

SIERRA ALTA

Pilot: Heavens and Earth

by

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TEASER

EXT. CLEARING, SAN GABRIEL MOUNTAINS -- NIGHT

STRAINS of a SITAR float up past the tall palm trees that circle the clearing.

A DOZEN half-naked MEN and WOMEN cluster around a small fire. ANIMAL MASKS cover their faces from lips to hairline.

Some sway drunkenly to the music; others LAUGH or CRY into their neighbor's arms; a COUPLE make love off to the side.

A WOMAN in a white bikini inhales from an ornate bong, then springs to her feet and stretches her arms up to the heavens.

Undulating provocatively, she spins lazily to the music at first, then moves faster and faster -

Until she trips and TUMBLES to the ground.

But rather than cry out, she merely LAUGHS and rolls onto her back, languidly allowing her limbs to go loose.

Her chest still heaving with effort, she smiles up at the FULL MOON in exhausted delight.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. PASADENA, CALIFORNIA -- DAY

The SUN beats down overhead as a BRIGHT GREEN CADILLAC CONVERTIBLE drives along Colorado Boulevard.

TITLE: Pasadena, California - 1968

In the driver's seat, MITCHELL 'MITCH' WHITE (27) is alive with excitement, enjoying the wind in his short brown hair.

In the passenger seat, Mitch's wife RUTH WHITE (24) is far less comfortable. She adjusts the plain scarf tied over her head and fiddles with her simple wedding band.

Both wear sunglasses, but whereas they look natural on Mitch, Ruth seems to hide behind hers, shying away from the world.

MITCH

(over the wind noise)

Isn't it great?

RUTH

What?

MITCH

This place! This *weather!* Back home,
it'd be ninety percent humidity.

RUTH

Oh. Yes.

MITCH

Gets even better, though. You'll see!

Ruth stares at PEOPLE on the sidewalk. A BUXOM BLONDE (20s)
in a miniskirt and platform heels sways her ass as she walks.

Ruth glances at her own calf-length skirt, feeling inadequate.

They pull up at red stop lights.

MITCH (CONT'D)

Okay, get ready. It's ahead.

The lights turn green, and the car crosses Del Mar Boulevard -
bringing them to CALTECH'S CAMPUS.

MITCH (CONT'D)

Look on your left!

A huge round white building with a Moroccan style roof sits on
the far side of a broad green expanse.

RUTH

(shocked)

Is that a... Mosque?

MITCH

(laughing)

No! That's the Beckman Auditorium.
It's for lectures and events.

Ruth stares dubiously until it's out of sight, then studies
the more Spanish-inspired architecture they're passing now.

Every building is stunningly clean and bright, glowing in the
sunlight, and flanked by glorious gardens and manicured lawns.

MITCH (CONT'D)

Impressive, right?

RUTH

Yes.

MITCH

Should be. They don't spare any
expense!

Ruth nervously fingers a TINY HOLE in her skirt.

EXT. CALTECH ATHENAEUM -- MOMENTS LATER

Mitch pulls the convertible into a dignified parking lot.

A UNIFORMED VALET (20s) hops to it, coming forward right away.

VALET

Are you a guest with us, sir?

MITCH

Uh... no, we're here for lunch. With Professor Cantripp.

VALET

Very good, sir.

Mitch gets out, while the Valet opens Ruth's door for her. She stares up in awe at the beautiful building.

Mitch instead stares at the steps leading up to the entrance.

MITCH

You know, Oppenheimer once stood right there.

RUTH

Who?

Mitch is embarrassed, but the Valet doesn't react. Putting an arm around Ruth, Mitch urges her toward the steps.

VALET

Sir?

Mitch turns to see the Valet waiting expectantly.

MITCH

Sorry. I, uh...

He pulls his wallet from his pocket.

VALET

Your car keys, sir?

Mitch's embarrassment deepens. He hands the keys over, then turns back to Ruth, setting his shoulders.

Together, they mount the steps.

CUT TO:

EXT. IOWA FARMLAND -- DAY -- *EIGHT YEARS EARLIER*

Mitch - *at 19, dressed in little more than rags* - marches up a grassy slope, his head lowered.

A LARGE HAND grips his shoulder, keeping him on course. Like a prisoner headed for the gallows.

They reach the top and halt. Mitch raises his gaze.

THREE BEARDED MEN (50s, 60s) stand waiting, dressed like the pilgrim fathers. Their leader ISAAC (50s) holds a WHIP.

At the sight, Mitch recoils, but is held in place by ABRAHAM (40s), the huge man at his side.

ISAAC

Michael, you have been found guilty of
heresy in your thoughts!

Surrounding the group at a distance are TWO DOZEN others in similar dress, their ages ranging from babies to grandparents.

Mitch's eyes find a figure, head bowed, at the edge of the crowd. *Ruth, at 16, barely a woman.*

ISAAC (CONT'D)

Sacrilegious books have been found in
your possession.

Isaac points to a small pile of BOOKS on the ground.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

Books contradicting the teachings of
our Lord!

He steps aside to reveal the small FIRE behind him.

MITCH

No!

Mitch struggles in truth for the first time, fighting to get loose of Abraham's hold.

INT. CALTECH ATHENAEUM -- DAY -- *BACK TO PRESENT*

Mitch and Ruth follow a UNIFORMED MAITRE D' into the -

INT. ATHENAEUM MAIN DINING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Ahead the Maitre d' makes for a LARGE TABLE, around which sits PROFESSOR CANTRIPP (50s) and FIVE MALE STUDENTS (early 20s).

Nervous, Ruth clutches at Mitch's hand.

MITCH

Look, just... try not to say anything.

Ruth looks up at him in surprise. Mitch squeezes her hand comfortingly - but lets go of it as they reach the table.

CANTRIPP

Ah, good. Our final guests are here.

Professor Cantripp smiles and waves to TWO EMPTY SEATS.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

Please, please, have a seat.

As Ruth sits, helped into her chair by a WAITER, she avoids looking directly at the young men around the table, although they all regard the newcomers curiously.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

Now, what may we offer you to drink?

RUTH

Um...

MITCH

We'll both have iced tea.

Cantripp scribbles on a piece of paper and passes it to the Waiter, then beams around the table.

CANTRIPP

Well. Introductions, I think...

He gestures anti-clockwise around the table.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

Stephen McGregor, Donald Reams...

STEPHEN is lanky and pasty, DONALD short and pudgy.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

Adal Blenk, Enrique Mora...

ADAL wears a bored, superior look.

ENRIQUE is the darkest-skinned person in sight, aside from some of the waiters. He looks quietly thrilled to be there.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

Lucas Short...

LUCAS has an attentive gaze behind his delicate glasses.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

And of course, Mitchell White and his lovely wife...?

MITCH

Ruth.

Ruth peers up to see Cantripp looking at her inquiringly.

CANTRIPP

I'm sorry to have dragged you both here straight from the airport.

RUTH

Oh, we -

MITCH

It's our fault, we should have caught an earlier flight.

CANTRIPP

Well I'm very glad you could make it. This lunch is a little tradition I like to follow -

ENRIQUE

(faint Mexican accent)

Is that...?

Enrique's eyes are locked on someone just entering the room. Mitch and the others crane their heads to see too.

Ruth also risks a look, but sees only a TALL, DARK-HAIRED MAN - *Richard Feynman* - surrounded by several ANIMATED STUDENTS.

STEPHEN

It is him!

(guiltily to Cantripp)

Sorry, Professor.

Cantripp forces a tight smile as the others drag their gazes away too.

CANTRIPP

As I was saying... this is a tradition for all the new Geology graduate students when they first arrive.

RUTH

(softly to Mitch)

Who was that?

MITCH

Later.

CANTRIPP

Georg Lichtenberg once said... oh, I hope you all know who he is?

The conversation becomes a BLUR OF SOUND as Ruth instead takes in the architecture, noticing wood paneling on the ceiling.

The design has a repeating pattern of geometric shapes. Ruth studies them, tilting back her head for a better view.

MITCH (O.S.)

Ruth.

Mitch's voice snaps Ruth out of her reverie.

RUTH

Yes?

Everyone around the table is staring at her, while ANOTHER WAITER hovers at her side.

MITCH

Would you like some *bread*?

RUTH

(embarrassed)

Oh - um - yes. Thank you.

As the waiter serves Ruth a bread roll -

ENRIQUE

Is it true the Apollo astronauts will be taking classes with us, sir?

CANTRIPP

(half laughing)

Not *quite*. We will be taking them out into the desert, though. Give them a sense of what a geologist looks for in any new environment...

As Cantripp holds everyone else's attention, Mitch flicks Ruth an irritated frown.

Looking away, Ruth stares unhappily into space.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

EXT. CALTECH ATHENAEUM -- DAY

Ruth and Mitch sit in the convertible again, both tense.

Putting the car in drive, Mitch pulls them out of the parking lot, and onto the road in a SCREECH of tires.

EXT. PASADENA STREET -- DAY

As they drive along in silence, Ruth ignores the exotic scenery - the tall palm trees and bright purple flowers.

Instead her unhappy gaze rests on the CARS around them, her focus on the NUMBERS and LETTERS that make up their license plates, the patterns and combinations somehow soothing...

Ruth jumps as Mitch puts a hand on her leg. He SIGHS.

MITCH

I'm sorry if I was short with you.

We're both tired, I guess.

(as she says nothing)

Ruth?

RUTH

Just leave me in the car next time.

Mitch SIGHS again. His hand rubs on her leg.

MITCH

Ruth...

Suddenly the car jerks sharply, making Ruth grab for balance.

MITCH (CONT'D)

Wow.

RUTH

What?!

As Mitch pulls them quickly to the side of the road, Ruth peers back at the pavement to find the reason they stopped.

MITCH

Look!

Ruth follows where Mitch is pointing...

And sees MOUNTAINS in the distance. Hidden by smog until now, they rise out of a brown haze, stretching high into the sky.

EXT. PASADENA STREET -- LATER

The Mountains grow closer - and clearer - as the car drives north, climbing gradually uphill.

Head laid back on the seat rest, Ruth stares dreamily ahead, enjoying the view and The Doors playing on the CAR RADIO.

She starts to HUM along softly, barely audible.

MITCH

We're almost at the next one.

Ruth glances down to her lap, where a LIST OF ADDRESSES sits atop a LARGE MAP. Most already have lines through them.

INT. RENTAL APARTMENT -- DAY

A over-made-up REALTOR (40s) shows them around.

REALTOR

You're timing couldn't be better.
This apartment just came back on the market, and it's *always* snapped up.

Mitch frowns out of the window.

IN A SWIMMING POOL OUTSIDE:

Swimsuit-clad MEN and WOMEN (20s) frolic in the water, SHOUTING and LAUGHING at each other.

REALTOR (CONT'D)

We have a lot of young people here.
Some of them are at Caltech, too.

Mitch heads into another room, leaving the Realtor with Ruth.

REALTOR (CONT'D)

Do you go to school as well?

RUTH

No. I'll be looking for a job soon.

REALTOR

What do you do?

RUTH

I worked in a feed store. Back in Iowa City.

REALTOR

(unable to relate)

Oh.

As Mitch returns, the Realtor beams at him over Ruth's head.

REALTOR (CONT'D)

So, what do we think?

EXT. PASADENA STREET -- MOMENTS LATER

Mitch drives as Ruth studies the map.

MITCH

I'd never be able to study with all that noise going on.

RUTH

The last place is a house - I'm sure it'll be quieter.

EXT. RAMSHACKLE SINGLE FAMILY HOME -- DAY

Mitch and Ruth stand next to the house in an overgrown yard full of rusted car parts and other junk, while a neighbor's DOG BARKS LOUDLY at them through a chain-link fence.

Mitch glares at the dog, while Ruth regards the WIDE OPEN patio door with suspicion.

RUTH

When they said 'open' I thought they meant unlocked.

INT. RAMSHACKLE SINGLE FAMILY HOME -- CONTINUOUS

Mitch enters, moving slowly over the thick, beige carpeting. Behind him, Ruth enters too... then reacts.

RUTH

Mitch, your feet!

Mitch looks down in time to see a THICK HALO OF DUST rise up from the carpet as he steps down on it. Looking back, his footsteps show up clearly in the inch-thick dust cover.

MITCH

Yeugh.

Ruth puts a hand over her mouth, stifling GIGGLES.

Reaching a HALLWAY, they head in different directions. Ruth rounds the corner into a -

INT. GRIMY BATHROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Nose wrinkling, Ruth moves closer to the toilet -

Peers into the bowl -

A huge brown TURD sits in a bowl of BRIGHT ORANGE urine.

Ruth recoils in disgust.

INT. RAMSHACKLE SINGLE FAMILY HOME -- MOMENTS LATER

Ruth and Mitch meet up again, looking equally grossed out.

MITCH

Seen enough?

RUTH

Yes!

EXT. RAMSHACKLE SINGLE FAMILY HOME -- MOMENTS LATER

The two of them hurry out through the sliding door, GASPING for breath as they LAUGH like excited children.

RUTH

Oh Lord!

MITCH

What did you see?

RUTH

Can't... can't... speak!

Ruth clutches at Mitch's arms, tears of laughter falling.

MITCH

What?

RUTH

There was... there was something *foul* in the toilet bowl! I think an animal got in there.

MITCH

An animal?

RUTH

Maybe a coyote? They have them here, don't they?

Mitch looks perplexed.

RUTH (CONT'D)

What?

MITCH

Y-you think a *coyote* used the *toilet*?

Ruth stares at him... then EXPLODES into MORE LAUGHTER.

MITCH (CONT'D)
Must've been some turd.

RUTH
(between splutters)
Huge... and... bright orange!

Mitch stares back at the house.

MITCH
I gotta go back in there -

RUTH
No!

Ruth reaches for him as he playfully slips free.

MITCH (O.S.)
(calling from inside)
I'm a scientist! I must observe with
my own two... Holy *shit*!

Ruth SPLUTTERS with LAUGHTER again.

EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT -- DAY

The convertible pulls into a parking space.

Ruth leans against Mitch's shoulder, almost asleep. He brushes the hair off her face, then kisses her forehead.

INT. MOTEL ROOM -- LATE AFTERNOON

Mitch stares out the window, trying to pick out the mountains through the smog, but even the tops are barely outlines.

Ruth comes up beside him in a long, frilly white nightdress.

RUTH
You nervous about tomorrow?

MITCH
A little.

RUTH
That professor seemed nice.

MITCH
Doesn't mean he won't toss me out.

Ruth turns Mitch to face her.

RUTH

Hey, none of that. Look how far you've come already.

MITCH

I just don't want to be a small fish, you know?

RUTH

A bigger pond just means you have more room to grow.

Ruth reaches up and kisses him. As they embrace, we shift to the view outside the window.

It darkens until only HIGH-UP RED LIGHTS remain, seeming like UFOs, warning aircraft of the tops of the San Gabriel range.

INT. CALTECH CLASS ROOM -- DAY

Mitch and the other five graduate students from the lunch sit behind desks, watching Professor Cantripp talk at the board.

CANTRIPP

We expect you to take our three core undergraduate classes in your first year, as well as two Geology graduate courses in each term.

Everyone but Adal and Lucas take notes. Adal seems half asleep; Lucas looks like he's hearing things he already knows.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

In addition, you will each need to complete three first-year projects on topics of your choice.

Lucas perks up at this and starts writing.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

You will be working under the guidance of one or more professors... not necessarily in this division...

Mitch looks over to see Lucas scribbling away. Mitch flips over a new page and writes "Project Ideas" at the top.

CANTRIPP (CONT'D)

However, the projects *must* be given the blessing of a division faculty member. So get thinking about what you'd like to work on!

INT. CHANDLER DINING HALL -- DAY

DOZENS OF STUDENTS (ALL MALE) eat at tables in the background.

Mitch sits alone, finished tray next to him, staring down at the notepad. Now one line is written under "Project Ideas":

Planetary geology (Mars? Moon?)

Another notepad and a full tray lands on the table next to him. Mitch jerks his head up warily.

LUCAS

Mind if I join you?

Not waiting for a reply, Lucas sits down and starts eating. Mitch can't help glancing at what's on Lucas's notepad page:

Moon rocks!!!

Mars?? (magnetic fields? atmosphere??)

Mitch frowns. Clearly he and Lucas will be competing.

LUCAS (CONT'D)

You and your wife settling in okay?

MITCH

Still looking for a place to rent.
How about you?

LUCAS

Oh, I live with my parents.

Lucas grins at the surprised look on Mitch's face.

LUCAS (CONT'D)

Pasadena boy, born and bred. Did my undergrad at MIT, but it was too damn cold to stay out there! Nah, I'm glad to be back in LA.

Someone SNORTS.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

(German accent)

You *like* the bad air and ugly trees?

Lucas and Mitch look up to see Adal and Enrique across the table, holding trays.

LUCAS

You mean palm trees?

ADAL

They are like... a *dildo* with a hat.

As the two sit down opposite them, Mitch SIGHS faintly, resigning himself to getting no more thinking done.

ADAL (CONT'D)

They give no shade, so what is their point?

LUCAS

(sarcastically)

Sorry my home town can't match the arboreal wonders of Germany.

ENRIQUE

Oh, you grew up here?

LUCAS

Few blocks away. You?

ENRIQUE

Mexico City. My father does PR for Universal Pictures.

LUCAS

So... you grew up in the entertainment biz... and you want to be a *scientist*?

ENRIQUE

It's not as glamorous as it looks. But actually... I want to be an astronaut.

The others are surprised but impressed. Enrique deflects.

ENRIQUE (CONT'D)

How about everyone else?

LUCAS

I want a job on lab some day...

ADAL

'On lab'?

LUCAS

Sorry - the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Our neighbor works up there, and her job is so cool.

ADAL

You want to be a secretary?

Lucas scowls at him.

LUCAS

She's not a *secretary*. She, like, helped figure out the trajectories for the Mars probes.

MITCH

Women worked on that?

LUCAS

('obviously')

Yeah. Caltech's even taking female undergrads next year.

ADAL

We are? Wunderbar! There aren't enough women around here.

ENRIQUE

There are a few grad students I think. Well, and the ladies in the office.

ADAL

Too old.

(abruptly, to Mitch)

Oh, ja - they want to see you.

MITCH

Who?

ADAL

The ladies in the office.

MITCH

What about?

ADAL

I don't know. Maybe you forgot to fill out a form?

Mitch abruptly stands up.

LUCAS

I'm sure it's not urgent.

MITCH

I'd better find out.

Picking up his tray he hurries off.

ADAL

That man will give himself an ulcer.

Lucas picks up Mitch's forgotten notepad, reading what he wrote under "Project ideas." He sticks it on top of his own.

LUCAS

Yep.

INT. DIVISION SECRETARY'S OFFICE -- DAY

As Mitch walks in hesitantly, THREE WOMEN (30s) look up from their desks and typewriters.

MITCH

I'm Mitchell White, I was told to report here?

PAULA THURGOOD (50s) - impeccably groomed, oozing warm confidence and efficiency - emerges from an inner office.

PAULA

Mitchell? Professor Cantripp said you were looking for somewhere to rent?

MITCH

Uh, yes...?

PAULA

Come this way then.

INT. PAULA'S OFFICE -- CONTINUOUS

Mitch follows Paula into her pristine office. Sitting at her desk, she begins flipping through an impressively big Rolodex.

PAULA

The widow of our last Division Head has an estate up in Sierra Alta. She often rents out the guesthouses for a little extra income.

MITCH

Is that far from here?

PAULA

Sierra Alta? Oh, no. Four, five miles, that's all.

Paula finds the address card, then hesitates, hand on phone.

PAULA (CONT'D)

Should I see if she has room for -

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

Paula?

PROFESSOR OSCAR ADELMAN (30s) - vigorous, powerful and demanding - appears in the doorway holding a COFFEE MACHINE.

Paula jumps to her feet instantly.

ADELMAN

This thing needs to go back.

He sticks it down on her desk, ignoring Mitch altogether. Paula smiles at him, apparently delighted to be of use.

PAULA

Of course, Professor Adelman. I'll take care of it right away.

ADELMAN

Wonderful.

As Mitch watches the man stride out again...

PAULA

Room for you and your wife?

Mitch turns to see Paula seated again, hand over her phone, as if they'd never been interrupted. She raises her eyebrows.

PAULA (CONT'D)

So... should I make the call?

INT. MOTEL ROOM -- DAY

Ruth lies on the bed in her underwear, trying to stay cool.

The PHONE RINGS, making her jump. It RINGS again, and her hand trembles from reaction as she quickly reaches for it.

RUTH

Yes?

INT. PAULA'S OFFICE -- DAY

Mitch speaks into the phone as Paula smiles at him, satisfied.

MITCH

Ruth, it's me.

EXT. PASADENA STREET -- DAY

Ruth looks terrified as she pulls the big Cadillac convertible out of the motel entrance.

As she accelerates slowly, ANOTHER CAR swerves around her, the driver BLASTING her with its horn.

MITCH (V.O.)

I need you to go look at a guesthouse for rent.

EXT. PASADENA STREET -- LATER

The convertible is moving faster now, Ruth looking more confident behind the wheel.

MITCH (V.O.)
The owner's Mrs. Madeleine Humboldt.

EXT. PASADENA STREET -- LATER

As Ruth drives even faster, her headscarf is now a requirement to keep her hair in place, her gaze surer behind the shades.

MITCH (V.O.)
I have lectures all day, but she's about to go away for two weeks, so it's our only chance to see the place.

Ruth catches sight of a 25MPH sign and checks the speedometer: *She's going 45.*

Cheeks pink with excitement, Ruth touches the brakes.

EXT. PASADENA STREET -- LATER

As Ruth drives further north, the mountains become clearer, far more so than the previous day.

Fixed on them, she barely notices the street sign she passes: **SIERRA ALTA, Population 25,879.**

EXT. SIERRA ALTA STREET -- DAY

Ruth pulls into a street past a sign that reads DEAD END.

She slows, squinting at the faded numbers painted on the curb, until she can just make out "311" next to the third driveway along. Carefully, Ruth pulls the car into the narrow opening.

EXT. 311 WATSEKA -- CONTINUOUS

A long, narrow driveway leads up past an unkempt mixture of palm trees, bushes, and overgrown grass.

At the top is a LARGE BUNGALOW HOME - beautiful, but in desperate need of re-painting. In front of it, a ROSE GARDEN has seen better days, half of the bushes wilted or dead.

A CAR PORT sits to the left of the house, holding an old rusted caravan and a newer VW BUG.

The driveway winds around and sharply upward behind the main house. Part of a SMALL COTTAGE is just visible beyond.

Unsure where to park, Ruth pulls up in front of the rose garden and gets out of the car.

A loud MEOOWW! has her looking down as a HUGE ORANGE CAT squeezes its immense bulk out from the nearest hedge.

Ruth puts her hand out to it and makes friendly SOUNDS.

RUTH

Hey... who are you?

MREOWWW!! PSSSSTTT! The cat's massive paw swipes out at Ruth's fingers. Ruth jerks her hand back.

MADDIE (O.S.)

Great reflexes!

Ruth looks up to see a smirking woman, in a beige catsuit and sandals, coming down the main house's front steps. She looks like a cross between Veronica Lake and a jungle explorer.

MADELEINE 'MADDIE' HUMBOLDT (60s) goes down on one knee to pick up the heavy cat, who PURRS against her cheek.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Yes, John Wayne. Yes!

Straightening with an effort, Maddie glances over at Ruth.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Don't ask me why we called him that.
I think it was something about coming
out shooting, but I was pretty drunk
at the time. Or high.

As Ruth gapes, Maddie pretends to cover John Wayne's ears.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

We don't tell him that, though.

(beat)

So, you must be Ruth?

RUTH

Uh... yes.

Maddie turns and heads back toward the house.

MADDIE

(John Wayne impression)

Well come on in, pardner!

Unsure what she's getting herself into, Ruth slowly follows.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

INT. MADDIE'S HOUSE -- DAY

Beautiful wood is everywhere: a rocking chair on the porch; bookcases on every wall; a coffee table on the rug-strewn hardwood floor; and a dining table and set of chairs beyond.

Yet the room's also a disaster zone: dust and animal hair, and used food and drink receptacles, cover every surface including the floor; piles of books and sketchpads are strewn about.

Maddie deposits the cat atop a pile of books on an armchair. As they start to slide out under him, he MREOWS and jumps off.

MADDIE

You'll have to excuse the mess.

She picks up the books and sits in the chair herself instead, then turns to smile at Ruth.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

My housekeeper comes in May.

RUTH

But... it's September.

MADDIE

(gravely)

Yes.

Ruth looks about, wondering where - if - she should sit.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Just sit anywhere.

Easier said than done. Ruth finally perches on the edge of the sofa, picking up the sketchpad that rests there.

She looks down to see a sketch of a STRIKING BUILDING. An entire wall is glass, and it sits on the edge of a cliff.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Do you like that?

Ruth continues to stare at the picture. IN HER IMAGINATION: a PINK-GOLD SUNSET is reflected in the glass.

RUTH

Glorious sunsets.

Maddie CLAPS her hands together, startling Ruth.

MADDIE

Yes! I *knew* I liked you! And we only just met.

Jumping up again, she retrieves a BONG and takes a long hit.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Give it a few days and we'll be huge friends.

Ruth stares at the drug paraphernalia in amazement. Maddie notices, seems confused, then claps a hand to her head.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Of *course*: you need to see the cottage before I leave.

Putting the bong down, Maddie heads for the back door, motioning for Ruth to follow.

EXT. MADDIE'S BACK YARD -- CONTINUOUS

They emerge into a menagerie:

A PIG SNORTS its way around, TWO BIG DOGS jump up and down, emitting BARKS, and ANOTHER CAT - this one tiny and black - rubs itself along Maddie's ankle as she steps past it.

TWO COTTAGES sit behind the main house along a dog-legging driveway. The higher cottage is further up the steep hillside and sits half behind the lower cottage, half sticking out.

Opening a gate, Maddie heads ACROSS THE DRIVEWAY.

MADDIE

What brings you out to LA?

She twists around to look at Ruth.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Are you a model? *Actress*?

RUTH

No.

MADDIE

Well you have the bones for it.

RUTH

My husband's a new graduate student at Caltech.

MADDIE

Oh.

Ruth frowns, surprised by Maddie's clear lack of interest.

RUTH
Wasn't your husband - ?

MADDIE
And what about you? What do you do?

RUTH
Um... nothing.

As they reach the lower cottage, Maddie turns and blinks at Ruth as if confused by her answer.

RUTH (CONT'D)
Yet, I mean.

Maddie turns away and swings the cottage door open.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I used to work in a feed store -

MADDIE
And here it is!

INT. COTTAGE -- CONTINUOUS

Ruth enters behind Maddie... and falls in love.

The cottage walls are soft white, the tables and chairs pine, with a sofa in red and golden yellow that matches the drapes.

A small kitchen and bathroom sit at one end, while stairs lead up to a large loft bedroom *just* visible from below.

MADDIE
So... what do you think?

RUTH
I love it.

MADDIE
Wonderful! I have to run, so I'll just leave you to get settled in.

Maggie turns around and heads for the door.

EXT. DRIVEWAY -- CONTINUOUS

Startled, Ruth follows Maddie out of the cottage.

RUTH
Wait... I don't even know how much the rent is!

MADDIE

We'll figure it out when I get back
from Palm Springs.

RUTH

But -

MADDIE

(to her dogs)

Come on, babies! Come inside!

Maddie disappears back into her house, pulling her huge dogs
indoors behind her.

WILLIAM (O.S.)

Don't sweat it.

Ruth spins around to see a man leaning against a tree,
watching her.

WILLIAM INGRAM (30s) wears only a loose, open white shirt over
a pair of raggedy shorts, his mouth curved into a smirk.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

If the rent's too high, just tell her
when she gets back. She'll waive it
for the two weeks you were here.

(amused)

Or she'll lower it until you can
afford it.

RUTH

No, that wouldn't be fair.

WILLIAM

That's very principled of you.

RUTH

I'm sorry - are you Mrs. Humboldt's
son?

WILLIAM

It's Maddie to everyone. And... no.

RUTH

Well, I should probably follow -

A CAR ENGINE starts nearby, accompanied by a flurry of BARKS.

Ruth spins around to see the VW BUG shoot down a parallel
driveway and disappear, the BARKS fading into the distance.

RUTH (CONT'D)

She... she just *left*?

WILLIAM

Guess you impressed her.

RUTH

But... I don't even have the keys.

WILLIAM

Don't worry. Nothing ever gets locked around here.

Ruth suddenly realizes she's alone with a stranger... who's half naked. She takes a step back, aiming for the driveway.

RUTH

Thanks for the advice.

WILLIAM

It's quicker if you cut through the main house.

RUTH

That's okay.

Ruth hurries down the driveway.

WILLIAM

(calling after her)

I'm in the other cottage, by the way.
My name's William!

EXT. 311 WATSEKA -- CONTINUOUS

Ruth slows as she approaches the convertible... and finds John Wayne lying on the hood, stretched out and purring in the sun.

RUTH

Cat.

The cat looks calmly at her and starts licking himself.

Ruth gets into the car and rests her head back. And then she sees it:

The bright blue California sky beyond the vibrant green leaves of a great palm. Clearer skies than she's ever seen out here.

Tilting her head, she finds the mountains behind the house.

RUTH (CONT'D)

(murmuring to herself)

I never looked at the view from the bedroom.

John Wayne turns to regard her through the windshield.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Fine. I'll come back. But this is insane - you know that!

John Wayne flicks his tail a few times, then stands up, stretches, and strolls across to jump down from the car.

Ruth stares after him, then shakes her head.

INT. ASST. PROF. HUGO FRANT'S OFFICE -- DAY

Mitch waits in the large office. The custom-built shelves and desk are all a rich, polished mahogany. The shelves cover two whole walls, but it's the books on them that fascinate Mitch.

He moves closer, turning his head to read the titles more easily. Runs his finger gently down the spine of one book.

EXT. IOWA FARMLAND -- DAY -- EIGHT YEARS EARLIER

Abraham shoves Mitch forward, sending him crashing into the small, tattered pile of books.

They scatter, revealing a chemistry textbook, a biography of Albert Einstein, a child's guide to geology...

Mitch's eyes say he longs to gather them up and protect them. But that would do no good.

A foot flips him over onto his back and Isaac looms over him.

ISAAC

What is your explanation?!

MITCH

They're just books.

Isaac kicks him hard in the side. Mitch GRUNTS in pain.

ISAAC

What was that?

MITCH

They're just books!

Isaac's face fires up with rage.

Grabbing the textbook, he swipes it down across Mitch's face with a mighty THWUNK that CRACKS Mitch's nose, drawing blood.

FRANT (O.S.)

(British accent)

Sorry I was held up.

INT. ASST. PROF. HUGO FRANT'S OFFICE -- DAY -- *BACK TO PRESENT*

Mitch swivels almost guilty away from the books and meets the interested gaze of -

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR HUGO FRANT (mid 20s) - English with an odd sense of humor; so quick and confident that at times he can seem cruel or unsympathetic to other people's failings.

FRANT
(refined English
accent)
Mitchell White, I assume.

MITCH
Professor Frant.

Frant waves a nonchalant hand as he sits at the desk.

FRANT
Borrow anything you like, by the way.
As long as you bring it back.

Mitch stiffens, offended.

FRANT (CONT'D)
(easily)
Some of your comrades tend to forget.
Please, have a seat.

As Mitch sits, Frant regards him with interest.

FRANT (CONT'D)
So... you're looking for a first year
project and you came to me. Why?

MITCH
Um... I'm interested in Mars -

FRANT
Planet or god?

Mitch frowns.

FRANT (CONT'D)
Sorry. Just my little joke.

Frant refers to some papers on his desk.

FRANT (CONT'D)
I've read your transcripts from Iowa.
Excellent grades - and glowing
recommendations. They believe you'll
make a quite brilliant geologist.

MITCH

Thank you.

FRANT

Nothing about planetary science,
though. Not even one course.

MITCH

It wasn't offered at my school.

FRANT

Surely that's what summer vacations
and undergraduate projects are for?

MITCH

I'm married. I... I had to get a job.

Frant eyes Mitch's wedding ring.

FRANT

(lightly)

Then I hope your commitment here will
be greater.

Mitch stands up, stiffly.

MITCH

If you'd rather not work with me, sir-

Frant finds Mitch's reaction amusing.

FRANT

Come on, I never said that.

MITCH

You're acting like it. Do you think
I'm stupid because I'm older than you?

FRANT

(almost laughing)

No.

MITCH

Or is it because I didn't go to some
fancy school like you did? What was
it, Cambridge?

FRANT

The other one, actually.

MITCH

'The other one.' Jeez.

Mitch glances back at all the books.

MITCH (CONT'D)
 Don't worry. I won't be coming back.
 Your books are safe from me.

INT. CORRIDOR -- CONTINUOUS

As Mitch storms out of the office:

FRANT (O.S.)
 (calling after him)
 I'll see you in class on Wednesday.

Mitch comes to an abrupt halt. He'd forgotten that.

MITCH
Fuck.

EXT. SIERRA ALTA -- DAY

Ruth shuts the car door and locks it, then looks around her.

DOWNTOWN SIERRA ALTA: almost deserted at this time of day, a sleepy, old-fashioned seeming place, with several store fronts ranging from a print shop to a café to a real estate office.

Ruth pauses in front of a window display of a WEDDING DRESS.

INT. CITY HALL, WAITING ROOM -- DAY -- FIVE YEARS EARLIER

SEVERAL COUPLES and their FRIENDS and FAMILY sit waiting in plastic chairs in a long, corridor-like room. Some are happy, others stern; some are in street clothes, others dressed up.

At the far end of the room, Ruth - at 19 - stands in a pale blue suit, face turned away to stare out of the window.

Tears streak her cheeks as she fights not to sob.

Mitch - at 22 - comes into view carrying two cups.

MITCH
 Machine was out of coffee, so I got -
 Seeing Ruth's tears, he hurriedly puts down the cups.

MITCH (CONT'D)
 What's wrong?
 (glaring at the others)
 Did someone say something to you?

Ruth shakes her head vehemently, SNIFFING back more tears.

MITCH (CONT'D)
 Then what? Ruth, what's wrong.

RUTH
I-I want us to be blessed by God!

Mitch's face turns to stone.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I'm sorry!

Her SOBS draw attention. Mitch looks around awkwardly.

MITCH
She's just happy.

A few eyebrows go up, but most give him a pass.

MITCH (CONT'D)
Ruth, *please*.

Ruth buries her face in Mitch's neck, trying to control herself, but her quivering shoulders say it all.

MITCH (CONT'D)
Oh, God...

Mitch pushes her gently away so he can meet her eyes.

MITCH (CONT'D)
Okay, fine. I'll do it. I'll find a preacher. A church.

RUTH
You will?

MITCH
Yes. I promise.

RUTH
Oh, Mitch. Thank you!

Mitch just holds her as she clings to his suit.

EXT. SIERRA ALTA -- DAY -- *BACK TO PRESENT*

Ruth comes out of her reverie to find a SHOP ASSISTANT (20s) inside the store smiling out at her. The woman points to the dress and gestures for her to come in.

Ruth holds up her hand and indicates the wedding band.

The Shop Assistant grins and mouths 'Ah.'

Ruth grins back and moves on.

INT. PHARMACY / GIFT STORE -- DAY

Ruth examines a notepad and pen set that's on special offer.

Picking it up, she moves to the rear of the store, where a large sign over several shelves of used paperbacks reads:

SALES FROM THESE SHELVES TO BENEFIT LIBRARY FUNDRAISER!

INT. PHARMACY / GIFT STORE -- MOMENTS LATER

Ruth places the notepad set, a white washcloth, and three paperbacks on the COUNTER. Behind the counter stands -

DEENA (70s) - frail looking, and flustered due to poor eyesight and the wrong glasses. She squints at the items, then calls hopefully over her shoulder.

DEENA

Barbara? Are you there?

No response. Turning back to Ruth, Deena forces a smile.

DEENA (CONT'D)

Well, let's see, then...

Deena pecks at a LARGE, OLD-FASHIONED CASH REGISTER. While she waits, Ruth takes the exact change from her purse.

DEENA (CONT'D)

That'll be six seventy five.

RUTH

Uh...

DEENA

Oh dear. Did I do something wrong?

(remembering)

Oh, and I was supposed to separate the library funds.

RUTH

May I help?

DEENA

Well... I suppose...

Ruth touches the notepad set.

RUTH

That's forty-nine cents.

She touches the washcloth.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Plus twenty-five cents is seventy-four. Which is seventy-eight cents, with tax. It's five percent, correct?

DEENA

Umm... yes...

As she speaks, BARBARA JOHANSEN (30s) - a striking, well made-up redhead - emerges from the back.

Ruth touches the three paperback books.

RUTH

And each of these is ten cents, which makes thirty plus tax, so - rounding up - that's thirty-two cents.

Ruth puts a dollar bill and a dime on the counter.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Which is a total of a dollar and ten cents. Or a dollar and nine cents if I'd calculated the tax on everything together. But don't worry about that.

DEENA

You did all that in your *head*?

Ruth looks up to see Deena looking at her in awe.

RUTH

(awkwardly)

I... used to work in a feed store.

Barbara looks dubious and shifts forward to take the money, operating the cash register easily... and coming up with the same total. She looks impressed.

BARBARA

Honey, you ever need a job -

RUTH

Yes please!

Ruth instantly looks horrified at having blurted this out.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

EXT. SHADY PATCH, DOWNTOWN SIERRA ALTA -- DAY

Barbara smokes in a deck chair set out on a small area of grass, her demeanor something out of a Raymond Chandler novel. The town vamp, in tight shirt and hot pants.

BARBARA

So you're moving in with Maddie, hmm?

Ruth sits awkwardly in another chair, skirt tucked over her ankles, trying not to gape at all Barbara's exposed flesh.

RUTH

I'm not sure yet. And we'd be in the guest cottage, not living *with* her.

BARBARA

(drawling)

That's what they all think.

RUTH

I'm sorry?

Barbara leans back and opens her arms expansively.

BARBARA

Well, welcome to historic Sierra Alta.

RUTH

Historic?

BARBARA

So they claim. It's because of the old railway.

She gestures vaguely toward the mountains with her cigarette.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Used to take rich tourists up to a luxury hotel high up in the mountains.

Ruth peers up there. It seems improbable.

RUTH

Really?

BARBARA

Oh, yes. Famous as Disneyland in its day... you know, seventy years ago.

Barbara's eyes go to Ruth, who's still transfixed by the view.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
 'course, that's not all those
 mountains are famous for.

Ruth looks at her expectantly.

RUTH
 What?

Barbara leans toward her, confidentially.

BARBARA
 Well, there are a few hippy communes
 up in them thar hills, and supposedly
 Peyote makes for one *heck* of an orgy.

Ruth looks shocked. Barbara LAUGHS and pats her on the knee.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
 Don't freak out, honey. I've never
 seen anything of it, and I doubt you
 will either.

RUTH
 (flustered)
 I don't... I mean...

Barbara grins but gives Ruth a break.

BARBARA
 How about you and your husband? Where
 do you hail from?

RUTH
 Iowa.

BARBARA
 (announcer's voice)
 Land of corn.

Ruth's face shuts down. Barbara sees and changes the subject.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
 So, can you start tomorrow, nine a m?

RUTH
 Yes! And thank you so much for the -
 (suddenly worried)
 Oh, but I won't have the car. My
 husband needs it to get to school.

BARBARA
 I'll pick you up. Eight thirty sharp.

RUTH
That's *incredibly* kind of -

BARBARA
(brushing this off)
He's going to school while you work?

Barbara takes a drag on her cigarette.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
Modern of you.

RUTH
Mitch is so smart and he's worked so hard. He deserves this chance.

BARBARA
Honey, I'm *impressed*. Do I look like one of those fifties housewives who sits around all day waiting for hubby to come home?

RUTH
No!

Barbara ROARS with LAUGHTER - a real cackling sound, full of genuine mirth. A longshoreman in the body of a pin-up model.

BARBARA
That's right, kiddo!

Sitting forward, she checks her watch.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
I gotta go. Can't leave Mom manning the place for long or I'll go broke.

As they both get up -

RUTH
Was it your parents' store before?

BARBARA
Nope. Me and my ex bought it when we first got married. I kept it in the divorce.

Ruth looks momentarily stunned.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
We still get on pretty well. Even though he's living with that *whore*.

RUTH

Uh...

BARBARA

Can you believe, she used to be in my
book club?

Barbara grabs both chairs and starts walking away, then turns
back with a delighted grin.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Hey, you'll have to come along this
Friday!

RUTH

I'm sorry?

BARBARA

To book club! I'll introduce you to
all the Sierra Alta gals.

As Barbara happily marches off again, Ruth looks nervous.

EXT. CALTECH -- DAY

Mitch emerges from a building and walks over to where Ruth
sits in the car, waiting dutifully in the passenger seat.

As he gets in, she takes one look at his tense face, and has
no idea what to say. But he turns to her expectantly.

MITCH

Well?

RUTH

What?

MITCH

How was it?

RUTH

Oh, the place for rent?

MITCH

Yes! I've only been worrying about it
all day!

RUTH

I'm sorry. I didn't know how to call
you back, so -

MITCH

So are we taking it or not?

RUTH
Yes. I think we should...

MITCH
How much is it a month?

RUTH
I-I don't know.

MITCH
You didn't *ask*? Ruth...

RUTH
The owner was going out of town, so -

MITCH
For how long?

RUTH
Two weeks.

Mitch opens his mouth to protest again.

RUTH (CONT'D)
But William said we could stay anyway,
for free, even if the rent's too much!

MITCH
Who the hell is *William*?

RUTH
He lives there too. I think he rents
the other guesthouse.

Mitch is slightly mollified by this, but -

MITCH
Seems pretty odd.

RUTH
Oh, and I found a job!

MITCH
Already?

RUTH
It's just working in a shop.

Mitch's mood lifts.

MITCH
Doesn't matter. It's a start.

He kisses Ruth, then sits back and starts the ENGINE.

MITCH (CONT'D)

Next thing we need to do is buy a car.

Ruth looks saddened by the thought of losing the convertible, stroking its sleek paintwork as they drive off.

EXT. COTTAGE -- SUNSET

Mitch frowns at the cottage then at the location.

MITCH

(to himself)

This can't be cheap.

He looks around to see Ruth struggling to bring BOTH SUITCASES from the car. Cursing under his breath he hurries toward her.

MITCH (CONT'D)

Let me take those. You look like a Russian weightlifter.

RUTH

Thanks a lot.

MITCH

You know what I mean.

INT. WILLIAM'S WRITING LOFT -- CONTINUOUS

William sits at a window with a view south across the LA basin... or at least, a view of the smog.

His focus isn't on the view, however, but on the BLANK SHEET in his typewriter. Crumpled up paper also litters the floor.

DISTANT VOICES draw his attention. He peers down out of the window and - around the edge of the other cottage - sees the back end of their car, and the occasional flash of clothing.

SIGHING, he reaches for a bottle of wine and takes a slug.

INT. COTTAGE BEDROOM -- MOMENTS LATER

Ruth enters and flips on the LIGHT, then goes over to the window and looks out at the mountain view -

Part of which is blocked by the other guesthouse. Ruth spots William through its upper window, working on something.

Mitch comes up behind her, looking out too.

MITCH

Huh. Nice view.

He puts his arms around Ruth, rocking her gently.

RUTH
I'm glad we found this place.

MITCH
Me too.

Mitch turns her around in his arms, kissing her thoroughly.

INT. WILLIAM'S WRITING LOFT -- CONTINUOUS

William's trying not to look - trying to concentrate -

But then he catches a glimpse of them, BACKLIT in the window.

Giving up on work, he grabs the wine bottle, flops onto the bed, and retrieves a paperback novel from the bedside table.

INT. COTTAGE BEDROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Ruth twists away from Mitch and peers over her shoulder, acutely aware that William can probably see them.

RUTH
We have unpacking to do.

MITCH
Really?

RUTH
Mm-hm.

As they move out of the room, Ruth glances back at the window.

INT. COTTAGE BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Mitch SNORES in bed in the NEAR-DARKNESS.

Ruth goes to the window and pulls back the curtains. She looks out at the view of the MOONLIT mountaintops -

Then finds herself staring at William in his WELL LIT loft. He's working on his typewriter... *with his shirt off.*

Ruth stares in shock, then comes back to herself and yanks the curtains shut, hurrying to climb back in bed with Mitch.

INT. BARBARA'S STORE -- DAY

Ruth goes through a messy lot of ACCOUNT BOOKS and ORDER FORMS with Barbara, smoothing out one crumpled sheet to point at it.

RUTH

You see? You ordered six *times* six packets, instead of just six. That's where the price difference came in.

BARBARA

How the *hell* did you find that in there?

RUTH

I like solving puzzles, that's all.

BARBARA

It's a gift, that's what it is.

RUTH

I used to help out all the time at my old store. They were going to make me bookkeeper... but then we moved here.

BARBARA

Well, I may have to look into it!

As Barbara puts everything away she remembers something.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Oh! You are coming to book club tonight, aren't you?

RUTH

But I haven't read the book.

BARBARA

Doesn't matter. It's mostly just an excuse to get drunk.

Ruth looks deeply uncomfortable at this.

RUTH

I could get it from the library on my lunch break, at least make a start.

BARBARA

Library?

RUTH

Is it too far to walk?

BARBARA

Hon, the nearest library's in the next city.

Ruth glances at the big 'Library fundraiser' sign, puzzled.

RUTH

But I thought -

BARBARA

The fundraiser's so we can *build* one.
But it'll never happen. I only do it
to stop the old biddies making a fuss.

Across the store, her mother Deena is happily in conversation with ANOTHER ELDERLY WOMAN. Barbara grimaces.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

One in particular.
(re the book club)
Just come along and meet the others.
I'll pick you up at seven o'clock.

INT. COTTAGE -- EVENING

Ruth picks up her purse and checks her reflection. She's in the blue suit she wore at her wedding. Very 'proper.'

She goes over to where Mitch sits, poring over textbooks and his 'homework' at the big table.

RUTH

I'm off.

He turns to kiss her, noticing the suit.

MITCH

You're all dressed up.

RUTH

First impressions, right?

Mitch frowns, probably thinking of his on Professor Frant.

MITCH

Uh huh.

Ruth's eyes run over the sheet of paper Mitch is working on. Mathematical symbols and equations fill her vision.

She leans forward, her hand moving of its own volition to point at something, when -

A FAINT CAR HORN sounds from outside.

Ruth pulls herself away, heading for the door.

RUTH

Your dinner's in the oven whenever you
want it.

Mitch doesn't say anything or look up, only raises a hand in acknowledgement and farewell.

Ruth's jaw tightens. But she says nothing and leaves.

INT. SHELLEY'S HOUSE -- EVENING

SHELLEY (40s) - a real hipster in a gold jumpsuit - flings open the door to reveal Ruth in her suit, Barbara behind her in tight colorful pants and psychedelic shirt.

SHELLEY
Welcome! Come on inside!

Shelley swivels merrily away, leading them into the -

INT. SHELLEY'S LIVING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

THREE WOMEN (30s-50s) sit around the room, LAUGHING and joking with each other... until they notice the new arrivals.

As the women stare at her, Ruth notices uncomfortably that they're all drinking alcohol.

And they're all wearing modern, casual clothes that make her feel as if she's in a time warp from two decades earlier.

Ruth adjusts her jacket as she feels them assessing her.

SHELLEY
All righty then...
(pointing vaguely)
Marcia, Kathy, and Jeannette, meet...
(looking to Ruth)
...um...?

BARBARA
Ruth.

SHELLEY
Ruth!

Shelley grabs Ruth exuberantly around the shoulders.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Very Biblical of you.

Ruth shrinks under the weight of everyone's gaze.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

INT. SHELLEY'S LIVING ROOM -- EVENING

Awkwardly, Ruth takes off her jacket, revealing a sleeveless top below. A little younger and more modern... but not much.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Take a seat while I grab the drinks.

Barbara sits on an empty sofa, Ruth gratefully joining her.

MARCIA BROWNE (40s) - loud and peevish - leans forward.

MARCIA

So Ruth, are you new to Sierra Alta?

RUTH

Yes, w-we just moved here from Iowa.

Seeing the glint in Marcia's eye, Barbara interrupts.

BARBARA

Her husband's a grad student at Caltech, they're renting one of Maddie Humboldt's cottages, and she just started working for me. Now...

She leans forward and grabs a copy of Arthur Hailey's "Airport" from the coffee table.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

What did we all think of the book?

Marcia looks peeved, but allows herself to be distracted.

MARCIA

Well, I couldn't get past page twenty. It was all about snow plows and flight re-bookings. *Booring.*

KATHY VAGG (50s) - a little jaded - looks drily amused.

KATHY

You sound just like my daughter.

MARCIA

I thought it was meant to be *exciting*.

JEANNETTE MOORE (30s) - a vivacious African-American - smirks.

JEANNETTE

You should've kept going. The captain has an affair with a stewardess -

BARBARA

Of course.

JEANETTE

- then tries to talk her into an
abortion... and *then* -

Marcia clamps her hands over her ears.

MARCIA

Stop! Don't spoil it!

KATHY

The *idea* is to read it in advance.

JEANNETTE

It really kind of is.

Shelley glides across the carpet between the arguing women.

SHELLEY

Barbara... martini...

She hands a HUGE glass to Barbara, some slopping to the floor.
As Barbara shakes her hand dry, Shelley blinks at Ruth.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

And for Ruth? Daiquiri? Sidecar?
Harvey Wallbanger?

RUTH

Um...

BARBARA

How about a white wine?

RUTH

I don't really drink -

SHELLEY

Don't worry, I'll make it a small one.

As Shelley trots off again, Ruth looks worried.

MARCIA

Why couldn't we read something else on
the bestseller list?

JEANETTE

I tried the John Updike, but I needed
a dictionary just to get through it.

Jeanette leans forward, GIGGLING.

JEANNETTE (CONT'D)
 Although I did know *one* big word.
 (after a pause)
Tumescent.

A beat - then all but Ruth and Marcia SPLUTTER with LAUGHTER.

MARCIA
 What? I don't get it.

More SPLUTTERING, including a BARK of LAUGHTER from Barbara.
 Shelley returns and hands a FULL, LARGE wine glass to Ruth.

RUTH
 Oh, no, I couldn't...

But Shelley's already turned away and heading for her seat.

BARBARA
 (quietly to Ruth)
 Just leave it when you've had enough.

Ruth takes a cautious sip of her wine.

MARCIA
 Myra Breckinridge sounded interesting.

JEANNETTE
 Is that the one about the author?

Ruth takes another sip, bigger this time.

KATHY
 No, it's about a trannie waiting for a
 sex change operation.

Ruth is so surprised she BLOWS OUT the mouthful of wine.
 Barbara pats her on the back as she chokes.

KATHY
 (amused)
 I think we shocked our country mouse.

Barbara pats Ruth on the back, shooting Kathy a quelling look.

SHELLEY
 Excuse me!!

Everyone stops talking and looks at Shelley.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
 Can we *please* talk about the book
 before Harry gets home?

BARBARA

Go for it.

SHELLEY

Thank you.

(opening her copy)

Now, what page is the first sex scene?

That starts another rounds of SNORTING LAUGHTER. Ruth watches with rounded eyes, distractedly taking another sip of wine.

INT. COTTAGE -- NIGHT

Mitch paces the living room, checking the time, as FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL and LAUGHTER come from outside.

Mitch has the door open an instant later, revealing Barbara holding up a very tipsy, staggering-on-her-feet Ruth.

MITCH

Ruth?

Mitch helps Barbara get her in and slumped across the sofa.

BARBARA

Hi, I'm Barbara.

Mitch ignores the extended hand.

MITCH

What the hell did you give her?

BARBARA

(pragmatically)

Alcohol and no food. Sorry.

Ruth emits a gentle BURP from the sofa. Mitch stares at her.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Shelley's fubar, not mine, just so you know. I'll make sure there's food next time.

Barbara looks from Mitch to Ruth and back again.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Well, I guess I'll leave you to it.

(as she leaves)

You might want to have her drink a couple of glasses of water. Hangover prevention, you know?

MITCH

I can take care of my wife, thank you!

Mitch waits for Barbara to walk off down the driveway, then SLAMS the door closed.

He goes to walk past the sofa... but Ruth reaches out and grabs him around the legs, almost sending him flying.

He collapses onto the sofa over her, and she peers up at him.

RUTH

I know you.

Still a little horrified, Mitch frowns down at her.

RUTH (CONT'D)

(mumbling)

Am I drunk?

As Ruth passes out, Mitch grits his teeth.

MITCH

Christ.

PRELAP - a CAR HORN sounds outside.

EXT. COTTAGE -- MORNING

Ruth opens the door and steps out... then winces as the bright sunlight hits her sensitive eyes. She fumbles on sunglasses.

Behind her, Mitch glares out at Barbara waiting in her car.

INT. BARBARA'S STORE -- DAY

Barbara places a glass of iced tea at Ruth's side.

BARBARA

How's the head now?

RUTH

(embarrassed)

It's fine.

Barbara fans herself with a PAPER FAN.

BARBARA

It's really hotting up again.

RUTH

At least it's dry heat. And it cools right down in the evenings.

BARBARA

Ha. Wait a day or two.

INT. COTTAGE -- EVENING

Ruth wears pants with the legs rolled up, her shirt tied loosely under her breasts, exposing her midriff.

An ELECTRIC FAN WHIRRS on a nearby surface as she cooks, but she still wipes sweat from her face with the back of her hand.

RUTH

We need an air conditioner!

Mitch stretches his arms high above his head, sore from cracking the books, and wipes sweat from the back of his neck.

MITCH

What?

Ruth opens the oven and is hit with a blast of heat as she removes a HOT PAN of food and puts it down on the top.

RUTH

We need an air conditioning unit!

Fanning herself, she leans forward to open the window more -

- And BURNS herself on the edge of the pan.

RUTH (CONT'D)

OW!!

MITCH

What did you do?

Mitch rushes over and sees the burn on Ruth's stomach.

Yanking the refrigerator door open, he frowns inside.

MITCH (CONT'D)

Don't we have any ice?

RUTH

We ran out. And everything'll be closed now.

EXT. DRIVEWAY / MAIN HOUSE BACK YARD -- MOMENTS LATER

Mitch pulls Ruth after him toward the main house, Ruth tugging her shirt down for modesty as they go.

RUTH

Mitch, we can't!

MITCH
You said it's always open. That means
it's not breaking in.

RUTH
It's still stealing.

MITCH
Ice? She won't care.

PIG SNORTS come from out of the darkness as they reach the
back door, startling them both.

MITCH (CONT'D)
Fuck!

RUTH
It's just the pigs.

MITCH
I *know*.

INT. MAIN HOUSE -- CONTINUOUS

Mitch enters, flips on the LIGHT and goes straight for the
refrigerator, while Ruth waits in the doorway.

MITCH
Come on, close the door. You're
letting flies in!
(re the ice)
Dammit! She doesn't have any either.

As Ruth reluctantly enters, Mitch turns away... and his eyes
fall on the CHAOS of Maddie's house.

MITCH (CONT'D)
Oh my *God*.

RUTH
I wish you wouldn't say that when you
don't believe in Him.

Transfixed, Mitch moves into the rest of the house.

MITCH
This... She has a lot of stuff.

RUTH
Mitch? My stomach...?

MITCH
Right. Sorry... Maybe she has some
ointment in her medicine cabinet.

He disappears from view around a CORNER.

RUTH

Mitch! You can't go through her things!

Following him, Ruth ventures into a -

DIMLY LIT CORRIDOR

- Where her gaze falls on an ANIMAL MASK mounted on the wall.

The same mask the woman wore at the beginning.

Ruth shudders involuntarily.

MITCH (O.S.)

Found it!

Ruth jumps at the sound of Mitch's voice as he reappears, holding a tube of something aloft.

Ushering her back into the -

WELL-LIT KITCHEN

- Mitch moves in front of Ruth, brandishing the tube.

MITCH

Come on, lift up your top.

RUTH

We shouldn't be doing this -

MITCH

Do you want it to scar?

Ruth gives in and pulls her shirt up under her breasts, her eyes going nervously to the window -

Where a FACE with HUGE, PROTRUDING BLACK EYES stares in at them from outside.

Ruth SCREAMS in shock.

END OF ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE

INT. MADDIE'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

Ruth stares at the window, but the face has gone.

MITCH

What was it? Ruth?!

The back door opens suddenly, and Mitch grabs a frying pan from the stove, raising it over his head like a weapon.

RUTH

Wait!

Because it's *William* in the open doorway, in jeans and a sports jacket, **MOTORCYCLE GOGGLES** dangling from his left hand.

As he sees Mitch with the raised pan he recoils in surprise.

WILLIAM

Whoa!

MITCH

Who are you?

WILLIAM

Who the fuck are *you*?

RUTH

He's my husband. Mitch, this is our *neighbor*, Maddie's other tenant.

Mitch lowers the frying pan.

RUTH (CONT'D)

I know we shouldn't be in here, but I burned myself...

Ruth lifts her shirt, showing him the burn as proof.

MITCH

Ruth!

Mitch moves in front of her, blocking William's view.

RUTH

We just wanted to get some ice for it.

WILLIAM

I see.

The two men eye each other like rival prize fighters.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

So he's the genius, is he?

RUTH

How do you...?

WILLIAM

Maddie told me when she called. She wanted me to make sure John Wayne was okay before I went out.

MITCH

John Wayne?

RUTH

I told you...

Ruth points to the ginger cat, who snoozes away on the sofa, apparently oblivious to all the noise.

Mitch replaces the frying pan and glares at William.

MITCH

We'll leave you to your 'duties' then.

William stands aside so they can go past him. But -

WILLIAM

Ruth?

(as she looks back)

Did you get what you needed?

RUTH

Yes, we found some ointment. Thanks.

William casts a suspicious glance toward Mitch.

WILLIAM

And you're sure you're okay?

MITCH

Of course she is!

Mitch urges Ruth forward, out through the back door.

INT. COTTAGE -- MOMENTS LATER

Mitch SLAMS the door shut behind a bewildered Ruth.

MITCH

Interfering *asshole*.

RUTH

Mitch, he was only trying to -

MITCH
What did you tell him about us?

RUTH
Nothing! Why would I?

Mitch squeezes out some ointment and indicates the burn.

MITCH
Then why does he think I did that?

RUTH
What? I'm sure he doesn't -

Mitch lifts Ruth's shirt and bends to rubs in the ointment.

MITCH
I'd *never* hurt you!

RUTH
(confused)
Of course you wouldn't.

Worried, Ruth cradles his head, stroking his hair as he works.

INT. SHED -- EVENING -- *EIGHT YEARS EARLIER*

Mitch lies on a small amount of straw, heavily beaten, visible in the MOONLIGHT coming in through gaps in the roof.

The door CREAKS open, and he curls up, expecting more.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
It's only me. Esther.

It's 16-year-old Ruth.

Mitch looks up as she enters carrying a bucket and a cloth.

MITCH
(voice cracking)
You shouldn't be here. They'll hurt you, too.

Ruth says nothing, putting the bucket down softly by his head. After giving him some water to drink, she cleans his wounds.

MITCH (CONT'D)
Esther -

RUTH
Shh.
(after a pause)
It's not right what they did to you.

MITCH
If you're caught -

RUTH
No one saw.

Despite her words, Ruth looks around nervously before putting down the cloth and taking something from inside her shirt.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I saved a book for you.

The book's title is "The Universe."

Mitch struggles to sit up, then opens it and turns the pages. From the style, it's clearly intended for older children.

MITCH
How did you - ?

RUTH
I'm sorry. I knew where you hid it,
so... I borrowed it to read.

Ruth's finger moves across a page showing the age of different parts of the Universe, in billions and millions of years.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I like all the numbers. A thousand
times a thousand is a million, and
times another thousand is a billion.
(after a beat)
I know what it says isn't true, but -

MITCH
It *is*! Esther, it *is* true.

RUTH
No, Michael, the Bible tells us -

MITCH
The Bible's wrong!

RUTH
Don't say that.

Mitch stabs a finger at the book.

MITCH
All of this can be proved!

RUTH
How? We can't go back in time -

Agitated, Mitch starts to COUGH.

MITCH
Other... ways... to prove...

RUTH
Shh!

Glancing around nervously, Ruth helps him lie back. She pulls an apple from inside her shirt and presses it into his hand.

RUTH (CONT'D)
Hide whatever's left. And the book.

Mitch nods weakly. Ruth hesitates, then bends forward and kisses his head.

RUTH (CONT'D)
Be well, brother Michael.

As she scurries outside:

MITCH
Be well, Esther.

Mitch stares through a gap in the roof at an ORANGE 'star.'

FRANT (PRELAP)
Mariner Four. Our first close-up of
the red planet: Mars.

INT. LECTURE HALL -- DAY

In the DARKNESS, a SLIDE is projected onto a white screen: a BLURRY IMAGE of a rocky surface with five distinct craters.

FRANT (O.S.)
(from the darkness)
And what did we see? Rocks and dust.
The final nail in the coffin of the
"Mars has advanced life" enthusiasts.

The SLIDE SHOW ends and the LIGHTS COME UP, revealing about TWO DOZEN STUDENTS, including the entire graduate class.

FRANT (CONT'D)
But in fact, we knew far earlier that
vegetation - let alone *civilization* -
on Mars was highly improbable. Yet
many insisted on hanging onto their
old beliefs.

Frant paces at the front of the room.

FRANT (CONT'D)
It's like a love affair, really.

He picks on Donald and Stephen, sitting in the front row.

FRANT (CONT'D)
Suppose Donald here has a girlfriend
he trusts and adores.

Donald looks uncomfortable.

FRANT (CONT'D)
Now, suppose Stephen was going around
campus, telling everyone he saw her
making out with someone else.
(to Donald)
What would you do?

DONALD
Are you... are you serious?

FRANT
What - would - you - do?

DONALD
(nervously)
Probably punch Stephen.

FRANT
Of course you would. Defending her
honor and all that.

To more CHUCKLES, Frant addresses the whole class.

FRANT (CONT'D)
People tend to leap to their beloved's
defense. Until faced with her *in*
flagrante delicto, as it were.

He DIMS the lights and shows the ROCKY CRATER slide again.

FRANT (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Yet for Mars, the warnings were
already there.

ANOTHER SLIDE appears, showing a CHEMICAL SPECTRUM.

FRANT (O.S.) (CONT'D)
We already *knew* that Mars had very
little water in its atmosphere...

The NEXT SLIDE shows part of an ARTICLE by Dean McLaughlin,
titled "A New Theory of the Surface of Mars, 1956."

FRANT (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 Some had even suggested that windblown
 dust on a dry, desiccated planet could
 produce the seasonal changes we see...

The NEXT SLIDE shows an artist's impression of Mars with seas
 and green, lichen-like plants.

FRANT (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 But many still clung to the hope that
 seas and plants explained everything.

The NEXT SLIDE shows a map of the (in)famous "MARS CANALS"
 with a NASA logo at the top right corner.

FRANT (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 Mars canals even appeared on NASA's
 mission planning maps!
 (beat)
 And then came Mariner Four.

The NEXT FOUR SLIDES are more views like the very first slide,
 all showing a ROCKY, LIFELESS, CRATERED SURFACE.

FRANT (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 And a great many people were forced to
 admit they'd been idiots.

Frant brings up the LIGHTS again. Mitch, frowning, sticks his
 hand up in the third row.

FRANT (CONT'D)
 You have a comment, Mr. White?

MITCH
 Aren't you being a little harsh?

FRANT
 They didn't *question*. Not even when
 provided with alternate explanations
 that, frankly, made a lot more sense.

MITCH
 And you think you'd have been any
 better?

The CLASS draws its collective breath. Frant smiles slowly.

FRANT
 I'd like to think so, yes.

MITCH

Sometimes it's hard letting go of ingrained ideas. It doesn't make them idiots. Just... blinkered.

Lucas breaks the tension.

LUCAS

Like any chick who'd date Donald, huh?

This earns some CHUCKLES and a glare from Donald. Frant swings around and checks a clock on the wall.

FRANT

All right. I'll expect your essays and worked answers by Monday night.

As the CLASS disperses, Lucas shifts closer to Mitch.

LUCAS

He's just pushing our buttons.

MITCH

He's an arrogant British *twit*.

Lucas grins and heads for the door, Mitch following rapidly.

FRANT

Very fine work today, Mr. White.

Mitch stops and looks around in surprise.

FRANT (CONT'D)

(wryly)

My point was that a good scientist questions everything. Even what his professor argues to be true.

MITCH

You're... you're saying you'll deliberately mislead us?

FRANT

No, I'm saying we don't always *know* the truth, and very few conclusions are completely objective. What's important is staying open-minded.

Surprised but thoughtful, Mitch slowly leaves the room.

EXT. IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS -- DAY

STUDENTS hurry across a rainy campus, far lusher but also far less well-groomed than that of Caltech.

INT. DEAN'S OFFICE -- CONTINUOUS

The LIGHT is on as gray storm clouds grow outside the window.

The DEAN (50s) sits behind his desk, looking uneasy.

DEAN

I'm afraid Mr. White is no longer at
this institution.

Across the desk sits Isaac (now 60s). Still intimidating and harsh looking, we can see only the RIGHT HALF of his face.

ISAAC

And you won't tell me where he's gone?

The Dean shrugs awkwardly, a hand patting a FILE on his desk.

DEAN

You're not listed as next of kin, or
even as an emergency contact.

ISAAC

(after a long pause)
I understand. Rules are rules.

He starts to COUGH.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

I'm just so worried...
(coughing harder)
...about my boy.

The Dean stands up, moving to his door.

DEAN

Let me get you a glass of water.

As the Dean leaves the room, Isaac leans sideways in his chair, checking on the other man's position.

DEAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Sandy? Could we get a glass of water?

Isaac reaches for the Dean's file, swiveling it toward him.

EXT. SIDEWALK OUTSIDE -- MOMENTS LATER

Rain PELTS the concrete as Isaac steps outside, pausing under the overhang to put on a hat.

As he lowers his hands he reveals a RAGGED SCAR from his LEFT EYEBROW TO HIS LEFT CHEEK and a MILKY LEFT EYE.

ISAAC
California. Den of sin.

Face filled with rage and disgust, he spits on the ground, then steps out into the storm.

EXT. COTTAGE -- EVENING

Mitch sits facing the mountains, drinking a beer.

Ruth walks into view as an ENGINE PURRS away. She walks up behind Mitch and plants a warm kiss on the top of his head.

RUTH
I wasn't expecting you home yet.
Everything go okay today?

MITCH
I'm not really sure.

Ruth strokes his arm.

RUTH
Come on. Let's go inside.

MITCH
I think I'll stay out here a while.

Ruth glances at the other chair. Should she join him? But Mitch looks as if he doesn't want company right now.

RUTH
Okay.

INT. COTTAGE -- MOMENTS LATER

Ruth enters the cottage and puts her purse down, levering off her modest high heels with a SIGH of relief.

Her eyes go to the books and papers spread out on the table again. Walking around it, she stares down at the LINES OF EQUATIONS scrawled in Mitch's hand.

Engrossed and fascinated, Ruth slowly sits down, her eyes tracing down the page.

Ruth reaches blindly for Mitch's pen and starts writing...

And loses track of time...

The LIGHT FADING, shadows shifting...

MITCH (O.S.)
What are you *doing*?

Ruth jumps up from the seat as Mitch appears in the doorway. The pen falls from her nervous hands to the ground.

RUTH
I-I-I was just...

Ruth moves hastily back as Mitch stomps to the table like a dog defending its territory. His eyes run over the lines of BLACK INK she's added next to his own working.

MITCH
What did you *do*?

RUTH
I thought I saw another way to solve the problem, I-I just wanted to...

He stares at her incredulously and Ruth shrinks in on herself.

RUTH (CONT'D)
...to see if it would work.

Mitch looks down at the pages, frowning. His eyes flick between her solution and his.

Ruth's solution is shorter - *more elegant* - and produces the same answer as his own. Mitch's jaw works.

RUTH (CONT'D)
Did I ruin it? Mitch, I -

MITCH
I can copy it out again. It's fine.

Ruth heads for the kitchen, relieved.

RUTH
Are you hungry yet? I was going to make meatballs.

Mitch remains at the table, staring down at Ruth's solution.

MITCH
Sure. That sounds good.

INT. WILLIAM'S WRITING LOFT -- EVENING

William looks out of his window, seeing the LIGHTS in the lower cottage. Dragging his eyes away, he puts a fresh sheet of paper into his typewriter, and goes to work.

As he TYPES NOISILY, words appear ON THE PAPER:

"ACT ONE"

EXT. PALM SPRINGS, DESERT -- EVENING

The only light is MOONLIGHT as Maddie kneels over a SQUAT CACTUS PLANT - 'Peyote.' JONATHAN BOUNDING (40s) - debonair, jocular - kneels down beside her.

JONATHAN
My own personal supply.

MADDIE
It's so... *symmetrical*.

Maddie GIGGLES, high on something. Jonathan produces a KNIFE.

JONATHAN
Shall I do the honors?

MADDIE
Would you, darling?

Jonathan leans in, kisses her passionately, then draws back.

JONATHAN
For my Sierra Alta rose: *anything*.

INT. LOFT BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Ruth lies in bed next to a SNORING Mitch, the sheets pushed off them in the heat, their bodies lit by MOONLIGHT. She looks toward the open window, seeing a few STARS in the sky.

Pushing up her nightdress, she feels for the BURN SCAR, still an angry red on her skin.

PRELAP - SITAR MUSIC, faint at first, then growing louder.

EXT. SAN GABRIEL MOUNTAINS -- NIGHT

The masked Woman slowly sits up, still smiling, until -

TWO MASCULINE ARMS come around her waist, pulling her close.

She stiffens and goes to pull away as she glances over her shoulder... then relaxes into the arms instead.

As a DRUMBEAT joins the Sitar, the Woman leans back and stares up at the STARS, while the UNSEEN MAN gently caresses her bare stomach...

And the FADED BURN SCAR there.

OVER THE MUSIC, FADE TO BLACK.

END OF SHOW