

ELUCIDATING THE *LUCIDA*

AN INTRODUCTION

God is swearing at me.

Seated in the second row at the Bleecker Street Theatre in New York City, I am, in fact, close enough to this raging Jehovah that I'm tempted to dodge the sacred spittle he's spraying along with a litany of not-so-holy expletives. This is the Angry God of Old Testament fame, the smiter-in-chief and jealous deity, the one with the long white beard, Birkenstocks, and flowing robes who's had it up to here with humans complaining, disobeying his commandments, and generally being a collective pain in the tuckus.

Watching this Angry God—portrayed oh-so-divinely by Oscar winner F. Murray Abraham—rant and rave about his creation in the third act of Ethan Coen's off-Broadway production of three religiously themed mini-plays called *Almost an Evening*, I begin to reconsider the wisdom of mining the treasure trove that is the Coen brothers' cinematic oeuvre for spiritual gems. If the overarching spiritual message of Joel and Ethan Coen's twenty-five-year contribution to film is that God doesn't exist and we're all screwed—or, worse still, that God exists all right and boy is he pissed—then the book you're reading would be both short and, to borrow a favorite expression from one of the Coens' most enduring characters, "a bummer, man."

My fears are allayed when a second deity—played with abundant grace and good humor by Mark Linn-Baker—takes the stage in a

natty suit and bow tie, smiling kindly. This God is of a more recent, New Testament vintage, and he reassures the audience that we are loved and all we must do to find peace and direction is reach out to God. Everything's gonna be all right, he soothes. As you might imagine, Angry God does not take kindly to this rival Almighty and threatens to kick his butt. The exchange that follows is hilarious, poking fun not at God but at our sometimes schizophrenic perceptions of God. What Ethan Coen seems to be saying is that often what we believe about God is more a projection of our own needs or desires than what and who God might actually be. Be aware of the lens through which you view the Almighty, the playwright chides: before you invoke a divine imprimatur, make sure it's divine and not comically (or tragically) human.

Since their directorial debut in 1984 with the neo-thriller *Blood Simple*, the Minnesota-bred writing-directing-producing team of Joel and Ethan Coen has created some of the most quirky, enigmatic, and enduring films of my generation. Beginning with *Blood Simple*, the story of a man who has grave doubts about his wife's fidelity and what happens when he attempts to uncover the "truth," the Coens have boldly engaged serious existential questions with darkly intelligent humor. Many of their films are riotously funny and eminently quotable—just ask anyone who is a fan of *Raising Arizona* or *The Big Lebowski*—while others are somber noir treatments of other classical genres from romantic comedy to gangland drama. Each of their fourteen feature-length films is marked by theological, philosophical, and mythological touchstones that enrich even the slapstickiest moments. Each film probes confounding ethical and spiritual quandaries, giving us a tour of nuanced moral universes that may be individual (in the case of *Barton Fink*),

geographic (as in *Fargo*), or historic (such as the Depression era of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*).

It would be dishonest to try to wrestle the Coen brothers' films into a God-shaped box—or wood chipper, for that matter—and that is not my intention. I do, however, take seriously their invitation to wrestle with important spiritual and moral questions. It is in that dialogical spirit that I want to uncover what the overarching spiritual messages of their films—their "gospel," if you will—might be. While it is clear that the Coens are artists, not preachers, I agree wholeheartedly with one astute critic who calls them "secular theologians" whose body of work is "one of the most sneakily moralistic in recent American cinema."[1] While the spiritual content of their films is fairly evident, I don't want to infer from that an intention by the filmmakers to teach us some sort of spiritual lesson. Their films are like life itself, full of questions with little didacticism. Still, the Coens leave the door to interpretation (spiritual, artistic, stylistic, and otherwise) wide open. To paraphrase something Ethan told Charlie Rose in an interview after *No Country for Old Men* was released, the Coens' films are "something more than that, but that."

There is a moral order to the worlds the Coens create. Whether the story is a farcical crime caper or an American gothic tale of betrayal, there always are consequences to the characters' actions, for better or for worse. Bad guys are punished and the decent are rewarded for their innate goodness, though beware the viewer who assumes it will be easy to discern which is which. Sins come to light; lies and deception are revealed for what they are. It may even happen occasionally that the hand of God intervenes to restore order from chaos.

The Coens' films are visually stunning, with certain leitmotifs,

or recurring themes, that repeat in nearly every story. Often, the opening frames of the films depict long, empty roads or sweeping shots of tall trees or skyscrapers, symbolizing, perhaps, the horizontal relationship between one human being and another, and the vertical relationship between humans and the Divine. The filmmakers often play with light and dark, drawing on Roland Barthes's notion of *camera lucida*—that the viewer is deeply and personally affected by the images he or she sees. Our interpretation is just that—ours. It is personal; we project our own ideas onto the story, just as the film's images are projected onto the screen.

The Coens are virtuoso wordsmiths in love with language and wordplay. The dialogue in their films is rich, nuanced, and playful, awash with allusions, cultural homage, and inside jokes. It is intriguing to speculate how much Ethan's undergraduate studies in philosophy at Princeton University might have influenced his approach to the spoken word. In 1979, Ethan wrote his senior thesis on the later works of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose major emphasis was on the philosophy of language. Wittgenstein argued that what we can think is contingent on what we can say, that thought flows from language, and not the other way around. If not, we're just making noise.

In his Princeton thesis, Ethan discusses the idea of meaning by explaining the difference between understanding and sympathizing. "If it's a question of my understanding/not understanding their beliefs, rather than my feeling sympathy/not feeling sympathy with their attitude as manifested in their avowals of belief, then yes, I *understand* what it means to say that there is an omnipotent, benevolent creator, and that claim strikes me as the height of stupidity," he wrote.[2] Perhaps this understanding of language and meaning has al-

lowed the Coens to write eloquently about spiritual or metaphysical beliefs they don't necessarily hold.

One persistent criticism of the Coens' work is that it is all style without any soul. To my mind, this seems like missing the forest for the trees. With the charge of style, I agree wholeheartedly. What such critics fail to appreciate is the transcendent meaning rife in all their films. Even those that appear merely silly or frivolous on the surface contain elegant—and often self-deprecatingly humorous—glimpses of true grace amid worlds dominated by greed, malice, and inhumanity. The Coens often juxtapose comical scenes with brutal depictions of violence that stun us into considering the consequences of what we believe and how we act. It's as if by exploring with an unblinking eye the worst of humanity—the darkest of evil—the light, the goodness, shines even brighter. Their films often echo songwriter Bruce Cockburn's insistence that we must "kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight."

Some people of faith likely will take issue with the entire premise of my endeavor here. Why look to secular theologians for perspectives on God, faith, and the life of the Spirit? Christians in particular may object to my application of the word *gospel* to the Coens' overarching worldview. I would urge my coreligionists to keep an open mind. Film is a powerful cultural artifact and translator that transcends—and helps us transcend—racial, economic, and religious divides. "Film is the language of this new generation," my friend Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Christ*, told me recently. "It's the way in which they communicate."

Rather than simply condemn films that present points of view with which we disagree or even find abhorrent, we should examine them and seek to grasp the messages they send, messages with which

so many viewers find emotional resonance. We should, perhaps, ask why. Maybe we'll learn something.

While the Coens' films seldom reflect a classical Christ-centered worldview, they are an articulate reflection of the spiritual and existential sensibilities of many of our brothers and sisters of different faith traditions and of none. Do not be afraid of the darkness; without it, light wouldn't exist. To quote another of my generation's great secular theologians, U2, in their song "God Part II": "Don't believe the devil; I don't believe his book. But the truth is not the same without the lies he made up." A kernel of truth will rise above a mountain of lies, just as even a single spark pierces the darkness. And all truth is God's truth, no matter where it comes from or who's saying it.

The beauty of art is, of course, that it's open to interpretation and moreover that it *requires* interpretation. What I see may not be what you see, and that is as it should be. Art demands interpretation, and each work of art exists in a field of possible interpretations, but that field is not infinite. As you travel with me on this tour of the Coen brothers' moral universes, I hope you'll disagree with conclusions that don't ring true to you and draw your own. As the great slacker saint of Los Angeles, Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski, so eloquently put it, in the end, "That's just, like, your opinion, man."

Opinions are important, and they are subjective, colored, and shaped by life experiences, predispositions, and points of view. We should be able to disagree, especially when what we're disagreeing about is something that truly matters.

BLOOD SIMPLE

CHAPTER 1

BLOOD SIMPLE

"Down here, you're on your own."

THE FOREST

In an unnamed Texas town, Abby is cheating on her bar-owning husband, Marty. Abby's lover is Ray, one of Marty's bartenders. Marty hires Visser, a sleazy detective, to kill Abby and Ray, but Visser has his own nefarious plans. The plot of this neo-noir crime thriller uncoils in double- and triple-crosses where almost nothing is what it seems, ending in a chillingly violent showdown between Abby, Visser, and the ghosts spawned by her guilty conscience.

THE TREES

Bleak images of rural Texas slowly flip past as day turns to night. A scrap of a blown-out tire lies on a span of an asphalt highway punctuated by yellow demarcation lines. Desiccated brown fields foreground the tall buildings of a nondescript city on the horizon. The black silhouettes of huge oil derricks pierce the hard Texas earth like birds hunting grubs. Finally, the twin headlights of a lone vehicle break the gloom of a dark, rainy stretch of road.

A narrator's voice, dripping with smarmy faux-southern charm, sets the tone:

Narrator: "The world is full of complainers. But the fact is, nothing comes with a guarantee. I don't care if you're the Pope of Rome, President of the United States, or even Man of the Year, something can always go wrong. And go ahead, complain to your neighbor, ask for help—and watch him fly. Now in Russia, they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else—that's the theory anyway. But what I know about is Texas, and down here, you're on your own."

Two people, barely visible in silhouette from the vantage point of the backseat, ride in a car in silence through the rain-soaked night. The driver of the car, Ray (John Getz), is chauffeuring Abby (Frances McDormand), the gamine wife of Julian "Marty" Marty (Dan Hedeya), the owner of the roadhouse where he tends bar. Abby is heading for Houston, on the run from her husband. Ray is her getaway man in more ways than one. "He gave me a little pearl-handled .38 for our first anniversary," Abby tells the laconic bartender. "Figure I better leave before I used it on him."

When Ray expresses a modicum of interest in her—"I always liked you," he says—she yells at him to stop the car. Ray figures this is because she recognizes the car that's following them. Instead it's because she's spotted the sign for a motel. "What do you wanna do?" Ray asks. "What do *you* want to do?" she answers. So they make love fitfully in the hollow dankness of a cheap motel room, and the next morning, the phone rings. Abby is still asleep, wrapped in a sheet, so Ray answers. It's Marty. He knows.

Marty is a swarthy, skeevy, ne'er-do-well businessman straight out of central casting. He's been having Abby tailed by a private in-

vestigator, figuring she was having an affair but not sure with whom. The private eye is a comical-looking creature, a fat man with a dingy cowboy hat and a leisure suit the shade of lemon-yellow custard, who drives a beat-up Volkswagen Beetle—the same car that had been following Ray's vehicle the night before on the rainy highway. This is Loren Visser (M. Emmet Walsh), though we never hear anyone call him by name. He chews gum while he smokes, grins like a madman, and cracks inappropriate jokes.

The day after Abby's affair is discovered, in Marty's office at the roadhouse, Visser shoves a manila envelope across the desk at Marty, who curtly flips through the black-and-white photographs of his wife in bed with Ray. "I know a place you can get that framed," Visser drawls, snickering.

"What did you take these for?" Marty demands. "You called me, I knew they were there, so what do I need these for?"

"Call it a fringe benefit," Visser cackles, adding that he watched the couple make love most of the night. Marty pays Visser his fee, tossing an envelope stuffed with money at him so that it lands on the floor next to his chair.

Marty: "You know, in Greece they cut off the head of a messenger who brought bad news."

Visser: "Now, that don't make much sense."

Marty: "No. It just made them feel better."

Visser: "Well, first off, Julian, I don't know what the story is in Greece, but in this state we got very definite laws about that. Second place, I ain't a messenger. I'm a private investigator. And third place—and most important—it ain't such bad news. I mean, you thought he was a colored. You're always assuming the worst. Anything else?"

Marty: "Yeah, don't come by here anymore. If I need you again, I know which rock to turn over."

This last biting comment gives Visser pause for a moment, but then he just laughs maniacally, saying, "That's good. 'Which rock to turn over.' That's very good." As Visser ambles to the door, still chuckling at the cuckolded husband, he adds, "Well, gimme a call whenever you wanna cut off my head. I can crawl around without it."

Marty chooses to be cruel to Visser, a man who is far from heroic, but whose presence in Marty's world was a result of Marty's invitation. Visser was merely doing the job Marty hired him to do. The audience is left to wonder, as the tragic events of the rest of the film unfold, whether things would have been different had Marty just paid Visser and left it at that, without verbally attacking Visser as a way of demonstrating his sense of moral superiority.

It's a small, seemingly insignificant choice, one of many that Marty and the other characters make throughout the film that lead to their downfalls. What if Abby had let Ray drive her to Houston as planned without inviting him to spend the night with her at the motel? What if, when he learned that Marty knew about the affair, Ray had walked away from Abby rather than pursue the relationship? What if? We are, the filmmakers seem to be saying, the authors of our own destruction, setting tragedy in motion — or avoiding it altogether — by the smallest decisions to turn, as it were, left instead of right, or to choose to follow our own lustful desires rather than doing the moral, sensible thing.

In the next scene, Ray takes Abby, who decides not to go to Houston after all, to her and Marty's house to collect a few things — namely, that little pearl-handled revolver. Then it's back to his apartment, where Abby waits while Ray runs an errand. Despite

her warning him not to do anything stupid, Ray goes to the roadhouse to confront Marty, who is sitting out back, watching his employees dump empty liquor boxes into a tall incinerator. Ray wants the two-weeks' pay Marty owes him, but Marty refuses to pay, saying, "She's an expensive piece of ass."

The logical step would have been for the two rivals for Abby's affection to come to blows, but Marty engages in mental warfare instead, planting seeds of doubt about Abby's intentions toward Ray. Marty says she's probably sleeping with other people and mocks Ray for believing that Abby stayed in town to be with him. "What's really going to be funny is when she gives you that innocent look and says, 'What're you talkin' about, Ray. I haven't done anything funny.' "

The next morning, Abby wakes up and walks into Ray's living room, where she's surprised to find her dog, Opal, panting and staring at her. Marty appears out of hiding and grabs Abby from behind, lifting her off her feet and dragging her outside with the intention of raping her. Abby, diminutive but feisty, grabs Marty's finger, bending it backward until it breaks with a satisfying crack. She then kicks him in the groin, sending him crawling pathetically across the lawn to retch on his knees.

Marty later tracks down Visser and offers him $10,000 to murder Abby and Ray. Visser, laughing most of the time, agrees and tells Marty to get out of town for a few days. Go to Corpus Christi and go fishing, he suggests. Get noticed.

That night, Visser appears ominously at Ray's apartment window while the illicit couple sleeps. He sneaks inside and steals Abby's .38, then goes back outside. Visser steps up to the window, and we see a flash of light, which we assume is the gun going off. Later, Visser

meets with Marty back in his office at the roadhouse, where a string of dead fish sits morbidly on his desk. Again, he shoves across the desk a manila envelope with photographic evidence inside—black-and-white glossies of Ray and Abby in bed with what appear to be gunshot wounds riddling their upper bodies.

Marty is sick to his stomach, rushing to the nearby washroom to retch. (The Coens have an odd preoccupation with vomit, a peculiar leitmotif in many of their films.) Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Marty leans into his safe to get Visser's $10,000. What we don't know until later is that Marty has swapped the photo for a sign from the bathroom warning employees to wash their hands. It's the first of many double-crosses that will follow in quick succession as the plot of the film unfolds.

After handing over the cash, Visser asks Marty if he's been "very, very careful" about covering up his tracks. When Marty says he has, Visser shoots him in the chest with Abby's pearl-handled .38, drops the gun on the floor next to Marty's body, and leaves—forgetting to retrieve the Zippo lighter engraved with his name and "Elks Man of the Year" from under the pile of dead fish.

In the next scene, we learn that Abby and Ray are alive and well; Visser has doctored the photographs. The flash we saw that night outside Ray's apartment was a flashbulb from the private detective's camera. Ray leaves Abby at an apartment she's rented in town and returns to the roadhouse to try to collect the money Marty owes him. He discovers Marty's body and, seeing Abby's .38 on the floor, assumes she's killed him.

Instead of calling the police, Ray tries to clean up the bloody mess before hauling Marty's body to his car and driving off to bury him. Having second thoughts, Ray pulls over by a field on a long,

empty stretch of road and runs away in a panic. When he returns to the car a few moments later, Marty's body is no longer in the backseat. Marty, it transpires, is not quite dead and has managed to crawl away from the car.

Ray drags Marty to the field, digs a hole, throws him in, and buries him alive. Thinking he was covering up his lover's murder, Ray becomes a murderer himself. He turns up at Abby's apartment some time later, clearly shaken, and tells her that he's "cleaned it all up." She has no idea what he's talking about. Frightened and confused, she says, "What're you talkin' about, Ray? I haven't done anything funny."

At last, Marty's words of warning come back to haunt Ray, and he starts to think Abby is playing him for the fool. The phone rings and Abby answers, but the caller says nothing. She assumes it's Marty and tells Ray as much. Ray, of course, assumes she's lying to him and storms out, telling her she "left her weapon behind" at the bar.

That night, alone in her cavernous apartment, Abby dreams that Marty appears—alive and menacing. "I love you," he says. "I love you too," she answers. "You're just saying that because you're scared," he growls, and adds, "You left your weapon behind," tossing the revolver at her. When she lunges to catch it, she sees that it's her makeup compact. Marty then doubles over in front of her, vomiting blood—and she awakens, covered in sweat.

In the morning, Abby goes to find Ray at his apartment. His belongings are in boxes, and he informs her that he's leaving town. When she asks why, he says he figured it's what she wanted. He asks her to come with him, but she says she first needs to know the truth. Abby assumes that Ray went to the bar to get his money from Marty, the two had a fight, and Ray killed Marty in self-defense. Ray tells

Abby that Marty was killed with her gun. They're both confused and, stammering, Ray confesses: "The truth is, he was alive when I buried him." Abby runs away.

In the next scene, Ray returns yet again to the roadhouse, where someone has tried to break into the safe. Ray finds hidden inside the safe the doctored photograph of him and Abby in bed with gunshot wounds. He's starting to put things together, and when he gets in his car to drive away, he spots a man—Visser—watching him from his VW parked down the block.

Ray goes to Abby's apartment and waits there in the dark, staring out the enormous picture window. Abby walks in and turns the light on, but Ray shouts at her to turn it off because someone's watching. She does but then turns it back on, demanding an explanation of what's happened to Marty, and then Ray is blown forward by a rifle blast to the back, killing him.

Visser is perched atop the building across the street, shooting into the illuminated apartment. Abby cowers in the corner, throwing her shoe at the one exposed lightbulb until it breaks. Visser enters the apartment while Abby, thinking it's Marty come to kill her, flees to the bathroom. Visser rifles through Ray's pockets looking for his photograph—and, presumably, the missing Zippo that he left in Marty's office and thinks Ray has discovered and pocketed. Finding nothing, he stalks the apartment looking for Abby. When he enters the bathroom, it's empty.

Abby has managed to crawl out of the small bathroom window, onto a narrow ledge, and into the room next door. Visser reaches through the window, groping blindly, and Abby drives a knife into his hand, impaling it on the window ledge. Visser's agonized screams are horrific. He begins to shoot through the wall, illuminat-

ing Abby's dark hiding place with narrow shafts of light. He finally manages to shoot a big enough hole in the wall to reach through and pull the knife out of his hand. Abby runs into the corridor between the rooms, grabs her gun and trains it at the bathroom door. When she senses movement, she shoots, and we hear Visser's body drop to the floor.

"I ain't afraid of you, Marty," she says.

Mortally wounded and staring up at the sweating bathroom pipes, Visser cackles a wicked, crazy laugh and shouts, "If I see him, I'll sure give him the message." The film ends as the Four Tops begin to sing, "It's the same old song, but with a different meaning since you been gone."

Blood Simple takes its title from a line in Dashiell Hammett's masterful hard-boiled detective novel *Red Harvest*, in which the term *blood simple* is used to describe a kind of mania that takes over when people are exposed to bloody violence. The Coens' debut film is in many ways an homage to Hammett and film noir but with decidedly modern twists. *Blood Simple* uses the film noir themes of alienation, uncertainty, subterfuge, and double-cross — but it cleverly subverts and inverts them. Abby is seemingly guileless, hardly the femme fatale of classic noir films, though the men in her life still meet tragedy as a result of her actions. The Coens make effective use of film noir's fascination with light and dark — much of the deception and double-crossing happens under the cover of darkness. Yet, as the Bible says, all that is hidden shall be revealed in the light of day and by the light of truth.[3]

THE MORAL OF THE STORY . . .

Blood Simple is a meditation on free will. No one in the film is coerced into making mistakes. Their undoing is entirely their own. No one else is to blame. Each character, when presented with a choice to do the right thing, makes the wrong choice—with tragic results. Abby could have gone to Houston as planned and never hooked up with Ray. Ray could have turned her down when she suggested going to the motel. Marty could have divorced Abby without trying to seek revenge. Ray could have walked away with the girl and left his two-weeks' pay behind rather than confront Marty. Marty could have paid Visser without insulting him. Ray could have gone to the police when he found Marty's body. Abby could have gone to the police when she suspected Ray of murdering her husband. Each time, the players chose to cover up their sins rather than be exposed.

If just one of them had made the right choice, tragedy might have been averted. Every choice the characters made was pivotal. This reminds me of something the writer Frederick Buechner once said: "All moments are key moments." Buechner follows that thought with another: "Life itself is grace." But there is no divine intervention in the Coens' story—no redemption and no grace. *Blood Simple* is a cautionary tale about actions and reactions, reminding us that everything we do has consequences that cannot be avoided, no matter how hard we try to hide from them.