

STEEN'S FOLLY

(Based on a True Story)

[Excerpt]

by

Jeffrey Gold

Jeffrey Gold  
(213) 787-6066  
jeffreyfgold@mail.com

WGA Reg. #1579605

EXT. RESIDENTIAL HOUSE (TEXAS, 1933) - DAY

The front yard is a testament to neglect.

A young GIRL (13), pouting and arms folded in a huff, walks away from the house and quietly climbs into the back seat of a car.

A rusty screen door swings open until it smacks up against the side of the ramshackle house.

A MOTHER (late 30s)---one of those overweight women who compensates by participating in every activity at the local church---emerges in her Sunday best.

She pushes past the screen door, tugging at her wispy-haired young son, CHARLIE STEEN (10).

MOTHER

Come on, Charlie, get in the car.

Inside the dark apartment, barely visible through the doorway, is a scrawny MAN wearing a sweaty wife-beater t-shirt. Through the screen door that shuts in his face...

MAN

Where you goin'?

MOTHER

Manage on my own, Augy. Bet on your own life.

She scurries to the car with Charlie, opening the door.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

(kindly)

Get in and slide on over.

INT. CAR - SAME

Dutifully, Charlie hops in and slides past the steering wheel. She gets in and struggles with the door, and looks at the Girl through the rear-view mirror. Charlie looks up at her, his eyes betraying things will never be the same again.

MOTHER

Your pa is a good man...but he takes big risks and...

(frustrated)

...and just makes 'em bigger.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - LATER

Charlie, now more resolute, is looking out the window, as if awaiting a new adventure.

MOTHER

Just remember one thing, Charlie.

He looks up at his mother while she drives.

Making eye contact with the Girl in the back seat...

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Rewards worth having don't require risk. Know what they require?

CHARLIE

No, mother.

MOTHER

They require a lotta work...a whole lotta work.

She pats him on his knee with her gloved hand.

He looks back out at the open road, as if ready to live up to his mother's maxim.

EXT. HIGHWAY (COLORADO PLATEAU, 1946) - DAY

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

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

Charlie (now 22) is behind the wheel, amiable and carefree. Sporting thick-rimmed glasses, Charlie looks like an engineer in the space program.

He pulls off the highway into a dusty, single-pump gas station.

EXT. GAS STATION - SAME

Charlie gets out of the Plymouth, stretches, taking in the scene. The shell-pink and morning-blue structure doesn't look operational---more like a replica. The station recalls friendly gas service attendants and enthusiastic travelers that have long since faded into time. Sizing the place up, Charlie enters...

GAS STATION (INTERIOR)

Behind the counter is an ATTENDANT (mid 40s), desiccated by life and eager for human interaction. He greets Charlie with a nod.

ATTENDANT

How are you doing today?

Charlie nods in reply and proceeds to the beverage section, pulls up a cooler lid, stops...

CHARLIE

That's an adequate question, isn't it? They never ask, "Why are you doing today?" Do they?

The Attendant looks a bit perplexed---and now less eager for conversation.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I guess asking, "What are you doing today?" might be considered a bit invasive.

He grabs a Grape Nehi and walks to the counter.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

So that leaves us with the non-threatening, "How are you doing today?"

He plops down the soda. The Attendant opens the bottle while he pays...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

But, if you were to ask me the more existential, "Why are you doing today?", I'd have to say, "Because I already did yesterday."

He grabs the bottle, stops...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Nice geology around here.

The Attendant unsuccessfully tries to formulate a response. Pulling the bottle with him...

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Much obliged.

EXT. VEHICLE PEN (TEXAS) - NEW DAY

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 gets out and tosses the keys to one of the them, as if he was the designated valet.

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

OVERSEER

We expected you over four hours ago.

CHARLIE

I'm here, ain't I?

OVERSEER

What did you do, go sightseeing again?

CHARLIE

It's called field research.

The Overseer laughs...

OVERSEER

Grossman wants to see you.

CHARLIE

Sure thing, bossman.

OVERSEER

How many times have I told you?

CHARLIE

Told me what?

The Overseer dismisses the comment by waving him off...

OVERSEER

Ahhhh.

INT. GROSSMAN'S OFFICE - LATER

GROSSMAN, a curmudgeon with black caterpillar eyebrows, jabbars on in the background.

Charlie listens respectfully, eager to please, even though cigar smoke is blown in his face.

GROSSMAN (O.S.)

You don't make it easy on me.  
Somebody's got a beef with you, and  
they decided to flex some muscle:  
said you were being insubordinate.

Grossman, sizing up what he just said, takes a lingering  
drag from his cigar before continuing.

GROSSMAN (CONT'D)

Now, I know what it means in the  
abstract, but just to make sure, I  
made a point to look it up again.  
Says it means defiant of authority  
or disobedient to orders. I've never  
known you to be guilty of the latter,  
but I guess you can always grow into  
that. Of the former---not saying  
there's anything wrong with it---but  
knowing you: I figure that's probably  
right.

Charlie flashes a brief smile despite the disappointment.

GROSSMAN (CONT'D)

I've prepared your final check. I  
had to deduct eight cents...for social  
security.

Grossman pushes forward an envelope and rifles through his  
papers.

GROSSMAN (CONT'D)

Charlie, you still owe the company  
twelve Benjamins for the school. I  
didn't see how you were gonna be  
able to pay that off at twenty-three  
dollars a month, so I'd look at it  
as a positive...a chance to  
reevaluate.

CHARLIE

I'll find something after I finish,  
Mr. Grossman. The company will get  
its money. You needn't worry.

GROSSMAN

I'm not worried. Obviously, I hate  
to lose you...

Both men stand up, and Grossman reaches out...

GROSSMAN (CONT'D)

...but good luck, son.

Charlie reaches out to shake his hand---an extended shake.

GROSSMAN (CONT'D)

I don't think you'll find the success  
you desire in a corporate environment.  
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 he's simply going through the motions of life---as if his best has already been confiscated from him. It's possible he weighs less than the heavy grocery bags he is supporting under both arms. They both stop at the walkway leading to Augustus' house. Hesitant at first, but perhaps out of sympathy, Charlie takes one of the bags. They turn and somberly trudge toward the house. Inside, Charlie eases the bag down on a table. Without looking back...

AUGUSTUS

Couldn't come at the worst time.

Augustus sets his bag down next to the refrigerator, opens it, rearranges some items inside...

AUGUSTUS (CONT'D)

Plenty more where those came from.

...to retrieve two bottles of cold beer. He turns around to find an empty room and an open screen door.

INT. LIBRARY, TARTLETON AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE - NEW DAY

The center reading area is flanked on both sides by bookshelves. Cold daylight filters through circa 1920s machine-shop-style pivot windows.

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

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

LIBRARIAN (O.S.)

Cut the gas!

...and then looks back down at her desk without missing a beat.

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

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

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

The Librarian looks back up at M.L. M.L. looks over at the librarian. Like a dare, M.L. musters a courage that reads: he is mine. The Librarian looks back down and returns to her business.

M.L. slowly approaches Charlie's table.

One of her friends, a buxom midwestern cheerleader, returns---almost intruding---and looks on from a bookcase.

M.L. stops a short distance from Charlie.

M.L.  
Charles? Right?

He looks up.

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

CHARLIE  
Geology.

M.L.  
Right.

CHARLIE  
Do I know you?

M.L.  
They say you're a real fream.

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

She doesn't say anything.

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

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

CHARLIE  
Alright. 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  
I do things with my egghead friends.  
How's that?

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  
Ok...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.

CHARLIE

The truth is... I don't even do things  
with egghead friends.

M.L.

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 leaves.

CHARLIE

Can you give me the initials?

With her back turned, she whips her head back and smiles...

M.L.

Nice try.

CHARLIE

Will I see you again?

She turns her head back around.

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 his full graduation garb, gets out and walks around the car with a spring in his step, and with his hand on the hood, pivots himself around to open the driver's side door.

M.L. emerges with her cap and gown.

They seem really comfortable with each other.

M.L.

What are we doing out here, Charles?

CHARLIE

Wait and see. 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 dunes spotted with tufts of wild grass and reach the summit of one: a gorgeous view of a long flat beach that stretches to the horizon.

They sprint toward the water and Charlie tries to run and 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 and squeezing out water.

A sheet of water makes its way to them, enveloping them and splashing around their ankles.

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

CHARLIE

(inaudibly)

Just like a terminal moraine.

M.L.

(not hearing him)

What's that, Charles?

CHARLIE

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

M.L.

Yeah.

CHARLIE

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

M.L.

What's it called?

CHARLIE

A terminal moraine.

M.L.

Only you.

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

They enjoy a wordless reverie.

M.L. (CONT'D)

So, what does the future hold in store for Charles?

Charlie stops.

CHARLIE

Ever hear about the Parable of the Unreasonable Dream?

M.L.

Tell me.

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

CHARLIE

Two men, each with a dream. The first guy? 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 by asking the universe for 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

Right. So, what do you think happened?

M.L.

The reasonable man got his dream, of course.

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

M.L. (CONT'D)

Whose dream was granted?

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 their dream, Charles?

She hangs in limbo.

Finally...

CHARLIE

Both! Both were granted their dream.

Charlie walks off by himself---as if he is disappointed in her---or frightened by the cruelty of it all.

M.L.

Who did you get this from?

Looking down at the water---as if there is an invisible boundary---she stays behind, watching him as he strolls off lost in thought.

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), looks like an academic type kept in an office for his own safety.

INTERVIEWER 1

Now, why did you start at Tartleton?  
Surely you could have gone somewhere else?

CHARLIE

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

INTERVIEWER 1

Your father was an oil man?

CHARLIE

That's right. Wildcatter.

INTERVIEWER 1

And how did that pan out for him?

CHARLIE

Well, he made it and he lost it.

INT. OFFICE 2

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

INTERVIEWER 2 (O.S.)

What would you say is your greatest strength?

CHARLIE  
Perseverance.

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

INTERVIEWER 2  
So, you've got some moxie.

CHARLIE  
I'd like to think so.

INTERVIEWER 2  
There are a lot of able people who have applied for this position, Mr. Steen...

CHARLIE  
That doesn't surprise me.

INTERVIEWER 2  
...and they all say the same thing.

CHARLIE  
Can they back it up?

INTERVIEWER 2  
What would you say is your greatest weakness?

CHARLIE  
I'd say it is interviewing. I'm better out in the field.

INTERVIEWER 2  
Right. But you don't get out into the field without going through my office first.

INT. OFFICE 3

Charlie sits in front of a desk. No one is speaking, as if the first to speak loses.

We can hear someone handling a piece of paper---the sound of frustration. Charlie's eyes try to get a read on the situation.

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

Sweaty 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.

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

Another nostril flare. He slides the resume away.

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.

INTERVIEWER 3 (CONT'D)

Can't do it.

He slides the resume all the way back to Charlie, who retrieves it.

INTERVIEWER 3 (CONT'D)

Thanks for coming in.

Interviewer 3 returns to his paperwork on his desk, as if nothing happened.

Without looking up...

INTERVIEWER 3 (CONT'D)

Leave the door open.

Charlie sees his own way out. As he looks back, Interviewer 3's breathing sounds labored, as if he's getting cooked in his own office. Charlie closes the door anyway.

INT. HOTEL LOBBY - NIGHT

Charlie is in a poorly lit wood-paneled phone booth.

CHARLIE

I tried just 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

I'll try a few more. Maybe I'll contact some coal operations back east.

M.L. (V.O.)

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

CHARLIE

Haven't you heard?

M.L. (V.O.)

Heard what?

CHARLIE

I'm all out of credit.

CUT TO:

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

The home advertises the economy of a strict household. M.L. is in the dark foyer---the only light spilling in from an adjacent room. She forces a smile...

M.L.

(on the phone)

You make me laugh, Charles.

CHARLIE (V.O.)

Just like my father. But at least he struck it rich once.

A pregnant pause. Filling the silence, she offers...

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

With a few oil rigs dotting the landscape and storm clouds on the horizon, Charlie walks through an empty field.

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

Charlie 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 others. 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. Parkes-Robinson will see you now.

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

CEO OFFICE

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

Charlie doesn't sit---but waits to be prompted by HILLIARD PARKES-ROBINSON, mid 60s, looking out the window. 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

Look at you, Mr. Steen. I envy you.

CHARLIE

Envy me?

HILLIARD

You've got your youth, your looks, your energy. You're gonna need it.

CHARLIE

Sir, I don't understand.

HILLIARD  
Of course you don't. You're still  
too young to know.

CHARLIE  
To know what, sir?

HILLIARD  
Every hear of Valparaiso?

CHARLIE  
No, sir.

HILLIARD  
It's a paradise. Absolute paradise.

CHARLIE  
I don't follow...

HILLIARD  
And you better enjoy it.

Hilliard turns back toward the window.

CHARLIE  
About the job...

HILLIARD  
Don't interrupt a man caught up in  
his own nostalgia.  
(more gently)  
It's all he's got left.

Charlie doesn't know if he should answer, but punctuates the  
awkward silence with...

CHARLIE  
Yes, sir.

Turning back around...

HILLIARD  
I can see that your pilot light is  
still on.

CHARLIE  
I don't think I get...

HILLIARD  
I see something in you, Mr. Steen. I  
can 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

Does that mean you're offering me  
the job?

HILLIARD

A job's a job, young man. Who cares  
about a job when there is Valparaiso.

Hilliard prepares some scotch for both.

CHARLIE

I don't know if I could afford this  
Valparaiso without income.

HILLIARD

Details, relax.

He hands Charlie a scotch.

CHARLIE

Is it a place?

HILLIARD

Is it a place? It is my life. "Mi  
Vida."

CHARLIE

Must be some good memories.

HILLIARD

The best, Mr. Steen. The best.

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

HILLIARD (CONT'D)

Welcome to Standard Oil, son.

Charlie gives him an enthusiastic shake.

CHARLIE

For a minute there I didn't think  
I'd get the job.

HILLIARD

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

Hilliard turns around to look out the window again.

CHARLIE

Thank you for this opportunity, sir.

HILLIARD

Just make me proud.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Charlie is in a drab hotel room that looks like it has been decorated by an interior designer who specializes in funeral parlors. Charlie on the phone...

CHARLIE

Wanna know how much I'll be making?

M.L. (V.O.)

Charles, 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

Suffice it to say I can pay off  
Chicago Bridge and Iron in half a  
year.

(beat)

It solves one problem but creates  
another.

M.L. (V.O.)

What?

CHARLIE

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 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 looking out  
at the bright orange sunset in the window.

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

I already did. Thank you.

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 notices 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 over-achiever who never got his due, but the one guy you can always count on in a pinch.

McGill and Charlie head toward his 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?

He 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  
The cost of the 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  
I was only up there for a year. 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

We found a gusher.

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-he-do-that? kind of look on his face.

PERUVIAN OIL FIELD - LATER

Another rig oozes oil around the shaft entrance.

FIELD OFFICE - NIGHT

Champagne all around.

PERUVIAN OIL FIELD - NEW DAY

Charlie is busy tending a drilling rig.

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

Parkes-Robinson?

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.

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. Your secret. I mean, you come down here with an invisible divining rod or something, walk around in circles, put chicken scratches on a 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?

MCGILL  
Yeah.

Charlie beckons McGill to inch forward, confiding...

CHARLIE  
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  
Ok, 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...

CHARLIE  
M.L.

McGill shakes his head.

Charlie ascends the steps into the plane.

McGill explodes with...

MCGILL  
It's Motherlode, isn't it?

Charlie just 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.

McGill scratches his head as the plane rolls away.

INT. HILLIARD'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Charlie and Hilliard are standing in his office.

HILLIARD  
Was it everything I said it was?

CHARLIE  
Which part?

HILLIARD  
The most important one.

CHARLIE  
I didn't have enough time.

HILLIARD  
You've got to make the time count,  
son. Let's celebrate. What'll you  
have, a Scotch?

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  
If you say so.  
(beat)  
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  
Please. Call me Charlie.

Hilliard distributes glasses of scotch to all assembled.

WALLACE  
Did Hilliard tell you what he's celebrating?

CHARLIE  
No.

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 Charlie to you, Wallace. 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. Charlie 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 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

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

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

M.L.

(softly)  
Don't.

She runs off, with Charlie in 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 catches up. Continuing to slog...

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

Never got a chance to really thank  
him for giving me my start.

MCGILL

He didn't.

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

MCGILL (CONT'D)

(changing the subject)

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

Charlie forces a smile.

MCGILL (CONT'D)

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

CHARLIE

I don't think anyone really knew him  
all that well. A strange man, but  
interesting. 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 operate  
the rig.

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 dark and certainly  
nothing black.

He steps on one, pulverizing it.

INT. CEO 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 slightly 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. Can't find any anticlines.

OLIVER

Somebody had the notion that there  
is oil out there. Otherwise we  
wouldn't be having this conversation.

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

WALLACE

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

Charlie points to emphasize...

CHARLIE

Have you been out there? The only  
thing I can survey it for is road  
construction. There isn't any oil  
out there, at least not based on  
structures that are oil-bearing.

WALLACE

I don't believe you.

CHARLIE

You don't have to believe me. 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 have been brute-  
force, not based on known  
geology...which is what you hired me  
for.

WALLACE  
I didn't hire you, if you remember.

CHARLIE  
Science is science, Wallace.

WALLACE  
Unbelievable.

OLIVER  
Unbelievable. I mean, that you can't  
find anything out there. Right?

Oliver looks over to Wallace for approval.

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

CHARLIE  
You got amnesia or forgotten  
everything you ever learned?  
(to Oliver)  
Why don't you crack that window open  
and let's get some oxygen in here  
for Wallace.

WALLACE  
Never in my years have I ever  
experienced this kind of  
insubordination.

Oliver starts for the window.

WALLACE (CONT'D)  
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  
So I'm supposed to ignore the opinions  
of real experts just for you?

CHARLIE  
You're always ready to accept it  
when it supports what you guessed,  
and then you wanna reject it when it  
doesn't confirm what you dreamed up.

WALLACE

This map...

CHARLIE

This map is meaningless. Frankly,  
it's a piece of shit...the land  
doesn't care what the map says.

Charlie lifts a wooden chair....

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

What is this about for you? Control?

...and slams it on the floor.

WALLACE

Is it for you?

CHARLIE

Hilliard would have never....

WALLACE

With all due respect, Hilliard used  
to know how to pick 'em, but the  
last ten years?...he hadn't done  
anything important.

CHARLIE

And that makes you feel adequate  
now?

WALLACE

Ok, Oliver, get this guy outta here.

CHARLIE

I think we're getting to the real  
issue here, aren't we? I'm sorry  
this isn't another Peru for you,  
Wallace.

OLIVER

I think you're stepping over the  
line.

Charlie whips his head around...

CHARLIE

Is that a line on another one of  
your imaginary maps, Oliver?

WALLACE

Looks to me like your luck already  
ran out in South America, Charlie.  
You just wasted me a precious month  
on that site.

CHARLIE

Think you wasted a month? Well, 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)

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

And with that parting shot, Charlie storms out of the office. Oliver turns to Wallace...

OLIVER

Who's Grossman?