

"THE JEWEL OF GENOA"

Written By

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FADE IN:

EXT. SACRAMENTO RETIREMENT CENTER - DAY

Early-morning sunlight bathes the front elevation of the MARANATHA SENIOR RESIDENCE as it awakens with activity. Staff interact with a cross-section of residents, from those nodding in wheelchairs to the more actively alive. The sign out front reads:

MARANATHA SENIOR RESIDENCE
Independent and Assisted Living
"Living Closer to God"

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

ESTABLISHING (UNDER CREDITS): CLOSEUP of an old scrapbook lying atop a bureau. An old woman's hands open the cover and leaf slowly through the pages, revealing old photographs of:

CLOSEUP: A SIGN, circa 1930, reading:

Welcome to
MINDEN, NEVADA
Douglas County Seat
Pop. 1,840

CLOSEUP: A primitive Western sign, circa 1930, arching over an unpaved ranch driveway, reading:

DIAMOND M

CLOSEUP: Two handsome couples, posed in front of a 1932 Model A Ford roadster, rumble seat open. One strapping young man is wearing a silver Stetson, the other, smaller man, a straw boater. The young women smile broadly, as if sharing a joke. Behind them is a neat, whitewashed storefront; over their heads is a sign reading:

SILVER ROWEL SALOON
Food • Drink • Entertainment
Abner & Hattie Gardner, Props.

CLOSEUP: A stiffly serious, young rancher and his late-teens bride, displaying a wedding studio logo dated "September 5, 1936."

CLOSEUP: The same couple, older, with a smiling six-year-old daughter.

CLOSEUP: The same couple, older, with a saucy, 16-year-old daughter and a timid-looking 10-year-old son, all posing in swimsuits in an arid lake setting.

The hands close the scrapbook, carry it to suitcase on a bed, and pack it carefully away.

INT. MARANATHA BEDROOM - DAY

Standing before his mirror, BARNEY RASMUSSEN cinches a turquoise bolo tie into his Western shirt collar. He carefully dons and adjusts a cowboy hat that would have made Roy Rogers jealous.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. TRAILWAYS BUS - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Forty years younger, Barney sits in the driver's seat of a long-haul passenger bus. He adjusts his driver's cap to a jaunty angle and appears satisfied. He opens the door and begins greeting his period passengers gaily. He makes one and all laugh, and comfortable.

INT. MARANATHA BEDROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

HECTOR ALVAREZ buttons his dated but still-natty jacket, steps to his bureau and puts on his wristwatch. He looks at an old portrait of himself in his Marine dress uniform, circa 1943.

INTERCUT WITH:

EXT. LANDING CRAFT (LST) - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Artillery and mortar rounds splashing all around him, a tense Lance Corporal Hector Alvarez crouches in a landing craft and clutches his M-1. SUDDENLY, the LST's gate drops and he follows his platoon mates into the waves, scrambling for the beach.

INT. MARANATHA BEDROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

Hector replaces the photo and goes to the corner of the room and takes the handle of a small dolly holding an oxygen cylinder. A mask and tubing are attached. He leaves, wheeling the dolly behind him

INT. MARANATHA BEDROOM - DAY

Dressed to go out, BEATRICE KNUDSEN finishes smoothing the duvet on her twin bed.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. U.S.O. BALLROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

A head-turner even in an olive-drab uniform, a saucy Beatrice picks up dance cards from drink and butt-laden tables, dodging G.I. pinches. She mounts the bandstand, caresses the microphone, and begins crooning.

INT. MARANATHA BEDROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

Beatrice crosses the room to BERTHA SUE HANKS. She straightens the bow on her roommate's blouse and touches her cheek.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. SOUNDSTAGE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Stunning in a slinky gown, Bertha Sue leans in as a makeup artist touches her up on a set decorated with "Buy Bonds" paraphernalia. The director approaches.

DIRECTOR

We're ready, Bertha Sue. We truly appreciate this.

BERTHA SUE

Least I can do, with a war on.

INT. MARANATHA BEDROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

ELLIE BUSH sits alone in a dark room overstuffed with religious artifacts. She rises and straightens her prim, boring dress.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. APARTMENT - DAY (FLASHBACK)

"Civil Defense" armband in place and notepad in hand, an identical but much younger Ellie peers through her front room blinds to the street below. Her neighbors are furtively loading foodstuffs into a car.

ELLIE

(acidly)

Another rationing violation,
eh? Well, we'll just see
about that!

INT. MARANATHA BEDROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

Ellie exchanges a severe, self-approving look with her reflection, takes up her Bible and handbag, and bustles out.

INT. MARANATHA BEDROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

Hale and ramrod-straight despite her 83 years, PEARL OPAL VENEMAN MUTTER stands in her half of the room and finishes dressing. In a pale pastel pantsuit, she turns from the closet to the bureau. She retrieves her sun hat, gloves, and purse and makes for the door. She hesitates.

PEARL

(to herself)

Oops! Almost forgot!

Pearl crosses to her freshly made bed, reaches under the pillow and retrieves a balled-up napkin. She opens it and removes a tiny, peach-colored, oval tablet.

PEARL (V.O.)

Huh. Xōnoft. Get on it,
like Fern, you don't give a
shit. Get off it too quick,
you can't stop.

Pearl shrugs.

PEARL
(to herself)
Oh, well--it'll come in handy
today.

Pearl adds the pill to several others in an Altoids tin in her purse, smiling at its "Curiously Strong!" slogan. She walks around the other, vacant bed and pauses to stare at it.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SAME BEDROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

TITLE OVER:

12 Years Earlier

Pearl enters the room, followed by HATTIE GARDNER, 73. She is diminutive and rambunctious. They're in high spirits. A porter trails, laden with Hattie's luggage.

PEARL
(laughing)
Well, dear, that was some
send-off for your Abner,
wasn't it?

HATTIE
(also laughing)
Gracious, Pearl. Did you see
the Reverend go weak in the
knees when I put up that
picture of Abner in his derby
hat and favorite sleeve
garters?

PEARL
In death as in life, I always
say. Ab spent more time
prayin' in that back card
room of yours than he ever
did in church.

Hattie eases herself onto her new bed, with some difficulty.

PEARL

By the way, who's going to run the Silver Rowel now?

HATTIE

Oh, there's a nice couple worked off and on for us for a dozen years willin' to lease. Give me time in my "retirement" to decide who gets the place.

Pearl sits down on her own bed.

PEARL

Got anybody in mind, since Johnny moved back East?

HATTIE

Stevie Hutchinson, maybe, if he hasn't settled on somethin' by then, and Johnny stays away.

HATTIE

(to the porter)

You can just set those down in the closet. Mind that heavy one, please.

The porter obeys, but the heavy case slips a little. Glass clinks noisily when it hits the floor.

Pearl and Hattie share a flustered look. The orderly looks suspiciously at the bag, then the girls. Pearl leaps up and crowds the porter toward the door.

PEARL

That'll be all, dear. Thank you!

The porter shrugs and departs. Pearl sits beside Hattie and hugs her with feeling.

PEARL

I'm so happy you're here.
I've been lost the seven
years since Earl died and
Delroy uprooted me to this
place. Your letters and
calls all that's kept me
goin', really.

HATTIE

Me too, honey.

Hattie takes in her new surroundings.

HATTIE

Well. Ab and I were more
grasshoppers than ants, I
guess. All we had was the
bar, restaurant, and the flat
upstairs. It's awful good of
your boy to put me up like
this.

PEARL

(archly)

Least Delroy could do. I
made it a condition of my
future good behavior.

HATTIE

Anyway, here I am. Don't
know what I'll do without
tables to wipe down and
drunks to sing to, on
weekends.

Pearl slips her hands around Hattie's.

PEARL

Don't worry. There's a piano
in the day room; we're
desperate for somethin'
besides hymns.

(slyly)

Besides, we'll find ways to
occupy ourselves--always
have.

Pearl rises and helps Hattie up.

PEARL
Now, let me introduce you to
"dinner"--the shut-in's
version of airplane food.

They depart for the dining room.

INT. SAME BEDROOM - LATER THAT EVENING (FLASHBACK
CONT'D.)

Pearl prepares for bed, while Hattie unpacks her cases.

HATTIE
You were right as rain,
Pearl. That was a long way
from Nevada grain-fed beef.
What was that called, again?

PEARL
"Salisbury Steak"--so they
say.

HATTIE
So you say. Snouts and lips,
I say. Calls for a nightcap.

Hattie pulls a fifth of WHISKEY from the heavy case.

HATTIE
The usual?

Pearl opens her purse and pulls out two small cans of
lemon-line soda purloined from the dining room. She
lifts them toward Hattie.

PEARL
"Seven and Seven."

Hattie retrieves their two glasses from the bathroom,
sets them on her bureau, and pours two generous drinks.

HATTIE
Bar's open!

PEARL

WHOO! Go easy, girl! That half-case you smuggled in has to last a good long while.

Hattie picks up the drinks, carries one to Pearl and sits on her bed, facing Pearl.

HATTIE

No worry, there. I've already set up a regular delivery schedule.

PEARL

What? How'd you manage that?

HATTIE

(between sips)

Bein' in the saloon trade has its perks. You remember Terry Crook, the Seagram's distributor?

PEARL

After my time, I think.

HATTIE

I talked the deed to his house off the poker table and back into his pocket one Saturday night, a while back.

Pearl slaps her thigh.

PEARL

You did enough of THAT in your time!

HATTIE

(pensively)

I don't know which I'll miss more--the characters or the counseling ...

(continues)

Anyway, Terry's my new "nephew" and he'll be here twice a month, bearing gifts.

SUDDENLY, Pearl grabs her purse and digs.

PEARL

Now that we have the
equipment, we can have a
proper ceremony!

She produces a balled-up dinner NAPKIN and corrals the
Mutter family BIBLE and Hattie.

PEARL

Bring your drink, hon, and
let's "process" to the
crapper.

Pearl steps in mock reverence into the bathroom; Hattie
plays along and dodders behind. They place their drinks
on the toilet's TANK. Pearl unwraps the napkin and
removes a small, peach-colored pill from it, which she
puts in the center of the Bible, held flat in one hand.
She smooths the napkin loosely over it and takes the
arrangement in both hands, outstretched over the BOWL.

PEARL

Reverend Gardner, prepare to
flush!

At the tank, Hattie poises over the HANDLE.

PEARL

"To thine depths, O Lord, we
consign your faithful if
unrequited servant ..."

Pearl tips, the pill drops, and Hattie flushes. They
render solemn, simultaneous salutes and retrieve their
glasses.

PEARL

Here's to total
consciousness!

HATTIE

Hear, hear!

They clink, drink, and spill back into the bedroom, in
stitches.

HATTIE

That was classic, how you hid
that thing in your mouth so
long, nobody the wiser!

PEARL

No worse than a dip o'
"snoose." What kind of
cowhand would I be if I
couldn't cuss, chew, and
spit, while holdin' a piggin'
string in my mouth?

They sit on their beds, still enjoying themselves.

PEARL

Earl always said, if there
was one thing of mine he had
to save in a fire, it'd be my
mouth.

Pearl gives Hattie a look of delicious satisfaction.

PEARL

Said he enjoyed every one of
its many talents.

Hattie's mouth drops open.

HATTIE

Pearl Opal Veneman Mutter!

PEARL

Look at this! Pearl shocks
Hattie, for a change!
Revenge is mine!

Their laughter trails off to smiles, then a sip or two.

HATTIE

How'd you get on that stuff,
anyway?

Pearl darkens.

PEARL

You know me--"Stand Up and
Speak Up, then Shut Up."
Earl's passin' bein' so
sudden, I was a case. Delroy
hired a pill-peddler to keep
me quiet.

HATTIE

How long did you actually
take them?

PEARL

Long enough to get through
the grievin'. Poor
substitute for love and
comfort but, when you're
stuck with strangers ...

They reflect, a little. Pearl shakes it off and raises
her glass again.

PEARL

That's all behind us, now.
Here's to good times, old and
new.

HATTIE

Right back at you, honey.

Girlish giggles ensue.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SAME BEDROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK CONT'D.)

TITLE OVER:

Two Weeks Ago

Hattie, now 85, lies in a robe on her bed, an air cast
on her leg. Pearl sits anxiously at her side.

HATTIE

Aw, it ain't so bad, honey.
Four days of hospital tests
and all they found was a
sprain.

PEARL

Sure--they kept you in just long enough to soak up a little extra Medicare and deprive me of a roommate!

HATTIE

Don't you fret--I'll be up on that walker directly, and right across the way.

PEARL

Oh, Hattie! You're goin' to hate "assisted living." Nothin' but rules, and the deaf and demented over there.

HATTIE

(haltingly)

We'll still see each other, sometimes.

PEARL

And breakfast at seven AM? You haven't dragged out of bed before ten since baby Johnny could find his own milk!

An orderly enters, transfers Hattie to a gurney, and wheels her out. She waves, weakly. Pearl raises her arms in futile protest, drops them, then sits, alone and dejected. A few moments pass; her head comes up again.

PEARL

This just isn't right, and I'm not takin' it lyin' down!

INT. SAME ROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

Pearl leaves the empty bed and moves behind the half-closed door, looking in the full-length mirror.

She sees herself as a younger woman: Strong, brown, with auburn locks, bold, clear eyes, and a laughing mouth. Her sturdy frame fills a faded denim shirt, Levi's, and rough-out boots. She has sinewy forearms and gnarled hands with the veins, knots, and calluses standard on the wife of a working cattle feeder.

PEARL (V.O.)

Where did she go?

She addresses her reflection.

PEARL

Well, I'm going t' find her again, and the lookin' starts now!

The door parts slightly and another, dark-haired woman with brown skin appears - MARISOL CONTRERES, the nurse-assistant.

MARISOL

Señora Mutter, are you ready? You must hurry or you will miss your bus!

Pearl braces Marisol at the upper arms.

PEARL

Marisol, you've been real good to me--made life in this place bearable. Almost. I'm goin' to miss you the most.

MARISOL

(puzzled)

But, Señora; you are only going overnight to the South Shore, as always. Yes?

PEARL

Well--

Pearl gets a mischievous smile and a nudge from her attendant.

MARISOL

Maybe even to gamble a
little, yes?

PEARL

Whoop-tee-do. If "Miss Goody
Two Shoes" takes her eyes off
us for five minutes. Anyway,
goodbye, Marisol.

Pearl brushes by Marisol, avoiding her eyes.

MARISOL'S P.O.V.: Pearl's resolute figure recedes down
the dim hallway toward the foyer's bright sunlight.

PEARL (V.O.)

Just a few more hours, and
everything will be fine.

EXT. MARANATHA PARKING LOT - DAY

ANNA MAE MCDONALD, Maranatha's pinch-faced Director of
Recreational Services and Spiritual Development, stands
beside the steps of a converted, Blue Bird mini-
schoolbus. She is thirty-six and plain, with just a
hint of possibility. She taps a pencil resolutely on
her clipboard. Twenty-odd residents, including Pearl
and Hattie, queue up.

ANNA MAE

(shouting)

Attention, "Sprightly
Seniors!" Listen, please, so
I can review the slate of
exciting activities we've
planned this trip for all of
you!

Pearl looks down at Hattie, hanging on her elbow and
shielded by confederates as they move toward the steps.

ANNA MAE

We'll start at the First
Church of the Evangelist, as
usual, for a spirited
afternoon of Holy Land slides
...

PEARL

(whispering,
to Hattie)

We're going to the playpen of
the Sierra Nevada, over a
Friday night, for church! Is
this a great goddamned
country, or what?

Hattie lets a snort escape, then quickly covers her
mouth.

ANNA MAE

... Then, a yummy early
buffet at the Royal Plate--

BARNEY (O.S.)

Aw, fer Chrissakes, Anna Mae!

Barney Rasmussen shakes his head.

BARNEY

It's the same dern trip every
time. Give us a little
credit, willya? All the
droolers are stayin' home,
anyway!

ANNA MAE

There'll be no cursing on
this bus, Barney Rasmussen!
Remember: "To say is to pray;
to curse is worse." Now, if
I may continue ...

Anna Mae prattles on. In the crowd, Pearl squeezes
Hattie's arm.

PEARL

Now, Hattie, you just stay
quiet 'til we get you past
Anna Mae--Okay?

Hattie nods. Pearl looks across at Beatrice.

PEARL

Bea, if you would just help me get Hattie up the steps, please--right after Hector goes into his little act.

Beatrice nods and catches Hattie's other elbow. Pearl taps Hector on the shoulder.

PEARL

Hector, you ready?

Hector turns and smiles like a secret agent. He plays out most of the slack in his oxygen line into large loops. As he draws abreast of Anna Mae he trips into her, magnificently.

HECTOR

Good morning, Anna
MaaaAAAAARRRRGGGGH!

Hector grabs for Anna Mae's upper arms after thrusting the loops over her forearms. She reacts by stepping backward and jerking her arms violently upward, which pulls Hector, the lines, the cylinder, and its trolley to her--tightly. She struggles, shrieks, and launches her clipboard.

In the hubbub, Pearl and Beatrice pack Hattie up the bus steps to:

INT. MARANATHA BUS - CONTINUOUS

A fussing Beatrice blocks the aisle and creates a bottleneck at the door while Pearl moves Hattie to the last row.

PEARL

Duck down, dear, while I find Lindell.

Hattie wedges herself between the seats. Pearl unlatches and lowers the top half of the adjacent WINDOW. Around the end of the building comes LINDELL MAPLES, an orderly as imposing and deep as Isaac Hayes. He covers his human warmth with a thin veneer of diffidence. He muscled their cases adroitly through the window.

PEARL

Thank you, Lindell. Hattie
and I--

LINDELL

Uh-Uh! I got a Spalding™
leather basketball signed by
Chris Webber and a half-case
of Seagram's. That's all I
need to know!

Lindell cocks an eyebrow.

LINDELL

Where'd you get the
basketball, anyway, Pearl?

PEARL

Gift from my son, Delroy.
Just the thing for an eighty-
three-year-old cowgirl, don't
you agree?

Lindell attempts a small wave good-bye, scarcely able to
contain himself, and heads back toward the building.

Pearl stashes the cases beneath their seat.

By now, pent-up demand to get seated forces Beatrice to
move to the rear. Barney and Hector herd a half-dozen
bystanding passengers, mostly male, that they've
conscripted into the last three rows of seats, forming a
defensive perimeter.

EXT. MARANATHA PARKING LOT - DAY

Lindell walks behind the bus, pauses at the EMERGENCY
EXIT DOOR and flips at an old, rusted PADLOCK HASP.

LINDELL

Somebody ought to fix that
latch before the damned door
falls off!

INT. MARANATHA BUS - DAY

Pearl leans over to Hattie, poked up behind the seat
like a groundhog.

PEARL

You ready, hon?

Hattie opens her shoulder bag. There, beneath the Preparation H and the Fig Newtons, Pearl makes out a nickel-plated, pearl-handled, .32-caliber semi-automatic pistol with a nine-shot magazine, and a box of cartridges.

HATTIE

(grinning)

Ready to fornicate, fight, or flee!

PEARL

Let's just stick with the "flee" part, for now.

Pearl gets up and marches to the front of the bus as it leaves the residence and sits down next to Anna Mae.

PEARL

Anna Mae, how's about a little variety, this trip?

ANNA MAE

What do you mean?

PEARL

Well, every time we stop at Denny's in Placerville for coffee and--uh--rest, then push on.

ANNA MAE

Yes?

PEARL

What say we go straight to Pollock Pines and stop at the Heidelberg Inn for a proper lunch?

Faces brighten at the suggestion; some issue timid murmurs of approval.

ANNA MAE

Now, Pearl. You know we have a schedule. Reverend Alston always expects us around four.

PEARL

It's still just the one stop--about the same amount of time, really.

ANNA MAE

I don't know. That's a real, "sit-down" place. Might be more expensive ...

Ellie, self-appointed assistant chaperone, speaks up:

ELLIE

Certainly sounds expensive to me!

Pearl ignores Ellie's unwelcome intrusion.

PEARL

I'll treat. I've put a little extra by for this trip. Anna Mae, I know you like a good, home-made pastry with your coffee.

Barney, Beatrice, and Hector whine on cue.

BEATRICE

I think that's a wonderful idea!

BARNEY

Yeah--come on, Anna Mae!

HECTOR

It would make a nice break.

ANNA MAE

Well, I don't suppose there's any harm--just this once.

ELLIE

Personally, I think we should
put it to a vote, because--

A forest of HANDS springs up and a chorus of VOICES cut
Ellie off:

VOICES

The Heidelberg!

ELLIE

(rising
halfway)

But, we always stop in
Placerville!

BARNEY

Aw, Ellie. You can change
your goldern diaper anytime!

Ellie goes beet-red and sits back down.

EXT. U.S. ROUTE 50 EAST - DAY

The ancient, shortish bus, cheaply repainted to barely
conceal the name of the school district that unloaded
it, wheezes under an overpass sign:

Rancho Cordova	7 mi.
Placerville	39 mi.
S. Lake Tahoe	99 mi.

INT. MARANATHA BUS - DAY

Recovered, Ellie is on her feet in her "teacher's pet"
role, trying to lead the travelers in spirituals. They
respond half-heartedly. They improve slightly when any
one of them makes eye contact with Anna Mae, so
individually they try to avoid it.

Anna Mae alternates beaming with approval at Ellie and
glaring at those muttering or showing any other
rebellious signs. She shows a habit of cocking her head
at odd angles, like a White leghorn searching for grubs.

EXT. U.S. ROUTE 50 EAST - DAY

The bus climbs a grade and rounds a curve, passing freeway SIGNS that read "Pollock Pines", then "Strawberry".

Around the curve, the bus sighs and turns right off the winding highway into the parking lot of the HEIDELBERG INN.

EXT. RESTAURANT PARKING LOT - DAY

Anna Mae alights from the bus first, torn between the break in routine and the prospect of freshly-baked pastry. Her pace shows the pastry is winning.

Ellie fails to form her peers into ranks, as usual. Without Anna Mae's backup, she is nearly trampled by her fellow passengers.

Pearl clammers down and breaks out ahead of the pack to stay as close to Anna Mae as she can.

INT. GERMAN RESTAURANT - DAY

Twenty-two hungry seniors pour in and overrun the officious, pseudo-Teutonic *MAITRE D'*, breaking into familiar cliques and seizing six TABLES of FOUR.

Pearl cuts Anna Mae out of the herd and steers her to the seventh table. Ellie heads for the third chair, but Pearl glares her away. Ellie retreats to the last table with an open seat. The lone diner there is ELMER DINWIDDY, a mousy, pious little man--in essence, Ellie Bush with a penis, but much less *machismo*.

Ellie seats herself without invitation or ceremony. Elmer gladdens as much as his inhibitions permit.

ELMER

What's going on?

ELLIE

I think Pearl Mutter is up to something. We'd better keep an eye on her.

They crane in synch, like two nervous, minor shore birds.

PULL BACK to see Pearl, frozen by a thought.

PEARL (V.O.)
 Oh, shit! I forgot--it's
 Friday and Anna Mae is born-
 again Catholic!

Their WAITER brings menus, water, and bread.

WAITER
 You ladies need anything else
 before I take your order?

PEARL (V.O.)
 How about a short miracle?

PEARL
 (to Anna Mae)
 Ever eaten here before, dear?

ANNA MAE
 No, Pearl--can't say as I
 have.

PEARL (V.O.)
 Thank you, Jesus!

PEARL
 (to the waiter)
 Can you give us a few
 minutes, please, dear?

Pearl looks the waiter away and interrupts Anna Mae's
 menu study.

ANNA MAE
 Now, I'm going to have to
 have fish, because--

PEARL
 I remembered. I recommend
 the Szegediner Goulasch with
 Spaetzle.

Anna Mae's eyes narrow.

ANNA MAE
 What is it?

PEARL

Swordfish stew. Trust me.

ANNA MAE

Maybe I'll just ask the
waiter ...

PEARL

No need, really. Our folks--
Earl's and mine--were German,
you know.

Pearl jumps up and tugs at Anna Mae's chair, startling her.

PEARL

Why don't you freshen up?
I'll order for both of us.

ANNA MAE

Well, it has been a while.
Coffee to drink for me. And
ask him to leave a dessert
menu.

Pearl waits until Anna Mae leaves earshot, snags the waiter and orders for herself and her chaperone, including dessert. Her relief is momentary.

Seated halfway across the room with Beatrice and Bertha Sue, Barney and Hector are halfway through pints of porter, and growing boisterous.

Pearl storms over. She hesitates before the virtual stranger, but abandons caution.

PEARL

(hissing)

You boys better knock it down
a peg. Don't forget--we've
got a job ahead of us!

Barney and Hector are penitent. Bea helps with a disapproving look. Bertha Sue keeps her own counsel. Beyond them, Ellie and Elmer watch and strain to hear.

Pearl regains her seat and her nonchalance seconds before Anna Mae reappears. She is barely seated when the waiter returns with their steaming plates.

WAITER

And here we are, ladies. Two generous helpings of exquisite por--

Pearl coughs violently. Behind her napkin, she finds the waiter's eyes and entreats him.

WAITER

--er, Goulash, with German noodles. Are you well, *Mein Frau?*

PEARL

Much better, thanks.

WAITER

Prima! Sehr Gut! Then ... Enjoy!

The waiter wheels with a flourish and a wink at Pearl. Anna Mae takes a tentative forkful.

ANNA MAE

Oh, my gracious. This is rich! Not as flaky as most fish ...

PEARL

Swordfish is like that. Game fish, you know. Hardy.

While Anna Mae stabs hungrily at everything, Pearl picks at her plate and eyes the entrée, side dish, and beverage in front of Anna Mae as they disappear.

PEARL (V.O.)

She'll spot it in the goulash. Noodle gravy's too thin. Coffee? Nope; aftertaste. One more chance. Don't panic.

Anna Mae finishes every bite and picks up the dessert menu.

ANNA MAE

So, what goes good after fish
stew?

PEARL

(quickly)

Big hunk of strudel, I'd say.
In fact, it's on the way.

(earnestly)

While you were in the
Ladies', Anna Mae, I
remembered that Mira Bridges
asked me about the "Eggs 'n'
Scripture" breakfast
tomorrow. Maybe you could go
fill her in while the strudel
heats up?

ANNA MAE

Why, of course, Pearl. Be
right back. Don't eat any of
mine, now!

PEARL

Don't you worry.

The waiter brings the strudel. With the skill of a burglar, Pearl retrieves three pills from the tin in her purse and pushes them into Anna Mae's hot pastry.

PEARL

(in a low
voice)

All right, you little
suckers. Melt!

Over her shoulder, Elmer comes into focus--alone, and watching Pearl intently. Ellie returns from "helping" Anna Mae, having seen her get up. She sees that Elmer has Pearl under surveillance.

ELLIE

Anything happen while I was
gone?

ELMER

I'm not certain ...

EXT. RESTAURANT PARKING LOT - DAY

Pearl strolls out with a Styrofoam box. When the door closes, she breaks into an octogenarian sprint across the parking lot to:

INT. MARANATHA BUS - DAY

Pearl ankles down the aisle, just a little out of breath, and sits by Hattie, who's lying on the rear seat.

PEARL

I'm sorry to leave you here,
dear, but I couldn't risk
Anna Mae finding out that you
weren't on her list. You
know Anna Mae and her
goddamned head-count!

HATTIE

(sits up,
warily)
Is the coast clear?

PEARL

For a minute, anyway. Left
Anna Mae to her Strudel.
Told her I had a headache.

Hattie sits up, watching the restaurant's door.

HATTIE

Are you still worried that
Ellie Bush might snitch on
me?

PEARL

I was, but I don't think
she's even noticed you're in
"assisted." She and Elmer
had their heads together in
there, though.

HATTIE

That can't be good.

PEARL

Aw--A busybody like her is so taken up tryin' to catch the neighbors at somethin' that she doesn't see the old man goin' over the back fence.

Hattie giggles.

HATTIE

Assuming she had one.

PEARL

Now, that Elmer; I'm not so sure ...

HATTIE

So, did you get those pills into Anna Mae?

PEARL

In the pastry. Even a blue-nose like her has a weakness, and her sweet tooth is it. Ate every damned bite.

HATTIE

How many?

PEARL

Bites?

HATTIE

Pills!

PEARL

Three.

HATTIE

You think that's enough?

PEARL

Hell, Hattie. We just want her off her feed--not dead!

Pearl hands the box to Hattie.

PEARL

Now go on, hon, and eat your lunch. The rest of 'em will be out soon. I'm sorry I couldn't get you a drink. They wouldn't let me take any beer outside.

Hattie takes a bottle of water out of her bag.

HATTIE

That's all right, Pearl. I got my "chaser" bottle right here.

Hattie opens the box and stares for a long moment at the thick, shiny Knackwurst.

HATTIE

You know, dear, I still miss Abner. A lot.

EXT. RESTAURANT PARKING LOT - DAY

The sated diners saunter out of the restaurant. Speeds and degrees of difficulty vary. Barney and Hector border-collie their press-ganged troops to the front.

BARNEY

Last one in has sexual dysfunction!

SAD-EYED MAN

After Viagra, who cares?

HARRIED FEMALE

I do!

INT. MARANATHA BUS - DAY

The passengers remount. Pearl quickly helps Hattie hide again. Their co-conspirators and draftees take up their positions in the last three rows again.

Ellie resumes her station near Anna Mae. Elmer troops down the aisle and stops, looking hard at each of the conspirators, then Pearl. They all feign innocence. He turns and sits in the row closest to them, on the other side from Hattie and Pearl. His new seatmate is annoyed and the conspirators trade looks of concern.

As the bus drones on through the Sierra Nevada, Pearl monitors Anna Mae's deteriorating diction. A languorous, swiveling nod, impervious to the bus's lurches, replaces her cranial tic.

Some under the influence of liquid German courage sneaked at lunch, some full and drowsy, and the rest just glad for the break, all but two of the other passengers overlook her state of decline.

Ellie begins to take her feet and open her mouth.

SAD-EYED MALE

Don't you have something to
DO?

Defeated again, she sits and resumes her own Anna Mae watch.

EXT. U.S. ROUTE 50 EAST - DAY

The bus chugs through Little Norway and around the Echo Summit hairpin, revealing the breathtaking panorama of the sculpted Tahoe basin.

INT. MARANATHA BUS - DAY

Pearl carefully hauls Hattie up to where she can see down into the valley. They whisper.

PEARL

This is it, Hattie: the great
divide.

HATTIE

Look there, Pearl. Good old
Nevada--our world!

PEARL

Right--where folks are more
caught up in life than in
themselves.

HATTIE

Yep. Where self-sufficiency is knowin' that you owe most of what you are to others-- and getting' comfortable with it.

PEARL

Not like California, where bein' "independent" amounts to cuttin' yourself off from others.

HATTIE

And windin' up alone with the most toys is most folks' idea of "success."

PEARL

(sighs)

Problem is, after a life of duckin' risk and sneakin' around conflict, they'll have to come to terms with the strangers they've shared space and air with.

Pearl breaks off and stares away.

PEARL (V.O.)

Like my son, Delroy, for example ...

HATTIE

Pearl? You okay?

The REAR WINDOW frames their heads as the bus winds down the hill, shrinking into the magnificent scenery.

EXT. LAKE TAHOE BLVD. - DAY

The bus turns right from Emerald Bay Road onto Lake Tahoe Boulevard. From the Sodom and Gomorrah of casinos looking south, we see it moving north.

INT. MARANATHA BUS - DAY

By now, Anna Mae babbles through a throat full of virtual molasses and can barely sit up. MR. ROSCA, the Filipino driver, is clearly alarmed but powerless. Ellie, Elmer, and a couple other disciples are on nervous alert, but the rest entertain themselves with possible temptations.

Pearl gets to her feet.

PEARL

"*Carpe Diem*," Hattie. C'mon,
and bring your bag.

Hattie crawls around her and makes her way forward, seizing the POLE behind the DRIVER'S SEAT. Pearl follows.

Elmer sees them go by and his lips part. Furiously, he tries to signal Ellie, but it's too late--they're in the way.

Pearl braces a slack-jawed Anna Mae against the bus's wall and watches intently as they enter Casino Row.

Pearl stands again, next to Hattie, who's behind Mr. Rosca.

PEARL

Mr. Rosca, please pull over
at the stoplight in front of
Harrah's.

(turning
around)

Now, folks, there's been a
slight change in plans.
We're takin' a little detour
over to Minden, where Hattie
and I get off. If everythin'
works out right, you'll be
back to the First Church of
the Warehoused and Waiting to
Die in good time.

Pearl gestures toward Barney.

PEARL

Mister Rasmussen, would you
escort Miss McDonald into the
casino and leave her where a
Good Samaritan might
eventually take pity, please?

Barney whoops and leaps up.

BARNEY

It would be my pleasure!

He throws Anna Mae's arm around his neck. She's
somewhere between comfort and coma. He whisks her down
the steps, across the street, and into the casino.

Elmer slithers slowly to the rear of the bus, carefully
turns the latch handle, pushes open the exit door a
crack, and climbs down. We see the door close, the
handle slowly return to its place and, through the side
window, Elmer mincing toward the entrance where Barney
disappeared with Anna Mae.

Mr. Rosca rises and begins to speak. Hattie fishes in
her bag, finds her weapon, and points it at his neck.

HATTIE

We mean business!

Mr. Rosca sinks back into his seat.

Pearl is bemused.

PEARL (V.O.)

Good old Hattie. Even when
her flair for the dramatic
outruns her good sense.

Now Ellie is up.

ELLIE

Pearl Mutter and Hattie
Gardner, you are both going
to burn in Hell FOREVER!

Pearl glowers.

PEARL

Ellie Bush, if you don't sit down and keep a lid on it, I swear to Christ you'll have to trade that gold cane for a white one!

Ellie falls back.

Barney bounds up the steps, fanning himself with his hat.

BARNEY

Mission accomplished, Pearl!

PEARL

Good work, Barney. Mr. Rosca, if you'll put it in gear, we'll be making a right turn about--

MR. ROSCA

No.

Pearl and Hattie look at each other. Mr. Rosca pleads with his eyes and his hands.

MR. ROSCA

I m-mean, I can't. I don't have a "Class A" license. If I get caught, I lose my job!

HATTIE

Uh, oh, Pearl. Looks like we've got a kink here.

Pearl studies the driver and mulls over her options.

PEARL (V.O.)

Here's a man who beat Demon Rum the old-fashioned way-- bypassed the "Twelve Steps" for the "Three-D" method. "Drunk; Dried out; Devout." He surely deserves a break.

PEARL

Barney, didn't you used to drive a bus?

BARNEY

Yes, Ma'am. Trailways-- thirty-two years.

PEARL

Think you can handle this antique Blue Bird?

BARNEY

Just like riding a bike!

Pearl turns back to Mr. Rosca.

PEARL

If you'll take a seat over here next to me, Mr. Rosca, please. Hattie, come sit behind us. Barney, you'll want to go north about a mile--

BARNEY

Know it like the back of my hand!

Barney slides eagerly into the driver's seat. Mr. Rosca seems more relieved than frightened as he takes Pearl's side, even though his peripheral vision picks up the occasional FLASH of nickel behind his left ear.

PEARL

Hattie, is that safety on? You know--in case of a bump. Or Parkinson's. Or something.

EXT. NEVADA HIGHWAY 207 - DAY

The Maranatha bus labors east, up the hill toward Dagget Pass and the Kingsbury Grade beyond.

INT. MARANATHA BUS - DAY

Pearl briefs Barney.

PEARL

Here's the plan: Turn north on Foothill Road from Two-Oh-Seven, take Muller Lane east over to Three Ninety-five. Turn south, drop us in Minden, then head right back to the church.

Barney nods and salutes.

BARNEY

Aye, aye, Cap--I mean, Ma'am!

HATTIE

What do we do once we get there, Pearl?

PEARL

It's a short hop out to the ranch. I figure I can bulldoze Charlie Nye, our tenant, into putting us up. Then we can puzzle out how to deal with Delroy.

Beatrice, Barney, and Hector are a young, fit bridge crew aboard a hurtling starship, awaiting the order to battle stations. Bertha Sue looks interested.

Ellie plucks up her courage enough to read Old Testament passages aloud, pausing to emphasize those that feature the fiery retributions of a just and vengeful God. Her two remaining, true-believer allies whisper prayers.

The rest hope for--they aren't certain what, exactly, but it doesn't seem to matter that much. The uncertainty reinvigorates them.

Pearl looks back through the window of the emergency exit and picks up the glinting of the LAKE. just beyond the Nevada Beach campgrounds.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MINDEN STREET - DAY (FLASHBACK)

TITLE OVER:

July 4, 1936

Pearl Veneman, barely 18, meets a 20-year-old Hattie Churchill Gardner under the sign over Minden's flagship SALOON, the Silver Rowel.

HATTIE

The old gal looks pretty good, doesn't she?

PEARL

Sure does. How long you been open now, since Abner spruced her up?

HATTIE

Over a year--since just after Johnny was born.

PEARL

Where is Johnny?

HATTIE

Mama's got him for the night. One less excuse to come home early!

ABNER GARDNER strolls around from the back--compact, ebullient, and looking more the dandy than the innkeeper this day. He lugs picnic supplies. EARL LUDWIG MUTTER, 25, cowboyed up as befits the foreman of and heir to the "Diamond M," trails him with more gear. On his head he sports a brand-new Silver Stetson. They stack their cargo on the passenger-side fender of his Model A roadster, and lash it down.

Hattie drags Pearl toward them.

HATTIE

(whispering)

Ab and I ride up front, you and Earl in the rumble seat. The noise will keep you from saying anything stupid before you're used to each other.

Pearl slapped at Hattie's shoulder.

PEARL
Hattie Gardner, if you aren't
the biggest--

HATTIE
I know you two. Ain't
nothin' ever goin' to happen
unless you get pushed into
it.

Earl shyly approaches the pair from behind.

EARL
'Afternoon, Miss Veneman.

PEARL
Goodness, Earl Mutter! You
gave me a start!

ABNER
Everybody ready?

HATTIE
Ready as they'll ever be!

Earl finds his feet, blushing. Abner grins and slaps
him on the back.

The young men head for the car. Hattie yanks Pearl
aside and whispers in her ear.

HATTIE
You can't be pure forever,
Pearl. Give it a chance. A
little Hell is worth a big
slice of Heaven--believe me.

Pearl betrays a mixture of apprehension and
anticipation.

EXT. ABNER'S MODEL A - DAY

The group drives west. Abner and Hattie converse
animatedly. Pearl and Earl try.

EARL
 (shouting)
 You plannin' on goin' on in
 school?

PEARL
 What?

EARL
 School! After you graduate!

PEARL
 (straining)
 What?

EARL
 (frustrated)
 I said--

PEARL
 What?!

Earl gives up and searches for something casual to do with his hands.

Hattie answers Pearl's glare with a smile.

EXT. NEVADA BEACH, LAKE TAHOE - DAY

The afternoon is spectacular. The sun and the lake battle to a draw in their shimmering contest, against the luminousness the shallows and evergreens.

Others are there, but the four focus on each other. They change into swimsuits under an old blanket and run, swim, wrestle, and lounge. They fall into the roles of creatures familiar to them. Abner and Earl preen, snort, and athletically circle the females, seated together. They alternate actively teasing their beaux and feigning indifference, by pretending to read-- feeding the boys' need to show off.

PEARL (V.O.)

Oh, I was a champion flirter;
Hattie saw to that. Up 'til
then, though, the most I'd
seen on a boy was a shirt
off. And that, from a way
off.

Earl's alabaster chest, trunk and legs, against his tanned face, neck, and forearms, fascinate Pearl. She hides her curiosity about the parts and the whole of his ranch-hardened body from the men, but not from her pleased *confidante* and supervisor. Hattie catches Pearl looking at Earl occasionally and her embarrassed pleasure earns a smile.

In their roughhousing, Pearl naturally touches Earl's chest, armpits, and the backs of his legs.

PEARL (V.O.)

It was the strangest thing.
That wiry-lookin' hair
between his nipples, under
his arms, and sproutin' out
of his suit was silky-soft.
And the skin on his upper
thighs was nothin' like his
strong, rough hands ...

Pearl surprises herself during their rituals. Her swimsuit rakes her nipples and tugs against her pubic mound, sending sharp currents of pleasure through her.

Out comes their twilight dinner. They eat hungrily, chasing fried chicken with lemonade. Gin and coffee follow the pie. Alcohol and libido accelerate their talk and laughter. Pearl looks into Earl's shy eyes, as clear and boundless as Nevada pasture.

EXT. NEVADA BEACH - NIGHT

Twilight yields to dark. Abner and Earl make a show of building a FIRE while the girls watch. The couples huddle under separate blankets. Up the beach, Abner and Hattie watch intently as the other couple talks quietly.

Hattie elbows Abner.

ABNER

Ow! What?!

HATTIE

C'mon, Ab. I've got her this far; time for Nature to take over. Let's give 'em a little privacy.

Abner nuzzles her a little.

ABNER

We could keep a little for ourselves, too, huh?

Hattie rumbles with laughter and grabs his backside. They rise noiselessly and disappear toward the car.

EXT. NEVADA BEACH - CONTINUOUS

Firelight flickering off his face, Earl speaks earnestly into the lake about his plans. Nestled on his shoulder, Pearl watches his strong profile.

EARL

Way I see it, it's best to cut the herd, take a loss, and put most of the graze into hay until beef prices come up some--

SUDDENLY, the staccato crackle and red glare of FIREWORKS erupt from both of the distant ends of the lake. Earl jerks his head back and forth in surprise.

Pearl laughs and impulsively pulls herself up to him. His leathery scents inflame her. He flushes and kisses her, hard. They press and gasp and slide into and around each other.

PEARL (V.O.)

Right then, the mystery unraveled. It was natural, warm, and right to me.

CLOSE-UP: As Earl penetrates her, she winces, hesitates; then pleasure spreads over her face, and she becomes more aggressive.

PEARL (V.O.)

And Hattie was right. A little pain gave way to a deep pleasure I'd never felt before.

Their undulating pace increases. Inside their heated passion, Pearl detaches for a moment and marvels at the coolness of their drenched, united flesh.

PEARL (V.O.)

It struck me. Unlike mindless, momentary, animal procreation, this was different. Special. Earl and I were gods, in an ancient and protected ritual.

Earl strains into ejaculation and a clinging and moaning Pearl follows. Distant explosions of high rockets bracket them.

PEARL (V.O.)

How about that? Real fireworks!

They lie together, swaddled, faces inches apart.

EARL

(haltingly)

Opal. My "Jewel of Genoa."
I-I love you. I want--Will you--?

Pearl pushed her finger to his lips.

PEARL

Yes, Earl, dearest. I will.

She encircles his body and buries his head in her breasts. She feels hot droplets on them as he tries manfully but fails to contain his relief and joy. She covers his head with kisses and mixes her tears with his.

EXT. NEVADA BEACH - NIGHT

LAKE P.O.V. - Sharing a blanket and each other, Earl and Pearl walk up the beach, chatting quietly. They veer toward the distant headlights of Abner's car. As they approach, above the lights are Abner, dozing behind the wheel, and Hattie, beaming.

PEARL (V.O.)

For me, from that moment
until my Earl died, nothing
was guaranteed, everything
was up for grabs, and
anything seemed possible.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MARANATHA BUS - DAY (PRESENT)

Barney hears sirens through his open window.

BARNEY

Uh-oh. Pearl!

The travelers can see the intersection where Muller Road runs into U.S. Route 395.

PEARL

Pull over behind the stand of
trees, will you, please,
Barney?

EXT. U.S. ROUTE 395 - CONTINUOUS

Pearl alights, sneaks to the edge of the trees and squints. The Dopplered wail of two Douglas County Sheriff's cruisers peaks as they flash past a sign at the intersection, reading: "Minden →."

PEARL

(to herself)

H'm. Anna Mae must be makin'
more sense by now than I
figured. Should have used
four.

INT. MARANATHA BUS - CONTINUOUS

Pearl re-boards.

PEARL

Barney, double back and take
Foothill north. Mr. Rosca,
you have one of those
cellulite phones. May I
borrow it a minute, please?

Barney makes a U-turn and guides the bus east. We watch Pearl sit and make her call without making out what's said. They turn right on Foothill; Pearl snaps the phone shut and sees a sign through the windshield:

GENOA, NV
Pop. 245
Welcome

Pearl stands at the front rail and watches intently up the street.

PEARL

There, Barney--Agnew Street!
Turn left, please. And ...
stop!

EXT. GENOA - CONTINUOUS

Pearl lets herself down and, hands on hips, takes it in.

PEARL'S P.O.V.: Large, two-story house; yellow clapboard, white trim. Magnificent, three-sided porch that would lengthen and magnify any summer night.

Pearl's face shows recognition.

BOBBY (O.S.)

Pearl! Pearl Opal Mutter!

A lean fifty-something, BOBBY SANGIACOMO bursts through the screen door, vaults down the steps, hoists Pearl and twirls her aloft, joyously.

PEARL

(gaily)

Easy, youngster. The only
knife I ever flirted with was
in the Silver Rowel, and I'd
like to keep it that way!

He sets her down, his face shining down on hers.

PEARL

Is that REALLY you, Bobby
Sangiaco?mo?

BOBBY

Yes, Ma'am!

(mock frown)

But, please; it's "Bob." I'm
a businessman now.

He sweeps his arm grandly toward the yard sign.

BOBBY

That is--when I'm not
coaching and recruiting for
U.N.R.

PEARL

(reading)

"Genoa Home Inn Bed and
Breakfast."

(continues)

God knows it was home to me
and half the town when your
grandparents lived here.

BOBBY

Just like your place was to
me, that summer I hired on to
buck bales. A good start on
manhood.

Pearl is grave.

PEARL

That was a harder year than I
bargained for. You were more
than a help to us, Bobby; you
were a good friend to Delroy--
when he needed one.

BOBBY

How is Delroy?

PEARL

(evasively)

We don't talk much.

Pearl sweeps aside the uneasiness.

PEARL

Is the hardware store still thriving?

BOBBY

Naw, Dad closed it and retired ten years ago. Between Wal-Mart and Carson growing, he took a real beating.

PEARL

How are Robert and Linda?

BOBBY

Dad died seven years ago and Mom, right after that.

PEARL

Oh, Bobby, I'm so sorry!

(angrily)

That's another thing--can't keep up, bein' so far away!

BOBBY

No, Pearl, I'm sorry. Mister Mutter buried nineteen years ago and me on the road. I didn't ever get to say good-bye to either of you.

PEARL

That's life, these days. Everyone's on their way somewhere else. Oh, what the Hell, Bobby--no need, now. I'm back.

BOBBY

So you told me, and you need a ride?

PEARL

Please--if it isn't any trouble.

BOBBY

Not a bit. Where we off to?

Bobby looks up at the branch full of owls in the bus.

BOBBY

And, is it just you, or am I gonna have to make several trips?

PEARL

(laughs)

Don't know right yet. Startin' out, it was just Hattie Gardner and me, straight to Minden. What do you have in the way of wheels?

BOBBY

The Inn has a nine-passenger van, mostly for fetching guests from Reno or Carson and squiring them around to the local, uh, sights. That do?

PEARL

Sounds fine.

Bobby heads for the partially-hidden GARAGE.

BOBBY

Back in a few, Pearl.

Pearl folds her arms and paces. Hattie gets down and watches her.

PEARL (V.O.)

Let's see. Barney and Hector are into this pretty deep, and we're gonna need leverage in case anything else jumps up ...

She senses someone behind her.

BERTHA SUE (O.S.)

I'll make a better hostage.

Pearl whips around and looks down into Bertha Sue's steady green eyes.

PEARL

Why, Bertha Sue Hanks! The new girl who doesn't say five words a month at the home!

(merrily)

Well--what are your qualifications?

BERTHA SUE

Ain't as big a pain in the butt as Ellie Bush, for starters.

PEARL (V.O.)

Other than being a mind-reader, I mean.

BERTHA SUE

I'm--used to be--an actress; pretty good one, too. My youngest is a lawyer back in Sacramento, with political ambitions. Complete horse's patoot. He'd do anything to protect his political future.

PEARL

(mock
seriousness)

What's in it for you?

BERTHA SUE

Publicity'd do me good. Might get some character work; look at Gloria Stewart! Besides, if my grandkids think I'm famous, maybe they'll tear themselves away from their video games more often.

PEARL

Well, I guess you're hired!

Pearl, Hattie, and Bertha Sue turn to reboard.

INT. MARANATHA BUS - CONTINUOUS

PEARL

Good news, Ellie. We're back
on track. You'll be in
Jesus' arms by sundown.
Hattie, get our things.
Anybody else want to remain
fugitives?

Barney and Hector get up, looking like schoolkids afraid
of being picked last for kickball.

PEARL

That's what I thought. Come
on, boys.

(to Mr. Rosca)

You can find your way back,
can't you? I wouldn't worry
too much. They won't be
expecting you--from this
direction, anyway.

Hattie, Barney, Hector, and Bertha Sue disembark.

Pearl surveys the remainder; her brow furrows.

PEARL

Wait a minute--where's Elmer?

Pearl sees satisfaction flash across Ellie's face.
Pearl gets it, and gets off.

EXT. GENOA HOME - CONTINUOUS

The boys wave stupidly like tots left off at day camp.
Pearl sees a hint of a smile from Mr. Rosca as he closes
the door and turns the engine over.

As the bus creeps away, more than a few disappointed
faces peer out at the five. Ellie glares out and gets
up.

INT. MARANTHA BUS - DAY

Ellie smiles triumphantly and claps her hands.

ELLIE

Now that we're free of
Satan's grip, everyone, how
about "Shall We Gather at the
River?"

ELLIE'S P.O.V.: The Sad-Eyed Man leads a unified chorus
of voices from 15 angry faces:

VOICES

Screw you, Ellie Bush!

EXT. GENOA HOME - CONTINUOUS

The refugees huddle.

PEARL

Wasn't Anna Mae that gave us
up. Elmer Dinwiddy must've
sneaked off when Barney took
her into Harrah's.

BARNEY

Aw, Dagnabbit!

HATTIE

Well, what next? We can't go
straight on back to Minden
now.

PEARL

I know, I know. Let me
think.

Barney brightens.

BARNEY

How about Mexico?

The other four glare at him.

BARNEY

(sheepishly)
Okay--maybe not.

Bobby pulls up in the B & B's VAN and winds down the window.

BOBBY

All set, Pearl?

Hattie and Pearl conclude a private conference.

PEARL

Just one more favor, Bobby.
May I use your phone?

BOBBY

You bet. Right inside the
door, in the hallway.

Pearl hustles up the steps and through the door.

INT. GENOA HOME - CONTINUOUS

Pearl dials the hallway phone.

PEARL

Hello, information? Carson
City or Mound House. I need
the number of the Rabbit
Ranch, please.

INT GENOA HOME VAN - DAY

Bobby heads north out of Genoa, up Jack's Valley Road,
and steers left onto U.S. Route 395, going north.
Before long, a Nevada State Police car screams by, going
south. He and Pearl trade worried looks.

PEARL

Guess they still think we're
headed to Minden.

BOBBY

Guess so!

EXT. CARSON CITY - DAY

The van continues north into the city, past the State
Capitol, and turns right onto East Williams, then six
miles on Rte.50 to Red Rock Road. It follows a series
of signs, passing one that reads:

HOT & NASTY SEX
300 Yds. AHEAD

INT. GENOA HOME VAN - CONTINUOUS

A cluster of low, manufactured buildings--easily mistaken for a close-order trailer park, but for the tawdry signs and the white stretch limousine out front--grows larger through the windshield. Fronting it is a high chain-link fence with a heavy, motorized, welded-steel security gate operated from just inside the entrance.

HATTIE:

Land! Looks like they're building an atomic bomb in there!

BOBBY

Entertainment is serious business in this state. Indulging the appetites of others for profit requires close supervision.

HAMMER, a bodyguard--Mr. T, but tattooed, 20 years younger, and drafted directly from the WWF--appears, peers into the van at Pearl and motions to his colleague LI'L JIMMY, a Caucasian copy, to buzz them in. Pearl is awestruck at the sight.

PEARL

Oh, my. Six o' them and Earl and I wouldn't have needed ropes and horses.

SUDDENLY, a bloatish apparition throws open her door, seemingly on the verge of a hearty greeting. It's CASWELL P. "PETE" COLLIER, every inch the retired, out-of-shape cowhand turned entrepreneur. He seizes her arms and yanks her out onto the driveway.

EXT. PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

PETE

Miz Mutter? Goddamn!

PEARL

(uncertain)

Is that you, Pete Collier?

PETE

You bet it is, Ma'am; best
calf-roper this side o'
Lovelock. Wull. Used t'be,
anyhow.

Pete cants his fleshy, slick-haired head and tries to
find his Italian shoes under the outcrop of paunch.

PETE

Still eat like a hand, but
the hardest thing I ride
these days is a desk chair.

Pete shields his mouth from the other's ears.

PETE

Officially, I'm "Cashwell P.
FoXXX"--three capital Exes.
C.E.O. of "Happy Hare
Enterprises, Inc." Show
business--film, publishing,
and ... pleasure.

PEARL

You own all this? No
offense, Pete, but the way I
remember it, everything but
your saddle wound up on the
card table most Saturday
nights.

PETE

Aw, I'm doin' better now, Miz
Mutter--but I ain't the
owner. That would be our
Chairman of the Board.

PEARL

Who's he?

PETE

(shrugs)

Dunno, rightly. Some dude in
New Jersey.

Pearl holds her counsel about Pete's appearance and his
new profession, and touches him gently.

PEARL

Thanks for your loyalty and
your shelter, Pete. I truly
appreciate it.

PETE

Least I could do for the best
and prettiest ranch cook in
five counties.

Now offloaded, they all see Bobby wave and drive off.

Pete and Hammer grab the girls' luggage and guide the
troupe toward the front door, held open by Li'l Jimmy.

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

The group enters the brothel. Pete shoos several
scantily-clad entrepreneurs, already in position in
response to the gate buzzer, toward their rooms.

PETE

Take a break, girls.

Pearl is preoccupied, but Hattie is homecoming queen.
Bertha Sue, on Hammer's arm, is already in character,
all method anxiety.

BERTHA SUE

I'm being held against my
will, you know.

Hammer acknowledges with a nod.

HAMMER

It's a hard world sometime,
Ma'am.

The boys try to absorb it all, wide-eyed. Barney is
simply transfixed. Hector studies the glamour photos
intently.

Pete drops his share of the bags, momentarily.

PETE

(to Pearl)

It's nearly five, so I'm
expecting our Friday-night
regulars pretty soon.

Pete points down a side hallway.

PETE

There's a new suite just
delivered for our fall
expansion that has three
bedrooms and its own bath.
It ain't been decorated for
business yet, but the
essentials are in there.

Pete picks up the grip and leads them toward a hallway.

INT RABBIT RANCH HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Pete shepherds them down the hallway and into the next
building. He stops near a doorway.

PETE

Sorry, ladies. I guess two
of you will have to double
up, unless the gentlemen are
willing to make up the
dinette.

Barney and Hector verge on chivalry, but Pearl speaks
first.

PEARL

Hattie and I'll be fine
together, thank you. Bertha
Sue will need her own room,
being under "house arrest"
and all, so you boys can take
the third.

PETE

You're the boss. Cook'll
whip up whatever you want
when you're hungry.

PEARL

Well, we don't figure to stay long, so we'll take meals with the others. Hattie, I guess we can put away our things.

HECTOR (O.S.)

Is "Marine Corps Marla" working tonight?

Everyone turns dumbly to Hector. He taps an envelope through his shirt pocket.

HECTOR

Eagle flew today, folks. I was goin' to sneak out and risk a little on the slots after Anna Mae was asleep.

(smiles)

New situation, new plan. My nephew may have to work harder to make tuition this semester.

Pete conveys concern.

HECTOR

Don't worry, Mr. Cashwell. Look.

Hector pushes up a sleeve, revealing a faded, "Birdie-on-the-Ball"/*Semper Fi* tattoo.

HECTOR

Japs couldn't kill me on Guadalcanal or Iwo Jima. I doubt Marla'll be able to.

PETE

(laughs)

Don't you want to inspect the goods first? Every customer's entitled, you know.

HECTOR

One Gyrene always trusts
another to get the job done.

Hattie nudges Pearl.

HATTIE

Sure you're up to it, Hector?

HECTOR

I'm seventy-seven, Hattie.
Never learn any younger.

Pete ushers Hector back toward the parlor.

HECTOR

(over his
shoulder)

Besides--just because I can't
ride the elephant doesn't
mean I won't like the circus!

INT. RABBIT RANCH BEDROOM (ONE HOUR LATER) - DAY

Pearl comes out of the suite's bathroom, wiping her face
and neck, into the sitting area. All but Hector are
there.

PEARL

Bertha Sue, you're welcome to
any "necessaries" you might
find in our things.

HATTIE

Including my hooch, if you
get thirsty.

BERTHA SUE

Thank you, Hattie.

Pearl menaces Bertha Sue with her washcloth.

PEARL

Remember, Bertha Sue: No
funny stuff!

BERTHA SUE

I've already tried all the bars on the windows. No luck.

PEARL

Barney, I think I have an extra razor if you need it.

BARNEY

No, thanks. I never shave on vacation!

Barney switches on the television.

BARNEY

Oh, boy--premium cable. Wonder if they have "Pay-per-View?"

(pauses, grins)

Get it? "Pay-per-View?"

PEARL

Find some news, Barney.

Barney begins flipping.

PEARL

Wait. There! Turn it up!

CLOSEUP OF TELEVISION SCREEN: A local ANCHOR reads a lead-in; over her left shoulder is a graphic of a school bus with a question mark superimposed.

ANCHOR

(filtered)

Today, a pair of gun-wielding seniors allegedly drugged their chaperone and hijacked their home's bus on Casino Row in South Tahoe. Here's Skip Peters, live, with more.

PULL BACK: The four are annoyed by the smirk in her voice.

TELEVISION SCREEN: SKIP PETERS appears in a casino lobby, shoring up a goggle-eyed Anna Mae. Elmer sways and fidgets neurotically in the background.

PULL BACK:

BARNEY

Look! There's that little weasel, Elmer!

PEARL & HATTIE

Shush, Barney!

TELEVISION SCREEN:

SKIP

Thanks, Alison. We're here at Harrah's with Anna Mae McDonald, recreational and spiritual director for Anathema--

ANNA MAE

(slurs)

Mary-nap-a-tha.

SKIP

That's Mare-A--

ANNA MAE

Mary-Ann-the-Puh.

SKIP

Uh, Marry-an-Patha--

ANNA MAE

(irritated)

Mar-uh-nath-th-th-th-AH, goddamn it!

Anna Mae paws at her mouth in delayed surprise. We hear Hattie's musical giggles.

SKIP

Whatever. So, is it true that you were drugged, held at gunpoint, and kidnapped by these women?

ANNA MAE

(pause)

Gunpoint?

SKIP

Our source tells us that the two suspects are former Nevada residents. Can you confirm that?

ANNA MAE

(pause)

Kidnapped?

SKIP

There's speculation that the suspects may have had help from co-conspirators in gaining control of the bus. True?

ANNA MAE

(pause)

Drugged?

Getting nowhere fast, Skip turns to the camera. Anna Mae continues to grasp at him.

SKIP

There you have it--straight from the horse's mouth--

Anna Mae surprises Skip with a snort, whinny, and stupid grin.

SKIP

Uh, back to you, Alison ...

ANNA MAE

(dopily
seductive)

You married?

ANCHOR

Uh--thanks, Skip.
Authorities believe the
suspects are heading to the
Minden area. Anyone seeing a
faded blue bus with the words
"Mara"--uh--that's "Maranatha
Senior Residence" on it are
requested to call ...

(becomes
filtered)

Pearl leans forward, still looking at the screen.

PEARL

Good. Looks like Mr. Rosca
got them back over to the
church undetected. That'll
give me tonight to think,
while all Hell breaks loose.

EXT SOUTH TAHOE CHURCH - EVENING

The Maranatha bus wheezes to a stop in the shadow of the
First Church of the Evangelist. Pastor REV. NOAH ALSTON
emerges, scowling. Ellie Bush swoops from the doors,
hard into him.

ELLIE

Reverend! Something terrible
has happened. We've got to--

REV. ALSTON

I know. Elmer Dinwiddy
called from Harrah's. He
asked for you. I'll drive us
over.

INT. SOUTH TAHOE CASINO - NIGHT

In his collar and relaxed blazer, Rev. Alston moves
uncertainly down a hallway with a vengeful-looking Ellie
clutching at his sleeve. They pick their way through
the usual array of excesses toward a welter of light,
noise, and confusion. They pass and overhear a pair of
croupiers on break.

CROUPIER #1

Who the Hell is that anyway?

CROUPIER #2

Got me. Security found her in the lobby, talking to her purse. The little guy was hopping around her like an organ grinder's monkey. TV crew showed up a little while ago.

ELLIE

(pointing)

There! There they are!

A small knot of reporters with notepads and microphones surrounds Anna Mae, still dazed but improving. She is confused and wary, but not entirely uncomfortable. Throughout, she keeps a weather eye on her new friend, Skip. A distraught but irrelevant Elmer spies his rescuers and runs over.

ELMER

Here you are! Thank God!
This is just awful!

Rev. Alston focuses warily on the media.

REPORTER #1

Miss McDonald! How dangerous do you think these women really are?

ANNA MAE

Dangerous? But they're my sheep, my little flock ...

REPORTER #2

Did you fear for your personal safety at any time?

ANNA MAE

(irritated)

Not really--until about five minutes ago ...

Rev. Alston hesitates, reconsiders and backtracks for the exit. Ellie and Elmer are aghast.

ELLIE/ELMER

(in unison)

Aren't you going to go get her?

REV. ALSTON

I'm not so sure that's such a good idea, right now. I'll tell the desk where to drop her, when she's ready. Let's go call the police and the home.

Ellie and Elmer follow, protesting.

EXT GENOA HOME INN - NIGHT

Two young Douglas County Sheriff's Deputies question a bath-robed Bobby by porch-light.

BOBBY

That's it, Deputy. I was going to call it in right away, but I was so stunned ... Must've been some kind of post-traumatic thing.

DEPUTY #1

(writing)

So, tell me again. When, exactly, did she produce the weapon?

BOBBY

Right after we got reacquainted. Came here because she knew me, I guess. Forced me to drive the five of 'em north.

DEPUTY #2

An old lady?

BOBBY

Hey--I've seen her fire a
Winchester off a horse!

DEPUTY #1

And the other three, the
hostages. What was their
state of mind?

BOBBY

Hard to tell, Deputy.
They're all really old, you
know?

DEPUTY #1

And you took 'em where?

BOBBY

One of those, uh, clubs east
of Carson. Rabbit Ranch, I
think. Don't get up there
often.

DEPUTY #1

(to partner)

Charlie, get on the wire to
the state patrol in Carson.
Tell 'em Minden was a decoy
and there's a situation at
the Rabbit Ranch. Armed and
dangerous.

Charlie goes to call it in. Deputy #2 shakes hands with
Bobby, then turns to leave.

DEPUTY #1

Thanks, Mr. Sangiacomo.

(pauses)

Lucky thing, nobody got hurt.

BOBBY

Indeed.

Bobby watches them depart, lights flashing. He speaks
into the air.

BOBBY

How was that, Pearl?

INT. STATE POLICE HEADQUARTERS OFFICE - NIGHT

CAPT. STEVE HUTCHINSON, regional Watch Commander, hangs up the phone and sips at a mug of coffee. He rises from the desk corner in the ready room and turns to his desk sergeant.

STEVE

Tim, raise those units north and south of Minden and relocate them to the Rabbit Ranch.

TIM:

Rabbit Ranch, Sir?

STEVE

Douglas County says that's where our fugitives and their hostages are.

TIM

Will do, Cap'n.

The sergeant starts for the dispatcher. An afterthought from Steve.

STEVE

Oh, and Tim--better call Floyd at home and tell him to raise a negotiation and response team, ASAP. I'll bet two counties and Carson are over there already.

Steve runs his hand through his hair.

STEVE

All that scanner traffic, most of the Fourth Estate should be camped out there by morning.

TIM

Want me to get the P.I.O. up to speed?

STEVE

Nah. I can handle this one,
when the time comes. I'll
call Miz Mutter's son out in
California, directly.

Sergeant Tim looks curious.

STEVE

He's a big-time lawyer--and
wrapped a little tight, I
hear. No reason for the
National Guard to fall out of
bed, too.

Sergeant Tim leaves Steve alone. He can't help a
chuckle.

STEVE

"Annie Oakley and Calamity
Jane bust out." Welcome
home, ladies!

He shakes his head and retreats to his office.

INT. MILL VALLEY BEDROOM - NIGHT

A couple lies in bed. She's dead asleep; his reading
lamp is on and he's propped up slightly by pillows.
He's just dozed off, his half-glasses still on this
face. Barely 60 and formidable even in repose, DELROY
MUTTER starts and mouths obscenities as he uncradles the
shrieking bedside PHONE. His wife, BITSY, moans and
rolls over.

DELROY

Thad, if this is another lame
excuse for not getting the
jury study out here by nine--

On the phone, Steve Hutchinson clears his throat.

VOICE (O.S.)

(filtered)

Mister Mutter?

Delroy rises to an elbow as legal papers cascade off the
bed onto the floor.

DELROY

Who is this?

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. STEVE HUTCHINSON'S OFFICE - NIGHT

STEVE

Captain Steve Hutchinson,
Nevada State Police, Sir.

DELROY

What--?

STEVE

Sorry to wake you, Mr.
Mutter. I'm calling from
Carson City. We've got a
situation over here involving
... your mother.

Delroy throws his legs onto the floor. Bitsy stirs
again.

DELROY

My Mother?!

STEVE

Seems--ah--she's taken a
leave of absence from her
primary residence.

DELROY

What happened? How did she
wind up in Carson City?

STEVE

Uh, she "borrowed" the bus.

DELROY

What?!

STEVE

Yessir. Seems she and Hattie
Gardner got a little
homesick.

DELROY

Jesus Christ! I really don't need this now; I've got a trial starting Monday.

(pauses,
irritated)

Can't Maranatha just pick her up, or something?

STEVE

I haven't been in touch with the home yet, Sir. I thought that, since she's your Mother, you'd like the opportunity to--

DELROY

Just--just have her call me first thing in the morning!

Delroy bangs down the handset. Steve pulls his away and looks into it.

STEVE

... And thank you, Sir, for your touching concern!

Delroy jumps up, paces, and mutters his misfortunes. He goes through the open glass door onto:

EXT. MILL VALLEY DECK - CONTINUOUS

Delroy finds the rail. He sees a figure below him near the pool and follows it onto the diving board.

Below is 19-year-old STACY OPAL MUTTER, her back bathed in moonlight. We track around and move slowly upward along her slender, black-tank-suited body. Her features are silhouetted in front of a bright patio floodlight above her.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT TOPAZ LAKE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

TITLE OVER:

Topaz Lake, Nevada

THEN:

July 4, 1953

Pulling back from the bright mid-day sun, we see OPAL MUTTER, 16, from the same angle below, first in face then in slender body. She also wears a black but more contemporary tank suit. She prepares to dive from a high rock, pausing to torment her brother Delroy and his summer companion, Bobby Sangiacomo, both 10.

OPAL

The eagle prepares to leave
her high perch, hungry to
attack the little chickens
below ...

She looks down into her brother's upturned, dread-filled face. Bobby watches, more curious than afraid.

DELROY

Opal, you'd better come down
from there--or I'll tell Ma!

Opal balls her fists by her sides.

OPAL

Oh, honest to John, Delroy--
you're such a baby! When are
you gonna learn to live a
little?

DELROY'S P.O.V.: Opal spreads her arms and takes off gracefully, soaring in a slow-motion arc. Halfway into the water, a sickening SNAP. Her legs collapse in a tangle. Her body slowly floats up. Her neck broken, her head twists oddly toward the boys, a blank look of trauma on her face.

Slow motion continues. Bobby's face comes into Delroy's paralyzed view.

BOBBY

(slow, echoed)

D-E-L-R-O-Y? H-e-l-p m-e!

Getting no response, Bobby splashes to the body and struggles it to the gravel near Delroy's feet. He looks into Delroy's face again, then runs off.

We turn and linger on Delroy's gaping, frozen face. The sun over his shoulder is suddenly blocked by a dark, hatted silhouette.

Delroy sees the shadow, turns. His mouth is open but no words come. He watches as his father Earl brushes past, hesitates in horror, and carefully picks Opal up.

DELROY'S P.O.V.: Earl turns and looms again, Opal's lifeless body draping his arms and his silver Stetson bunched in his hand. He gives Delroy a long look that reveals nothing, then departs.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MILL VALLEY POOL - NIGHT (PRESENT)

DELROY'S P.O.V.: Stacy climbs from the pool, looks up, and sees her father. She grabs a towel and sprints under the deck.

EXT MILL VALLEY DECK - CONTINUOUS

Delroy spins away from the rail, seething, to face Bitsy.

DELROY

What is she doing here?

BITSY

(defensively)

She worked a double shift, Delroy. She wanted to come by and cool off. I didn't see any harm--

Delroy storms by, pointing.

DELROY

I want her out of here! You know that!

EXT. RABBIT RANCH - SUNRISE

Morning finds four squad cars parked near the gate. Hammer brings coffee to the *gendarmes*; they chat amiably. A few station SUVs and TV vans are joined by the first satellite truck. Tension notches up with each arrival. The cops labor to keep the road clear.

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - DAY

Pete peers through the blinds, then steps back.

PETE

Shit. Here we go.

He hurries into:

INT. RABBIT RANCH HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Pete pulls up at a bedroom door and knocks.

PETE

Judge? You awake? We're
acquirin' a pretty solid
media presence here.

Muffled scuffling inside. The door opens. A
distinguished-looking, middle-aged JURIST appears, SHIRT
open, PANTS over his arm, and panic in his face.

PETE

(pointing)

Back door's that-a-way.
Limo's waitin'.

PETE'S P.O.V.: The Judge hurries away, revealing his
bare buttocks. A tie and pair of boxer shorts fly out
the door, onto Pete's feet.

PETE

Thank you, Mia.

Pete moves down two doors and knocks.

PETE

Senator? Sun's up.

The door opens. A leather-hooded head and long-nailed
fingers around a whip appear. It's RIKKI, a specialist.

RIKKI

He's tied up right now--for
another twenty minutes.

PETE

(shakes his
head)

Okey-doke, Rikki. Tell him
he's here for the duration.

RIKKI

Can I charge him again? He's
a shitty tipper.

PETE

Suit yourself. Just keep him
in there.

INT. RABBIT RANCH DINING ROOM - DAY

Pearl, Hattie, Barney, and Bertha Sue are finishing
breakfast.

PEARL

These eggs are good. Wonder
why they taste so much better
here?

HATTIE

Maybe it's the real
cholesterol?

PEARL

No ... it's something else.

Hattie is about to answer when Bertha Sue speaks,
without looking up.

BERTHA SUE

No scripture on the side.

PEARL

That's it!

Hector joins them with a full plate.

HECTOR

(singing)

From the HALLS of Montezoo-
OO-ma, to the shores of TRIP-
oh-LEE ...

HATTIE

Well, if it ain't the Latin
Lover!

Hector sings and hums ebulliently, smiling at them as he sits and begins wolfing his food. They regard him deliberately.

BARNEY

So, Hector. How'd it go?
Did you make it ashore?

HECTOR

(wipes mouth)
My boy, not only did I hit
the beach, I took the high
ground and--with a little
expert help--raised the flag!

Hectors waits. Barney's impressed. Finally, they all burst out laughing.

Pete enters.

PETE

Pearl, I hope we can wrap
this up before I lose the
whole weekend. My East Coast
associates take a dim view of
unexpected cash-flow
problems.

PEARL

Think it through, Pete. I do
believe the extra attention
might pay off, come
September.

PETE

Hadn't looked at it that way.
Yeah--charge it off to
"marketing" ...

EXT. CARSON CITY GAS STATION - DAY

A maroon station wagon emblazoned:

KORN-TV-7
"Reno's News First"

careens across U.S. Route. 395 into the station, causing screeching tires and a near-pileup.

The driver, DICK PRINCE, badly-toupeed and ferret-like telejournalist, jumps out, jerking on his blazer. Inside, RALPH, his camera/sound crew, curses and turns to restack toppled equipment.

Dick steams to the cashier's shack. In its window is the ubiquitous Western poster, on which one buzzard, perched in a tree over a waning, prostrate prospector, says to the other: "Wait, Hell! I'm gonna kill me somethin'!" It remains center frame. The slightly swarthy cashier leans on a hand, reading.

DICK

Rabbit Ranch!

CASHIER

'S'cuse me?

DICK

Rabbit Ranch! How do I get to the Rabbit Ranch?

CASHIER

I hope you're going there to relax ...

DICK

Listen, Abdul--

CASHIER

Name's Fred, pal.

DICK

I'm a broadcast journalist and there's a breaking story out there!

CASHIER

Oh. Late to the dance, are you? Take Three Ninety-five south and turn left on East Williams. Five, six miles. Watch the--

Dick hurries back to the car and peels out. Ralph's newly-stowed equipment tumbles the other direction. The cashier watches the car lurch into traffic again, leaving panic stops, curses, and digital salutes in its wake.

CASHIER

--signs. And a grateful Nevada goes with you.

EXT. RABBIT RANCH - DAY

Print and broadcast media take up every inch of ground unclaimed by cops and sagebrush. They occupy their time with loud, ceremonious bouts over territory and pecking order.

A cruiser with the small antennas and subdued emergency lights that signify authority arrives. Capt. Steve Hutchinson emerges. He huddles with a Carson cop and Douglas and Lyon County deputies. He gets a hand signal from the SWAT commander in a large, windowless van.

Seeing Steve, the press gang rushes and engulfs him with questions.

REPORTER

Commander, what is the state of the hostages? Are they alive?

STEVE

Whoa, boys and girls. It's "Captain." I've not yet spoken to the alleged perpetrators; I'm hopeful of doing that now. I'll have a statement when I know something.

Pete joins Hammer at the gate and hails Capt. Hutchinson.

PETE

(shouts)

Captain, I believe our fugitives want to pow-wow.

Steve breaks a trail through cameras and microphones to reach the gate. A news helicopter wheels in low to record this sudden action, kicking up dust and complaints.

STEVE

Who the Hell is that?

HAMMER

First Amendment Air Force.

Dick and Ralph roll up hard, scattering their peers at the back fringe. He and Ralph leap out and up, craning their necks.

REPORTER #1

Look, everybody. "Road-kill" finally decided to grace us.

INTERN

Why's he called that?

REPORTER #2

(points at head)

Bad rug. And how he leaves his interview subjects.

Steve spots them and smiles.

STEVE

(shouts)

Hey, Dick! Lose your invitation to the party?

Hammer signals and Li'l Jimmy buzzes Steve in. Inside, Steve follows Pete into:

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Steve removes his hat and sunglasses and waits for his eyes to adjust. Pearl, Hattie, Bertha Sue, Barney, and Hector are seated. Pete stands by.

HATTIE

My land! Is that YOU, Stevie
Hutchinson?

Hattie bolts haltingly to him. Steve looks happily embarrassed.

STEVE

I guess it is, Miz Gardner.

Hattie hugs his waist, then pushes back to look him over.

HATTIE

My stars and garters, look at
all that hardware. No longer
pushing a cruiser full-time,
huh?

STEVE

No, Ma'am. I've been
promoted way past my
usefulness.

HATTIE

(coyly)
Still single?

STEVE

Sorry. Lana Gaynor ran me
down and saddled me with
twins--Abner and Hattie.

Hattie beams.

HATTIE

Where on Earth did you come
up with those names?

He rests his arm on her shoulder.

STEVE

After this crazy old
saloonkeeper and his wife,
who helped me with my
homework and sent me home
with beer and smokes, so the
old man wouldn't hit me as
hard.

His voice thickens and softens as he fixes his gaze on
her.

STEVE

Who finally convinced me I
wasn't a waste of space, and
gave me the guts at sixteen
to pack up my sisters and
move to my aunt's in Reno.
Who came to my high school
graduation.

Hattie waves her hand.

HATTIE

Now, Stevie ...

STEVE

Who made a couple calls to
college friends and pointed
me toward a degree in
criminal justice.

He brushes his eyes and scans the room. Hattie
introduces everyone.

STEVE

So, Miz Mutter. I hear
you're masterminding this
conspiracy.

PEARL

Well, Stevie--uh, Captain--
Hattie and I were just
lookin' to get on back home,
and things got a little
complicated.

STEVE

"Complicated?" Assault and battery, kidnapping, and interstate flight, is all. Spoke to Delroy early this morning; his drawers were in a serious knot. Wants you to call.

PEARL

Huh--just like Delroy to put it on somebody else. He's why we're here, anyway.

STEVE

Ma'am?

PEARL

(emotionally)

Earl wasn't hardly cold before I found myself sittin' on a bed in a strange place, staring at a white-bread print o' the Lord.

Steve fools with his hat.

STEVE

Could've chalked it all up to a family squabble, Miz Mutter, but you inconvenienced your escort and dragged three other people along.

Hector and Barney grin like retrievers. Bertha Sue looks at Pearl, pleading for direction. Steve shakes his head.

STEVE

Feds can make a lot of hay out of cases like this. Another forty-eight hours and they'll probably be real interested.

Pearl thinks.

PEARL

What should I do, Captain?

STEVE

Tell you what. You give up a
"hostage" or two--

Barney clenches his dentures and juts out his jaw.

BARNEY

I ain't no "hostage," and I
ain't givin' up!

Hector is studious. Pearl nods at Bertha Sue.

HECTOR

I'll go. My people are a
little sensitive about
putting it on the street,
and--

(sly smile)

--my work here is done.

BERTHA SUE

(to Hector)

You'll need someone with you
who can handle the press.

Steve looks back at Barney.

STEVE

Mister Rasmussen, you got any
close family living?

BARNEY

Nossir.

STEVE

Okay. That's a good start.

(to Pearl)

How about you try to work
something out with Delroy?
I'll make up something to
feed those wolves outside and
get these two home. That'll
keep everybody busy for a
while. What do you think?

PEARL

(mooning)

Do I have to call him?

STEVE

Everybody says whoever opens negotiations, has the upper hand.

(winks)

Except the French.

Good-byes are said and Steve escorts Bertha Sue and Hector out.

EXT. RABBIT RANCH - CONTINUOUS

Steve runs interference for Hector and Bertha Sue through the maelstrom of surging cameras and shouting mannekins.

STEVE

(official
voice)

I've just spoken with the chief suspect, Missus Pearl Mutter, who's preparing a list of demands for reforms in nursing homes. As a gesture of good faith, she has released these two hostages into my custody. The negotiation team will be in contact, in due course.

REPORTER

How many hostages remain?

STEVE

Undetermined, at this time.

He waves off a torrent of questions.

STEVE

I have nothing more substantive to report at this time. Deputy--

He grabs a deputy's lapel and reads his nameplate.

STEVE (CONT'D.)

--Goodman will brief you further and apprise you of any changes.

The horde turns on the mortified deputy. Hector slips into the back seat of the cruiser unmolested. Bertha Sue recaptures their attention with her fanning, gesturing, and remonstrating.

BERTHA SUE

Good morning. My name is Bertha Sue Hanks; that's H-A-N-K-S.

REPORTER

Were you a hostage?

BERTHA SUE

Of course.

REPORTER

What was it like?

BERTHA SUE

Why, nip and tuck, dear. Nip and tuck ...

She continues chattering, enjoyably.

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Pearl marvels through the blinds at Bertha Sue's performance until it's over and the cruiser pulls away.

PEARL

What I wouldn't give to be in the room when Bertha Sue's boy sees this.

Hattie steps up and touches Pearl's hand. Pearl sees that she's exhausted.

HATTIE

I'm goin' to go lie down for a while, Pearl.

PEARL

You go ahead, dear. I have
to make a call.

EXT. MILL VALLEY DECK - DAY

Delroy is seated in an Adirondack chair, again
surrounded by legal papers. The cordless phone rings.

DELROY

Yes?

(pauses, then
wearily)

Yes, operator, I'll accept
the charges.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - DAY

PEARL

Hello? Delroy?

DELROY

Mother, what the Hell's wrong
with you? I'm missing a
pretrial strategy conference
at the office because of
this!

PEARL

Why, I'm fine, son. And you?
What happened to those
manners your Daddy and I
taught you, anyway?

DELROY

(aside)

Here we go.

(continues)

What is it this time--not
enough red meat in the
Maranatha diet?

PEARL

Don't patronize me, Delroy.
It's what it's always been.
Since you put me in that
place, I've lost every bit of
the only life I knew, except
Hattie.

DELROY

I thought we agreed you
needed a structured
environment.

PEARL

We?! Half my life was torn
away, and I was grief-
stricken. I HAD a structured
environment.

Delroy pinches his temples.

DELROY

Okay. For the sake of
argument, Bitsy and I thought
that Maranatha was the best
thing at the time.

PEARL

What--dropping me in with a
bunch of Holy Rollers who
spend this life jostlin' for
a good seat in the next one?

(snorts)

And, a lot that dried-up
ingenué knows about anything.
The only time she ever gets
dirty is applying a mud pack.
She's just--you're both just
ashamed of me. Too country.

DELROY

We just thought you might
benefit from a more personal
relationship with God.

PEARL

Hah! I've taken winter hay
to high-desert cattle. Show
me anybody in a wet blizzard
at forty below who doesn't
turn to prayer!

Pearl reddens and quickens.

PEARL

And that's fine talk comin'
from you, down in the front
row at the Church of the
Almighty Dollar!

Delroy rises, angry.

DELROY

I've earned every penny I've
ever made. I never asked you
and Dad for anything!

PEARL

You never wanted for
anything, Delroy. Had your
college all paid for, too.
Earl and I saw to that. That
dramatic "declaration of
independence" on your
eighteenth birthday was your
idea.

DELROY

You know Dad didn't want me
around. He couldn't stand
the sight of me after--

PEARL

(pausing,
softer)

Son, you've got to get past
that. Couldn't have been
helped. Earl lost a big
piece of his heart that he
never got back. I'd probably
have gone the same direction,
if it'd been you.

Delroy swallows and chokes up.

DELROY

Ma, I don't want to talk
about this any more right now
...

PEARL

Hear me out. He never blamed
you for a single minute. He
just wasn't ever one who
found words to match his
feelin's.

DELROY

Ma, please--

Pearl inhales and presses on.

PEARL

Truth be told, your shuttin'
him out afterwards hurt him
more than even Opal's dyin'.

Tears overtake Delroy, lining his face. After a time he
composes himself.

DELROY

What do you want to do about
this?

PEARL

I want my life back. I want
to sit on the porch with my
friends and look out on what
Earl and I made. I want to
fall asleep in the bed where
he held me close for forty-
six years.

DELROY

You can't live in the past,
Ma.

PEARL

Torn away from it, Delroy,
I'm no longer me--I have no
present, nor future. Don't
you see? Just because you
can't go back there doesn't
mean it's wrong for me.

DELROY

What if something happens to
you?

PEARL

Son, I don't mean to hurt
you, but you haven't seen me
more than twice a year in the
last twenty.

A heavy silence. Delroy waits in desperation for some
kind of reprieve. Pearl furthers her case.

PEARL

I'm eighty-three. What aches
and pains I have, my pills
take care of. There's
nothin' that'd happen to me
that you could do anything
about anyway, bein' two hours
away.

DELROY

But, what will you do?

PEARL

I'll live! Then, I'll lie
down and die in that same
bed, where you and Opal were
born. Seems fittin', doesn't
it?

DELROY

How will you manage?

PEARL

Charley's holdin' out okay, though I might need to take a hard look at some of the late hires. The house is plenty big enough, and it's on my half of the place.

DELROY

But, Ma--the whole valley is going the other way. Ascuaga is selling off three of his four ranches right now.

PEARL

Delroy, as long as people grow or eat beef there'll be a place for the "Diamond M." Why are you in such a damned rush to subdivide? You're already wealthy, and the region's only goin' to grow.

DELROY

Wouldn't you rather have your share of the purchase money now, Ma?

PEARL

And do what, Delroy? Take it back to where I can't do anything but give it away? For someone trained in logic, you're not making much sense.

Delroy slams his fist on the rail.

DELROY

Goddamn it! I have a responsibility to take care of you!

Pearl stifles her anger, sighs, and lowers her voice.

PEARL

Son, you haven't heard a word I've said, have you?

Delroy studies his feet and sighs.

DELROY

All right, Mother, you win.
We're not getting anywhere
this way. I'll move things
around and drive up--

PEARL

(crisply)

You can point that German
four-wheeler this way if you
want to. I won't see you.

DELROY

What?!

PEARL

Hattie and I are going home
from here. And as long as
I'm alive and clear-headed,
there's nothing legal you can
do to stop me.

Delroy collapses into the chair.

DELROY

Is there anyone you'd listen
to?

Another silence.

PEARL

You could send my
granddaughter up.

DELROY

Staci?!

(laughs
bitterly)

My nineteen-year-old screw-
up?!

PEARL

Yes. Goodbye, Delroy.

Pearl hangs up gingerly, then stares motionless at the
phone.

PEARL (V.O.)
Forty years of runnin',
marryin' up, and chasin'
money--and he's still blind.

Pearl turns in her chair and sees a stricken Barney.

BARNEY
Pearl ... It's--It's Hattie.

They bolt from the parlor into the:

INT. RABBIT RANCH HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

We follow as Pearl and Barney careen toward the open bedroom door. SUDDENLY, Pearl stops, finger to lips. Barney is flummoxed. An aged voice still clear enough to convey its strength and purity sings "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." It's Hattie's.

PEARL
(whispering)
There wasn't a drunk in
Douglas County didn't go to
his knees when she sang that
song.

INT. RABBIT RANCH BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Pearl and Barney tumble in. Hattie is ghostly pale and red-eyed. The frilly, tasteless pillow under her head reads:

Foxy Lady

PEARL
(panicked)
Hattie--!

Hattie raises her frail hand as determined as a marshal halting a parade.

HATTIE

Now, before anybody else goes to pieces, the bar is open. Pearl, fetch that Seagram's out of my bag. Barney, rustle us up some glasses and 7-Up or Sprite. Either will do--long as it's not diet!

Barney bustles out. Still in shock, Pearl brings the bottle and sits beside Hattie.

HATTIE

I'm not goin' to say, "No tears," Pearl. A decent cry does a girl a world o' good every now and again. Nobody knows that better than me, the Silver State's Sarah Bernhardt.

Pearl strokes Hattie's hair.

PEARL

But, I didn't expect--

HATTIE

Oh, fie. I'm two years older than you--and a lot less wick to burn, to boot! Abner and I didn't do heavy work, like you and Earl. Bad light and air, too. And, Land, girl--you know how I liked to stay up and holler, most nights!

PEARL

(sniffling)

Oh, Hattie, dearest. We're so close, now. You've got to go home with me. Can't you stay, just another day or two?

Hattie presses Pearl's hands to her breast and fights her own tears with wan optimism.

HATTIE

You know I've always said that the Good Book has it backwards. "The spirit is willin', but the flesh is firm!"

PEARL

I don't want you to go.

Pearl sobs and lies beside Hattie, who cradles her head against her shoulder.

HATTIE

My old, sweet friend. You never know--those Jesus freaks we ran away from might be on to something. Whatever waits, waits for us both--win, lose, or draw. I'll save you a seat right in front of the best-lookin' dealer, and I won't double-down 'til you're beside me again. I promise ...

Hattie rolls her eyes up.

HATTIE

Sing with me, Pearl: "SOMEWHERE ..."

Pearl squeaks out a word or two.

Hattie's eyes close; her voice trails off and stills. Pearl pushes herself up, looking upward.

PEARL

Please, God: Just one more verse together ...

Pearl slowly removes her glasses. Barney re-enters. She takes the tumblers from him and pours two stiff "7 & 7s."

PEARL

(toasts)

Here's to Hortense Atticus
Churchill Gardner, the best
damned friend any mortal soul
could hope for. May Gabriel
hurry on that harp, so she
can start right in, singin'
for Abner again.

BARNEY

To Hattie.

They sip in silence; at last, Pearl puts down her drink.

PEARL

Barney, can you leave us
alone for a minute or two,
please, dear?

Barney exits. Pearl grieves a little longer, then finds
a small file in Hattie's bag and pulls out a stark, tri-
fold document entitled:

GEER-WAITE DOUGLAS COUNTY MORTUARY
Minden, Nevada
DEED OF INTERMENT

Pearl carries it out of the room.

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - DAY

Pearl finishes a phone call. Pete enters and comforts
Pearl.

PETE

I just heard, Pearl. I'm
real sorry.

PEARL

Thank you, Pete.

PETE

Is there anything I can do?

Pearl thinks, twisting a handkerchief.

PEARL

I just need to say somethin'
to someone about Hattie.
Feels unfinished, to me.
Folks need to know her
better, that it wasn't her
fault ...

PETE

You want me to ask one o'
them TV fellas to come in?

Pearl weighs the suggestion.

PEARL

That might do ...

EXT. RABBIT RANCH - DAY

It's late morning and the waiting game is on. Equipment is stowed, replaced by decks of cards, digital games, and other diversions. Blazers are off, ties are loosened, and coiffures are under cover. Everybody but Dick Prince, who remains fully dressed and paces near the gate. He's trailed by Ralph, who labors under his equipment.

RALPH

(whining)

C'mon, Dick. Can't we take a
break?

DICK

(angrily)

Look at this face! How many
more years do you think it
has to find a major market?

Pete ambles to the gate and signals L'il Jimmy. The buzzer goes off and the gate creaks to life.

PETE

Miz Mutter's friend, Miz
Hattie Gardner, has passed
away. She wants to talk
about it.

Legs uncross and vehicle doors crack, but not before Prince worms through the opening gate, Ralph in tow.

DICK

We're it! We're it! KORN
has the broadest penetration
in the Reno-Sparks area.
Check Arbitron if you don't
believe me!

Pete nods; Hammer holds flailing competitors at bay up front and Li'l Jimmy closes the barrier against a surge of clamoring bodies.

PETE

Sorry. One crew only.

The wave recedes and shouts tail off to whines when Hammer opens his vest and taps a shoulder holster.

HAMMER

There's the quick, y'all--and
there's the dead.

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Pearl rousts herself from her thoughts and rises as Pete comes in, followed by Dick, Ralph, and Li'l Jimmy. Ralph begins setting up.

DICK

(abruptly)

Miz Mutter, I'm Dick Prince,
KORN-TV-7 News, Reno.

PEARL

Pleased to meet you, Mr.
Prince. I'd like to tell
folks about Hattie--

DICK

Fine, fine. We're not
equipped to do a live feed,
so we'll tape and take it
back for edit and replay,
okay?

PEARL

Uh, all right. What I want
to say is--

Dick glares at Ralph; he hurriedly checks his lighting
and pulls a bewildered Pearl into position.

DICK

Now, Pearl, if you'll just
stand right there. When
Ralph turns the light on I'll
ask you some questions.
Don't be nervous. Ready?

Pearl halfway nods.

DICK

(animated, into
camera)

Rolling, Ralph? Three, two,
one. Thanks, Rob and Cheryl.
This is Dick Prince, with an
exclusive interview with
Pearl O. Mutter, former
Minden-area resident and go-
go Grandma, whose alleged
daring, daylight escape from
a Sacramento old-folks home
has her facing possible
federal kidnapping charges.

He turns to Pearl, now a deer in the headlights.

DICK

Tell our viewers, Pearl, is
it true that you drugged an
employee to make your
getaway?

PEARL

Well, yes; I--

DICK

And isn't it true that until
just this morning you held
three other residents against
their will?

PEARL

No! Now that's just not--

DICK

And the death of your best friend from Minden, Hattie Gardner, may have been caused by all this excitement?

PEARL

(angrily)

Now just you stop--

CLOSE-UP: Dick pastes a crooked grin on his face and thrusts his microphone forward.

DICK

How does that make you feel?

SUDDENLY Pearl's sandaled right foot half-disappears into the trouser material covering Dick's groin.

CLOSE-UP: Unsuspected pain and horror remold Dick's face.

DICK

HUUHHHHHHNNNNNNNNnnnnnnnn!

Dick crumples to the floor, toupee unhinged and flapping. Pearl stands over him. Ralph is still rolling.

PEARL

Beat a rapist that way in Thirty-eight. Funny. I don't remember feelin' quite as violated at the time.

Pearl examines her foot.

PEARL

Had a boot on then, though. Hope I don't lose a nail over this.

Pearl looks at Ralph, who's powered down and is beside himself.

PEARL

You're not plannin' on doin'
anything with this, are you?

RALPH

I'll erase the tape just as
soon as everyone at the
station sees it, Ma'am. I
swear.

PEARL

Well, all right, then.

Li'l Jimmy impassively drags Dick, gasping and
sputtering, out the front door. Ralph follows,
shielding his gleeful face with his camera.

PEARL

(to Pete)

No wonder nobody trusts 'em
any more.

EXT. RABBIT RANCH - CONTINUOUS

Staci Mutter pulls her battered Toyota as close to the
gate as she can manage. Clad in a midriff top, bell-
bottoms, and Doc Martens, she emerges, snaps on a
Snugli, and packs a squirming bundle into it. Slinging
another bag onto her shoulder, she blows her streaked
bangs off her forehead and strides for the gate. She
attracts no attention as the ladies and gentlemen of the
press assume she's an employee.

STACI'S P.O.V.: The brothel door flies open and Li'l
Jimmy emerges, dragging Dick Prince toward the gate. He
cycles to his feet as he's handed off to Hammer, who
pulls him through and pats the toupee down on his head.
Laughter erupts. Dick glowers at Ralph, who answers
with a blank look. Dick stalks toward their car. Ralph
shrugs, again to laughter, and follows.

Staci engages Hammer discreetly as the pack remains
fixed on Dick.

STACI

Hi. I'm Staci Mutter. My
Dad said that my grandmother
wanted to talk to me?

Hammer waves at Li'l Jimmy, who steps back inside to admit them. Word spreads and the slumbering media giant awakes noisily. Reporters begin to crowd around her. Hammer does his best to hold them off.

Behind them, Dick finds his voice and confronts Deputy Goodman.

DICK

Deputy, that woman in there assaulted me! I demand that you arrest her!

DEPUTY GOODMAN

(distracted)

Oh, put a sock in it, will you, Daniel Boone?

Dick's humiliation turns to rage.

SUDDENLY, we hear a roar as a wild-eyed Dick starts the station's wagon, slams it into gear and accelerates, spewing dust and gravel, toward the gate.

Ralph dives clear and rolls, protecting the camera.

The throng turns. Dick's peers see him and part like the Red Sea.

Hammer reacts instinctively. He pushes Staci through the opening gate, signals for it to be closed, and reaches for his weapon. He turns, assumes a firing position, and trains the barrel on the windshield.

Dick's anger turns to panic. He hits the brakes, covers his head, and throws himself to the floor.

The wagon slows, but not enough. Hammer tries to throw himself clear. He cries out in pain as the wagon pins his trail leg against the now-closed gate. He sags over the hood.

Deputies rush forward, drag Dick out of the wagon and into custody, and move the vehicle backward. Hammer crumples against the gate.

Staci pushes herself up, trying to stifle the cries from her bundle. She recoils in horror at Hammer's bloody, mangled leg.

HAMMER

Ask the Bossman to dial Nine-
One-One, hear?

His eyelids flutter. Pete and Li'l Jimmy fly out the door; another bodyguard waits in the doorway. Pete grabs the bars of the still-closed gate and fixes on the downed sentry, who's trying vainly to resume his post.

PETE

(shouts)

Don't move, Hammer!

(to man in
doorway)

Open it!

Pete and Li'l Jimmy snake through the opening gate.

PETE

Hammer--stay with us! You in
a lot of pain?

HAMMER

I'll tell you when you move
me inside.

PETE

(to Li'l Jimmy)

Let's get him in--real
careful-like!

They lift Hammer as gently as his mass allows. He groans and winces as they slide him through the gate. The third bodyguard hits the buzzer and the barrier crawls, humming, until it clangs shut.

Pearl dodges them in the doorway and hustles outside. She sees a dazed Staci, still on the ground, trying to comfort a screaming infant.

PEARL

Oh, my sweet Lord--Staci!

STACI

Gran?

Pearl helps Staci regain her feet. As one, the mob realizes who the old woman is. Pandemonium erupts as they swarm the gate, thrusting equipment at her and filling the air with shouted questions.

In total silence, we sweep slowly around a dazed Pearl, shielding her granddaughter, as she is paralyzed momentarily by a sea of clamoring faces, flailing limbs, and whirring and flashing cameras.

She recovers and helps Staci and the baby through the door.

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Hammer is on the sofa, bracing himself against the pain. Pete is on the phone.

PETE

Hello? I need an ambulance at the Rabbit Ranch, One Rabbit Road. Yes. Crushed leg. Pronto!

Pearl and Staci stumble in and fall onto a sofa across the room.

PEARL

Staci! Dear God, child--are you all right?

STACI

Yeah, I'm okay, I think ...

Staci resumes comforting her baby. Pearl crosses to Hammer, her face clouded with worry.

PEARL

Oh, Mr. Hammer--I'm so, so sorry!

HAMMER

It's all right, Miz Pearl--I got plenty of sick leave. Li'l Jimmy'll take care of you 'til I'm back. Right, Bossman?

PETE
(uncertain)
You damn straight.

Pearl spreads, then drops her arms.

PEARL
Lord help me. This is all my
fault.

INT. RABBIT RANCH PARLOR - DAY

Paramedics wheel the stretchered Hammer through the door, with Pete close behind. Li'l Jimmy follows to take up his post.

Pearl sits close by Staci, who removes the Snugli from the now-still bundle. Pearl self-consciously helps them get comfortable beside her.

PEARL
So, who's this, here, whom I
almost got killed?

STACI
Oh, Gran--we're okay!
(beaming)
This is your first great-
grandbaby, Joshua Earl.

Staci peels back the tiny hood.

PEARL
You passed your Grampa's eyes
along, I see. Who's his
Daddy?

STACI
Not important right now--
believe me.

PEARL
Oh, my.

Pearl cuts Staci some slack by changing the subject.

PEARL

I see that you're not one o'
those "Gothics" any more,
girl.

STACI

(grins)

No, Gran. It's not
acceptable to waitress and
"temp" in Marin County
looking like a figment of
Anne Rice's imagination.

PEARL

Anne who?

STACI

She's--never mind.

PEARL

You're what, now? Nineteen?

STACI

Yep. Be twenty in a couple
weeks.

PEARL

Did you ever get out of high
school--one way or the other?

STACI

Finally. I went back nights
for a G.E.D. after I got out
of "juvie."

Josh coos at her; she smiles.

STACI

That's where I met Josh's
father. He's kind of a
loser--still working some
shit out. Oh. Sorry.

PEARL

I'm sure he'll come along, in time. Most important thing right now is that Josh's Mama loves him--and his Gramma, too. May I hold him a minute?

Staci hands Josh over and throws an arm over Pearl's shoulders.

STACI

I wish other people heard me like you do, Gran. You've always been the one I could talk to. I hate it that you're so far away.

Pearl dangles her index finger and strokes Josh's tiny lower lip, delighting him.

PEARL

So. What happened, this time?

STACI

(clouds over)

I thought things might improve after I did my stretch for dealing weed. Working days and taking classes nights was my idea.

Staci rolls her eyes.

STACI

Daddy wanted me to intern at the firm, towards something permanent. I just couldn't stand the idea of being ignored all day, and all night!

Staci stands and moves to the window, staring.

PEARL

Didn't work out, huh?

STACI

It was tolerable 'til he found out I was pregnant. I refused to give up the father, so he kicked me out and cut me off after Josh was born. "Tough love," he called it. Said he was sick of the arguing, paying for therapy--

PEARL

(sniffs)

Only therapy I ever needed at your age was a long, hot bath at Walley's.

STACI

--And the shame, his first grandchild born illegitimate.

Pearl looks up after her.

PEARL

It's a pity your father gets so full of himself. His sister wasn't born out of wedlock, but she wasn't exactly made in it, either.

Staci turns, her mouth open.

STACI

Gran?!

PEARL

That's right. Your late aunt Opal was born April Fourteenth, Nineteen Thirty-seven. Earl and I married on September Fifth, Ninteen Thirty-six. Opal came to us on the Fourth of July. Delroy never did the math, I guess.

Staci walks back over and sits down by Pearl.

STACI

So you and Grampa had to--?

PEARL

Not "had to," child--"did."
I wasn't afraid; he'd already
proposed. If my folks or his
were ashamed, they had the
grace and the good sense not
to say so. I was lucky, and
so was your aunt.

STACI

I know so little about her--
just a few pictures. Dad
never even mentions her.
What was she like?

Pearl touches Staci's chin.

PEARL

Pretty, headstrong, a
handful. Like you. You
favor her, in a lot of ways.
Maybe that gets between
Delroy and you.

STACI

(puzzled)

Did Daddy hate her?

PEARL

Only for dyin' on him. He
thought it was his fault. On
top of the normal, brother-
sister things--well, it was
too much for him.

STACI

Did Grampa blame Daddy?

PEARL

(sadly)

No, child. I told Delroy so,
again--just this morning.
Earl bore it as best he
could, which the boy took for
shuttin' him out. Earl was
just a creature of his time.

Staci laces her hands on her head and bites a cheek.

STACI

Why can't we talk to the
people we love the most?

Pearl throws her an "Excuse me?" look.

STACI

My parents, I mean.

PEARL

Things are more complicated
now, I guess. Every time you
feel right about somethin'
and just take the risk of
sayin' or doin' it, you have
to find a label to put on
what you said or did.

Pearl reflects a little, then shakes her head.

PEARL

Then, you've got to pay a
head-shrinker to lie down and
talk about it. Doesn't
matter how it turned out!

Pearl extends her arms and makes circles with her hands,
framing her Freud impression.

PEARL

"How does zis make you feel?"
"How does zat make you feel?"

Staci guffaws, then crosses her arms and frowns.

STACI

There's just so much I always wanted to say to Dad and Mom--about me, my problems, my dreams. Seems like what they fear most is hearing that I'm as fragile and vulnerable as they are, in spite of my "advantages."

(pauses)

The worst part is feeling like I'm disappointing them, without every really knowing why.

PEARL

I know, dear, I know. Lord knows, Hattie and I were wild enough at your age. I can't say what's changed. Seeing yearlings run, buck, and kick, then just grow out of it, must've been a lesson for me.

Josh fusses. Staci takes him back and pushes him under her top. Pearl admires them.

STACI

So, Gran. What are you going to do now?

PEARL

Don't know, child. It all seemed so clear before. First Hattie, that TV man, then Mr. Hammer. Put you and the baby in harm's way. Maybe Delroy's right ...

STACI

About what?

PEARL

That I'm too old. Life's passed me by. I belong in a home.

Pearl gets up and goes to the window, her back to Staci.

PEARL

Guess I'll just have to wait
on the law to end all this
...

Staci can't find words. Pearl returns. They fall silent, touching each other in random, needful ways. Light from the western parlor windows seeps across the floor until it bathes their feet.

Pearl catches a breath halfway out and purses her lips.

PEARL

Staci, how are you gettin'
on, right now?

STACI

Like I said, Gran--waiting
tables and temporary office
work.

PEARL

No. I mean, how are you
living?

STACI

Oh. I have two roommates;
one actually has a little
girl. We kinda look out for
each other. Expensive,
though.

PEARL

That's good ... That's real
good.

She ruminates. Pete comes through the door.

PETE

Pearl--'s'cuse me. The man
from the mortuary is here.

WILL WAITE enters behind him, wearing the standard-issue dark suit, starched white shirt, and nondescript tie. He crosses stiffly to Pearl and seizes her hands. He sees the baby asleep and tones it down a little.

WILL

H'lo, Miz Mutter. I'm so
sorry for your loss.

PEARL

Thank you, Will. How's the
senior partner these days?

WILL

Oh, Ralph passed on three
years ago. Had a real nice
service--

(chagrined)

--if I do say so, myself.
Circumstances aside, Miz
Mutter, I'd be lyin' if I
said I wasn't glad you and
Hattie are back home again.

PEARL

(slowly)

Home ...

SUDDENLY, she's up and trying to pull Staci up. Staci
complies, but has to keep an arm back to cradle a
startled Josh.

PEARL

Granddaughter, how'd you like
to take a little ride down
the road with me?

STACI

Gran?

PEARL

Will, what are you driving--
van or hearse?

WILL

I've got the panel truck,
Pearl. The hearse is for
burials.

PEARL

Does it have windows?

WILL

In the back door, but they're tinted.

PEARL

Got room in the back for anything besides the body?

WILL

Not to sit, but there's leftover floor space, once the gurney's in. Why?

PEARL

(to Pete)

Think Will can get his wagon close enough so's we can get Hattie in there privately?

PETE

Not through the parlor. We could get him around to the break between Buildings A and B, though.

Pearl squeezes Staci's hand.

PEARL

Anything in your car you can't part with?

STACI

No... No--Not a goddamned thing!

PEARL

Well, then hitch Josh up! We've got a lot to talk about.

Staci begins gathering herself. Barney wanders in.

PEARL

Barney, could you get our bags from the bedroom, please?

Pearl does a double-take.

PEARL (V.O.)

Barney!

PEARL

(embarrassed)

Barney, did you want to come with--

Barney smiles charitably.

BARNEY

Naw, Pearl--but thanks, just the same. Me'n Pete been talkin'. He says he can use a driver to run errands and such, for room and board. I'm old enough to handle a car, but too old to handle the girls!

Barney and Pete share a laugh.

BARNEY

Pete says it'd be like ancient times, havin' a "Eunice" around to tend the harem. Best thing is, I'll be no burden to the God-fearin' nor the Medi-Cal any more.

Pearl spins Barney gaily around.

PEARL

Barney Rasmussen, you're a Helluva wheel man, and a true friend. I get in a scrape again, I'll know right where to turn!

Barney radiates pleasure. Pearl turns and kisses Pete on the neck.

PEARL

Caswell P. Collier, you're a wonder, and I'm grateful. If I was a twenty-five-year-old man, I'd spend every other paycheck up here.

PETE

(sniffles)

You're welcome anytime, Miz Mutter.

He abandons caution for a tearful bear hug.

PETE

Aw, Hell--welcome home, Pearl. Sure wish I could still ride and rope.

Pearl smiles tenderly at Pete, pushes back, and looks around.

PEARL

Well, time's short. Pete, you tell Stevie if anybody still has business with me, he knows where I live.

Everyone scatters to their assumed tasks.

INT. RABBIT RANCH HALLWAY - DAY

We follow Pearl and Staci, arm in arm, as they walk the hallway toward where the mortuary van is. Will wheels Hattie's corpse ahead of them and Barney trails with their belongings.

PEARL

What do you want to be when you grow up, dear?

STACI

Artist, I think--though Daddy always thought that idea frivolous.

PEARL

Huh! Feels the same way
about runnin' cows, even
though it fed him pretty
well.

Staci stops and looks at Pearl.

STACI

Why?

PEARL

How about cowgirl for a
while, to hold the ends
together? Lived in or sold,
I'll bet my half of the
"Diamond M" will be worth a
lot of paint and brushes one
day!

Staci stoops a little, captures the back of Pearl's neck
in her hands, and kisses her forehead.

STACY

We're a pair, ain't we, Gran?

Pearl pinches her granddaughter's cheeks.

PEARL

Not yet, honey--but we will
be!

They continue, laughing, toward the open door at the end
of the building.

EXT. RABBIT RANCH - DAY

The press mob stirs as the mortuary van circles out from
behind the building. It is the lone vehicle and Li'l
Jimmy remains on guard, so there's little apparent
curiosity.

REPORTER #1

Think we ought to follow it?

REPORTER #2

Why? Ever get a good stand-
up from a dead body?

REPORTER #1

Guess not. God knows old
people are boring enough,
alive!

The van passes the reporters and heads down the road,
into the fading afternoon sun. From inside we hear two
voices, rising together in song:

PEARL & STACI

"Some-WHERE, Over the rain-
bow/Skies are BLUE ..."

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SOUTH TAHOE CHURCH - EVENING

Rev. Alston twirls the kinks out of a slide projector's
remote control and takes his place in front of a blank
screen at the lectern in the sanctuary.

REV. ALSTON

Well, thanks for your
patience, everyone. We're
finally ready for our
"virtual" Holy Land tour--a
day late. Any questions?

REV. ALSTON'S P.O.V.: Only four of 24 seats are filled;
in the rear, one Maranatha is asleep, the other bored.
In the front row, an eager Ellie Bush launches her hand,
while Elmer sits by in worship.

Rev. Alston winces, but quickly forces a smile.

INT. SOUTH TAHOE CASINO - EVENING

We glide through the casino, catching the happy faces of
the other fifteen Maranatha voyagers, busy working the
tables, slot machines, and roulette wheel. Through the
lounge doors, Beatrice climbs up on stage and helps an
Elvis impersonator shimmy and croon. On the main dance
floor, the Sad-Eyed Man turns a laughing female cashier
through a tango.

INT. RENO WEDDING CHAPEL - NIGHT

A smiling "minister" stands before Skip and Anna Mae. She sports a small, elastic bridal veil and admires the thin, cheap wedding band on her left hand. A drowsy, bath-robed keyboardist prepares to hammer out the chords of the "Wedding March." Visibly drunk, Skip is finishing his vows.

SKIP

I dah-uh. I dah-uh. I DEW.

MINISTER

You may now kiss the wife,
Sparky.

SKIP

That's "Skip," Paaaarrson.

MINISTER

Whatever. Thirty-five bucks,
plus tax and license.

Skip gropes for his wallet and turns to the bride.

SKIP

NOW can we get a room?

INT. STEVE HUTCHINSON'S OFFICE - DAY

Capt. Hutchinson, his feet up, is on the phone. He's mildly irritated.

STEVE

Look, Special Agent Rector.
I appreciate your point of
view. Problem is, we can't
scare up anybody locally to
press charges, either.

(pause)

Yes, kidnapping and
interstate flight are serious
matters. If you want to work
those from the California
side, be my guest.

(pause)

All right. You get a grand jury to kick out an indictment, call me back and we'll talk arrest and extradition.

(pause)

Fine. You do that. Okay. Goodbye, Special Agent.

Steve hangs up and stares at the phone.

STEVE

Not on your best day, G-Man.

INT. RABBIT RANCH LIMO - DAY

Through the windshield, we see Barney driving and humming. Party chatter can be heard in the back. There's a knock at the smoked-glass window behind him. He locates a switch and lowers it. A laughing Rikki pokes her head through and playfully kisses and nibbles his ear.

Barney blushes. SUDDENLY, he slams on the brakes. Rikki stops laughing. Barney looks in his lap; so does Rikki. She smiles and returns to her business. He looks up.

BARNEY

Uh-oh!

INT. MARANATHA HALLWAY - NIGHT

The long-suffering charge nurse gawks from her station as "Marine Corps Marla" swivels up the hallway in full regalia. Arriving, she finishes her gum noisily and parks it under the ledge.

MARLA

I'm lookin' for Hector Alvarez.

NURSE

(wearily)

Are you family?

MARLA

Yeah. I'm his "niece,"
Marla.

NURSE

(points)
Two-Oh-One. Around the
corner.

MARLA

Thanks.

NURSE

Don't mention it. Please.

Marla takes a few steps, hesitates, and turns.

MARLA

Oh. This is the first Friday
of the month, right?

INT. SACRAMENTO TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

Bertha Sue Hanks sits in a makeup chair as the artist
finishes. A production assistant ducks in.

ASSISTANT

Bertha Sue, we're ready for
you.

She looks in the corner. Her two grandchildren look up
from their Game-Boys, impressed. She rises, airily.

BERTHA SUE

Well? Shall we go shoot a
commercial?

They leave together, bubbling. The Game-Boys stay.

EXT. CATTLE RANCH - DAY (FLASH FORWARD)

TITLE OVER:

MINDEN, NV

THEN:

Two Years Later

A silver Boxster races toward us on a two-lane highway. It slides into a turn onto an unpaved drive and passes under a weathered, primitive Western sign:

Diamond-M

It rolls past green hay and fat cattle, trailing dust up to the porch. Delroy and Bitsy, all Marin County chic, climb out. Sounds from a big barbecue, complete with jug band, beckon them to the back yard. He's tentative; she takes his hand and drags him, with firm affection.

Pearl and Staci turn. Pearl looks the same, maybe a little sturdier. Fully the cowgirl, a fit Staci glows with peace; Josh, now 3, runs up and tackles her leg. They're all there: Barney; Pete; Hammer (with cane), Li'l Jimmy, and the other bodyguards; Mia and Rikki; Steve and Lana Hutchinson, and twins; Bobby Sangiacomo; Will Waite; Charlie Nye and a couple other hired hands; and a good share of Minden. As one, they look up and see Delroy and Bitsy.

Delroy resists, rooted. Bitsy drops his hand and heads for Staci, embracing her warmly. She turns to Pearl; they hesitate, then open to one another with their eyes.

Pearl offers a long-stemmed goblet and wine bottle in her direction.

PEARL

Coastal Chardonnay, Bitsy?
It's a little young, but the
butternut-squash finish
should suit you.

Bitsy's mouth falls open. Pearl's sidelong glance meets Staci's wink. Bitsy looks at Staci, who cranks up her eyebrows and shrugs.

BITSY

Why, thank you, Pearl! That
sounds lovely. Right after I
get reacquainted with my
grandson!

Bitsy kneels to find Josh's eye level.

BITSY

Hey, cowboy. New in town?

JOSH

Hi ...

Josh chews his finger, looks up, and gets the go-ahead prompt.

JOSH

... Grandma.

Bitsy sweeps him up eagerly and wheels to find Delroy, who hasn't moved. He still refuses to look directly at them. Stymied, she turns to Pearl, who gives the glass and bottle to Staci.

PEARL

Twenty-two years don't fall
away just like that. Give us
a minute.

Pearl walks to Delroy and cradles his hands, as though they might bruise easily. She speaks softly.

PEARL

Come on in the house, Delroy.
See if it's like you
remember.

Delroy follows, lagging and dreadfully quiet.

INT. RANCH HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

They cross the threshold into the foyer. Pearl patiently steers a halting Delroy up a long staircase and down the hall, to a bedroom on the end.

INT. RANCH HOUSE BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

It is Opal's old room. He stands in the doorway, scarcely breathing. It's all there: her old twin bed, with an updated bedspread. The dresser, littered with a teen female's knick-knacks and memorabilia. The only obvious big addition is a small, race-car bed. Pearl sees him looking at it.

PEARL

That's Josh's. He'll move to your old room when he's big enough.

DELROY

Uh-huh.

The walls are loaded with bold, post-modern paintings--many more than Delroy remembers. He looks at Pearl quizzically.

PEARL

All those from here over are Staci's. Uncanny, isn't it?

The definition and symmetry of the work overpower Delroy. He cannot speak.

PEARL

Yeah, she's a lot quicker to it than Opal was. Seems more determined, too. She's mountin' a show in Carson City next month.

Delroy follows the work around the room to the dresser. Side by side are two photographs: Opal with Delroy, and Staci with Josh. Delroy stares at them; slowly and carefully, he picks them up as though they might burn his hands. The subject-pairs' poses and expressions are nearly identical.

Delroy buckles onto Staci's bed and breaks down. Pearl quickly sits beside him. He grasps for her, dropping the photos, and is wracked with sobs. She cradles his head.

PEARL

Welcome home, son. Welcome home.

Pearl strokes Delroy tenderly until he stops. He sits up and wipes his face with his sleeve.

DELROY

It's okay, Ma. I-I'm okay.

Pearl stands up and grasps his shoulders. He looks up at her like's he's 10 again and just roused from a nightmare.

PEARL

You come on, when you're ready. We'll all be there.

DELROY

I'll be down soon. I need to look around a little more. Okay?

Pearl nods and goes downstairs. Delroy folds his hands and just stares. Momentarily, he gets up, goes through the door and inches the length of the hallway to:

INT RANCH HOUSE MASTER BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Delroy halts at the edge of the time warp that is his parents' bedroom. Everything is as it was before he left. His fearful but needy eyes deliberately follow every contour and feature, settling on the carved oak bureau. Hanging from the beveled mirror next to his reflection is his father's worn and sweat-stained Silver Stetson.

EXT. RANCH HOUSE - DAY

The backyard festivities are on again, but muted. Pearl, Staci, and Bitsy share affection and concern. Pearl has her back to the screened porch.

OFFSCREEN, the sound of the screen door opening.

Pearl sees every now-quiet face before her looking slightly over her head. The music stops. She turns, slowly. Her eyes widen and she throws her hands over her mouth.

PEARL'S P.O.V.: Framed in the doorway is Delroy; his stern features relax and promise a smile. Placed confidently on his head is Earl Mutter's silver Stetson.

FROM THE DOORWAY: As a riotous reel breaks out, Delroy strides to the women and hugs them into a bunch. He breaks free, squats, plops the hat on Josh's head and hoists him onto his shoulders. They hop around boisterously as the women laugh, cry, and applaud.

The SQUARE DANCER CALLER steps up to the microphone.

CALLER

Now, grab your best gal ...

Delroy hands Josh to Bitsy and offers Pearl and Staci each an arm. Everyone else falls into place, and joy reigns.

FADE OUT.

THE END