

## Winter in the Blood - Synopsis

Virgil First Raise wakes with a shiner and a hangover in a roadside ditch on the hardscrabble plains of Montana. As he rises to face the scorching day he sees a vision of his father lying dead at his feet. Impossible-- his father froze to death in a snowdrift years earlier. The vision fades.

Nursing an old injury, Virgil limps back to the small ranch that he runs with his mother, Teresa, and his ancient Grandmother. Teresa tells Virgil that his young wife, Agnes, has taken his rifle and electric razor and left for town. Virgil seems more concerned about the gun than the girl because, as he tells Grandmother, "it meant something once."

Virgil is frozen too. Stuck in a numbed-out existence he is haunted by childhood memories-- some happy, some tragic-- of his beloved big brother Mose. The most painful memory is of a roundup the boys attempted just before the onslaught of winter. Adolescent high jinks, a stubborn cow and a freak accident combined to crush Virgil's knee-- and kill Mose.

The memory of that death, coupled with ridicule from his mother's hilarious but overbearing suitor, Lame Bull, and Teresa's warning that there is "no longer a place for you here", prompts Virgil to leave the ranch on a quest to retrieve his runaway bride and stolen possessions.

Virgil's search for Agnes in the cowboy-and-Indian towns of Montana's "Hi-line" leads him to the Airplane Man, an eccentric outsider who recruits him for a murky smuggling operation. Virgil's payment is a car that runs and a boozy bedroom skirmish with Malvina, a beguiling barmaid. As Virgil and Airplane Man embark on this ill-conceived scheme two mysterious men in suits-- Feds? Corporate goons?-- shadow them.

Just as they prepare to cross into Canada with the mysterious contraband, Virgil encounters Agnes. Overcome by unexpected emotions he ditches Airplane Man and entreats Agnes to run away with him in his new car. She stands by while Ray Longknife, an old nemesis, sucker punches Virgil, leaving him knocked out and bloody.

Marlene-- young, streetwise, and attracted to Virgil's kind of trouble-- peels him off the sidewalk and he gives her the last of his money to buy beer. Airplane Man reappears and chases Virgil through the alleys as his shadowy pursuers, in turn, chase him. When the cops apprehend Airplane Man, Virgil is spared.

Marlene returns with two sixers and she and Virgil get a hotel room. When their passionate interlude turns violent Virgil must confront her shocked question: "What kind of a man are you?" Unable to answer, Virgil returns home, more bruised and shattered than when he left, only to discover that his Grandmother has died.

This new loss, coupled with his failed attempt to bring Agnes home, breaks what's left of Virgil's heart and hope.

He loads his rifle, saddles his old horse, Bird, and rides into the mountains, perhaps never to return. There he encounters Yellow Calf, a blind hermit, who reveals an essential truth about Virgil's grandmother, mother, and Virgil's own identity.

As the hot dry summer finally breaks into heavy rain, Virgil returns to the ranch to find the same awful cow-- the one that caused his brother's death-- mired to its neck in suffocating mud. Virgil drags the cow free, but breaks Bird's leg in the process. In order to end the old horse's misery, Virgil is forced to shoot his only true friend.

Cleansed by the rain and his selfless act, Virgil attends his grandmother's funeral. The hand-dug grave is too small for her coffin so Lam Bull must jump on it to make it fit. Saying goodbye to his grandmother and making peace with his family ghosts thaws the winter in Virgil's blood.

At long last Virgil knows who he truly is. He is able to leave his childhood home and set out on the right road to a new beginning.