

STEEN'S FOLLY

(Based on Actual Events)

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EXT. OIL DRILLING SITE - DAY

Super: Based on a true story.

Nestled against a gentle hill in windswept grasslands, a solitary oil rig churns reliably while workers idle.

Super: Texas, 1948.

One of the men, a DRILLER with the kind of sun-leathered face Dorothea Lange would have loved, rubs his beard...

DRILLER

You want us to shut 'er down?

He turns to CHARLIE STEEN (mid 20s), a lanky academic type who looks out of place among these backcountry chainhands.

Charlie shakes his head.

CHARLIE

A few more meters.

DRILLER

Feet or meters?

Not giving in to sarcasm, Charlie winks...

CHARLIE

Meters.

A black 1940s Ford with fat white wall tires pulls onto the site, stopping some distance away. The SUPERINTENDENT, clearly a man in charge, gets out and shouts...

SUPERINTENDENT

Steen!

Charlie makes his way over to the car. Wiping his hands on an oily rag, he eyes with suspicion an envelope the Superintendent pushes on him.

CHARLIE

What's this?

SUPERINTENDENT

(smugly)

A check. What do you think?

Hesitating, Charlie takes it--puts a big smudge on it with his thumb.

CHARLIE

Just got one three weeks ago.

SUPERINTENDENT

Final check.

Charlie goes limp--stupefied. All of a sudden...

Excitement flares up at the rig as workers are whooping and hollering.

Charlie and the Superintendent both turn around.

Acknowledging the commotion...

SUPERINTENDENT (CONT'D)

What luck! Looks like you get to
keep your job after all.

Charlie hands him back the envelope...

CHARLIE

I don't believe in luck.

...and walks away--the Superintendent: dumbstruck.

EXT. HIGHWAY (COLORADO PLATEAU, 1946) - DAY

A red '40 Plymouth winds its way through the scorching alpine desert.

Super: A few years earlier.

It's post-war America, and opportunity hangs in the air--
like in a Hal Riney commercial.

A younger Charlie, sporting thick-rimmed glasses, is behind
the wheel, amiable and carefree.

He pulls off the highway into...

EXT. VEHICLE PEN (TEXAS) - SAME

Trucks, cars, and other vehicles are corralled in haphazard
fashion by a rusty chain-link fence.

Charlie's red Plymouth pulls into the lot with bravado,
sliding to a stop and kicking up a cloud of dust.

A couple of guys in overalls turn around like someone just
ruined their day. Charlie tosses the keys to them as if they
are idle valets.

A fat OVERSEER with a clipboard, the kind of guy who is nice
to children but not to adults, turns around...

OVERSEER

You got smog in the noggin'? We expected you over four hours ago.

CHARLIE

I'm here, ain't I?

OVERSEER

You're supposed to be shuttling cars, not sightseeing.

(matter-of-factly)

Grossman wants to see you.

CHARLIE

Sure thing, bossman.

INT. GROSSMAN'S OFFICE - SAME

GROSSMAN, an avuncular curmudgeon with black caterpillar eyebrows, jabbars on. Charlie listens respectfully, even though cigar smoke is blown in his face.

GROSSMAN

Had to look it up. You can't call a super a pusillanimous asshole.

CHARLIE

To which part did he object?

Unfazed, Grossman slips an envelope into Charlie's hand.

GROSSMAN

Had to deduct eight cents...for social security.

He puts a friendly hand on Charlie's shoulder.

GROSSMAN (CONT'D)

Son, I don't think you'll find the success you're looking for in the corporate world. The question is: what can you do where you can go it alone?

EXT. RESIDENTIAL HOUSE - NEW DAY

Charlie walks briskly along the sidewalk, then slows when he notices the scrawny man ambling toward him.

Charlie's father, AUGUSTUS, looks like a man without a future. He appears to weigh less than the heavy grocery bags he is supporting under both arms.

They both stop at the walkway leading to Augustus' dilapidated house. Hesitant at first, but perhaps out of sympathy, Charlie takes one of the bags. They somberly trudge toward the rusty screen door.

Inside, Charlie eases the bag down on a table.

Augustus shuffles toward the refrigerator, opens it.

AUGUSTUS

I hope you didn't come to ask me for money.

He retrieves the only bottle of beer and turns...

AUGUSTUS (CONT'D)

Your sister already beat you to it.

...offering the bottle to an empty room and open screen door.

INT. LIBRARY, TARTLETON AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE - NEW DAY

The reading area is flanked on both sides by bookshelves.

Cold daylight filters through 1920s machine-shop-style pivot windows.

Charlie sits alone at a long table studying a book of contour maps.

A gaggle of five college girls emerges from around the bookshelves. They are talking a bit too loudly. A stern LIBRARIAN shushes them...

LIBRARIAN

Cut the gas!

...and looks back down at her Sears catalog without missing a beat.

One of the girls, a pert M.L. HOLLAND, early 20s, stops and looks over, while the rest continue on, giggling, and disappear.

M.L. Holland is one of those Texan blue-eyed beauties--the quintessential all-American girl who is saving herself for the man she is destined to marry.

She looks curiously at Charlie, who is oblivious to what is going on.

The Librarian looks up at M.L. M.L. looks over at the librarian. Like a standoff, M.L. gives her a steely-eyed look that reads: he is mine. The Librarian returns to her reading.

M.L. sashays to Charlie's table.

M.L.
Charles? Right?

He looks up.

M.L. (CONT'D)
You're that guy that everybody is
talking about in science.

CHARLIE
Geology.

M.L.
Right.

CHARLIE
Do I know you?

M.L.
They say you're weird.

CHARLIE
(looking around)
What is this, a dare?

She doesn't say anything.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
Okay. What do you say?

M.L.
I haven't said anything...haven't
made up my mind yet.

CHARLIE
So there's still time to set the
record straight.

M.L. steps a bit closer.

M.L.
Ever take any time off to do anything?

CHARLIE
You writing a book?

M.L.
Nah. I'm just asking.

CHARLIE
Sometimes I do things. You wanna see
my dance card?

She doesn't respond.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

The truth is...

(beat)

What is your name?

M.L.

M.L.

CHARLIE

Emel. What kinda name is Emel?

M.L.

M. L. They're initials.

CHARLIE

Initials for what?

She sits down.

M.L.

(secretively)

Well, I'm not gonna tell you.

CHARLIE

Okay...M.L....the truth is I don't mix well with crowds. They bore me.

M.L.

Me too.

CHARLIE

Always talking about inconsequential stuff.

M.L.

I know. And reading--what is that?... maps?--is entertaining?

Charlie closes the book.

CHARLIE

Not when you put it that way.

M.L.

Well, okay then.

She gets up to leave.

CHARLIE

Okay what? You made up your mind already?

M.L.

Sure have.

CHARLIE

And...

M.L.

Not gonna tell you.

She turns to leave.

CHARLIE

Will I see you again?

Walking away, she whips her head back and smiles...

M.L.

You can still see me now, right?

He sits there, in a state somewhere between flummoxed and aroused.

EXT. SAND DUNES - NEW DAY

A car meanders its way through sandy country and pulls off the road near some dunes.

Charlie, wearing full graduation garb, walks around the car with a spring in his step.

With his hand on the hood, he pivots himself around to open the driver's side door.

M.L. emerges with her cap and gown.

They are extremely comfortable with each other.

M.L.

(playfully)

What are we doing out here?

CHARLIE

We gotta walk a ways first.

She follows him, after taking her high heels off.

M.L.

This couldn't have just been a regular date, could it?

They make their way up over sand dunes spotted with tufts of wild grass until they summit the highest one: a gorgeous view of a long, desolate beach that stretches to the horizon.

Astounded, M.L. drops her shoes and sprint toward the water.

Hot on her heels, Charlie tries to take off his shoes at the same time, laughing.

They slow as they come to the water's edge--their feet pressing firmly into the soft sand--squeezing out water.

A sheet of water makes its way to them, enveloping their feet.

As the water recedes, it leaves a rim of sea foam.

CHARLIE
(inaudibly)
Like a terminal moraine.

M.L.
(not hearing him)
What's that?

CHARLIE
You see how the waves come up and
leave a line of foam?

M.L.
Yeah.

CHARLIE
Glaciers do the same thing. Just on
a different time scale.

M.L.
Only you would think of that.

She takes Charlie by the arm, and they stroll along the beach, waves lapping at their feet.

They enjoy a wordless reverie. Tugging at him...

M.L. (CONT'D)
So, what does the future hold in
store for Charles?

He slows.

CHARLIE
Ever hear the parable of the
unreasonable dream?

She shakes her head.

They continue walking. M.L. is spellbound by Charlie's instant seriousness, as if he is about to reveal a great secret.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Two men, each with a dream. The first man? He wanted too much. He asked the universe for a mansion--not a house. Lots of cars, maybe one for each day of the week. A good-looking wife to show off. A pool. Maybe an airplane too, and lots of vacations all over the world. He wanted the works, and he wanted it now.

M.L.

That's a big request.

CHARLIE

You bet. Reasonable or unreasonable?

M.L.

I'd say unreasonable. What about the other man?

CHARLIE

Since the first man asked for too much, the second one thought he might have a better chance of being granted his dream if he asked the universe for something more reasonable: a nice home...not too big, not too small--comfortable. A kind wife: girl-next-door. A shiny new car in the driveway. Maybe a couple of kids. A steady job...you know. Seems reasonable, right?

M.L.

Sure.

CHARLIE

So, what do you think happened?

M.L.

The reasonable man got his dream, of course.

Charlie walks away, disappointed. She attempts to catch up.

M.L. (CONT'D)

Charles?

CHARLIE

You don't know how the universe works, do you?

M.L.

Was it the unreasonable man?

He again pulls ahead of her.

She lurches forward to grab him and turns him around.

M.L. (CONT'D)
Which one was granted his dream,
Charles?

She hangs in limbo.

Finally...

CHARLIE
Both! Both were granted their dream.

Charlie walks off by himself--as if frightened by the cruelty of it all.

Calling after him...

M.L.
(disbelieving)
Who told you this?

Charlie continues, lost in thought.

She stays behind, as if held back by an invisible boundary.

INT. GREYHOUND BUS (MOVING) - NEW DAY

Through a large window, Charlie watches oil rigs doing what he isn't: working.

INT. OFFICE - NEW DAY

Charlie sits for an interview in what looks like a room in an annex.

INTERVIEWER 1 (late 30s) gives the appearance of an academic type kept in an office for his own safety.

He appears to dominate the session by talking about himself, pointing at the diplomas on the wall.

INT. OFFICE 2

Charlie sits for yet another interview, as if nothing has changed--except the color of his tie.

It doesn't take much to see that INTERVIEWER 2 (early 50s) is a short-cropped, no-nonsense bureaucratic prick.

He slides a sheet of paper back toward Charlie.

INT. OFFICE 3

Sweating and overworked, INTERVIEWER 3 (mid 40s) is a manatee of a man who looks like he's been wearing the same shirt for three days.

An uncomfortably long silence lingers before he inhales loudly through his nostrils. He exhales like a tire quickly losing air: not the sound of satisfaction.

He turns the resume over, as if expecting to find something on the blank side, then flips it back around.

Another nostril flare.

INTERVIEWER 3

Nope. Can't do it.

He shakes his head violently, frustrated, shaking off a few beads of sweat the way a dog would shake off rain. In a slightly higher pitch, as if trying to persuade himself...

INTERVIEWER 3 (CONT'D)

Can't do it.

INT. HOTEL LOBBY - NIGHT

Charlie is in a poorly lit phone booth.

CHARLIE

I tried about every company out here, even a few west of Houston. Nothing.

M.L. can be heard through the earpiece--hollow and far away.

M.L. (V.O.)

Why don't you try that big one again...what was it called?

CHARLIE

Naw. If the small ones ain't biting, there's no way in hell Standard will want me.

M.L. (V.O.)

Have a little more faith in yourself.

CHARLIE

Maybe I'll contact some coal operations back east.

M.L. (V.O.)

Did you hear me? Give yourself a little more credit.

CHARLIE
Don't you know?

M.L. (V.O.)
Know what?

CHARLIE
I'm all out of credit.

CUT TO:

INT. FOYER - M.L.'S PARENT'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The home advertises the strict economy of a bluenose household. M.L. is in the dark foyer, the only light spilling in from an adjacent room.

M.L.
(on the phone)
You make me laugh.

CHARLIE (V.O.)
Just like my father. But at least he struck it rich once.

A pregnant pause. Filling the silence...

M.L.
I wish I could be there with you right now.

A delayed answer...

CHARLIE (V.O.)
(distant)
It's probably best you aren't.

The phone clicks. M.L. slowly puts down the receiver.

EXT. FIELD - NEW DAY

A few oil rigs punctuate the bare landscape of golden grass. Storm clouds hang on a dark horizon.

Charlie's companions are a flock of dried tumbleweeds rolling in the wind, bumping into each other, stopping and going.

He picks up some rocks and inspects each before throwing them. He watches to see where they land.

One rock in particular catches his attention. It is a smooth one, nicer than the rest. He caresses it with his thumb and throws it farther than the others. It makes a small thud in the ground, kicking up a bit of dust.

INT. STANDARD OIL COMPANY - LOBBY - NEW DAY

Charlie sits by himself in a very large waiting area blasted by sterile industrial lighting.

Could be heaven or could be hell. Everything in the waiting area is a lifeless shade of gray, including the faded industrial photographs on the walls--everything except Charlie's pastel-blue suit.

He leafs through a magazine on a table...gives up, anxious.

A very prim SECRETARY behind a long counter, 30s, wearing a tight purple outfit, puts down the phone.

SECRETARY

Mr. Steen? Mr. Robinson will see you now.

Charlie gets up, straightens his tie, and bolts forward with determination.

INT. CEO'S OFFICE - SAME

Charlie finds himself in a dim, wood-paneled office that looks like a captain's quarters. A rich, burning sunset pencils in through the open blinds.

HILLIARD ROBINSON, mid 60s, is looking out the window at a rig pumping in the distance. Hilliard's face looks like it has seen a lot of exotic sun. He could have been a wayfaring poet, a barnstorming pilot, or a smuggler who never got caught--or all three.

As Hilliard turns from the window, Charlie sees he is a weathered executive who speaks in confident but gruff tones.

HILLIARD

Why did you start at Tartleton? Isn't that an agricultural college?

CHARLIE

It was what was avail...
(correcting)
I wanted to stick around those parts.
(going for the save)
Where the oil is.

HILLIARD

Your father was an oil man?

CHARLIE

That's right. Wildcatter.

HILLIARD
And how did that pan out for him?

CHARLIE
Well, he made it and he lost it.

Turning back toward the window...

HILLIARD
Your pilot light is still on.

CHARLIE
I don't think I...

HILLIARD
(preparing some scotch)
I see something in you, Mr. Steen. I see you've still got that fire in the belly. You want to learn everything about the world you can. Isn't that right?

CHARLIE
I haven't really traveled...

Hilliard turns around to hand Charlie a tumbler.

Hilliard quickly downs his drink, releases the glass to his desk, and firmly offers his hand.

HILLIARD
Welcome to Standard Oil, son.

Nearly choking on his drink, Charlie gives him an enthusiastic shake.

CHARLIE
Thank you for this opportunity, sir.

HILLIARD
It is us who need you, not the other way around. Always remember that.

Hilliard turns around to look out the window again.

HILLIARD (CONT'D)
Just make us proud.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Charlie is in a drab hotel room decorated like a funeral parlor. On the phone...

CHARLIE
Wanna know how much I'll be making?

M.L. (V.O.)
 You know I don't care about things
 like that. It won't impress me.

CHARLIE
 What's a guy gotta do to impress a
 girl these days?

M.L. (V.O.)
 Let me think.

Long pause.

CHARLIE
 You still there or you off making a
 list?

M.L. (V.O.)
 I'm thinking.

CHARLIE
 See? Whatever it is, it ain't easy.

M.L. (V.O.)
 No, it's not.
 (beat)
 Just be yourself.

CHARLIE
 (not sure he heard)
 What's that?

M.L. (V.O.)
 I said: just be yourself. That's
 what you got to do to impress a girl.

CHARLIE
 Who's the girl?

M.L. (V.O.)
 I'll tell you...if you don't tell me
 how much you're gonna make. Deal?

CHARLIE
 It solves one problem but creates
 another.

M.L. is silent.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
 I've got to go to South America.

M.L. (V.O.)
 Why would that be a problem?

CHARLIE

I'm gonna be away for a while, maybe
a long time.

Pause.

M.L. (V.O.)

You worried about that girl?

CHARLIE

Should I be?

M.L. (V.O.)

I could keep an eye on her for you.

CHARLIE

How long d'you think you could do
that?

M.L. (V.O.)

I don't know, Charles. There are a
lot of unknowns in life.

EXT. SKY - NEW DAY

A tiny silver plane flies in a fiery orange sky. The sun
sequentially peeks through a series of its portholes.

INT. DOUGLAS DC-6 - SAME

The passengers are in a cozy state of hibernation.

A jaunty STEWARDESS makes her way down the aisle gingerly,
alternately looking on both sides at her charges like a nurse
in a maternity ward.

Charlie is resting comfortably, his head tilted toward the
orange sunset.

The sun glints off the silver wing of the plane.

As the plane rolls slightly, the bright orange light shines
onto his face.

STEWARDESS

(gesturing)

Mister, you can pull the curtains if
you like.

CHARLIE

Thanks.

She gives him a knowing smile, sashays farther down the aisle,
and tends to another passenger.

He looks back out at the setting sun.

EXT. AIRPORT TARMAC (LIMA, PERU) - NEW DAY

Charlie steps out of the plane with a suitcase and looks around.

He spies a small group of five Americans in their black slacks and birth control glasses.

He walks toward them.

ANDY MCGILL introduces Charlie to the others. McGill, a scruff-faced Canadian in his early 40s, exudes competence and confidence--an overachiever who never got his due, but the one guy you can always count on in a pinch.

McGill and Charlie head toward a parked jeep.

MCGILL

Those are some of the guys you'll be working with.

CHARLIE

They seem like good men.

They get into the jeep. McGill starts it up, and they jolt into motion.

MCGILL

Some of the best. How was the flight?

CHARLIE

First flight ever.

MCGILL

I'm going to drop you off at your quarters, and then I'm heading into town with the rest of the guys. You're welcome to join in if you like.

CHARLIE

I'll take a rain check. I'm gonna try to get settled in first.

MCGILL

If you need anything, let me know.

CHARLIE

You'll find that I'm pretty self-contained.

McGill smiles to that.

MCGILL
Then you'll fit right in.

INT. GROSSMAN'S OFFICE - NEW DAY

A MAIL CLERK hands Grossman a letter from Standard Oil addressed to him, its stamp proudly proclaiming "Peru."

Handwritten in the upper left corner is Mr. C. A. Steen.

With everyone else around absorbed in their work, Grossman enjoys this private moment with a smile and rests the letter on the top of his bureau: savor it later.

EXT. MOUNTAIN FOOTHILLS, PERU - NEW DAY

Charlie, holding a map, is getting bumped around in a noisy jeep on rough, arid terrain.

CHARLIE
Now I know what it's like to be
Douglas MacArthur.

The driver looks back.

DRIVER
What's that, sir?

Charlie puts down the map. Slapping the side of the jeep with his hand...

CHARLIE
I've got to get me one of these...and
the corncob pipe.

DRIVER
Yes, sir.

CHARLIE
One complication, though.

DRIVER
Getting hold of a jeep?

CHARLIE
I don't smoke.

INT. PUB (LIMA, PERU) - NIGHT

Tommy Dorsey is playing from a jukebox in the corner.

Charlie and McGill, mugs in hand, venture to a dark corner of the pub.

MCGILL
How was Chicago? Is that old coot
Pettijohn still up there?

CHARLIE
You knew him?

MCGILL
Hell no. Only read that book he and
Krumbein wrote. What was it?

CHARLIE
Manual of Sedimentary Petrology.

MCGILL
That's the one.

CHARLIE
Has it helped?

MCGILL
No way. I prefer igneous.

They laugh.

MCGILL (CONT'D)
What about you?

CHARLIE
Petroleum was my specialty.

Raising his glass...

MCGILL
Well, let's see how long it will
take you to get a lay of the land.

EXT. PERUVIAN OIL FIELD - FIELD OFFICE - NEW DAY

McGill and other engineers are huddled around a desk
discussing technical operations.

They hear a vehicle screech to a stop outside the field
office, scattering gravel.

A worker covered in grime bursts in, breathless.

WORKER
The ginzel got a blowout.

McGill rises from his desk.

MCGILL
What?

WORKER
Steen found a gusher.

MCGILL
So?

WORKER
We can't stop it.

A brief moment is required to take it in, before everybody piles out.

PERUVIAN OIL FIELD - LATER

Multiple jeeps arrive at the location.

Five men are working hurriedly around the rig to stop the flow of oil.

Amidst the men, Charlie looks up and sees McGill. Charlie smiles, self-satisfied.

McGill smiles back at him with a how-in-the-fuck-did-you-do-that? kind of look on his face.

FIELD OFFICE - NIGHT

Champagne all around.

PERUVIAN OIL FIELD - NEW DAY

Charlie is busy supervising a drilling.

McGill approaches and yells over the noise of grinding machinery.

MCGILL
Steen.

Charlie signals for one of the other men to take over.

CHARLIE
I worry when you call me Steen.

MCGILL
I just got a call from Houston. Looks like they want you back stateside, ASAP.

CHARLIE
They wanna pull me off this project right now? Is it something I should worry about?

MCGILL
Paranoid?

CHARLIE
I have a way of stepping on toes.

MCGILL
(laughs)
You?

CHARLIE
Round trip?

MCGILL
Nope. Must be some big new assignment.

CHARLIE
How can you tell?

MCGILL
It's not Ferguson.

CHARLIE
Hilliard?

MCGILL
You have some truck with the man.

CHARLIE
I'm gonna miss the camaraderie.

Charlie quickens his step with McGill following behind.

EXT. AIRPORT TARMAC (LIMA, PERU) - NIGHT

Charlie and McGill, each carrying a suitcase, walk up to a silver Douglas DC-6, ceremoniously lit like a diamond against black satin.

A warm, golden light emanates from the tail door. McGill stops ahead of Charlie. Over the whir of propellers...

MCGILL
What is it with you, Steen?

CHARLIE
What do you mean?

MCGILL
You live a charmed life. What's your secret?

CHARLIE
My secret?

MCGILL

Yeah, you come down here with an invisible divining rod or something, walk around in circles, put chicken scratches on a contour map, and all of a sudden...

CHARLIE

Fear of failure.

MCGILL

We all have that.

CHARLIE

Maybe I've got more of it.

MCGILL

I don't want to compete with you, Charlie, but that's complete bullshit.

CHARLIE

You really want to know?

Charlie beckons McGill to inch forward, confiding...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Before I got here? M.L.

McGill backs off.

MCGILL

Don't be cryptic, Steen. What does it stand for?

CHARLIE

M.L.? Hell if I know.

MCGILL

That's your secret?

CHARLIE

Not my secret.

MCGILL

Okay, now I don't believe you for sure.

(smirks)

Selfish jerk. Have a safe flight.

McGill hands Charlie a suitcase.

CHARLIE

I'll be in touch.

MCGILL

M.L.?

Charlie winks and ascends the steps into the plane.

McGill explodes with...

MCGILL (CONT'D)

It's mother lode, isn't it?

Oblivious, Charlie smiles out from the interior of the plane, giving him a thumbs-up.

The door closes, and the plane's four prop engines sputter to full throttle.

McGill backs away slowly--the eureka moment quickly wearing off--scratching his head as the plane rolls away.

INT. CEO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Charlie and Hilliard are both looking out the window at the working rig. Hilliard turns...

HILLIARD

Let's celebrate. What'll you have, a Scotch?

Realizing there is no other choice...

CHARLIE

Scotch is fine.

While pouring out four glasses of scotch...

HILLIARD

You've got that look in your eye. I know that look.

CHARLIE

One will be fine for me.

HILLIARD

(surreptitious smile)

I want to make some introductions.

Two men enter the office.

WALLACE, early 50s, is your standard cookie-cutter company man with a natural instinct to navigate his way into favorable situations and out of bad ones.

His lackey, OLIVER, middle 40s, is an obsequious, groveling pilot fish to Wallace's landshark.

OLIVER

Hill.

HILLIARD

Gentlemen. Charlie Steen.

Wallace and Oliver take turns shaking hands with Charlie.

WALLACE

Wallace Ferguson.

CHARLIE

Of course.

OLIVER

Oliver Tuttle. We keep on hearing about you, Mr. Steen.

CHARLIE

Charlie.

Hilliard distributes glasses of scotch to all assembled.

WALLACE

Did Hilliard tell you what he's celebrating?

HILLIARD

I'm celebrating Charlie's success in Peru. Here's to the biggest oil reserves in South America. Salud!

They all toast Charlie.

OLIVER

Congratulations, Mr. Steen.

WALLACE

Well done!

Charlie basks in the celebratory atmosphere.

WALLACE (CONT'D)

Did Hilliard mention the other thing he's celebrating?

CHARLIE

Naw, he keeps me in the dark.

OLIVER

He keeps everybody in the dark. Hell, he keeps his own office in the dark. Could be daylight outside right now and we wouldn't know it.

Laughter all around.

WALLACE
Hilliard is retiring.

The jovial air has vacated the room.

CHARLIE
Ah, Hilliard. I'm sorry to hear it.

HILLIARD
I'm not. I'm looking forward to
escape.

WALLACE
What are you gonna do with all that
money you made? Sail the world?

HILLIARD
Wouldn't you like to know.

WALLACE
What I would like to know is: all
that money.

Laughter.

HILLIARD
That's why I'm handing him to you,
Wally.
(Wallace is irked)
Treat him right.

OLIVER
We'll treat him with kid gloves,
Hill.

WALLACE
We were thinkin' of putting him on
the Quero Formation.

HILLIARD
Oh. I thought you might have gotten
somebody else on that, but...it's
your call now.

WALLACE
It's a good test case for Charlie.

HILLIARD
Not that Charlie needs it. He just
mapped the largest oil field in South
America.

WALLACE

Of course. Naw. I wanna keep him on a short leash so I can see the magic at work.

Hilliard raises his glass to Charlie with a nod.

HILLIARD

To Charlie.

The others join in: bottoms up.

EXT. NEAR A STREAM (TEXAS) - NEW DAY

A small GATHERING of twenty men and women in fine, formal garb are congregating a small distance away...flecks of black and white and red amidst green wildgrass.

Charlie and M.L. walk up to a precipice with a grand view of the stream below--she wearing a bridal gown and he wearing a satin-finish tuxedo.

CHARLIE

(complaining)

I could never figure out what the hell this is for. Is it necessary?

Charlie is holding a goldenrod cummerbund. M.L. grabs it and playfully places it over Charlie's mouth and kisses him.

She runs off laughing, with Charlie in hot pursuit.

EXT. QUERO FORMATION (QUERO, TEXAS) - NEW DAY

Charlie pulls up in a jeep. He gets out and, frustrated, takes off his hat, wipes his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. He takes a swig from his canteen and looks around.

He walks a bit and kicks a rock on the ground, which rolls for a while and then stops on a large mud crack. There is nothing but a dry lake bed for miles in all directions--except for a dead, barren tree.

A raven flies overhead, squawking.

EXT. CEMETERY - NEW DAY

People are leaving a burial site, including Charlie. Wallace and Oliver and other company men and their wives scatter out behind Charlie. McGill, continuing to gain on Charlie...

MCGILL

Helluva way to catch up, isn't it?

CHARLIE

It's good to see you again, Andy.

MCGILL

By the way, I figured out your *real* secret.

CHARLIE

And what's that?

MCGILL

It was Hilliard. He protected you the whole time from Wallace.

Charlie looks over at McGill--the comment hitting hard.

CHARLIE

Never got a chance to really thank him.

MCGILL

He was a good guy, but a complete mystery to me.

Charlie forces a smile.

MCGILL (CONT'D)

Never did figure out what M.L. is, though.

CHARLIE

(introspective)

Said he only got to do once what he wanted.

EXT. QUERO FORMATION - NEW DAY

Charlie is crisscrossing the formation in his vehicle, kicking up long plumes of dust in his wake.

QUERO FORMATION RIG 1

Charlie stops by a noisy drilling rig. One man supervising the rig shakes his head and turns back to help his men.

QUERO FORMATION RIG 2

With another rig in the background, Charlie and four other GEOLOGISTS are poring over geologic maps, contour maps, and seismic data maps spread over the hood of his vehicle.

Charlie drives away, again kicking up a funnel of dust.

QUERO FORMATION RIG 3

At another rig, dry cores laying on the ground consist of every desert color imaginable--but nothing indicating oil. He steps on one, pulverizing it.

INT. CEO'S OFFICE - NEW DAY

Echoes of Hilliard's office remain, but it's clear a new tenant has moved in. Charlie, standing up, is agitated. From all appearances, a now overweight Wallace controls the meeting. Oliver, his adjutant, leans up against his own desk.

OLIVER

Where's the report?

CHARLIE

There isn't one. I went out there.
Nothing. No anticlines.

Wallace is looking for something in his shirt pocket, on his desk, then inside desk drawers. He can't find it and gives up. Oliver opens his cigarette case and runs over with it. He reaches into his pocket for a lighter--is waved away.

WALLACE

I can get my own light.
(to Charlie)
What the hell do you mean you can't
survey the area?

CHARLIE

(outraged, pointing)
You're welcome to sink dogholes all
over that stretch. And you know what?
You might even be lucky enough to
find some oil, but it will be brute-
force, not based on known geology...
which is what you hired me for.

WALLACE

I didn't hire you, if you remember.

His head snaps over to Oliver...

WALLACE (CONT'D)

What the fuck is this? Tell me,
Oliver, is this a goddamn joke?

CHARLIE

(to Oliver)
Why don't you crack that window open
and let's get some oxygen in here
for Wallace.

Oliver starts for the window.

WALLACE
(incredulous)
What are you doing?

OLIVER
I was gonna get the window.

Wallace shakes his head in disbelief.

CHARLIE
You're not qualified to call it...you
don't even know the goddamn science.

WALLACE
And so I'm supposed to ignore the
opinions of real experts just for
you?

Charlie lifts a wooden chair....

CHARLIE
What is this about for you? Control?

...and slams it on the floor.

WALLACE
(relaxed)
Is it for you?

CHARLIE
Hilliard would have never....

WALLACE
With all due respect, Hill used to
know how to pick 'em, but the last
ten years...?

CHARLIE
And that makes you feel adequate
now?

WALLACE
Your luck already ran out in South
America, Charlie. You already wasted
me a precious month on that site.

CHARLIE
Think you wasted a month? Get ready
to waste another one.

WALLACE

I'm not interested in what you have to say, because you don't work here anymore.

CHARLIE

What?

WALLACE

I coulda had somebody out there who knows what the hell they're doing.

OLIVER

Good luck finding another job in oil, my friend.

Facing Wallace, Charlie pulls his jacket from a chair.

CHARLIE

We'll see about that, won't we?

Charlie approaches Oliver, looks him up and down, and breathes into his face...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I don't like how you use the word "friend." Grossman would at least take the time to look it up.

With that parting shot, Charlie storms out of the office. Turning to Wallace...

OLIVER

Who's Grossman?

EXT. SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD (TEXAS, 1948) - NEW DAY

A crisp morning.

A car slowly wends its way through a neighborhood littered with Levittown-like box houses.

As the car turns, the windshield glints as a single sheet of light.

Through the window: a now clean-shaven McGill cranes his neck looking around.

The car pulls up to a tiny box home--another cookie-cutter construction.

McGill gets out, unsure, walks up to the door.

He knocks on the door, steps back, looking around: incredulous.

The door opens.

M.L., cradling a young child in her arms, steps up to the threshold.

He tips his hat.

MCGILL

Ma'am.

M.L. expects him to say something.

MCGILL (CONT'D)

Is this the Steen residence?

M.L.

(embarrassed)

That's kind of you. If you got a chance to size up the place--and you pretty much can between the curb and the door--you wouldn't call it a residence, but, yes, this is where the Steens live.

McGill is caught off guard...

MCGILL

I'm looking for a friend. Charlie.

M.L.

Charles doesn't have too many friends, and I think I've met them all. I've not had the pleasure to make your acquaintance.

MCGILL

Andy McGill.

M.L.

From Peru?

MCGILL

That's right. You a sister?

M.L.

Wife.

MCGILL

I didn't know.

M.L.

Conversely, I've heard a lot about you. Care to come in and wait?

MCGILL
 (caught off-guard)
 I'm heading back in a couple of hours.
 Where can I find Charlie?

M.L.
 He's up there a ways working on a
 house.
 (pointing)
 Right over there.

McGill motions to leave...

M.L. (CONT'D)
 You wouldn't have any work for him,
 would you?

...and stops.

MCGILL
 Sorry. Can't say I do.

Tipping his hat...

MCGILL (CONT'D)
 Good day, ma'am.

M.L.
 I hope so.

McGill briefly halts at the comment.

McGill walks back to his car while M.L. watches on, gently
 rocking the baby in the doorway.

EXT. CONSTRUCTION SITE - LATER

McGill's car pulls up to the exposed ribs of an unfinished
 house crawling with workmen.

The staccato of hammering is disquieting.

McGill treads carefully to avoid nails or puddles of cement.

Charlie, hammering, notices him between the two-by-fours,
 gets up, and walks toward the front of the house.

CHARLIE
 Look at you.

Charlie indicates McGill's clean-shaven face.

FOREMAN
 Make it quick.

They amble away from the construction noise.

MCGILL
How are you doing, Charlie?

CHARLIE
It's not much, but it keeps food on
the table.

MCGILL
I reckon it does.

CHARLIE
It's good to see you. It's been a
long time.

MCGILL
She said "conversely."

CHARLIE
What?

MCGILL
Up the road...she used the word
"conversely," Charlie. Does she always
talk like that?

CHARLIE
Who?

MCGILL
Your wife. Nobody talks like that.

CHARLIE
Ah, she must be in a good mood.

McGill attempts to utter a word that comes out as an exhaled
sigh.

MCGILL
I heard you're still trying to get
back in the game...

CHARLIE
Might.

MCGILL
...but they badmouthed you to the
whole industry.

Charlie gives him a quizzical look.

CHARLIE
Blackballed?

MCGILL

'fraid so.

CHARLIE

Or is it blacklisted? Which is it?
Blackballed or blacklisted?

MCGILL

I don't think it matters. The fact
is they've been able to stop you
from getting back in.

CHARLIE

You're talking about Wallace.

MCGILL

Insubordination?

Knowing smiles.

FOREMAN

Steen!

CHARLIE

(wincing)

I better get back. I appreciate you
coming out to visit.

MCGILL

Drive out here just for that? Are
you kidding?

CHARLIE

So, why waste your time?

MCGILL

You forget. I'm a problem solver.

This stops Charlie cold.

MCGILL (CONT'D)

It's not exactly what you were doing,
but I was able to find you some work.
I didn't tell your wife. Figured you
might wanna tell her yourself.

CHARLIE

I appreciate that.

MCGILL

Wanna know what it is?

CHARLIE

(pause)

I can't do it.

MCGILL

What? I haven't even told you what it is.

CHARLIE

I'm out.

MCGILL

That's the point. You've any idea how long it took me to finagle this thing?

CHARLIE

I'm sure you pulled a lot of strings, but I already have my eye on something else.

MCGILL

(arms outstretched)

This?

CHARLIE

I read some articles about it.

MCGILL

Articles? About what?

Charlie's face is neutral.

MCGILL (CONT'D)

Okay, you're not going to tell me.

CHARLIE

You'll be the first to hear from me if it pans out.

Charlie shakes his hand.

MCGILL

Alright. Have it your way. But I think you're making a big mistake.

CHARLIE

Maybe I am.

MCGILL

It's your call. I'm not gonna argue with you: I just don't wanna miss my flight.

McGill turns around and heads back to his car, presenting a quick nod as he gets back in.

Charlie raises his hand--a stiff Indian wave--but an unsure gesture.

He watches McGill's car as it pulls away--lost in thought--until the piercing buzz of a saw summons him back to work.

INT. STEEN HOUSE - NIGHT

M.L. is in the cramped kitchen, setting the table bathed under a soft light.

Steam rising from pots on the stove gives the place a pleasant domestic atmosphere.

Charlie enters through the back door, watches M.L. a bit, and looks as if he is going to say one thing, but instead...

CHARLIE
Smells good in here.

She turns around and gives him a peck on the cheek as he strips off his suspenders.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
The little one off to bed?

M.L.
Put him down about an hour ago.
(pause)
How was work?

CHARLIE
About four weeks left.

Charlie goes into the bedroom, the door slowly shutting behind him.

M.L.
Your friend Andy dropped by.

CHARLIE (O.S.)
I know.

M.L. probes more...

M.L.
What did he want?

CHARLIE (O.S.)
Job offer.

M.L.
Maybe we can finally get that new crib.

Nothing.

M.L. (CONT'D)
Did you hear me?

CHARLIE (O.S.)
Perfectly. I didn't take it.

M.L.
Didn't take it?

Silence.

CHARLIE (O.S.)
I'm working on something better.

M.L.
I thought you said you'd take anything
if it came along.

CHARLIE (O.S.)
True. Anything reasonable. I've got
something better in mind.

M.L.
I don't know what you're talking
about.

Nothing.

CHARLIE
Are you going to glare at me through
the door?

She enters.

Charlie, suspenders hanging off him like vines, is sitting
at his small bureau.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
Come over here. I wanna show you
something.

M.L.
I've got pots boiling.

CHARLIE
They can wait.

He pulls her in to sit on his lap.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
This is our future.

He pulls out pamphlets and a collage of articles shorn from
newspapers and magazines.

M.L.

This?

CHARLIE

It's everyone's future. That's why
it's so...

M.L.

They're advertisements. You can't
have me believe you're falling for
some get-rich-quick scheme.

She gets up and heads back into the kitchen. He follows with
the literature.

CHARLIE

This is not a scheme, honey. This is
the future.

M.L.

Somebody else's future, maybe.

CHARLIE

Look at this. Nuclear power will be
so cheap it can't be metered.

M.L.

If it's too cheap to be metered, how
do they expect it to make any money?

Charlie smiles: clever girl.

CHARLIE

It's not here yet.

M.L.

So, what does this have to do with
us?

CHARLIE

You know how they generate nuclear
power?

M.L.

No.

CHARLIE

Uranium.

M.L.

I still don't see how this has
anything to do with you. You're a
petroleum geologist.

CHARLIE

Our country needs it. Right now we get it from Canada and Africa.

M.L.

So, what're you saying? We're gonna move?

CHARLIE

We might.

M.L.

No, I don't want to go to Canada, and certainly not Africa. We've got a child now.

CHARLIE

I want to make you happy.

M.L.

In Africa?

CHARLIE

Yes.

(pause)

I'm kidding. No, right here in the States.

She turns around to stir a pot.

M.L.

And how are you going to do that?

CHARLIE

(holding a newspaper clipping)

Look at this. The government is offering thirty-one dollars a pound for uranium.

M.L.

You're not a prospector.

CHARLIE

No. You're right. But who is better equipped to find uranium? A guy who doesn't know where to look, or a guy who does?

M.L.

I don't know, Charles.

CHARLIE

If we're gonna do this, I want you on board one hundred percent.

M.L.

This is risky. There are no guarantees. At least right now you have a job.

CHARLIE

But this job's dime-a-dozen. I think it's riskier to keep this job than to not try.

M.L.

That's some logic.

CHARLIE

I can always come back to one of these shit jobs.

M.L.

I've never heard you call it that before.

CHARLIE

Remember the parable of the unreasonable man?

M.L.

(not amused)
Yeah, I remember.

She pulls away...

INT. PIGGLY WIGGLY GROCERY - SAME

...now pushing a grocery cart in the produce section.

CHARLIE

Then that's a good thing, right?

She continues pushing the cart away from Charlie.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I'm joking, hon.
(tries again)
Honey.

Stopping to select vegetables...

M.L.

Do what you want. You're going to anyway.

CHARLIE

No!

She stops. Turns around.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I won't. Not without you.

M.L.

You said we'd have to move.

CHARLIE

That's right.

M.L.

Where to?

CHARLIE

Colorado.

Putting cucumbers in a paper bag...

M.L.

As long as it's near a real city.
How close would we be to Denver?

CHARLIE

It's not...it's the Four Corners
area.

M.L.

I didn't think there's anything there.

CHARLIE

The closest town is called Boulder.

M.L.

That sounds promising.

CHARLIE

It will be an adventure.

M.L.

Boulder?

CHARLIE

Boulder.

M.L.

(shaking her head)
Sounds like the perfect place for a
geologist. Can't say you've got your
head in the clouds...

They stare at each other for a while.

CHARLIE

(gently)
Boulder.

M.L.
 ...more like the dirt.

CHARLIE
 You're gonna love it.

M.L.
 When were you planning to tell me?

CHARLIE
 Not until I had it all worked out.

M.L.
 The plan or the plan to tell me?

EXT. STEEN HOUSE - NEW DAY

Early morning is bathed in an ultramarine blue at this hour.

Charlie closes the back of a fully packed station wagon and gets in.

The topaz-yellow car lights turn on.

EXT. SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD

A single car pulls from a curb and drives away in a sea of homes--their warm window lights floating like buoys in a harbor.

EXT. COUNTRY HIGHWAY (TEXAS) - LATER

Confident, Charlie is driving the car.

He looks at the front passenger seat: his companion is a lampshade expectantly looking over the top of a box.

He briefly looks back at the road, then back toward the lamp.

CHARLIE
 Can you see okay?

Silence.

M.L. (O.S.)
 Yes.

M.L. and the baby are in the back.

CHARLIE
 I feel like I might finally be able to give something back.

They talk through his rear view mirror.

M.L.
Give what back?

CHARLIE
They kept me out of the war.

M.L.
Who is they?

He indicates his glasses.

M.L. (CONT'D)
A good thing.

CHARLIE
You don't understand, honey.

M.L.
You already did. In Peru.

CHARLIE
But...

Nothing from M.L.--just eyes.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
...this time I want to do it on my
own terms.

EXT. DINER (SOMEWHERE IN THE TEXAS PANHANDLE) - NIGHT

Charlie's car is parked at the Crossroads Diner, an old trolley converted into a greasy spoon.

EXT. GAS STATION (TULSA, OKLAHOMA) - NEW DAY

The car pulls into a gas station and a happy-go-lucky attendant immediately runs out and starts fueling the car.

EXT. TOWNSHIP (COLORADO PLATEAU) - NEW DAY

Charlie's car whizzes by.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - DAY

With the baby fast asleep, M.L. is looking out the window of the car.

Passing in front of her eyes: comfortable pastel-colored houses with large front porches--nicer than she is used to.

M.L.
 Maybe it won't be so bad.

CHARLIE
 Why do you say that?

M.L.
 It's nice out here.

Anything that Charlie says now could only subtract from that.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF DOVE CREEK (DOVE CREEK, COLORADO) - DAY

The car pulls off the road into a clearing between two houses-- a nice, small wooden structure and a dilapidated black tar paper house.

Charlie gets out of the car, followed by M.L.

CHARLIE
 I guess this is it.

M.L. looks around: somewhere between "it ain't much" to "downright disappointing."

M.L.
 How much farther is the house?

CHARLIE
 What do you mean?

M.L.
 I'd like to get settled in before we lose any more light.

CHARLIE
 This is it.

M.L., pointing at the nicer of the two houses...

M.L.
 This one?

With a brave smile...walking toward the rattier one.

CHARLIE
 This one.

M.L. is horrified. Luckily, Charlie isn't looking. Bravely she makes her way to the tar paper house. Charlie unlocks the door and pushes it open.

Inside are nothing but barren floors and enough light to accentuate the neglect.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Christ. There was supposed to be some furniture.

He looks at M.L. for reassurance and gets none.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

We better get the stuff out of the car.

Charlie leaves.

M.L. looks around, disappointment wearing heavily on her face.

She slides shut a window that's been left open.

She looks out the window: no solace to be found in the bland surrounding countryside.

EXT. TAR PAPER HUT (DOVE CREEK, COLORADO) - NIGHT

M.L. trudges away from the house.

Charlie makes his way to the door with some items.

From the doorway...

CHARLIE

I'm glad you're not too disappointed.

He turns around to enter.

M.L., walking toward the car, bursts into tears, placing a hand over her face.

She sits on the back of the car and lets it all drain out.

Wiping her face off with her sleeves, she manages to regain her composure.

INT. TAR PAPER HUT - NEW DAY

The early morning light caresses the sun-bleached splintery floorboards.

Charlie is already up and getting dressed, looking out the window the whole time.

He looks over at the mattress in the corner and the baby crib.

M.L. wakes.

M.L.
Up already?

CHARLIE
Going outside.

M.L.
Breakfast?

CHARLIE
I could pick some up.

M.L.
No, I mean: do you want me to make
you some?

CHARLIE
I'll be alright. You gonna be okay?

M.L.
(offering)
It's a little cold in here.

CHARLIE
I'll see what I can do about that
too.

M.L.
Where're you headed?

She sits up, propping herself up against a pillow.

CHARLIE
I'm gonna run into town, see if I
can rustle up some equipment.

M.L.
Honey, you don't have to start today.
We just got here.

CHARLIE
Yeah. But I wanna get us into a real
place as soon as possible.

M.L.
(polite)
It's not that bad.

CHARLIE
Then you're braver than me.

He flashes her a smile and leaves.

She hears the car engine start up and tires crunching the gravel.

After silence returns, she clutches her knees and looks around: a tinge of worry.

EXT. DOVE CREEK, COLORADO - LATER

Charlie drives into the wide, empty main street of Dove Creek-- a town so sparse it looks like it was abandoned earlier that morning.

He passes by a number of places with names stolen right from a glossary of mining: Carnotite Cafe--offering Yellow Cake on special, Spud Saloon, Motherlode Motel, Bonanza Barbershop, and other terrible alliterations.

He heads out of town--looking like the last one leaving.

EXT. DOVE CREEK MERCANTILE (DOVE CREEK, COLORADO) - DAY

A ways out of town, Charlie turns his car toward the wood-plank general store: it looks like a church lot on Sundays.

Surprised, he gets out and approaches the store: ambivalent.

About to step up, the door bursts open, and men spill out carrying pick axes, shovels, and other equipment.

Charlie moves out of their way.

DOVE CREEK MERCANTILE (INTERIOR)

Inside is even worse: jam-packed with more men.

It's a hive of activity: a full house of unqualified exuberance--as if somebody was handing out free money.

Most of them look like lumberjacks: sturdy and rugged--not academic types like Charlie.

Some distance off, Charlie witnesses a shiny, brand-spanking new Geiger counter being placed in front of a customer.

The customer hands over a generous portion of bills, lifts the metallic device and two extra D-cell batteries off the counter, and walks away.

Charlie makes his way to the counter, ready to pull some bills from his own wallet.

The owner, BILL McCORMICK, tall like LBJ, and an affable fellow in his 50s, covetously re-counts the stack of bills.

CHARLIE
(pointing)
What's that?

MCCORMICK
That's the Gilbert U-239.

CHARLIE
How's it work?

MCCORMICK
Easy.

Putting the bills away, he plops a unit in front of Charlie.

After he flips a switch, an occasional static ping can be heard.

Demonstrating, he puts his hand under the tube: nothing.

Even the needle on the dial hasn't moved.

He grabs a sample of yellow ore.

CHARLIE
Carnotite.

McCormick nods.

MCCORMICK
When electrically charged radiation enters the tube, it ionizes a gas which...

CHARLIE
(interrupting)
...alters the capacitance by short-circuiting the voltage.

MCCORMICK
Basically.

He places the yellow ore under the Geiger tube, and an immediate burst of static pops is heard.

The needle swings wildly in response to the radiation.

CHARLIE
How much?

MCCORMICK
Three hundred.

CHARLIE
For aluminum and gas?

As MCCORMICK pulls the sample away from the tube, the needle drops back to its resting position.

MCCORMICK
And electricity.

CHARLIE
Got anything cheaper?

MCCORMICK
It's the standard model.

CHARLIE
What about used?

MCCORMICK
Might have one.

He grabs the Geiger counter, puts it away, then turns back and winks at Charlie:

MCCORMICK (CONT'D)
Just as soon as the next prospector gives up.

EXT. CAR DEALERSHIP (BOULDER, COLORADO) - DAY

Freshly washed, Charlie's car looks like an emerald on display-- certainly the finest car on the lot.

The SALESMAN walks around the car, with Charlie following.

SALESMAN
I can give you thirty-nine smackeroots.

CHARLIE
I'm gonna need a lot more than that.

The Salesman cocks his head...

SALESMAN
Then you shoulda come in with a different car.

EXT. TAR PAPER HUT - DAY

With an elegiac blue sky looming in the distance, M.L. pulls fresh white linen from a clothesline into a basket on the ground.

She hears a vehicle approaching in the distance.

Kicking up a plume of dirt, Charlie is steering a secondhand jeep at high speed through the horizontal light of early evening.

He comes to a sliding stop.

M.L.

Wha...?

He stands up with his arms outstretched...

CHARLIE

How do you like her?

...and steps down as if disembarking from a carriage.

The large plume of dust floats toward them.

Retrieving the basket, she scrambles to collect the remaining laundry.

M.L.

(bracing herself)

What in the world?

CHARLIE

You're going to have to get used to it.

Shielding the basket as the dust cloud floats by...

M.L.

Not any more than I have to. What happened to the car?

CHARLIE

Got a great deal on a trade.

M.L.

Is that why I'm eating dust?

Cradling her from behind...

CHARLIE

It's the only way to reach the back country. How's the baby?

...he plants a kiss on her cheek.

M.L.

Don't change the subject.

INT. TAR PAPER HUT - NIGHT

Rain is pelting against the window. Charlie and M.L. are having a makeshift romantic dinner over an upturned wooden fruit crate holding a single candle. The limited light hides the disrepair and poverty around them.

M.L.

Why do you think you don't need one when everybody else's got one?

CHARLIE

I'd need to find someone to grubstake me.

M.L.

How much more do you need?

CHARLIE

We'd be giving up a significant chunk of the claims.

M.L.

Are you telling me we didn't come out here with enough?

She gets up.

CHARLIE

Honey?

She whips around.

M.L.

I was getting up to wash the dishes.

CHARLIE

I...

She comes back over, putting her arms around him.

M.L.

Who am I to tell you how to go about it?

His smile belies an eroding confidence.

EXT. COLORADO PLATEAU - NEW DAY

Charlie is walking in the sweltering heat.

Two tough cowboys, PROSPECTOR 1 and PROSPECTOR 2, approach.

Friendly, they stop.

PROSPECTOR 1
Any luck?

CHARLIE
Not yet. Yourself?

PROSPECTOR 1
(shaking his head)
None.

PROSPECTOR 2
Found some surface ores.

Prospector 1 holds out a few meager samples in his hand.
Charlie leans in to inspect.

CHARLIE
How long you been out?

PROSPECTOR 1
Can't remember.

Looking at each other...

PROSPECTOR 2
Three or four days. Just heading in?

CHARLIE
Coveman's Creek.

PROSPECTOR 2
Never heard of it. Where's your
equipment?

Prospector 2 hoists his Geiger counter for show.

CHARLIE
I'm not using any.

PROSPECTOR 2
(looking at his partner)
You're kidding. How do expect to
find anything?

PROSPECTOR 1
Scour the ground? Good luck.

Suspiciously exchanging glances with his partner...

PROSPECTOR 2
Could be salted.

PROSPECTOR 1
Can't afford one?

Charlie points at the Geiger counter...

CHARLIE
Those haven't been ruled valid claims.

PROSPECTOR 2
(confident as hell)
They will be.

CHARLIE
Surface ore has little to do with
what's in the ground.

PROSPECTOR 1
Wishful thinking. Word is it's gonna
be overturned real soon. There's a
lot of pressure on the courts.

PROSPECTOR 2
Uncle Sam's got too much at stake.
Hell, their own Los Alamos boys are
using scintillometers.

CHARLIE
Scintillometers, huh?

PROSPECTOR 1
Yeah, you can see 'em flyin' all
over the plateau like crop dusters.

Again hoisting his Geiger counter for show...

PROSPECTOR 2
More sensitive than these.

He prompts Prospector 1 to leave.

PROSPECTOR 1
(nodding)
More expensive too.

PROSPECTOR 2
All I can say is: Good luck!

Charlie watches them walk away shaking their heads and
laughing.

EXT. COLORADO PLATEAU - NIGHT

Charlie, wearing a miner's hat with a light probing the
darkness, navigates his way to his jeep.

He gets in and switches off the light.

He takes a prolonged moment of reflection or exhaustion before starting the jeep and turning on the headlights.

EXT. TAR PAPER HUT (1949) - DAY

A young boy and M.L. holding a baby are leaned up against the tar paper hut.

Charlie sets up a camera and runs into the scene--and turns into a blur in the static photograph.

EXT. COLORADO PLATEAU - NEW DAY

Charlie, his jeep nearby, is on a high mesa.

He wipes his brow with his sleeve and takes a swig from his canteen.

He hears a sound, looks around, but can't make out where it is coming from.

It gets louder...

...and like a frightful burst from below, a USGS Piper Super Cub fitted with scintillometers catapults up from below the mesa and strafes Charlie.

Charlie falls to the ground.

He gets back up, dusts himself off, and replacing his hat, watches the pilot rock the wings and make a barrel-roll: much more fun than a groundling.

INT. DOVE CREEK DINER - NEW DAY

The place is littered with rag-tag prospectors.

Charlie is paying his bill, about to leave.

OTIS, a young mechanic with inarticulate teeth, bursts in.

He holds a newspaper with one hand, smacking it with the other.

OTIS

Wooooee!

Another middle-aged patron, ASA, in the diner...

ASA

Somebody make a strike?

OTIS
Let me read it, if you please.

PATRON 1 in the diner chimes in...

PATRON 1
Can you?

Laughter.

MECHANIC
Yeah. Yeah. Real funny.

Shaking the newspaper to straighten the article, Otis attempts to read it as best he can...

OTIS
"The statute requiring discovery of the 'vein or lode' within the claim must be construed in accordance with its purpose which is to foster and encourage the discovery and development of mineral resources by providing a practical method of procedure for those who in good faith desire to search out and develop such resources."

All patrons are transfixed--as if frozen in time. Breaking the spell...

ASA
What are they saying?

PATRON 2
Shhhhh.

PATRON 3
Let him read on.

The listeners: spring-loaded.

MECHANIC
"To this end, the courts have been quite liberal in sustaining discoveries in favor of the first locator of mining property. Justice J. Allan Crockett wrote the unanimous opinion: We deem it entirely legitimate to rely upon such indications, by Geiger counters, scintillometers and other radiometric instruments, as one means of locating uranium."

The place erupts: the celebrants hoist their Geiger counters, hug each other, and engage in whatever rowdiness that accompanies a victory.

Charlie looks on, his face broadcasting a relative defeat.

One of the celebrants indiscriminately raises a beer to Charlie.

Charlie leaves, disgusted.

EXT. DESERT ROAD - NEW DAY

An old couple is stranded along the side of the road with a flat tire.

Charlie pulls over to help out the appreciative pair.

EXT. DESERT (COLORADO PLATEAU, COLORADO) - DAY

Charlie is running up a hill, frenzied.

As he gets to the ridgeline, he can see the valley floor below:

Prospectors with Geiger counters--everywhere.

They all laugh at him.

EXT. SLICKROCK FORMATIONS (GOBLIN VALLEY, MOAB, UTAH) - NIGHT

Charlie is out at night in a forest of giant mushroom-like slickrock formations.

The light from his helmet desperately darts around inside the formations--as if he is frantically trying to find his way out.

His moribund light is fading fast.

INT. TAR PAPER HUT - NIGHT

Charlie, sweating profusely, jolts up from a bad dream.

M.L. wakes and comforts him.

M.L.

You're having a terrible go at it.
You've been tossing the whole night.

CHARLIE

The whole thing is a bad dream.

M.L., not knowing how to respond, rubs his back.

M.L.
Not the whole thing.

CHARLIE
Okay. Maybe just the bed.

They laugh to this, waking the baby.

They cup their hands over their mouths trying to stifle their laughter.

INT. DOVE CREEK MERCANTILE - DAY

Charlie is dispassionately looking at an "Uranium Rush" board game.

MCCORMICK (O.S.)
Makes it look easy.

Charlie turns around to see Bill McCormick.

MCCORMICK (CONT'D)
They are certainly giving you a good ribbing, Mr. Steen.

Charlie slides the game back.

CHARLIE
Who is they?

MCCORMICK
Bill McCormick. I'm the owner.

They shake.

CHARLIE
(warming to him)
Charlie.

MCCORMICK
Calling you a crackpot geologist.

CHARLIE
They got the geologist part right.

MCCORMICK
I've never seen anybody last this long.

CHARLIE
I used to be a petroleum geologist for Standard Oil.

MCCORMICK

I don't doubt your credentials, Mr. Steen. I'm turning it around in my head, and I's thinkin', what does this guy know that I don't. If you don't mind my asking, how exactly does one prospect without radiometrics?

CHARLIE

Well, I guess I'm trying to think, what would I do if I was uranium?

McCormick sizes Charlie up, accepting his response.

MCCORMICK

I wouldn't know what that is like.
(beat)
How do you test your ideas?

CHARLIE

Right now it's beyond my means.

MCCORMICK

What if I grubstake you a counter?

CHARLIE

I could have used one a long time ago. Now I've got to go deeper.

MCCORMICK

How can I help?

CHARLIE

You wouldn't have an oil rig, would you?

They both laugh, but McCormick has a twinkle in his eye.

CUT TO:

DOVE CREEK MERCANTILE (EXTERIOR)

The back door bursts open. Charlie and McCormick emerge.

Before them: a rusted-out, portable oil drilling rig.

McCormick's eyes never leaving the rig...

MCCORMICK

It ain't much, but it's yours if you want it.

CHARLIE

How much?

He turns to Charlie.

MCCORMICK
Free of charge, Mr. Steen.

They shake hands enthusiastically, as if they both just sealed the deal of the century.

EXT. MAIN STREET (DOVE CREEK, COLORADO) - DAY

Charlie's jeep pulls the portable drill rig along Main Street.

People in the town look on--dumbfounded--some shaking their heads: there goes the village idiot.

EXT. TAR PAPER HUT - NIGHT

Charlie pulls up to the hut with the drill rig in tow.

He gets out to make sure it arrived in good order.

M.L. is rubbing clothes on a washboard.

M.L.
What's with the chariot?

CHARLIE
Bill McCormick just gave us our first grubstake.

M.L.
What we could have used is groceries.

He lifts a grocery bag out of the back of the jeep.

CHARLIE
On credit.

EXT. COLORADO PLATEAU - DAY

Charlie fires up the engine and operates the rig on a plateau.

He moves the rig to another location.

He sets the rig up for drilling.

He pulls up cores.

He steps on a core, pulverizing it.

He sets up in another location.

He pulverizes another core.

While the rig is working, a snap is heard, and the rig's engine wails loudly.

Charlie dives for a button and shuts the engine down.

He drives away in the jeep--leaving the rig behind.

INT. DOVE CREEK DINER - NEW DAY

Charlie sits in the diner, reading maps, giving half his attention to his soup.

Other prospectors are sitting in small groups.

Charlie is very much the odd man out.

A waitress, ALICE, middle 30s, visits one of the tables, serving food to the men.

One of the men, ROBERT, is measuring radiation from Alice.

ROBERT

Just what I thought: nothing!

Laughter.

Geiger counters are all over the table and on the floor.

One guy, MARK, a burly man in his early forties, slaps Alice's behind.

ALICE

Stop that, Mark. You're gonna make me spill the coffee. What if I spill it on you?

MARK

I'd love that.

Alice smiles.

Another guy, GREG, better looking than MARK, pulls Alice onto his lap...face to face.

ALICE

(freshly minted smile)
Good morning.

GREG

Good morning, Alice.

Alice enjoys the short interlude--poised to write down his request.

ALICE
What would you like this morning?

GREG
Whatever you think is best.

ALICE
Okay, sweetie.

Alice writes something down on her pad, and springs back up.

Greg lingers in the best moment of his day.

Laughter emanates from the table.

With every burst of laughter, Charlie looks over, a bit irritated.

From around the corner...

BREITLING (O.S.)
Steen.

Applause from the rowdy tables bleeds over into a grand entrance of Breitling.

BREITLING (CONT'D)
Got something for ya.

Breitling slowly walks toward him carefully holding two divining rods--making a big show of it.

Everyone else stops what they are doing to watch the slow-motion spectacle.

Charlie puts down his map.

BREITLING (CONT'D)
(without looking up)
Since you're gonna need some equipment, I thought I'd give you a pair of divining rods trained to find yellowcake.

The two tips of the divining rods slowly come together, pointing directly at Charlie, just as Breitling stops about a foot away.

Charlie gets up to stand face-to-face with Breitling--the rods pointing at his stomach in a threatening way.

All others in the restaurant grow silent, waiting to see Charlie's reaction.

CHARLIE
 (playing along)
 I appreciate that, Clyde. How did
 you train 'em?

Howls of laughter from the rafters.

Charlie takes the divining rods into his hands to operate
 them.

The rod tips start swinging wildly.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
 I don't think you trained 'em right.

The rods sense something and angle toward a collection of
 rocks on the table--and Alice in the distance.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
 Here...

Maintaining the position of the rods, he hands them back to
 Breitling.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
 ...looks like you trained this pair
 to find molly, not yellowcake.

Laughter. Breitling looks at Alice...

BREITLING
 Her name is Alice.

Charlie retrieves a shiny metallic rock from the table.

CHARLIE
 Molybdenum.

He tosses the rock to Breitling, who drops the rods to catch
 it.

Laughter.

MARK
 What're you gonna do now, Steen,
 with broke equipment?

Alice pours a pitcher of ice water on Greg.

He bolts up, drenched.

ALICE
 The special this morning.

Laughter.

Alice walks past Charlie, murmuring...

ALICE (CONT'D)
 You don't pay 'em any attention.
 They couldn't find their peckers if
 they was holding on to 'em.

INT. TAR PAPER HUT - NIGHT

Charlie is poring over a Los Alamos USGS map under a reading lamp.

CHARLIE
 We're moving.

M.L.
 We are?

She suddenly looks exhausted.

He points at the map.

CHARLIE
 This is where everybody is looking.
 Right here.

M.L.
 (tiredly takes a peek)
 There's probably a good reason.

CHARLIE
 I was going over these Los Alamos
 maps, and this whole outcropping
 here where everybody is finding
 surface ore, subducts under the mantle
 and comes back up somewhere else.

M.L.
 Where?

EXT. STEEN HOMESTEAD (YELLOW CAT, UTAH) - EVENING

Charlie, M.L., and the two kids arrive on a small plateau within eyeshot of the snow-capped La Salle mountains. Creating the camp-like grounds are a 20-foot aluminum RV trailer and a separate 8-foot by 16-foot wooden shack pierced by an askew stove pipe. The thrifty romantic setting is further ornamented by a few odd metal items, a rusty barrel, and decaying mining equipment scattered about.

Pointing at the La Salle mountains...

CHARLIE
 What do you think of the view?

M.L.
Which hermit did you steal this from?

INT. STEEN TRAILER - NEW DAY

Charlie, M.L. and the boys, John and Charles Jr., are sitting in the trailer, eating out of cans.

M.L.
We can't take showers this morning.

CHARLIE
Why not?

M.L.
The water tank sprung a leak during the night.

Dropping his spoon into the can...

JOHN
I'm still hungry.

CHARLES JR.
Me too.

John is walking in his father's boots.

CHARLIE
What the hell do you think you're doing?

M.L. whips her head around...

M.L.
Charles!

Charlie looks over at M.L., who shakes her head. Sensing a revolt...

CHARLIE
Who wants to go swimming?

EXT. SMALL LAKE (NEAR YELLOW CAT) - NEW DAY

Charlie, holding the two boys, is swimming in the deep part of a tiny caldera-like lake.

M.L., showing an eight-month bulge, picks up clothes and folds them at the water's edge.

CHARLIE
Join us for a bath.

M.L.

I can't.

CHARLIE

What do you mean you can't?

She stops what she is doing.

M.L.

I can't swim, Charles.

CHARLIE

You never told me.

M.L.

(restraining tears)

In my family, the only thing that
wasn't sinning was going to church.

EXT. STEEN TRAILER (1950) - DAY

Two young boys and M.L. holding a baby are leaned up against
the trailer.

Charlie sets up a camera and runs into the scene--and turns
into a blur in the static photograph.

INT. POST OFFICE (MOAB) - DAY

A nosy, pencil-thin Post Office CLERK is sorting mail.

Both Charlie and M.L. enter.

CLERK

Got some letters for you, mac.

The Clerk verifies the letter, scribbles something on a
clipboard, before handing a small bundle to him.

CLERK (CONT'D)

How's it going out there?

Charlie takes a letter and hands the rest to M.L.

Giving his full attention to opening the letter...

CHARLIE

Fine.

M.L.

How sweet. Another letter from the
Beebes.

CHARLIE
Another one?

The Clerk listens in.

M.L.
Your sister says your dad called her
from Galveston.

CHARLIE
(dismissive)
So that's where he's living now.

M.L. shoots him a disapproving look.

Charlie partially reads a letter and hands it to M.L.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
Now who's the foolish one?

M.L.
Your sister?

CHARLIE
Mother.

M.L. reads the letter.

M.L.
She's sold her house.

CHARLIE
That's what I got.

M.L.
She's enclosed a check.

The Clerk looks up.

CHARLIE
What?

M.L.
(reading)
Sold the house to help out. Furniture
too.

CHARLIE
That's not like her.

M.L.
(reading)
Says she's now moved in with Hoot.

CHARLIE
Hoot? Who is Hoot?

M.L.
(looking up)
Boyfriend.

CHARLIE
You've got to be joking. At her age?

Handing him the check.

M.L.
See, she believes in you.

CHARLIE
She believes in Hoot.

M.L.
She also wrote a postscript. It's
meant for you.

She hands him back the letter.

The postscript reads: Don't forget to take your girl out on
the town.

EXT. PORCUPINE DANCE HALL (MOAB) - NIGHT

Charlie and M.L. arrive in the jeep, the festive dance hall
blasting Fats Domino's "Be My Guest."

Guiding her by the small of her back, they amble in, like
teenagers in love.

INT. PORCUPINE DANCE HALL - SAME

Charlie, wasting no opportunity, grabs M.L.'s hand and pulls
her right into the shindig.

A bit older than the youth tearing up the floor, they keep
up, getting nods and smiles from the other dancers.

Charlie and M.L. rest after the song finishes.

An ANNOUNCER, the local pretty boy, grabs the fat-pipe Neumann
mic...

ANNOUNCER
And now something slower for the old
folks in the room.

The hall erupts with laughter.

As if an invisible spotlight is on Charlie and M.L., fellow dancers point at the flirtatious pair in a friendly way and laugh.

M.L. grabs Charlie for a slow dance: The Platters' "The Great Pretender":

MUSIC

Oh yes I'm the great pretender//
 Pretending that I'm doing well// My
 need is such// I pretend too much//
 I'm lonely but no one can tell// Oh
 yes I'm the great pretender// Adrift
 in a world of my own// I play the
 game but to my real shame// You've
 left me to grieve all alone// Too
 real is this feeling of make believe//
 Too real when I feel what my heart
 can't conceal...

EXT. BUDDY COWGER'S GAS STATION - NEW DAY

Another car is already at the pump, and its driver is filling it up.

Charlie pulls up in the jeep and gets out, next in line.

BUDDY COWGER, a forgotten cowboy in a wheelchair, rolls his way out of the single car garage.

BUDDY

What can I do you for?

CHARLIE

Bill sent me out here. Says you might check my core samples in exchange for a grubstake.

BUDDY

If Bill sent you out here, then that's good enough for me. Buddy Cowger's the name.

Extending his hand...

CHARLIE

Charlie Steen.

He reaches in and shakes.

BUDDY

I've heard about you.

CHARLIE

Anything good?

BUDDY
Well, let me think. Heard that you've
been at it for years.

CHARLIE
Is that good?

BUDDY
Tells me you ain't looking for
overnight success.

EXT. BUDDY COWGER'S GAS STATION - LATER

Buddy rolls to the jeep with the Geiger counter in his lap.

BUDDY
Where did you get these samples?

CHARLIE
Lisbon Valley. North of Arches.

Buddy scans the cores with the Geiger tube: nothing.

He looks up at Charlie.

BUDDY
Just as bad as my own samples.

CHARLIE
Where do you go?

BUDDY
Wherever this takes me.

He slaps the wheelchair with both his hands and wheels his
way back to the garage.

EXT. PHONE BOOTH (MOAB) - NEW DAY

Charlie is on the phone in Moab's single phone booth. A long
line is collected outside.

CHARLIE
Did you get my sketches?

MCGILL (V.O.)
Sure did.

CHARLIE
What do you think? I want your expert
opinion.

MCGILL (V.O.)
It's a big idea.

CHARLIE

You mean a good idea?

MCGILL (V.O.)

I'm not sure, Charlie.
There's absolutely no reason to think uranium behaves anything like petroleum.

CHARLIE

Everybody's looking for it in the Morrison, because that's what's exposed on the Colorado side, but I'm telling ya, it's poking into Morrison from underneath, from the Triassic Chinle layer or maybe even the Cutler, and collecting behind the anticlines. The problem around Moab is, you gotta drill for it...you can't just find it in the exposed rock faces.

MCGILL (V.O.)

Did you already make the move?

CHARLIE

Yeah. We did.

MCGILL (V.O.)

(uncomfortable pause)

My friend, let me put it this way:
If you're right, it will revolutionize the industry. If you're wrong, you haven't really lost anything except a few years...and you're young enough to absorb that.

EXT. BUS DEPOT (MOAB) - DAY

Charlie drives by the bus depot. He looks over: a bus spilling its precious cargo.

A very special, carefree man replaces his hat with one hand as he steps off the bus and into the light.

VERNON PICK (43), his dusty hat lopsidedly crowning his pleading, beagle eyes, looks like a farmer right out of the 30's Dust Bowl, or a vagabond grifter trying to keep a low profile. He looks like he's going to take over the town--and everyone is gonna love him for it.

The bus driver comes running up with two suitcases.

DRIVER

Here you go, Mr. Pick. It sure was a pleasure.

Peeling off a generous note for the driver...

PICK

The pleasure was all mine.

The driver walks away with a spring in his step--stretching the bill as if he was inspecting a small blanket for holes.

INT. BARBER SHOP (MOAB) - DAY

Charlie is sitting on a swivel chair, hemmed in by the barber's cape--BARBER 1 putting on the final touches.

Charlie is amusedly listening to the banter between a couple of waiting customers and the two barbers.

An OLDER GENTLEMAN is leafing through a magazine.

CUSTOMER 1

Boy, they keep a' comin', don' they?

BARBER 1

Heard some new guy just came to town, lookin' for the stuff up north, around the Swell. What you think about that? You think there's anything up there?

CUSTOMER 1

San Rafael?

CUSTOMER 2

Met him at the Nuclear Cafe the other day. Vernon Pick. Nice fella. Some kinda electricity scientist from California or somethin'.

BARBER 2

That's a bit far from the Morrison, isn't it?

Charlie is alarmed at the mention of "Morrison."

Barber 1 leans into Charlie, peeling away his cape...

BARBER 1

Looks like you're finished.

Charlie gets up and hands him some coins.

CUSTOMER 1
Reminds me of that damn-fool Cisco
Kid.

Charlie looks around--almost disoriented.

BARBER 1
Heard he was going around without a
Geiger.

CUSTOMER 2
Yeah, lookin' at the exposed rock
faces. But heard he's a crackpot.

The door chimes, signaling Charlie's exit.

BARBER 2
Don't think it matter. This place
has a way of makin' everybody equal.

CUSTOMER 1
You mean: poor?

Laughter.

Without looking up, the Older Gentleman who's reading a
magazine...

OLDER GENTLEMAN
That was the Cisco Kid.

BARBER 2
What? You're kidding. That was Steen?

BARBER 1
Well, I'll be damned.

He walks to the window and looks out.

BARBER 1 (CONT'D)
Ain't that a doozie.
(nearly sotto voce)
That is one unlucky son-of-a-bitch.

INT. STEEN TRAILER - NIGHT

The salmon-pink glow of early evening washes through the
curtains.

M.L. doles out meager portions of food as the kids clamber
around the table like hungry animals to a trough.

The smallest portion is on her own plate.

A hand grabs a fork and is about to partake of the sad morsel pretending to be a meal...

JOHN
What's papa gonna eat?

She puts the fork back down.

M.L.
He's not going to be here tonight,
sweetie.

She looks down at the morsel...

CUT TO:

INT. STEEN TRAILER - LATER

...the same morsel.

A hand picks up the fork. The hand belongs to Charlie.

No kids in sight, M.L. looks on in the shadows.

Disgusted, Charlie throws down the fork.

CHARLIE
(aggressive)
That's all I get to come home to?

M.L. tears up and runs out of the trailer.

INT. U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY (USGS) CLAIMS OFFICE - DAY

Charlie approaches the counter.

A clean-shaven, young USGS CLERK is ready to serve him. Two other clerks remain busy at their desks behind him.

USGS CLERK
County?

CHARLIE
San Juan.

He slides a new map over other maps already spread out.

USGS CLERK
What area?

CHARLIE
Big Indian District.

The USGS Clerk runs his finger along the map until it ends up in a large, cross-hatched area of the map.

USGS CLERK
Are you sure you've got that right?

CHARLIE
I put 'em there myself.

USGS CLERK
Survey and Commission geologists
have already deemed that area devoid
of uranium.

CHARLIE
Based on what?

USGS CLERK
Aircraft scintillometer readings.

He brushes his hand over a large swath of the map.

USGS CLERK (CONT'D)
They've tested this whole area. I
think you're looking in the wrong
place.

CHARLIE
That's based on surface ore readings.

USGS CLERK
Nah, that's based on solid geological
evidence.

CHARLIE
You're telling me that they don't
think there are any deposits of
carnotite in the Morrison in this
whole area.

USGS CLERK
That's exactly what I'm saying.
Geologists stopped looking there a
long time ago.

Worry creeps across Charlie's face.

USGS CLERK (CONT'D)
You'd be wasting your time continuing
in that area...you'll probably have
better luck on the Colorado side.

CHARLIE
I'd still like to file these four
claims.

Somewhat annoyed, the USGS Clerk looks back at the other clerks, baffled.

USGS CLERK 2 shakes his head.

USGS CLERK 3 gets up from his desk and approaches, wanting to get a better look at the naive prospector.

All three are wearing shit-eating grins, trying to suppress the urge to laugh.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
Go ahead, laugh it up, but write it up.

He hands them the paperwork.

USGS CLERK
No, no. We'll record them. No problem.

The USGS Clerk hands Charlie's claims to USGS Clerk 3, turns around, and places his hand over his mouth, about to lose his professional bearing.

USGS Clerk 3 stamps some paperwork, while Charlie looks around trying to avoid eye contact with the other clerks.

He limply hands the stamped registrations back to Charlie.

USGS CLERK 3
For your records.

Charlie heads for the door, closes it behind him, and stops.

Inside, the Claims Office bursts into laughter.

INT. STEEN TRAILER - NIGHT

Snowflakes swirl playfully through the air.

A light dusting of snow on the ground makes the place look like a cake decorated with powdered sugar.

Charlie opens the door and steps into pitch black.

M.L.
Charles?

CHARLIE
It's cold in here.

M.L.
The fire went out this morning.

EXT. STEEN TRAILER - NIGHT

Charlie emerges from the trailer.

M.L. (O.S.)

Where are you going? There's no money.

EXT. DESERT (OUTSKIRTS OF MOAB) - LATER

The jeep's rear lights look like lonely beacons in the dark.

Charlie pulls off the road and comes to a stop, the headlights illuminating the swirling dust.

Charlie walks into the darkness beyond the light.

He looks around and, crouching down, starts picking large shiny black rocks off the ground.

CUT TO:

Charlie sits in his jeep with the lights off, while a Santa Fe train headlamp throws its light on him--then races past.

INT. STEEN TRAILER - LATER

Charlie enters, pale moonlight pouring in through the doorway.

The dark, coupled with multiple strained groans, makes it sound like a hospital for sick children in a Dickens novel.

Charlie opens the stove hatch and starts loading the rocks.

M.L.

Where did you get the coal?

His slightly smeared face becomes illuminated by a flame dancing near the tip of a rolled-up newspaper.

CHARLIE

Santa Fe.

He throws it into the belly of the stove and closes the hatch.

EXT. STEEN TRAILER - NEW DAY

M.L., Charlie, and the kids are all outside.

M.L.

Can you take the kids inside.

CHARLIE

Sure. Come on...in the trailer!

Like herding cats, he sweeps them into the trailer.

M.L. walks to the backside of the trailer toward the ditch.

Spreading her dress out, she starts squatting on the ground.

In the doorway of the trailer, Charlie holds the kids back, as if they are little rockets ready to take off.

Everyone is giggling, as if part of some conspiracy.

Charlie looks at Andy and pushes him out the door.

Andy starts running behind the trailer toward M.L.

Charlie guides John the same way, and John comes catapulting around the trailer, trying to overtake Andy.

M.L. sees them launching toward her.

She rises from the ground.

M.L.

Oh, come on. Can I have some privacy?

Andy, John, and Charles Jr. come running and swirl around M.L.

M.L. (CONT'D)

I'm gonna get you, you little ankle-biters.

She pretends to be a monster, pulling up the littlest, Andy, who shrieks in delight or panic, tickling him.

Charlie comes around the trailer and leans up against it with an outstretched arm, observing the spectacle.

M.L. purses her lips and shoots him a look: naughty devil.

Charlie flashes a smile, as does M.L., shaking her head.

EXT. DRILL SITE (LISBON VALLEY, UTAH) - DAY

Charlie operates the rig.

Some distance away, a duo of professional geologists look upon Charlie working at his site.

GEOLOGIST 1 hands the other a pair of binoculars.

GEOLOGIST 2 peers through the glass.

GEOLOGIST 1

All he did was move the drill site
back a thousand feet.

Geologist 2 hands them back and shakes his head.

EXT. BUDDY COWGER'S GAS STATION (NEAR MOAB, UTAH) - DAY

Charlie pulls into the station.

Buddy rolls up and scans some cores lying in the back of the
jeep with his Geiger counter.

A burst of static sounds.

CHARLIE

What was that?

BUDDY

Nothing.

(defensively)

The switch is getting a little noisy.

EXT. STEEN TRAILER (1951) - DAY

Charlie is fussing with his tie.

M.L. comes out of the trailer to help him, followed by a
short procession of four boys in canary-yellow shirts--clean
enough for church.

The three young boys and M.L. holding a baby lean up against
the trailer.

The two youngest have no shoes.

Charlie sets up a camera and runs into the scene--and turns
into a blur in the static photograph.

EXT. MOTHER LODE BAR (MOAB, UTAH) - NIGHT

A large, excited crowd has pooled around the bar.

Charlie pulls up in his jeep.

He asks one of the stragglers in the lot...

CHARLIE

What's going on?

STRAGGLER

Somebody hit paydirt.

CHARLIE

Who?

STRAGGLER

Don't know. Some newcomer.

INT. MOTHER LODE BAR - SAME

Charlie wedges his way into the bar.

Someone in the far corner is being toasted.

A champagne bottle--not the first--is popped.

Obscured by a sea of heads, some rotund businessman--an impressario togged out like a Monopoly board game caricature--fills a glass for the man of the hour.

Charlie maneuvers his way closer to the festivities.

Through a temporary clearing in the crowd, Charlie spies the subject of the celebration--the man with a healthy serving of the amber libation: Vernon Pick.

Vernon raises his glass to the crowd to great applause, spilling a generous amount.

He looks directly at Charlie, as if they know each other, and with a twinkle in his eye, winks--as if telegraphing the words "here's to you" directly at Charlie.

He takes a big, long swig, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

Applause.

Charlie asks a BAR PATRON...

CHARLIE

Who's that?

Without turning...

BAR PATRON

The silver spoon? Floyd Odlum.

CHARLIE

No, the other guy.

BAR PATRON

Guy calls himself Vernon Pick.

CHARLIE

What he do?

BAR PATRON

Sold some big claim in the San Rafael
to the silver spoon.

CHARLIE

Uranium?

Turns to him with sweaty-tooth grin...

BAR PATRON

Yes, sir.

A significant blow to Charlie. Countering...

CHARLIE

I'm not surprised. He must have known
what he was doing.

BAR PATRON

How you figure?

CHARLIE

He must have deduced it.

BAR PATRON

Accident, he says. Said his
scintillometer went haywire after he
got lost, tried to cross a deep part
of the river but took a spill, and
then got dragged down to some spot
by the Muddy.

CHARLIE

Heard he's a scientist, so he had a
general idea where to look.

BAR PATRON

Ain't no scientist. Says he's just
another hardscrabble sparky who come
here from California an' try out his
luck like everybody else.

This does not sit well with Charlie.

The Bar Patron lifts his glass, as if toasting Charlie.

Charlie studies Vernon through a sea of heads: transfixed.

INT. STEEN TRAILER - LATER

Charlie ambles in and finds the boys all huddled around M.L.
lying in the bed.

CHARLIE

What happened? Did you hurt yourself?

JOHN
Mama's sick.

Without getting up...

M.L.
The fire went out again.

Charlie moves over to M.L. to inspect--a shocking sight:
M.L. looks like death warmed over.

CHARLIE
I'm taking you to the clinic right
now. Boys in the jeep.
(pause)
Now!

The boys scramble outside.

Picking her up...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
The other morning you said you were
alright.

M.L.
I lied.

INT. CLINIC (MOAB) - LATER

Charlie bursts through the door and carries a limp M.L. into
the clinic.

A NURSE jolts up and immediately directs him to a room.

They both enter. Charlie lays M.L. on a bed.

NURSE
What's the problem?

CHARLIE
Not sure. Could be flu.

NURSE
I'll be right back.

Just as the Nurse makes her way to the door, a DOCTOR arrives.

He inspects M.L. and turns his head to those assembled: not
good.

DOCTOR
How long has she been like this?

CHARLIE

She was fine when I left her two days ago. What is it?

DOCTOR

Two days ago? Pneumonia. Everybody out.

INT. CLINIC HALLWAY - SAME

Charlie and the Nurse emerge from the room, followed by the Doctor.

DOCTOR

She's critical. Did she display signs earlier?

CHARLIE

No.

DOCTOR

I'll be giving her some antibiotics, and we'll know how she will fare in two or three days.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM, CLINIC - NEW DAY

Charlie is pacing in the hallway.

The Nurse emerges from the room carrying a tray of food.

She nods at Charlie, and Charlie goes in.

CHARLIE

Couldn't eat?

A very frail M.L. musters enough energy to shake her head.

She tries to speak...her pleading eyes saying more.

M.L.

Well ar da boiz?

CHARLIE

What?

M.L.

Wher ar de boys?

Charlie leans in a bit.

CHARLIE

I dropped the boys off at Buddy's a couple of days ago.

M.L.

How ar dey?

CHARLIE

They're making a jolly time of it,
driving Buddy crazy, I'm sure.

He smiles, as M.L. comes to.

M.L.

How lon hav I been her.

CHARLIE

About three days. It was a bad one,
huh?

M.L.

Yes.

(beat)

Will you do me a favor?

CHARLIE

Sure. Anything.

M.L.

Talk to your father, will you?

He gets up, clearly annoyed. Changing the subject...

M.L. (CONT'D)

How's the drilling?

CHARLIE

Never mind that.

M.L.

Find anything?

CHARLIE

I'm shutting it down.

M.L.

(shocked)

What?

CHARLIE

Haven't told Bill yet.

M.L.

(tearful)

No, Charlie!

A long pause.

CHARLIE
 (tears in his eyes)
 You know that's the first time you
 ever called me Charlie?

M.L.
 I don't want to quit.

CHARLIE
 It was...
 (her words finally
 sink in)
 It was selfish of me...dragging you
 and the boys through five years of
 this.

M.L.
 It's my dream too.

CHARLIE
 No. You only thought it was.

M.L.
 What?

CHARLIE
 I guess you had to make it your dream
 too to make it through these last
 five shitty years.

Patting the bed, she motions for him to sit.

Charles reluctantly approaches and sits down beside her.

M.L.
 I still believe in your idea.

CHARLIE
 Thinking it's there and knowing it's
 there are two different things.

M.L.
 I'm always gonna blame myself.

CHARLIE
 Then you'd be as wrong as I was. I'm
 sorry, honey.

He leans in to embrace her.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
 (joking)
 You're not gonna divorce me, are
 you?

M.L.
I will, if you quit.

He pulls back, looks at her.

CHARLIE
We almost lost you.

They embrace again.

M.L.
If I only had the strength.

CHARLIE
What? To go out there and run a rig?

M.L.
To change your mind.

She squeezes him tightly.

EXT. DRILL SITE (LISBON VALLEY, UTAH) - NEW DAY

Charlie drives to the drill site, solemn: five years of disappointment riding on his face.

He lumbers out of the jeep, and arms akimbo, takes in the work ahead of him.

He starts to load a few loose items into the back of the jeep and--almost out of habit--hits the button to start up the engine.

The engine roars to life, and the rig starts drilling again.

He continues loading items into the jeep, and after dropping a few items...

CHARLIE
Goddamnit!

...out of sheer frustration, throws the gear some distance into the desert foliage, letting the rest of the gear fall to the ground.

A weird crunching noise is heard emanating from the rig, and then the rig starts whirring with a high-pitch whine.

Launching back toward the rig, he reaches the emergency shut-off button before the rig is seemingly about to self-destruct.

Clearly frustrated, he returns to his usual routine and starts pulling up the drill pipes.

As he pulls up the pipes, he systematically lays out the cores on the ground: no yellow carnotite in sight.

Pulling up the last pipe, Charlie notices what he expected: a shattered pipe and no drill head.

He lays out the last of the drill cores.

Noticing a few cores consisting of silvery-black material among the sandstone cores, he throws them into the back of the jeep as usual.

He hops into the jeep and drives off. Somber.

EXT. BUDDY COWGER'S GAS STATION - LATER

Charlie pulls up and skids the car to a stop in front of a pump.

Buddy wheels himself out of the garage to see the spectacle.

He wipes his hands with an oily cloth.

BUDDY

Whatcha need?

CHARLIE

Gotta drive to Grand Junction to pick up some gear...fish out a drill head. Got through the Morrison, but it broke off in the Chinle about one hundred and ninety-seven feet down.

BUDDY

Sorry to hear it.

CHARLIE

No big deal, I was just givin' it a few more turns. Shuttin' it down, Buddy.

BUDDY

For good?

CHARLIE

Can't take any more chances.

BUDDY

Chances are all you got.

CHARLIE

Not with the family.

BUDDY

Wouldn't know about that. But I got
the same luck with these rocks.

CHARLIE

Mine ain't no better. No yellow in
these cores.

BUDDY

Mind if I...?

CHARLIE

Help yourself.

Charlie gases up the car.

Buddy wheels over with his Geiger counter in his lap.

He turns the machine on, and the Geiger counter is silent.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

What'd I tell ya?

Charlie switches hands on the pump--subconsciously looks
away, as if ashamed.

Buddy continues scanning the Geiger counter tube over the
specimen.

The Geiger counter starts sputtering.

Without turning...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Is that thing even working?

The sputtering grows louder and more intense.

Charlie turns around to see Buddy: transfixed.

Buddy looks up at Charlie.

Charlie releases the pump handle and ambles over, suspicious.

Buddy continues running the Geiger tube over the strange
silvery-black cores.

The Geiger counter is now registering something furiously.

The needle is parked in the max position.

They look at each other again.

BUDDY

What is it?

Slapping his forehead, Charlie explodes with excitement...

CHARLIE

The whole time we're looking for the wrong color.

BUDDY

Now you tell me.

CHARLIE

Right at two hundred feet--like I said. I shoulda known it. What you're looking at here is urananite.

Charlie excitedly shakes Buddy's hand.

BUDDY

Urana-what?

CHARLIE

You're looking at pitchblende. It has a higher concentration of uranium than carnotite.

BUDDY

How much?

CHARLIE

Probably about three to five percent.

BUDDY

Is that good?

CHARLIE

Carnotite is about half a percent. This is six to ten times better.

BUDDY

How much will this pay?

CHARLIE

Let me put it this way: Uncle Sam is givin' us thirty-one dollars a pound for the weak stuff.

Charlie runs over to pull the pump handle from the jeep.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I've gotta tell M.L.

Charlie hops into the jeep and peels away from the gas station.

EXT. STEEN HOMESTEAD - LATER

Charlie barrels down the road at high speed and stops in front of the compound.

No one is outside, but the trailer door is open.

CHARLIE

We've hit it! We've hit it!

Charlie runs into a clothesline laden with fresh diapers.

The clothesline clips him, sending him tumbling to the ground, while the whole line of diapers descends to the muddy ground.

M.L. emerges from the trailer and sees the diapers in the mud.

M.L.

Now, what did you do that for?

CHARLIE

We've hit it!

M.L.

I can see that.

Getting back up and running toward her...

CHARLIE

We've hit it! We've hit it! It's a million dollar lick!

M.L.

You did?

M.L. runs toward Charlie and the two embrace--he swings her around as if he just returned from the war.

M.L. is crying.

CHARLIE

There's no need to cry.

M.L.

(through the sobbing)

Tears of joy.

The kids emerge from the trailer to watch the spectacle.

M.L. and Charlie jump up and down.

CHARLIE

We've hit it, kids!

The kids start bobbing up and down, cheering as best they can, mimicking their parents.

Charlie gets down on one knee, beckoning the children to run over...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Come here.

The kids run over to their parents.

As if stating something profound...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

You know what?

The kids, in unison...

KIDS

What?

CHARLIE

We've got to record today.

EXT. BUDDY COWGER'S GAS STATION (1952) - LATER

Buddy is fumbling around with a camera.

Finally getting the hang of it...

BUDDY

Okay, everybody: hold still.

M.L.

If we can.

JOHN

Yeah, if we can.

M.L. quickly turns her head, holding a finger over her mouth.

M.L.

(friendly)

Shhhh.

Winking at John and the three other boys, and wiping a tear from her cheek, she looks back at Buddy.

With Charlie and M.L. standing, and the four boys arranged on the jeep--two of them without shoes--the shutter preserves the moment: CLICK!

M.L. (CONT'D)

Let's get a picture of Buddy!

KIDS

Yeah!

Charlie grabs the camera from Buddy as the others crowd behind him.

CLICK!

A picture of Buddy and the gang.

CLICK!

A picture of Charlie's boots.

BUDDY

Now what?

CHARLIE

(to Buddy)

Can you take them to Grand Junction and buy 'em something?

BUDDY

I thought you were gonna fish out the drill head?

M.L.

What about shoes for the boys?

CHARLIE

I've got some unfinished business in Moab.

BUDDY

How sure are you of this?

CHARLIE

The shoes?

BUDDY

No, the mine claim.

CHARLIE

Why?

BUDDY

I just need to know.

CHARLIE

One hundred percent. Why?

BUDDY

Then the shoes are on me.

The kids are ecstatic, jumping for joy.

INT. USGS CLAIMS OFFICE (MOAB) - DAY

Charlie bursts in, as if doors don't have hinges.

The USGS Clerks freeze in position.

CHARLIE

Got a couple more claims.

Adjusting their heads like owls spooked by a strange noise...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

(pause)

Same area.

The expression on their faces: bag-of-hammers dumb.

EXT. USGS CLAIMS OFFICE - SAME

No sound emanates from the office as the door closes behind him.

Charlie smiles and walks off.

INT. STOCK EXCHANGE FLOOR (SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH) - NEW DAY

Stock Traders and Speculators are shouting and bumping into each another in a dense, clumsy ballet.

Charlie and McGill look upon the mania like two nomads witnessing Moses part the Red Sea.

They are herded into the center of the tumult by others pushing from behind.

Charlie puts up his hands: helpless.

McGill nods knowingly as both are carried along.

A greenhorn SPECULATOR, a young fool soon to be relieved of his money, turns to Charlie and McGill:

SPECULATOR

It's the hottest thing since the Gold Rush.

The crowd erupts in excitement--if a crowd could have an orgasm, this would be it.

The greenhorn Speculator is jostled by the burgeoning crowd and loses his bearing. He struggles to turn back...

SPECULATOR (CONT'D)
Get in on the action while you can.

McGill looks back at Charlie.

Charlie winks.

The Speculator reaches out and hands Charlie a brochure.

SPECULATOR (CONT'D)
Here, read the prospectus. You could
become rich!

CHARLIE
Thank you. I will.

The naive Speculator is swept away by the swelling crowd.

McGill, no longer able to contain himself, explodes with
laughter.

He talks over the crowd to the Speculator:

MCGILL
Know what you're getting yourself
into?

SPECULATOR
What do you mean?

MCGILL
This uranium thing.

McGill points at Charlie, who is looking away.

MCGILL (CONT'D)
Do you have any idea who that is?

SPECULATOR
No.

MCGILL
That's Charles Augustus Steen.

SPECULATOR
Who?

MCGILL
That's what I thought.

With a vacuous expression lingering on his face, the
Speculator is carried off by another wave of euphoric
investors.

EXT. MI VIDA MINE (LISBON VALLEY, UTAH) - NEW DAY

A gallows-like headframe has been freshly constructed over the vertical shaft of the mine.

A MINER pulls up a bucket of ore, grabs a chunk, and hands it to Charlie.

MINER

We haven't even bottomed out yet.
Found this at sixty-eight feet in
this location, just like you said.

CHARLIE

What's the assay?

MINER

Coming right in at five percent.

CHARLIE

Well, boys, that is one hell of a
birthday present.

MINER

Watcha gonna call the mine?

CHARLIE

"Mi Vida."

MINER

Is that something you caught down in
South America, because you're talkin'
kinda funny.

This gets a few chuckles.

CHARLIE

(looking at the rock,
introspective)

It's a souvenir I got from an old
friend of mine, no longer living. It
means "My Life."

EXT. MI VIDA MINE - LATER

Charlie, M.L., McGill, and miners, and a new face, Mitch, are having their picture taken in front of the mine entrance-- with the words "Mi Vida" now hand-painted on the headframe.

INT. SENATE HEARING CHAMBER (WASHINGTON, D.C.) - DAY

Charlie is hunkered down in front of a microphone. Next to him is Mitch Melum, a small-town lawyer of Serbian descent with jet-black hair.

A bank of stodgy senators face him; they look as if they are about to pass down a heavy sentence.

SENATOR 1

And you want to have a refining mill built right next to your mine, because you don't want to transport it two hundred and fifty miles?

SENATOR 2

And you expect the taxpayers to pay for all this?

Charlie holds up his hands just short of praising the heavens, looking around...

CHARLIE

They paid for this, didn't they?

This gets a few hearty laughs--over a thoroughbass of stifled ones--from the chamber audience.

SENATOR 3 employs the gavel.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

There are a number of viable operations in the vicinity, it makes no economic sense to transport the ore all the way to Salt Lake City or Hite or Grand Junction.

SENATOR 1

How much would this mill cost, Mr. Steen?

Mitch whispers in his ear.

CHARLIE

Approximately four million dollars, sir.

SENATOR 2

Now, why did your lawyer have to whisper in your ear, Mr. Steen? Surely you have an inkling about how much it will cost.

CHARLIE

He's just trying to keep me honest,
senator.

Laughter.

SENATOR 2

A lawyer?

More laughter.

SENATOR 3

I don't think we're prepared to
finance another mill, given that
we've already built one in Senator
Millikin's state.

CHARLIE

With all due respect, Senator, all
I'm asking for is the permit to build
one. I will be using my own money!

SENATOR 4

Is it true your mine is not really
producing? I was surprised to hear
you weren't awarded the Commission's
ten thousand dollar prize for the
first delivery of ore.

CHARLIE

That is true, Senator. I didn't
collect the prize: I let Happy Jack
operator Joe Cooper collect it.

(adding)

I feel I've been fortunate enough.

Giving up, he leans back.

SENATOR 2

You really want us to believe that,
Mr. Steen?

Leaning forward again and scanning their faces, as if
disclosing a secret...

CHARLIE

In this town? Probably not!

Explosive laughter and clapping...

EXT. URANIUM MILL (MOAB, UTAH) - DAY

...the clapping continues. Seated in front of a podium is a
large turnout of ecstatic townsfolk.

Among the crowd: Grossman, Bill McCormick, Buddy Cowger, and Andy McGill--even Alice the waitress, dressed to the nines.

At the podium...

CHARLIE

You know, it's a funny thing...

Soaking it in a bit before continuing...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

...before I hit paydirt, people called me crazy. When I hit, they called me a charlatan. Now that I've got it, they call me lucky.

Laughter.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I'm just lucky to be crazy. But...

More laughter.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

(looking at M.L.)

...but, the real crazy ones...

(looking back at the crowd)

there's no real order in which to put these things...

Collecting himself...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

There are a whole bunch of you out here today. This...

Holding up his hands--presenting the gigantic new mill...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

...this would not have been possible without your support. You provided my family money when we had none, and you never asked to be repaid. I know for some of you, helping us out put heavy burdens on your own families...things I learned only later on...and I would have stopped you had I known...Bill McCormack, a guy who can't count money worth a lick...who extended us credit beyond three hundred dollars in groceries alone, endangering his business... and Buddy Cowger who continued to

(MORE)

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

give me gasoline when he knew I was broke, the Johnsons and the Coopers and the Beebes...who sent money any time they heard the faintest rumor we were falling on hard times. But you did it regardless. You were crazy to give me that money. I don't want to diminish what you did...but the really crazy one, the one who above all allowed an unreasonable man...

Locking eyes with M.L.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

...to go into the desert by himself--without a Geiger counter--and try to find that needle in a haystack, that honor goes to my wife, M.L.

Explosive applause.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Come on up, honey.

M.L. sits in the front row, shaking her head: reluctant. No one has ever been so cute being so shy.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

You gotta forgive her. She's real shy.

Laughter and applause.

CUT TO:

Charlie and his small entourage is gathered in front of MR. BEEBE and MRS. BEEBE, an older couple, salt-of-the-earth kind of people easily confused with church-going folk.

Upon closer inspection, they are the same couple Charlie helped with the flat tire.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Thanks for coming down all the way from Salt Lake.

MRS. BEEBE

We are so proud of you, Charlie.

She leans forward to give him a generous hug and then one to M.L.

Mr. Beebe graciously shakes hands with Charlie.

MR. BEEBE
We knew you would do it.

CHARLIE
Here's a little something for you.

Mr. Beebe is a little shocked.

Charlie hands Mr. Beebe a folded check.

Mrs. Beebe looks over to her husband, also in shock.

MRS. BEEBE
Oh, no, Charlie, we can't accept anything.

M.L.
Please. It's a little something to pay you back for the money you lent us.

Mr. Beebe attempts to hand the check back to Charlie.

MR. BEEBE
I'm sorry, son, but we can't. We gave you that money. We didn't loan it to you.

MRS. BEEBE
That was for you to start your family. We've already had ours.

CHARLIE
That's why it means so much more to M.L. and me and the boys.
(with pleading eyes)
Please.

Mr. Beebe unfolds the check, and looks at it--stunned.

Tears well up in his eyes.

He hands it off to Mrs. Beebe whose eyes are also welling up.

Mrs. Beebe almost collapses into Charlie, crying.

MRS. BEEBE
No, Charlie.

Hugging her, rocking her...

CHARLIE

This is one of the funnest times of my life: paying back debts I want to pay back.

(beat)

Go visit the Caribbean like you always dreamed.

Trying to maintain poise, but his eyes and upper lip betraying him...

MR. BEEBE

We could go a thousand times with this. It really is too much.

CHARLIE

Not at all. If you didn't help us when we needed it, none of us would be standing here today.

Mr. Beebe leans forward to hug Charlie, crying, clutching Charlie's suit, almost in agony.

Charlie takes it in--a solitary moment of reflection.

CUT TO:

Charlie is moving through the crowd, stopped along the way with congratulations and handshakes, but he is looking for someone in particular.

Finally he spies Bill McCormack and Buddy Cowger talking near the gigantic mill entrance. He approaches, interrupting their private discussion.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

What'cha think? You like it?

MCCORMICK

You always do everything big?

Buddy pulls his Geiger counter from the back of his wheelchair.

BUDDY

Are we still gonna have to test everything coming out of there...with this?

Laughter.

CHARLIE

I'm sorry, but I didn't get a chance to write you guys any checks.

MCCORMICK

You don't owe us anything. We're just glad to be along for the ride.

BUDDY

That's absolutely right.

CHARLIE

Then, I'm sorry to have gotten you more involved than you wanted.

MCCORMICK

What do you mean?

CHARLIE

I went down to the claims office, not long after Buddy put the ol' Geiger on those good-for-nothing cores, and filed a few more claims around Lisbon Valley.

Charlie is looking at the crowd assembling near the mill entrance--and spies his father.

MCCORMICK

How's that involve us?

CHARLIE

(distracted)

What?

MCCORMICK

How's that involve us?

CHARLIE

Well, you might have to declare them with the IRS.

(sensing it isn't
sinking in)

I hope you don't mind.

(beat)

If you'll excuse me, gentlemen.

A sheepish grin darts across Charlie's face before he walks off, leaving the two to themselves.

BUDDY

What does he mean?

MCCORMICK

It means there are a couple of claims with our names on them.

BUDDY

I still don't know what that means.

He leans in and whispers in Buddy's ear.

Thunderstruck, Buddy cups his hands over his mouth...then laughs.

Buddy joins in--a delayed reaction.

Charlie walks toward the mill and catches sight of M.L. talking to a small gathering. She turns just in time--the look on her face tells him she knows.

Charlie joins his father at the entrance of the mill.

They walk in together--then out of sight.

INT. URANIUM MILL - LATER

Charlie and his father, Augustus, cleaned up and looking quite dapper, find themselves at the mill entrance, separated from the rest of the crowd.

AUGUSTUS

Looks like you found yourself a real treasure.

CHARLIE

They're saying it might be as much as thirty feet in some places.

AUGUSTUS

I'm not talking about the mine.
(beat)
Did you tell her about the parable of the unreas...

CHARLIE

...reasonable dream? Sure did.

AUGUSTUS

Doesn't strike me as the kind of gal who would believe such nonsense.

An awkward silence.

He holds out an object wrapped in cloth.

CHARLIE

What's this?

He unwraps it to reveal a small geologist's hammer.

AUGUSTUS

She tells me one of the tykes is into rocks.

Inspecting the hammer...

CHARLIE

Mark.

Handling it...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Where'd you find it?

AUGUSTUS

With the rest of your stuff.

CHARLIE

Glad you could come.

Both are quickly absorbed into a small party of spectators emerging from the bowels of the mill.

EXT. MOAB - NEW DAY

People arrive in Moab in droves--a mile-long caravan of families and individuals with anticipation glowing in their faces, followed by:

A series of new workers' houses, revealing the name of the township: Steenville.

Opening a new school--Charlie cuts the ribbon.

Opening a new church--M.L. cuts the ribbon.

Opening a clinic--Charlie and M.L. cut the ribbon.

Hopper cars of fresh ore ferried out of a horizontal Mi Vida mine shaft entrance.

Charlie's foot pushes a golden shovel into the dirt on a hill overlooking Moab.

EXT. STEEN HILL (MOAB) - NEW DAY

M.L. is blindfolded.

Charlie is guiding M.L. up a steep driveway.

M.L.

Are we there yet?

He steadies her.

CHARLIE

Almost.

They walk a bit more and stop.

M.L.
Can I take it off now?

Charlie helps her remove the blindfold.

M.L. sees the new mansion with a breathtaking view overlooking Moab.

M.L. (CONT'D)
Whose place is this?

CHARLIE
It's ours.

M.L.
No, Charles.

Her knees buckling and hands trembling, he props her up.

Placing her hand over her mouth to contain her amazement, tears form in her eyes and run down her cheek.

Through the emotion...

M.L. (CONT'D)
Who's gonna clean this place?

Charlie laughs.

M.L. softly slaps Charlie on his arm.

M.L. (CONT'D)
Don't make fun of me.

She gives him a big hug.

CHARLIE
Want to see the inside?

M.L.
I think we're going to be lonely in something this big.

CHARLIE
I have a feeling we won't.

EXT. STEEN MANSION (MOAB) - NEW DAY

Hundreds of people make their way up the driveway on Steen Hill. Hundreds of people are gathered poolside. A live band plays Latin music, fronted by Chita Equizabal's Lola Montes.

M.L. and Charlie, dressed to the nines, are looking upon the spectacle holding glasses of champagne.

A couple of folks arrive with Geiger counters. The GOVERNOR, J. Bracken Lee, introduces them to M.L. and Charlie.

GOVERNOR

This is Mr. and Mrs. Charles Steen.
Charlie...M.L....I'd like to introduce
you to Mr. Fonda.

FONDA

Thank you, governor.
(to M.L. and Charlie)
Thanks for having us. Call me Hank.

CHARLIE

I see you've got yourself a Gilbert.

Henry Fonda lifts up his Geiger counter for show.

FONDA

These are all the rage.

M.L.

Charlie did it without one of those.

FONDA

That's what I heard. Ironic isn't
it?

CHARLIE

What brings you down to Moab?

GOVERNOR

They're spending money in the state.

M.L.

Charles likes the movies.

FONDA

A western: *Warlock*. The rest of the
cast is here too.

Fonda waves the rest over.

FONDA (CONT'D)

Have you met Dick Widmark?

Other introductions are made, and the names Dorothy Malone, Anthony Quinn, and Dolores Michaels are dropped in the exchanges.

They all carry Geiger counters.

WIDMARK

You always have this many people at your parties?

M.L.

Half the town usually makes it out.

MALONE

What could be more fun than this lively shindig?

On Charlie's face: an answer.

CUT TO:

EXT. STEEN MANSION - NEW DAY

Charlie, surrounded by reporters, is holding his old boots-- now bronzed.

Mark and a tail-wagging Butch are at his side.

REPORTER 1

How easy is it to find uranium, Mr. Steen?

CHARLIE

Call me Charlie, please.

REPORTER 3

Yeah, just how easy is it?

CHARLIE

Finding ore is no harder than mining it.

Laughter.

He presents a wide smile.

A flash bulb goes off: POP!

The reporters are eating this up.

REPORTER 2

Can anybody do it?

CHARLIE

I opened up the field. There's plenty more down here if people would just get out and look for it. It's amazing what you can do with four claims if you put them in the right place.

Laughter.

REPORTER 4

Come on, Charlie, you yourself proved how hard it is.

CHARLIE

(holding up the boots)

That's why I bronzed these...in case I ever forget how hard it is to make a million dollars.

He winks.

Charlie sets down the bronzed boots, and Mark slides his bare feet into the shiny new boots.

EXT. MOAB URANIUM CORPORATION (MOAB) - DAY

Reporters are hounding C.M. HICKMAN, in fine executive garb, about to be chauffeured.

REPORTER 5

What's it like to compete with the geologist Charlie Steen?

Just before stepping into the limousine...

C.M. HICKMAN

You can tell when Charlie has another million. When Charlie had rough sledding, his dog's tail dragged. Every time he's mined another million, his dog's tail raised. Now that goddamn dog is running around Moab with his tail straight up in the air.

He points to the sky.

POP!

EXT. AIRPORT TARMAC (MOAB) - DAY

Reporters continue hounding Charlie and family as they walk toward their plane.

Another staccato of flash bulbs: POP! POP!

M.L. takes the kids and gets them inside.

POP!

Reporters and photographers are clamoring to get closer.

POP!

REPORTER 1

How is it to be rich, Charlie?

CHARLIE

For one thing, I eat a damned sight better.

Laughter.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Poverty and I have been friends for a long time, but I'd just as soon keep other company.

Laughter. POP!

REPORTER 2

How is the rest of the family enjoying it?

CHARLIE

Well, the funny thing is, the other day my wife mentioned getting a washing machine.

REPORTER 3

Are you going to buy her one?

CHARLIE

I thought about it. But I don't think she deserves one.

REPORTER 1

What? You gotta be kidding?

REPORTER 2

But you can afford to buy her the best in the world, can't you, Mr. Steen?

CHARLIE

It's not a matter of affording. M.L....my wife... washed clothes by hand for me and my boys for the last five years. I don't want her doing laundry for the rest of her life.

Proud, and looking like a fair scale, he holds up two very large bags of laundry.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

That's why I fly the laundry to Grand Junction every week.

POP! POP!

Laughter.

With growing desperation, the reporters shout out his name and continue jockeying for better positions as Charlie backs away toward the plane.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Now, if you please.

REPORTER 1

Thank you.

Charlie steps forward, as if confiding in a friend...

CHARLIE

I appreciate the attention, Dale. I just wish you boys could have kept me company a couple of years ago.

Laughter. He turns back toward the plane.

REPORTER 2

Have a safe flight, Mr. Steen.

CHARLIE

(turning his head)

You too.

Laughter. POP!

Charlie boards his plane and starts up the engine.

The plane pulls away and immediately starts rolling for takeoff.

As it gains momentum and pulls into the air, sunlight reflects off its bare metallic wings.

It rocks its wings--a friend in the air. POP!

EXT. STEEN MANSION - SWIMMING POOL - NEW DAY

Charlie, in the pool, is staring at M.L. lying down on a recliner reading a magazine.

M.L. senses something, puts down her magazine, and sees Charlie staring at her.

M.L.

What?

Charlie doesn't say anything.

M.L. (CONT'D)
(knowing better)
Charles?

CHARLIE
I was just wondering about how
somebody so small made it through
all this.
(beat)
Come here.

M.L.
No. You're going to try to pull me
in.

CHARLIE
(gently persuasive)
Come here.

M.L.
As long as you're on your best
behavior.

His face: a picture of innocence.

M.L. (CONT'D)
I know you.

She approaches the edge of the pool and sits down.

He drifts over to her.

M.L. (CONT'D)
Don't you dare.

He grabs her wrist.

M.L. (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

CHARLES
(whispering)
I got you.

With those words, she appears to melt. He slowly pulls her in. She glides into the water until she is floating, with Charlie supporting her. First she looks uncomfortable, but slowly relaxes. She lets her arms float freely, and looks off into the sky: Friendly clouds drift overhead.

He floats her around the pool--no words spoken.

EXT. STEEN MANSION - NEW DAY

A car pulls up to the mansion. McGill gets out of the car and knocks on the front door.

M.L. greets him with Butch at her side. Three kids come running up behind.

MCGILL
Is Charlie around?

M.L.
Something wrong?

MCGILL
No. We bottomed out on another shaft.

Butch's tail rises into the air.

M.L.
He's watching *I Love Lucy* with one of the boys.

MCGILL
Can't you peel him away from the TV?

M.L.
There's very poor reception here at the house.

INT. TV ROOM - EVENING

With curtains drawn to provide a dimly lit space, a tinny black-and-white TV plays the *Lucy Hunts Uranium* episode of "I Love Lucy"--seemingly to itself.

A man's laugh. A boy's laugh highlights one of Lucy's shenanigans. A tiny roving sun probes its way through burlap curtains. Charlie and Mark move to the window, and swipe the curtains out of the way--light of the setting sun caressing their faces.

EXT. PIPER CUB (FLYING) - SUNSET

Charlie and Mark peer through the Piper Cub's side window, with Charlie pointing things out to him.

The Piper Cub is flying over Dead Horse Point and the chartreuse Colorado River at a dizzying height. In the distance, the La Salle Mountains look like an oasis of snow haphazardly deposited in a ruddy desert.

CLAIMS CLERK ON TV (O.S.)
About this sample. Well, it's fully
uranium, alright. This looks like
one of those samples you get when
you buy a Geiger counter.

Laughter.

RICKY ON TV (O.S.)
Luuuuuucy!

Laughter fades into infinity as the plane is drawn toward
the setting sun.

SUPER:

Against all odds--and without a geiger counter--Charlie Steen
discovered the largest known uranium ore body in the world.

Initially thought to be worth a million dollars, Steen's Mi
Vida mine generated over 100 million dollars in uranium.

Charlie's discovery initiated a mining boom bigger than the
Gold Rush of 1849--putting the tiny town of Moab on the map
and making Charlie the undisputed Uranium King.

SUPER:

Once in the shadows of our nuclear history, Moab's economy
is now mostly based on the transcendent beauty of the natural
land.

Many off-road trails--now used by millions of tourists to
visit the canyons and natural bridges of Moab, Utah--were
originally created by the uranium prospectors of the 1950s.

SUPER:

Even when Charlie had nothing, M.L. was always fond of saying,
"I am rich with him."

Minnie Lee died in 1979. Charlie died on January 1, 2006.

The house that Charlie and M.L. built still overlooks Moab.

FADE OUT.