

# THE CAIRN

Written by  
Robin Johnston

Copyright (c) 2025

1st Draft

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAINSIDE - DAY

Mist swirls around distant jagged peaks, rising behind a landscape of endless cold scree.

The banshee wind HOWLS.

A trembling HAND reaches out, pale skin in contrast to the dirt that coats it, fingers shaking. A female hand.

The hand turns upwards. A pale PEBBLE nestles in the palm. This tiny smooth stone almost glows in the gloom.

The hand SHUDDERS and the pebble drops. It bounces, then rests among similar tiny stones at the base of-

THE CAIRN. A small mountain of grey stones, silhouetted against the dark grey sky. Rain starts to fall, spotting the grey stones as-

EYES stare up at the cairn, its dark monolith against the uniform sky.

A YOUNG WOMAN's eyes, like glass. Unseeing.

For a moment, a SHADOW passes, reflecting in her eyeball. A GHOST? A spectra above the shadow of the cairn.

Another HAND reaches out, with large strong fingers. It clasp's the woman's pale, dead cheek.

A man's voice WHISPERS.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

Hold on...

A YOUNG MAN's face looks down, handsome and smiling, filling the frame. Then he turns to look as-

The sound of heavy FOOTSTEPS can be heard in the distance.

YOUNG MAN

He's coming.

INT. SHACK BEDROOM - DAY

The young man sits up on the side of the bed, struggling to get dressed quickly, panicking.

The young woman from the cairn lies next to him. For a moment she lies still, staring up at the roof, as though still lifeless.

Then she stretches out her arms for her lover, terrified. She TURNS to face the door of the tiny SHACK.

It's clear now that she is heavily PREGNANT, and is struggling to get up.

A loud BANG on the door!

YOUNG WOMAN  
(to the young man)  
Go! Please!

YOUNG MAN  
No, I won't leave you!

The BLOWS continue. The flimsy wooden door of the shack gives way!

The silhouette of a POWERFUL MAN stands framed in the door.

He is the young woman's HUSBAND.

The only sound the young woman can make is a strangled squeal.

The young man steps up defiantly.

HUSBAND  
You?

The young woman SCREAMS and throws herself back from the bed, protecting her swollen belly and flattening herself against the opposite wall.

The husband leaps towards the younger man, wrestling him to the floor then grabbing him by the ankles and dragging him towards the door.

YOUNG WOMAN  
Leave him be!

HUSBAND  
I'll deal with you later, harlot!

She watches helplessly as her husband DRAGS the younger man by his feet, through the doorway into the blinding light of the outside.

EXT. VILLAGE — DAY

The husband continues to drag the young man through the mud out into the village square.

The young man is almost drowning in the mud as he is dragged along. The young woman protests as she struggles to keep up, holding her swollen belly.

YOUNG WOMAN  
Please, let him go!

HUSBAND  
Hold your tongue!

He does finally let go, and the younger man slumps onto the mud, trying to find his breath.

YOUNG WOMAN  
It's no fault of his.

The older man turns and looks her over.

HUSBAND  
You did this on your own?

YOUNG MAN  
It's not-

HUSBAND  
I'll not hear any more from you.  
Behind my back all this time-

YOUNG MAN  
You beat her!

HUSBAND  
She's not the one I'll be beating!

A number of other VILLAGERS have gathered and now surround them. The husband pulls the younger up by his forearms, almost off the ground.

HUSBAND (cont'd)  
I found him, he was lying with my  
wife!

Another villager approaches, wrinkled and bent double with age. She seems to have some authority.

ELDER WOMAN  
Is this true?

Neither of the young ones speak. The husband shakes the younger man violently by his arm.

HUSBAND

Say it!

ELDER WOMAN

The child?

HUSBAND

It's not mine!

(to the young woman)

Say it!

The young woman bows her head. She can see the rage rising in her husband, who his hand to STRIKE the younger.

YOUNG WOMAN

No!

The old woman gestures to the husband.

OLDER WOMAN

We have laws!

HUSBAND

I have the right-

ELDER WOMAN

You are convinced this unborn child is not your own?

The husband glances almost guiltily at his young wife.

HUSBAND

I am.

ELDER WOMAN

Then he shall be punished in the proper way.

YOUNG MAN

No!

OLDER WOMAN

He will climb the mountain-

YOUNGER WOMAN

No, please!

OLDER WOMAN

-and submit himself to the Cairn.

The older woman gestures and some of the village men walk up to the stricken young man.

YOUNGER WOMAN (O.S.)  
No, wait! Please!

They continue but the older woman turns to the younger.

ELDER WOMAN  
Then you will give your child freely  
to your betrothed?

The young woman looks equally shocked at this, and she holds her stomach. She looks pleadingly at her husband.

HUSBAND  
I don't want that the damned-

ELDER WOMAN  
Silence!

The older woman never raises her voice but her tone holds great authority. She addresses the dismayed young woman.

OLDER WOMAN  
(to the young woman)  
Talk.

She looks down at the swell of her stomach.

YOUNGER WOMAN  
I will go.

YOUNGER MAN  
No.

YOUNGER WOMAN  
You will spare him?

ELDER WOMAN  
He will live.

HUSBAND  
What-

YOUNG WOMAN  
...if I reach the Cairn?

ELDER WOMAN  
The child is yours if you survive.

HUSBAND  
That is not justice!

ELDER WOMAN

You wish to join her?

The husband backs down, and lets go of the younger man, who slumps into the mud. He looks pleadingly up at his lover.

YOUNG MAN

Don't-

YOUNGER WOMAN

I can do this. I will prepare-

ELDER WOMAN

You will go as you stand!

Everyone looks horrified at this, even the husband.

HUSBAND

But she can't climb like-

YOUNGER MAN

She'll die!

ELDER WOMAN

The Cairn will decide.

HUSBAND

At least-

OLDER WOMAN

She will go as she stands and she will go now!

the old woman proclaims this to the whole town square. The young woman bows her head low in deference.

YOUNG WOMAN

I will.

The old woman nods and the young man is DRAGGED away by the villagers, screaming.

The young woman shudders as she watches this. In the distance she can see the young man being forced into a tiny cage at the center of the village.

Even her husband looks horrified at this turn of events.

HUSBAND

Wait, maybe I-

ELDER WOMAN

The decision is made.

She hobbles up to the young woman, and moves in close.

ELDER WOMAN (cont'd)  
Take this.

She holds out her ancient gnarled hand. Inside is a small, pale white pebble, nestling in her palm.

ELDER WOMAN (cont'd)  
Lay this at the base of the Cairn.  
Then the guardian will know you.

YOUNG WOMAN  
What then?

ELDER WOMAN  
Then it will decide. Now go. The day  
is waning.

YOUNG WOMAN  
How will I find it?

ELDER WOMAN  
Follow the water.

The young woman looks back towards her young lover, now a prisoner in his cage, being tied up and restrained, who is still screaming in pain and protest.

Then she glances pleadingly at her husband, who cannot even look at her. He stands there defeated, his head bowed.

She grips the pebble tightly and struggles through the mud in her bare feet. Her thin nightgown and shawl are already soaked.

The remaining villagers open up the wooden gate.

YOUNGER MAN (O.S.)  
No, please! Let me go!

He is SLAPPED down by one of the villagers and his head hits the side of the cage cage.

As he watches, barely conscious, all he sees is the blurred image of the young woman fading into the dark.

The gate slowly closes on her.

CUT TO:



## EXT. MOUNTAINSIDE FOREST — DAY

The forest is strangely silent, hardly a sound greets the young woman outside the village.

She looks back at the closed gate. She can still hear the young man screaming, as though in another world.

She stands there, her bare feet on the grass, almost frozen with terror at the idea of the trial ahead.

She wraps her arms around her body and bulging stomach, her teeth chattering in the cold, already exhausted.

She starts to climb.

## INT. VILLAGE STOCKS — DAY

The young man sits slumped in his cage, his feet held firmly in wooden stocks, near unconscious in the gloom.

Water splashes on his face, waking him with a start.

HUSBAND (O.S.)

Wake up!

He tries to catch his breath, the water is freezing cold.

The husband stares down at him.

The young man just stares back silently, waiting. The husband kneels down closer, as the young man braces.

HUSBAND

I mean no harm.

(pause)

You loved her?

He nods.

HUSBAND (cont'd)

You will love her child?

YOUNG MAN

She won't survive-

HUSBAND

(interrupting)

She's strong. Stronger than us.

EXT. HILLSIDE — NIGHT

C.U. Naked toes gripping stone, as water flows across them.

The young woman desperately tries to stay on the stepping stones, perched on a large one in the middle of the river,

She looks lonely, sodden and desperate, glancing up forlornly towards the looming mountainside above.

There is no sign of the Cairn.

YOUNG WOMAN  
(to herself)  
Follow the water?

She looks down into the water.

For a moment she sees a SHADOW, tall and thin, menacingly reflected in the water.

She starts up, frightened, almost slipping and toppling in.

Steadying herself, she looks around wildly.

There is no-one there. She is alone.

INT. STOCKS — NIGHT

The wind rustles the young man's hair. His eyes open slowly in the dark, and he looks up at towards the mountains.

Just on the edge of the horizon he can see a point. A thin finger of STONE against the dark blue of the night sky, framed partly by the moonlight.

It seems to glisten. he can see something else, the shape of a tall FIGURE. A man?

Then there is a distant inhuman HOWL, which drifts down from the high mountains.

He looks terrified, and struggles against his restraints.

When they will not give he starts to SOB silently.

EXT. HILLSIDE / WATERFALL — NIGHT

The young woman is bent double, looking from side to side, moving quickly through the undergrowth. She is soaked through, and is deathly pale. Her poor feet are covered in dirt and grass.

She too can hear the HOWLING.

Something is hunting for her as she desperately looks for refuge.

Above her the river rises up towards a little WATERFALL.

Grimacing as her bare feet hit the rocks, she tries to reach it. The rocks cut at her hands.

The howling is drawing closer. She can see shapes among the trees, predators moving in swiftly.

Terrified, she starts to drag herself up the side of the waterfall. and under the drenching flow of water is a CAVE!

However she slips a little as she ascends, and it is enough that she loses grip on the pebble!

It slips from her grasp into the chasm below. She can just hear as it hits the water.

YOUNG WOMAN

No!

She reaches out but she can see the shadows of the BEASTS closing in. In a panic she crawls into the cave and huddles inside.

The animals are just outside, sniffing and scratching at the base of the waterfall. She does not dare look out.

As she starts to lose consciousness in her fear, exhaustion and exposure there is another SOUND, a low moan like the wind, or a VOICE maybe?

A SHADOW passes across the entrance to the cave.

One of the beasts YELPS in pain! Then the sounds of the beasts FADES away into the eerie distance.

Everything is silent once more, except for the sound of the waterfall outside.

The young woman curls up exhausted inside the tiny dank cave, holding her wounded feet. She looks down at her grimy, empty palm and starts to sob.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. WATERFALL - DAY

It is morning, rays of sunlight penetrating the water, shining like small jewels on the young woman's deathly pale face.

Maybe she is dead already?

The rays of the sun's warmth seem to stir her, her eyelids flicker in the light, and she sits up.

Her eyes widen!

SOMETHING IS EMERGING FROM THE WATERFALL OUTSIDE!

That same SHADOW is rising from the pool below to form a shape, a tall, thin hooded CREATURE!

The young woman's is paralyzed by fear, afraid to look directly up at this monster.

The shape reaches out towards her, its hands are ancient, gnarled, blackened by soil and wet gravel.

She pulls away as far as she can, again cradling her round stomach.

YOUNGER WOMAN

Stay back!

It opens its hands outward, in an offering. Inside its cupped, grubby dark palm is the white pebble!

The young woman stares at it, open mouthed, in a mixture of alarm and elation.

Slowly, carefully, she reaches out, her fingers shaking. She gingerly picks up the stone from the creature's hand, pulls back quickly, and GRASPS it to her chest.

When she gathers the nerve to look up, she is alone. There is no sign of the creature.

YOUNGER WOMAN (cont'd)

(to herself)

Thank you...

She can hardly finish the sentence, she is so cold and exhausted and closes her hand tight over the pebble.

FADE TO:

EXT. MOUNTAINSIDE - DAY

Near the top of the hillside can be seen the tiny form of the young woman as she climbs, dwarfed by the mountains.

She moves painfully and slowly over the desolate landscape, covered now in a sheet of gray mist.

At the edge of the horizon she can just see the thick base of

THE CAIRN.

She regards it with some relief, but also fear, knowing now she is not alone here.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Her husband stares up towards the mountain.

VILLAGER (O.S.)

No sign?

HUSBAND

None. She might reach the cairn...  
what chance she can return?

VILLAGER

What can we do?

They look over at the young man, still in his stocks, slumped unconscious in the cage.

The husband stands up, purposefully, and grabs a large walking stick and a hunting knife.

VILLAGER (cont'd)

What are you-

HUSBAND

I won't damn a child for the choices  
of its elders.

He throws the door open and strides out into the day.

VILLAGER (O.S.)

It is forbidden!

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN / CAIRN - DAY

The young woman has reached the edge of the scree at the summit of the mountain.

Beyond this stands the towering structure of the CAIRN, almost obscured by heavy fog.

The cairn is surrounded by large accumulations of earth, burial mounds.

She is not the first to make this journey.

Shaking with cold, exhausted and close to collapse, her shaking hand still hold onto the small pebble.

Trying finally to reach her destination her eyes glaze over, she bends double and collapses, only a feet from her destination. She tries to crawl closer to the Cairn.

The cairn is almost in touching distance. She reaches out desperately, her fingers trembling, then-

The pebble drops from her fingers.

FADE TO BLACK

The sound of the pebble dropping onto the stone base of the Cairn.

FADE IN:

EXT. CAIRN - DAY (CONT.)

When she regains consciousness a dark SHAPE looks down at her. For a moment it looks like her young lover.

SHAPE (O.S.)

Hold on...

The young woman tries to breathe. She is dying. She opens her mouth but no sound issues. She gurgles slightly, and her reaches for her swollen stomach once again.

Then her LIFELESS HAND hits the scree, next to the tiny pebble nesting among MANY SIMILAR STONES next to the Cairn.

Left by generations of the young woman's ancestors.

The young woman's eyes are deathly still, like glass, lifelessly staring up into the clouds above. The breeze rustles her wet hair.

Her last breath leaves her with a sigh as her hands slip from her pregnant belly.

She is gone. Her thin clothing ripples in the wind.

Above her still body, swirls of mist envelope her, rising next to the Cairn, coalescing into the tall

specter OF THE CAIRN.

The specter looks down at her, unmoved.

A shrill HOWL is heard behind it, down across the hillside.

It is not animals however.

The specter fades away back into the mist as in the distance the shape of another MAN arrives, running with great STRIDES towards the cairn.

It is her husband!

HUSBAND

No!

He rushes up, shrieking in grief. Her body lies prone at the base of the Cairn, her eyes still staring lifelessly.

The husband falls to his knees, hopelessly sobbing. He reaches for her head and holds it to his chest.

Then he notices something else, standing near, the shadow emerging from behind the Cairn.

He backs off in horror.

HUSBAND (cont'd)

Its true.

The dark shape silently approaches his wife's dead body and holds out its long weathered fingers, tracing the outline of her belly. Then it gestures towards him.

Realising what this means, the husband takes out the large hunting KNIFE. The dark shape FADES back into the cairn.

Trembling, gritting his teeth and choking back his tears, he places the knife.

HUSBAND (cont'd)

Forgive me.

The metal blade PIERCES her cold flesh.

INT. STOCKS - DAY

The young man is still lying in his cage, barely conscious when he hears a distant, anguished SCREAM.

All the other villagers all look up fearfully towards the mountain, even the old Elder Woman.

She shakes her head and walks away.

FADE OUT

FADE IN:

EXT. VILLAGE OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Some of the villagers are pointing towards the gate, excitedly. Someone is approaching down the mountainside.

VILLAGER

Open the gate!

It is the tall frame of the Husband, running down to the village. He is holding something.

Something small, and swaddled in a material that looks very much like the clothes his wife had worn, stained with blood.

The husband's hands and face are also spattered with dried blood too. He looks distraught, his face stained with tears, looking down at the small bundle in his arms.

He staggers, exhausted, into the village. The older woman emerges to confront him.

OLDER WOMAN

Is that-?

The husband just nods, weary with grief. He looks over at the young man still in his cage.

He looks around at the old woman.

HUSBAND

Open the cage.

The villagers look uncertainly at the old woman.

HUSBAND (cont'd)

Open it!

The Elder Woman nods.



One of the villagers pulls the door up off the cage. The husband leans forward and holds out the swaddling clothes.

The younger man is barely even conscious. He glances up under his near-closed eyelids.

HUSBAND (cont'd)  
She's yours.

The young man hardly registers what he is doing, as though waking from a dark dream.

Then they hear something else, the faint gurgle and whimper, from the tiny CHILD.

The young man looks up in wonder.

YOUNG MAN  
(weakly)  
She's alive?

The husband nods.

YOUNG MAN (cont'd)  
Where-?

The husband shakes his head. He looks down at the child and he starts to cry, as more villagers gather around the cage.

The Elder Woman turns away back to her hovel.

EXT. VILLAGE OUTSKIRTS - DAY

The young man, now cleaned up and fully awake, now holds his child in his arms.

He smiles warmly down at it, poking its nose with his finger, as the tiny baby chortles.

the young man looks back up towards the mountainside, and in the distance just catches a glimpse of the CAIRN on the far horizon.

It GLINTS faintly in the morning sun.

YOUNG MAN  
(whispering)  
At the Cairn your mother sleeps. One day we shall visit her, together.

EXT. THE CAIRN - DAY

High above the village the Cairn stands, as it has for generations.

Behind this small mountain of stones is a new BURIAL MOUND, marked by a single smooth white pebble, and a shred of pale, stained CLOTH drifting in the breeze.

Behind it are many similar burial mounds stretching across the bare mountain top.

Just visible in the mist is the shape of the specter, who watches over them all.

THE END