

THE SPECTATOR BIRD

by

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Adapted from the novel by Wallace Stegner

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FADE IN:

EXT. LOS ALTOS HILLS (1974) - DAY

The sky boils with clouds. The sun stares out every now and then like the eye of a doped patient groggily illuminating the rugged Northern California hillside.

A huge coastal oak is alive with WRENS and BUSHTITS busying themselves for a coming winter storm.

INT. JOE'S STUDIO - DAY

JOE ALLSTON (69) watches the birds from inside a simple redwood studio. He frowns and goes back to a stack of letters and yellowed newspaper clippings.

He picks up a letter, examines it and slips it into a file marked "Robert Frost." Several other files sit on the desk, each tagged with the name of a famous contemporary writer.

JOE (V.O.)

Eight years ago, I took the files from my office like some pensioned off bureaucrat, imagining I might do one of those name-dropping "My Life Among the Literary" books. Ruth thinks I am. I know better.

Joe picks up another clipping.

JOE (V.O.)

So I watch the birds and read old letters and compose a confession to Ruth to the effect that it is one thing to examine your life and quite another to write it. Writing your life implies that you think it worth recounting.

Joe continues filing.

EXT. ALLSTON HOUSE - DAY

Joe walks up a gravel path to a low-slung redwood and glass house, situated on a hilltop with a view down a rustic valley.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Joe enters the kitchen where his wife, RUTH ALLSTON (67), transfers lines from Emily Dickinson poems to large pieces of paper. Joe and Ruth are a study in opposites; he tall and rangy, she small with short gray hair and expressive eyes.

His face softens for a moment as he watches her. Ruth glances up.

RUTH
Do you need something?

JOE
Lunch.

RUTH
There's soup on the stove.

JOE
I don't feel like soup.

Ruth, annoyed, watches him rummage through the pantry and refrigerator. He doesn't find anything appealing.

He breaks down and tastes the soup. Ruth smiles to herself and goes back to her work.

Joe carries a bowl of soup to a lounge chair in the adjoining FAMILY ROOM. He opens a book and reads while he eats.

Except for the scratching of Ruth's pen, the occasional page turning and the steady TOCK from a grandfather clock, the house is quiet.

Something BANGS into the window, startling Joe. He looks out and sees a bird feeder swing back and forth. It HITS again.

Joe heaves himself up. He grabs a kitchen chair and hauls it outside through a sliding glass door.

RUTH
Wait!

She is halfway across the room when the phone RINGS. She hesitates, then answers while she watches Joe bump the chair along the deck.

RUTH
Allston residence.
(pause)
Césare?!

Ruth sees Joe position the chair under the feeder and signals for him to stop. He ignores her and climbs up. She tries to extend the cord but can't quite reach the window.

She turns away, resigned.

RUTH

Ah, tomorrow? Fine -- lunch would be lovely. Joe will be delighted. Ciao to you too.

She hangs up with a smile and hurries outside.

EXT. DECK - DAY

Ruth steadies the back of the chair as Joe reaches up.

JOE

Césare?! Well, he better not be expecting anything special on such short notice.

RUTH

I thought you'd be happy. He was always one of your favorite writers.

JOE

He was one of my favorite clients. His writing suffers from the carnal obsession that curses most writers these days. If the body had twelve orifices, Césare would gladly write a scene in which every one was penetrated.

Ruth rolls her eyes, grabs the bird feeder and leaves Joe to dismount on his own.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

Joe rakes eucalyptus leaves as Ruth drives a Volvo sedan down the drive. She rolls down her window.

RUTH

Try not to tire yourself out.

JOE

Yes, ma.

He waits until the car is out of sight then doubles his efforts.

EXT. PATIO - DAY

Joe is almost done bagging leaves when he notices a gaping crack in a paver.

EXT. GARDEN SHED - DAY

Joe drags a fifty-pound bag of grout from the shed. He GRUNTS as he lifts it into a wheelbarrow.

EXT. PATIO - DAY

Joe trowels grout into a crack.

INT. FAMILY ROOM - DUSK

Joe walks stiffly as he carries a tumbler of Scotch towards an easy chair. He eases himself down with a loud CRACK from his knees. He takes a big swallow.

Ruth comes in carrying groceries.

RUTH

The yard looks nice. I hope you didn't work too hard.

JOE

Nope.

RUTH

I thought of a good one in the car. Precious Ruminant.

JOE

That game is getting as old as I am.

RUTH

Dear, deer.

JOE

Don't dear dear me.

RUTH

It's the answer.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The bedroom reflects two people who live side-by-side but separately. Two full-size beds are divided by a large night stand with different stacks of books.

Ruth and Joe sit in easy chairs on opposite sides of the room from each other. They both read, each floating alone in a pool of light.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

Storm clouds scud across the sky as Joe walks down the long gravel drive. He stoops to pull a weed, then straightens awkwardly and continues.

EXT. CULVERT - DAY

Joe's mood sours when he finds the culvert full of beer cans and the mail box empty. Joe checks his watch and scans for the mailman.

JOE

Damn.

Joe collects the beer cans and puts them in a pile at the base of the drive. A strong gust of wind blows and Joe shivers as he sits on a tree trunk.

A white Jaguar sedan pulls up. DR. BEN ALEXANDER, ten years older than Joe but much more sanguine, lowers the window.

BEN

Roosting or nesting?

JOE

Brooding. Molting.

Ben's practiced eye scans over Joe's swollen knuckles.

BEN

You should wear a sweater in this kind of weather. Been having any more pain?

JOE

Who told you I'd been having pain?

BEN

Your doctor. To whom I referred you.

Joe looks up the hill in the direction Ben has come from.

JOE

How's Tom?

BEN

Two, three weeks...

JOE

Damn everything! The clouds, the mailman, the carcinogens -- damn them all!

He pulls himself together.

JOE
How's he taking it?

BEN
Like a project.

Ben holds out a stack of mail.

BEN
You can take the mailman off your
list.

Joe grabs the mail.

JOE
That's a federal offense.

BEN
You know what's wrong with you?

JOE
No, but I'm certain you'll tell me.

Joe flips through junk mail and charity appeals.

BEN
You've got a bad case of the
sixties. Once you pass your
seventieth birthday all that
clears away.

Ben waves the gnarled end of his walking stick under Joe's
nose. Joe recoils.

JOE
What the hell is that, a
shillelagh?

BEN
It's my hip joint. I told the
surgeon I'd walked on it for
seventy-nine years and I damn well
want to go on walking on it.

Ben sticks the grotesque brownish-white hunk of bone closer
to Joe's face. Joe bats it away with a laugh.

BEN
You'd have seen it if you'd taken
me up on lunch.

Joe notices a postcard of a small Danish village. He turns it over. It has Danish postage and has been forwarded from a New York City address. He reads:

ASTRID (V.O.)

Dear Friends -- how are you? It is so long a time! Just outside this village, which you know, I am living a quiet life.

A wave of emotion fills Joe's face. He turns away from Ben and starts up the hill. Ben looks after him in frustration.

BEN

How does Ruth put up with you?

Ben hits the gas.

INT. JOE'S STUDIO - DAY

Joe tosses the junk mail onto a covered typewriter as he reads:

ASTRID (V.O.)

My husband did suffer a stroke and I moved him here to a house which Eigel gave us. He is like a child, he takes much care. The castle is as you saw it, no better -- I see only Manon. But I have nothing and can not choose. I had to sell even my little cottage, which I loved. Often I wonder about you, if you have found your safe place. I wish much happiness to you both. Fondly, Astrid.

Joe stuffs the card in his pants pocket. He glances out the window to see if Ruth is there. The coast is clear. He scans the room until he spots a cardboard box in a corner.

Joe digs through the box. He pauses at a framed photo of his son, CURTIS (26), holding a surfboard. He pushes the photo aside and keeps looking.

Joe finds a shoebox that contains loose photos and three stenographic notebooks bound together with a rubber band.

Joe looks through the photos: Joe (49) at the wheel of a 1954 Mercedes convertible; Ruth (47) bundled up on an ocean liner deck chair. And finally:

A stunning blonde woman in a swimsuit sits quite close to Joe on a beach. They are a well-matched pair: both long-limbed and pensive, their faces open and vulnerable to the camera.

Joe moves closer to the window to study the photo. Ruth calls out sharply.

RUTH (O.S.)

Joe. Joe!

Joe puts the photo in the shoebox. Then he takes it back out and tacks it to a bulletin board covered with quotes from Seneca to Whitman.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ruth reads from a cookbook as she sautés mushrooms.

RUTH

Where were you?

JOE

Ben stopped by.

RUTH

For an hour? I could have used your help.

Ruth reaches across the electric stove and brushes her arm against a hot burner.

RUTH

Ow!

JOE

You alright?

RUTH

I burned myself.

Joe grabs a cube from a sweating ice bucket and hands it to Ruth.

JOE

Here.

Ruth holds it against her wrist.

RUTH

Was there any mail?

JOE
 Just the usual beggar's banquet.
 Is there any cause you haven't
 given to?

Ruth frowns, replaces the ice cube and goes back to work.

JOE
 I better get Césare's books. If
 they're not front and center there
 will be hell to pay.

Joe hurries out.

RUTH
 And wine!

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Joe, now dressed in a tweed jacket and slacks, picks his casual pants up from a chair. He feels the postcard in the pocket and takes it out. He looks around for a place to hide it and finally puts it in his jacket pocket.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Joe comes in with two bottles of white wine in one hand and the Rulli books in the other. He sets the books down, then picks up the one on top and examines it.

The novel is thick, with a lurid 1970s cover. Joe flips the book over and reads the back cover blurb. He SNORTS in derision and replaces the book.

A blast of wind and rain RATTLES the windows.

RUTH
 Where's Minnie?

Joe shoves the wine bottles in the ice bucket.

JOE
 Take it easy. Just do your
 cooking and I'll vacuum.

RUTH
 I think you're looking forward to
 this lunch.

Joe smirks at Ruth and wheels a monstrous Hoover upright from a closet. He plugs it in and herds it towards the Family Room.

More wind RATTLES the windows and the LIGHTS FLICKER. Joe and Ruth look at each other as the electricity fades in and out. Finally, the LIGHTS GO OUT.

RUTH

No!

JOE

Saved by the bell.

RUTH

Don't joke! I've got an apple pie in the oven.

JOE

It's just Césare.

RUTH

Just Césare? Isn't that some of our best Montrachet?

JOE

He is, after all, "Italy's greatest living novelist, the profound anatomist of passion..."

The side door BANGS OPEN letting in a gust of rain, cherry-plum blossoms and a blowzy bottle blonde, MINNIE (55).

MINNIE

Heyyyy! Ain't this some'm? Saw the entire front yard of one of them new places slide right down the hill. Fences, trees, everthin'.

She takes off her raincoat to reveal a white nylon nurse's uniform stretched over her ample flesh.

RUTH

Minnie...?

MINNIE

Oh boy, they some people over there. Nixon could have got his whole White House staff out of one subdivision.

Minnie kicks off her muddy shoes.

RUTH

Minnie, our guests will be here any minute, so could you...

MINNIE

Hey, that reminds me. Your
culvert's plugged up and there's
water runnin' all down your road.

The LIGHTS flicker ON for an instant, then GO OUT again with
a BANG from an exploding transformer.

JOE

Shit!

INT. FRONT HALLWAY - DAY

Joe removes his jacket and tosses it on a chair. He puts on
a slicker and rubber boots and goes out. Sending a blast of
wind into the hall as he pulls the door closed.

The postcard slips from the jacket pocket and onto the floor.

EXT. CULVERT - DAY

Joe is up to his ankles in rushing water, bent over and
fishing with both hands. Rain pours down over his hood.

He finds something and tugs. Harder. He loses his footing,
slips and falls onto his knees. He slowly groans to his feet.

Joe rubs his frigid hands together then grimaces as he
plunges them back into the water. He braces himself and
pulls. A WHOOSH of water sucks into the unblocked pipe.

Joe hauls himself out of the ditch just in time to see a red
BMW zoom up the road. He arranges himself by the mailbox and
mock salutes as ...

The driver GUNS the engine and swerves into the driveway,
spraying mud and gravel over Joe as the car fishtails towards
the house.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Joe trudges up the path to the FRONT DOOR.

Through the picture window he can see the silhouettes of Ruth
and the VISITORS in the candle-lit living room. He looks at
his mud-caked pants and changes course.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Joe removes his boots inside the kitchen door. He crosses
the darkened room in his stocking feet.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Joe creeps down the hall towards the LIVING ROOM. He hears CÉSARE RULLI (57) projecting as if for an Italian opera:

CÉSARE (O.S.)
 The Hungry I? I said, what could
 this be? Home to the insatiable
 ego? But no, it is a wonder house
 of women, topless and bottomless.
 I could have stayed all night.

Minnie GIGGLES.

Joe makes it to the door frame -- still unnoticed in the gloom. The LIGHTS COME ON.

CÉSARE (O.S.)
 Bravo!

Ruth sees Joe. She sends him an urgent look -- save me! -- over the unsuspecting visitors' shoulders. Joe slinks away.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Joe peels off his wet clothes and gratefully turns on the shower. Tepid water dribbles out. Joe looks defeated.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Joe tucks his shirt in as he enters the hall. He checks himself in the mirror and grabs his jacket. He doesn't notice the postcard lying on the floor.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Ruth's mouth smiles but her eyes shoot daggers as Joe saunters in.

Joe approaches Césare and appraises his 70s swinger outfit: silk shirt open to his chest, heavy gold chain and yellow-tinted aviators.

JOE
 Césare! Come va?

Césare bounds to his feet. He pulls Joe towards him and kisses him on both cheeks.

CÉSARE

Giuseppe! Perdonami! How could I know that was you? I thought, 'Poor devil, what some people must do to live.' The road was a torrente. Impossible to stop.

ANNE SHEPPARD (27) waits to be introduced, her smile as fake as her eyelashes.

CÉSARE

My tour guide, Ms. Anne Sheppard. From the San Francisco Junior League.

JOE

We in the Los Altos "Senior League" are most humbled.

Joe bows.

CÉSARE

Che brutto tempo. Ma bella. It really is like Umbria. But I am curious, Giuseppe. Why do you not live in San Francisco?

JOE

We're close enough for what we like. The museums, concerts, a walk in Golden Gate Park.

CÉSARE

Why didn't you take me to Golden Gate Park, Pussycat?

Anne gives him a knowing look.

ANNE

I didn't think it would be very high on your list.

Césare squeezes her with approval as he grins at Joe.

CÉSARE

She is simpatica, no?

Césare glances at the sodden landscape.

CÉSARE

What do you do besides dig in the mud?

JOE

Leggiamo. Meditiamo. Tanto in tanto facciamo una passeggiata.

CÉSARE

But who is there to talk to?

Anne slips away and drifts towards a framed photograph on the mantle -- Curtis in his early twenties. He has Ruth's eyes and Joe's lanky elegance.

ANNE

(to Ruth)

He's good-looking. Your son?

RUTH

Yes.

She is about to say more when Minnie enters, simpering, her hair pulled back in a semblance of an upsweep. Joe and Ruth share a look of distress.

MINNIE

Luncheon is served.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Ruth and Joe's plates are almost empty, while Césare and Anne's have barely been touched.

Césare speaks loudly so he can be sure Minnie, who hovers in the doorway, can hear.

CÉSARE

... we followed Sophia Loren down Via Veneto.

With a lecherous look he leans in close to Anne.

CÉSARE

Later I introduced her to the seductions of La Literatura Italiana.

Uncomfortable, she turns to Joe.

ANNE

You must have loved your work. How did you get started?

JOE

Ruth's father staked me. I decided it was better to be a talent broker than a broke talent.

CÉSARE

We're not all broke.

JOE

Or talented.

CÉSARE

Look at him. He was once a man of the world. He had juice in him, he liked people, literary discussion, pretty girls, excitement. Now he sits on a cow pad and consults grass.

JOE

Ruminating.

Joe and Ruth share a smile.

JOE

As for pretty girls, to quote Aldous Huxley, "sooner or later every man arrives at the point where he can't take yes for an answer."

Ruth stops smiling. Anne lets out an upper-class bray.

CÉSARE

You are not fair to your wife. She is an angel, I adore her, she should be out where things go on.

RUTH

Joe likes the peace. He's working on his memoir.

CÉSARE

Now, this is good news. Tell me, my friend, how many chapters are devoted to me?

JOE

(sarcastic)

I'm calling it The Spectator Bird, memoirs of a bystander.

Joe looks at Ruth.

JOE

As an agent, I'd have to pass.

Ruth gets up, fighting back humiliation.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - BMW - DAY

Anne stares out the rain-covered passenger window.

Joe holds an umbrella over Césare as Césare opens the driver-side door. They embrace, then Césare gets in. Joe closes the door and gives the hood a thump.

Césare starts the BMW and drives off. Joe stands under the umbrella and watches the car slither down the drive.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ruth scrapes an almost full plate of food into the trash while Minnie loads the dishwasher.

MINNIE

Ain't he a skyrocket? He sure
talks like a writer. And don't he
like the ladies!

RUTH

Some people, including himself,
have mentioned him for the Nobel
Prize.

Joe, visible through the window, looks up at the house then trudges towards his studio. Ruth sees the look on his face.

RUTH

I can finish up from here,
Minnie. You better head home
before the roads get any worse.

INT. FRONT HALL - AFTERNOON

Ruth carries Césare's novels. She notices the postcard on the floor. Puzzled, she sets the books down and picks it up.

Ruth examines the Danish village on the front and turns the card over with trepidation. As she reads, her face fills with an old, raw pain.

INT. JOE'S STUDIO - AFTERNOON

Joe hunches over in the desk chair, drinking from a chipped blue and white ROYAL COPENHAGEN MUG.

He ponders the stack of ancient notebooks. He pulls a bottle of BOURBON from a worn leather briefcase and refills the mug.

Joe rubs his cold, waxen hands together then tugs at the rubber band. It crumbles. He opens the top notebook to a random page and scans the handwritten text.

JOE

Seems the middle-aged fool was no
different than the old fool.

He keeps reading as the sky outside darkens to night.

Joe absently touches his hand to the pocket where the
postcard had been. Empty.

EXT. YARD - EVENING

Joe hurries through the rain, the journals tucked under his
coat.

INT. FRONT HALL - EVENING

Joe flips on the light and scans the area -- nothing. He
looks with concern at Césare's books abandoned on the floor.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Walter Cronkite recounts the day's WATERGATE news on the
television. Ruth barely listens as she puts away cutlery.

Joe enters, scanning Ruth for clues. She feigns deep
interest in Cronkite.

JOE

"The White House announeen today
President Nixon's secretary
accidentally erased the misseen
portion of the tape."

As he speaks, Joe slips the journals onto a pile of magazines
and goes to the sink where he runs hot water over his hands.

JOE

Cronkite couldn't pronounce his
way out of a paper bag. Gerunds
end in i-n-g.

Ruth notices Joe's stiff, white fingers.

RUTH

Do you have to ruin everything?

JOE

They're my hands.

Joe dries his hands on a dish towel.

RUTH

I try to take care of you, Joe.
I really do.

RUTH

But you fight me every step of the way. I don't understand, is it really so hard to be happy?

JOE

For some it's not a choice.

RUTH

That's ironic coming from you.

Joe frowns. Ruth pulls the postcard from her apron.

RUTH

When were you going to tell me about this?

JOE

The storm blew a lot of things in.

Ruth sees Joe glance towards the journals.

RUTH

What are those?

JOE

Papers.

RUTH

What papers?

JOE

The only papers. The files, the evidence. Allston was here.

RUTH

They don't look like files.

JOE

Because they aren't. They're notebooks. Three journals, to be exact.

RUTH

Whose are they?

JOE

Mine.

RUTH

You don't keep a journal.

JOE

I did this time.

RUTH
When?

JOE
Denmark.

RUTH
Denmark?!

Joe grabs the journals and leaves the room. Ruth looks after him, alone and betrayed.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Joe sits in his easy chair, reading the journals. Ruth appears at the door and watches him. She hesitates, then steps inside.

RUTH
Read it to me.

JOE
It isn't anything. You know --
blah, blah, blah.

RUTH
I was watching you read. It
matters to you.

JOE
Don't be misled by my gales of
laughter. It's mostly just what
we did. Anyway, it's long gone
now.

RUTH
Poor Astrid.

JOE
"Home is the place where, when you
have to go there, they have to
take you in."

RUTH
I liked her. I liked her as well
as anybody I ever knew.

JOE
I know.

RUTH
I think reading it might be good
for us.

Joe grimaces.

RUTH

Please?

Joe hears the fear in her voice and looks up. Her face is open and pleading.

RUTH

Would it be painful?

JOE

It wasn't a very happy time.

RUTH

No.

Joe sighs then flips to the beginning. Ruth sinks onto the edge of the bed, unsure of what she's gotten herself into.

RUTH

You'll read it?

JOE

Every bloody word.

EXT. COPENHAGEN DOCK (1954) - DAY - FLASHBACK

Joe (49) and Ruth (47) wait in a fine rain for their bags. They are surrounded by the tumult of disembarking passengers and well-wishers waving signs to their loved ones in Danish.

Ruth reaches up to adjust the scarf around Joe's neck. He lets her fuss, then pulls away.

JOE

It was a heart infection, not tuberculosis.

Ruth's eyes focus on a distraught Widow who walks beside a Porter wheeling a pine coffin from the ship.

JOE

So much for starting life over in the old country.

RUTH

How can you joke? Doesn't any of this bother you?

JOE

"After great pain a formal feeling comes..."

RUTH

Don't you dare use Dickinson
against me!

JOE

Against you? We're in this
together, Ruthie. Surely vomiting
side by side for two weeks has
made that apparent.

(mock Swedish accent)

More herring, Madame?

Despite herself, Ruth smiles. Joe signals to a PORTER who
pushes a cart of matching red luggage.

PORTER

(in Danish)

Welcome home, sir.

Joe looks puzzled.

EXT. HAVNEGADE - ASTRID'S APARTMENT - DAY

The luggage surrounds Joe and Ruth, who are inside a rain-
soaked cobblestone courtyard.

Joe reads a piece of paper and looks up at a stern facade
jammed in between two similar old buildings.

JOE

If this one's no good, we'll just
stay at the damned Angleterre.

RUTH

And use up our entire budget?

JOE

I'd rather spend a month in excess
than three months in some
Lutheran's converted outhouse!

RUTH

The agent said the landlady is a
countess.

JOE

A countess? I always knew you
Bryn Mawr girls yearned to be
royal.

RUTH

He also said she was once one of
the great beauties of Denmark.

JOE

And now?

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, PUBLIC HALLWAY - DAY

A heavy blue door opens to reveal a tall, stunning woman, ASTRID WREDEL-KRARUP (42). She is wearing a good but outdated tweed suit and has her heavy gold hair pulled back into a bun. Her only jewelry is a simple gold wedding band.

Ruth glances at Joe to gauge his reaction. She's pleased to see he's a bit dumbstruck.

ASTRID

You are the Americans? The literary agent and his wife. How nice. Yes? Wonderful. Please come in.

Astrid, flustered by Joe's stature and intelligent eyes, leads them into a FOYER and straight through to the drawing room. The apartment is filled with very good furniture and portraits of Danish aristocracy.

INT. DRAWING ROOM - DAY

ASTRID

This will be yours, of course, as will the dining room and back bedroom. I am very cozy in my little studio. We will share the kitchen and bath.

Joe gives Ruth a skeptical look. Ruth goes to the window and gazes out over chimneys to ships passing on the harbor beyond. She looks at the street and the canal below.

RUTH

It's beautiful. So shiny from the rain. Even the boys and girls on their bikes are shiny.

Joe eyes Astrid as she watches Ruth. She turns a thousand watt smile on him.

ASTRID

Isn't she lovely! I love people to look like that! I can tell we will get along fine because we will be nice against one another. Don't you feel the same thing, Mister Allston?

Ruth turns and gives Joe a pointed look. He smiles politely at Astrid.

ASTRID

You must wonder why I rent the rooms. It is hard for the Danish aristocracy to survive. Taxes go up while our role diminishes. The men, they are mostly interested in drinking and the women are all witches.

RUTH

Witches?

ASTRID

Unfortunately my powers are limited. I have a gift with horses and once, I cured a boy of warts. Please, let me show you the rest of the flat.

Astrid leads the way.

RUTH

(to Joe)

Maybe she can cure hearts.

Joe shoots her a look -- not funny.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Astrid stands back, vibrating with anxiety, while Joe and Ruth peer into the tiny bathroom. Astrid sees Joe grimace and try to catch Ruth's eye.

ASTRID

The location is wonderful, you can walk anywhere in ten minutes, even the Opera.

Ruth smiles at Astrid.

RUTH

It's charming. Isn't it Joe?

Two sets of feminine eyes turn on him.

INT. GUEST BEDROOM - DAY

Joe brings in the last of the suitcases and closes the door.

JOE
 Sharing a bathroom at my age?
 What shall I say in the morning?
 "Hurry up, countess, I'm in
 extremis."

Joe tests one of the single beds.

JOE
 If this belonged to the runaway
 husband, he must have been a man
 of very peculiar proportions.

Ruth turns from studying a very good oil painting of a
 POINTER.

RUTH
 Why would any man leave a woman
 like that?

JOE
 Maybe because she doesn't seem to
 have a very good silencer. It's
 as if she's been on a desert
 island for years and we're the
 poor sods who floated up.

RUTH
 I like her. She offered to show
 me the good shops.

JOE
 I'm sure if we keep to ourselves
 it will work out fine.

RUTH
 Well, I could use a friend.

Joe looks away.

INT. DRAWING ROOM - DAY

Joe stands in the window and watches Ruth and Astrid stroll
 along the quay below.

EXT. QUAY - DAY

A black poodle runs up and down the deck of a produce boat.
 A sign on the rail reads: "Hunden Binder."

INT. DRAWING ROOM - DAY

Joe opens a leather briefcase. He takes out a Danish-English
 dictionary and looks something up.

JOE
Hunden... binder. Dog bites.

Joe sees Ruth reach out to pet the dog. The dog BARKS and LUNGES. Astrid pulls Ruth away.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The room glows with candles. Joe waits alone at the table. The door from the kitchen swings open, revealing the two women, rosy-cheeked from cooking.

Ruth carries a tray of chicken and roast vegetables, while Astrid holds a bottle of white wine.

RUTH
Astrid is related to just about every castle in Scandinavia. And to Karen Blixen!

ASTRID
Yes, she is my cousin.

JOE
She's one person in Denmark I would like, out of sheer admiration, to meet.

Ruth sets the food down and takes a seat while Astrid places a crystal glass at each place setting. Astrid offers Joe the bottle of wine, then sits.

ASTRID
It's German. Do you mind?

JOE
Not if it's good.

Joe pours for the ladies and then for himself. He raises his glass.

ASTRID
Stop! A man must learn to skaal or the lady on his left cannot drink.

RUTH
How fun!

ASTRID

Look into my eyes. Hold the glass at your third vest button, which is about even with your sternum. Now keep looking in my eyes, raise your glass and drink.

Joe drinks. His eyes are lost in Astrid's. As their gaze continues, Ruth fidgets.

ASTRID

Now return your glass to the first position without looking away.

Astrid takes a deep drink of wine still holding Joe's eyes.

RUTH

Joe's mother was Danish. From a little town called Bregninge.

Astrid's head snaps towards Ruth.

ASTRID

On Lolland?

JOE

Yes.

ASTRID

If it is that Bregninge it is on the estate where I grew up!

RUTH

What a strange coincidence.

ASTRID

As Master of the Hunt, my father raised animals in Lolland for the King's fall hunting parties. It was said that every one of my father's creatures was a perfect trophy.

Joe raises his glass.

JOE

To your father's creatures!

ASTRID

To your heart's recovery!

Joe shoots Ruth a look of betrayal.

RUTH
Perhaps Astrid could help us find
your mother's home.

ASTRID
It could be complicated. I am not
on good terms with my brother,
Eigel. Since my father died, we
communicate through my sister-in-
law.

RUTH
Anyway, there is so much to see in
Copenhagen. Tomorrow I would like
to ride the Havnefart.

Astrid giggles.

ASTRID
In English, it means -- making
gas, yes?

Joe smiles, yes.

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, GUEST BEDROOM - NIGHT

Joe closes the door and immediately turns on Ruth.

JOE
What did you tell her?

RUTH
It just came up when we were at
the market.

JOE
Hand me a potato did you know
about poor Joe's myocarditis?

RUTH
I doubt she'll think any less of
you.

JOE
We left New York because we didn't
want everyone knowing our damn
business.

RUTH
Is that why we left?

JOE

I just don't want every move we
make to be complicated by the
feeling that she has to be asked
along.

EXT. KITCHEN LANDING - MORNING

Joe opens the kitchen door to a narrow landing. He sees a
bottle of milk and a jar of fresh yoghurt on the stoop.

He picks them up, then puts them back. He closes the door.
Then opens it and brings the milk and yoghurt inside.

EXT. COURTYARD - MORNING

Joe pulls his hat down against the drizzle as he steps
through the courtyard gates and onto the quiet street.

INT. BAKERY - MORNING

Joe stands in line with maids and housewives. His turn comes
and he uses the dictionary to order, to the amusement of the
women.

JOE

(in Danish)

Them pastries, please.

A female BAKERY CUSTOMER good-naturedly corrects him.

BAKERY CUSTOMER

(in Danish)

Those.

JOE

(in Danish)

Thanks.

BAKERY WORKER

(in Danish)

How many?

JOE

(in Danish)

Two.

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, GUEST BEDROOM - MORNING

Joe carries in a breakfast tray. He puts it down and gently
wakes Ruth.

RUTH

You got breakfast?

JOE

I needed an excuse to practice my
Danish.

He tosses some tourist brochures onto the bed.

JOE

Still up for the Have-a-fart?

Ruth laughs.

JOE

She doesn't look like she'd be so
earthy.

RUTH

You find her intriguing.

JOE

I wouldn't go that far.

INT. ROYAL COPENHAGEN STORE - DAY

Joe follows Ruth through a store filled with blue and white china. She is enamored by every piece. He is bored out of his mind.

He lets out an audible SIGH.

RUTH

Go on without me. I know how to
get home from here.

JOE

You sure?

RUTH

Quite.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Joe wanders a pewter-colored street under gray skies. Only the occasional splash of crimson in a window lends any color.

He makes way for a YOUNG WORKER who carries four beer steins in each hand. The youth enters a BUILDING SITE and hands beer to several PLASTER-COVERED WORKERS.

Sadness settles on Joe as he watches the easy camaraderie between the youth and the older workers.

EXT. OPERA HOUSE - DAY

Joe reads a poster for "Joan of Arc at the Stake" by Honegger.

He climbs the grand stairs to the ticket window and leans down to speak to the BOX OFFICE CLERK.

JOE
(in Danish)
Two tickets please. For tomorrow night.

BOX OFFICE CLERK
(in Danish)
Yes, sir.

JOE
(in Danish)
No, make that three. Three tickets.

EXT. STATIONERY STORE - DAY

Joe passes a window filled with neat stacks of office supplies.

INT. STATIONERY STORE - DAY

The choices are slim. Joe settles on a STENOGRAPHY NOTEBOOK. He gauges the number of pages and grabs a couple more notebooks.

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, PARLOR - DAY

Joe strolls in, surprised to find the double doors between the parlor and Astrid's studio open. Ruth and Astrid are engrossed in a drawing that lies on a drafting table.

ASTRID
... makes a nice complement to the archway.

Joe takes in Astrid's eclectic, feminine space. A four poster bed and a large portrait of an INTENSE OLDER MAN in a lab coat, a horse and a cow behind him, claim one side of the room. A work area, covered in fabric swatches and drawings, the other.

JOE
Ladies.

The women turn.

RUTH
Joe! Come take a peek, Astrid is a very talented decorator.

ASTRID

It helps pay the bills, my little hobby.

RUTH

This is for a French couple. The de Coltais.

Ruth and Astrid share a smile.

ASTRID

I call them Mister and Missus Cleavage.

They share a laugh.

JOE

I have a surprise for you both.

Joe leans against the door jam, not wanting to invade Astrid's lair. Ruth, still grinning, holds up a LEICA 35mm CAMERA.

RUTH

Look what Astrid's letting me borrow!

JOE

That's a very good camera.

ASTRID

It was my father's.

Joe holds the opera tickets out.

JOE

Three tickets to Honegger's "Joan of Arc."

Ruth sends a look of approval. Astrid frowns.

JOE

You don't like Honegger, Countess?

ASTRID

I love him.

JOE

Good.

ASTRID

Yes... good.

RUTH (O.S.)
It's funny, you keep referring to
her as 'The Countess.'

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BEDROOM (1974) - NIGHT

Joe looks up from the journal to Ruth, who's pulling a nightgown over her head.

JOE
That's what she was. I'm a simple
American boy. I don't go around
calling the nobility by their
first names.

RUTH
Never?

JOE
Nope. Never. She called me
Mister Allston and I gave her the
full business right back.

Ruth's head pops out of the nightgown, her eyes skeptical.

EXT. COPENHAGEN OPERA HOUSE (1954) - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Ruth's eyes gleam with excitement as the three of them, all in formal attire, approach the crowded grand staircase.

Astrid, breathtakingly beautiful, moves beside them, her head held high, her posture perfect. She sees a couple and smiles at them. The couple turn away. Joe notices the snub. Ruth, too busy enjoying the moment, does not.

Joe offers his free arm to Astrid.

JOE
Countess.

She takes his arm with gratitude.

INT. OPERA HOUSE - NIGHT

Joe ushers the women into their seats. He sits Astrid in the middle.

ASTRID
Thank you, Mister Allston, but you
must sit next to your wife.

Ruth sits and pulls Astrid down next to her.

RUTH

This way we get to share you.

The seats in front of them are unoccupied, leaving the trio open to curious eyes. Of which there are many. People turn in their seats to stare. They whisper.

Astrid studies the program, afraid to look up.

The lights go down and the OVERTURE starts. The curtain rises revealing Joan tied to the stake. The first line rings out:

OPERA SINGER

(in Danish)

A dog howls in the night.

Joe leans towards Astrid.

JOE

I understood that!

ASTRID

You understand everything.

Their eyes lock, hers large and full of pain.

Ruth notices the exchange but when Joe looks her way, she is absorbed in the stage production, where grotesque creatures frolic around Joan.

EXT. OPERA HOUSE - NIGHT

The threesome make their way through clots of people who have no words but plenty of disapproving looks for Astrid.

She maintains her composure until they are out of sight of the building. Her shoulders slump.

EXT. KONGENS NYTORV - NIGHT

The trio walk in silence past the opulent Hotel d'Angleterre as CHATTERING OPERA-GOERS drift inside for a nightcap.

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, FOYER - NIGHT

Astrid avoids Joe's and Ruth's eyes and rushes to her studio.

INT. GUEST BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ruth wipes cold cream off her face. Joe brushes his tuxedo jacket.

RUTH
Why were those people staring at
us with such hostility?

JOE
Perhaps my suit was the wrong cut.

RUTH
Really.

JOE
Maybe they're jealous of the
countess.

RUTH
I know jealousy. That wasn't it.

Joe studies Ruth as she throws the used tissue away.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Astrid, already dressed for the day, rinses a bowl and
spoon. She doesn't hear Joe enter.

JOE
Har de sovet godt?

Astrid whirls around, her face sharp and startled. She
recovers, smiling a bit too brilliantly when she sees Joe.

ASTRID
You sounded so Danish!

JOE
The one-word Dane. Et eneste ord.

ASTRID
You see! Et Eneste. Already you
are saying things like that which
some would never learn.

Astrid has to squeeze past Joe to leave the room. Their
hands brush against each other and their eyes meet. He's
close enough to smell her perfume. And see her deep pain.

Astrid hurries out, leaving Joe staring at the swinging door.

INT. PARLOR - DAY

Ruth peers through the camera. She trains it on Joe as he
comes in. She puts it down, worried.

RUTH
Are you alright? You look
flushed.

JOE
Do I?

RUTH
Is it your heart again?

Joe tenses as he hears the EXTERIOR DOOR close.

RUTH
Joe?

JOE
I'm fine.

Joe moves towards the window. He sees Astrid emerge and hurry down the street, then disappear around a corner. He moves from the window and towards the door.

JOE
Maybe you're right. I think I'll
rest for a bit.

INT. GUEST BEDROOM - DAY

Joe lies on the bed. He changes his mind and pulls one of the new notebooks from his briefcase, along with a fountain pen. He uncaps the pen and starts writing.

INT. PARLOR - NIGHT

Joe and Ruth eat dinner on a tray at the desk.

FOOTSTEPS pass the door. They both freeze. The STEPS move on and a door CLICKS shut down the hall. The sound of a DANISH RADIO news program fills the silence.

RUTH
Why do I feel so snubbed?

JOE
I warned you about getting
friendly with the landlady.

Ruth stabs at her dinner.

INT. PARLOR - DAY

Ruth studies tourist brochures while Joe uses his dictionary to try and decipher the local newspaper.

The doorbell RINGS. They look at each other. It rings again.

RUTH

I'm not sure if she's here.
Perhaps you should answer it.

INT. FOYER - DAY

Joe opens the door to an elegant gentleman, ERIK (45), who has a gray Homburg in one hand and gloves in another. Erik's striking blue eyes scan Joe from top to bottom. His well-repaired harelip curls in surprise.

ERIK

(in Danish)
I may have the wrong address.

JOE

(in Danish)
Do you speak English?

ERIK

Isn't this the apartment of Astrid
Wredel-Krarup?

JOE

Yes, my wife and I share it. I'm
not sure the countess is in.

Astrid's door opens. She looks at Erik with a smile but no affection. Erik pushes past Joe.

ERIK

God dag, Astrid.

ASTRID

Erik.

Astrid looks at Joe, embarrassed. She opens the door wide for Erik to enter, then closes it behind them.

INT. PARLOR - DAY

Ruth can barely wait for Joe to close the door.

RUTH

Who was it?

JOE

I think the husband.

RUTH

And?

JOE

And what?

RUTH

What did he look like?

Muffled but tense voices invade the room.

RUTH

We'd better take a walk.

JOE

I don't need a walk.

EXT. COPENHAGEN STREET - DAY

Ruth and Joe huddle inside their coats as they negotiate a narrow cobblestoned lane. A sign indicates the direction of the "Nyhavn" district.

RUTH

Isn't that where Curt lived?

She doesn't wait for a reply and starts walking. Joe reluctantly follows.

EXT. NYHAVEN - DAY

A rough harbor area. Stevedores and sailors fill the streets.

A group of BEATS in black turtlenecks stumble out of a bar. Joe looks at them in disgust. But Ruth is curious and she pulls out the Leica.

JOE

Don't!

RUTH

Why not?

Ruth takes some photos of the beret-clad Beats smoking and talking. They are scornful of her interest and Joe, agitated, walks on. Ruth finishes and hurries to join him.

JOE

Of course this is where he'd come. Why go to the motherland to elevate oneself when one could stay stuck to the teat of infantile ennui and feel exotic while doing it?

RUTH
 You don't know what he did while
 he was here.

JOE
 I know what he didn't do.
 Anything.

Ruth stops and looks squarely at Joe.

RUTH
 You think you're a pragmatist.
 The truth is, you're an idealist,
 and nobody can live up to your
 standards. Not even you.

Ruth walks away, leaving a stunned Joe in her wake.

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, PARLOR - NIGHT

Ruth reads while Joe uses a poker to stir the fire. A quiet
 RAP on the door breaks the stony silence.

ASTRID (O.S.)
 May I come in?

JOE
 Please.

The Countess enters and sits stiffly on a chair. Joe offers
 her a drink from the sideboard, which she waves off.

ASTRID
 First I must talk.
 (pause)
 I have not seen my husband in many
 months. He has not lived here
 since the war. Now he asks to
 come back.

RUTH
 And what do you think?

ASTRID
 Think? I do not live in my head.
 I live down here.

Astrid slaps the area below her belt.

ASTRID
 Ever, all my life. I feel better
 than most people think.

RUTH

You don't feel you want him back?

ASTRID

I am feeling many things at once.

Ruth gives Joe a look. Astrid notices.

ASTRID

No. Please stay. At the opera, you could not help seeing. It was embarrassing for you, I am sorry. I should not have tried. But I thought maybe because I was with you -- I had not been out like that since before the war ended.

JOE

That's nine years.

ASTRID

Yes. They called my husband a quisling -- they said he was spying for the Germans.

She looks at Joe as she touches her upper lip.

ASTRID

You saw? He was always bitter and he caught the Nazi disease. Two days before the war ended the partisans shot him on the steps of the Hotel D'Angleterre. I haven't had a husband since.

RUTH

How terrible!

ASTRID

When he went to prison they took almost everything. I sold the rest to try and get him out. He was my husband, what could I do? After, he came only to get his clothes.

She smiles bitterly.

ASTRID

He went straight away with a woman he met during the war.

RUTH

Oh, Astrid!

ASTRID

Now something has happened with his woman, he says it is I who have been his wife all along. But I will not have him!

Ruth grabs Astrid's hand.

RUTH

Of course you won't!

Joe waits, tense.

ASTRID

No, of course not.

JOE

I think we could all use that drink.

ASTRID

Please. A strong one!

Joe pours three drinks and hands them around. Astrid stands to receive hers, and with an impulsive gesture she leans up against Joe.

ASTRID

You are both so good! It is lovely to have friends.

Ruth smiles, pleased by the way Joe gives Astrid a quick hug back.

JOE (V.O.)

I was tempted to tell her about Curt.

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BEDROOM (1974) - NIGHT

Ruth sits up straight.

RUTH

You were?

JOE

It's why we went to Denmark.

RUTH

You seemed to shut it all out. The pain anyway.

JOE

I still don't know if I hate
Curt's death more because he never
fulfilled himself or because he
never fulfilled me.

RUTH

You've never gotten over it.

JOE

No, I guess not.

Ruth jumps out of bed and hugs him.

RUTH

It's been over twenty years. It's
not healthy to grieve forever. I
loved him, too. I thought I
couldn't bear it when he died, but
I have.

JOE

All that proves is that you're a
survivor and I'm not.

Ruth pulls away.

RUTH

What does that mean?

JOE

Maybe just that women are more
durable, they're made for holding
things together. Anyway, it's not
his death, or not only his death.

RUTH

What then?

JOE

How to respect myself when I know
I'm confused and cowardly. How to
live and grow old inside a head
I'm contemptuous of and a culture
I despise.

RUTH

He agreed with you. He despised
it, and himself too, as much as...
as you taught him to.

JOE

If he'd really fought against the things he'd hated, don't you think I would have been with him?

RUTH

I don't know.

JOE

But he just gave up.

RUTH

You could try forgiving him.

JOE

I forgave him long ago.

RUTH

Did you? He might have had something to forgive us for, too.

She gets up and goes into the bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Ruth flicks on the light. Surprised by what she sees -- a gray-haired lady in a sensible nightgown. Joe joins her.

JOE

If he'd been alive these last twenty years would we have found common ground?

RUTH

I think so. I have to think so.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

Joe is down in the ditch repairing the culvert. A HORN blares. Ben waves from his Jaguar. Joe scrambles up to meet him.

The RADIO reports the latest on Watergate. Ben turns it off.

BEN

Tom wants to know if you have a wood shredder.

JOE

No. But I've been meaning to get one. If he can wait a day or two I'll run out and pick one up.

BEN

He has one. He wants to know if you'd like it.

JOE

Oh. Christ.

BEN

Can I tell him yes?

JOE

I suppose. It somehow makes me feel complicit.

BEN

No, it makes you a part of the only thing Tom has left.

JOE

I'm guessing you don't mean the shredder.

BEN

You can joke, but dying is just as natural as living.

JOE

That doesn't make it welcome.
"Rage, rage against the dying of the light," and all that.

Ben calmly holds Joe's uncomfortable stare.

JOE

How can you stand it, being around so much death?

BEN

It's the only thing we can't fake.

Ben turns the RADIO back on and drives off.

Joe doesn't have the heart to go back to work. He sits on a rock and watches wrens build a nest in a hole in a tree. They are surly and aggressive, jabbing and poking each other.

Joe hears Ruth's Volvo descend the driveway. He stands up and extends his thumb, as if hitchhiking. Ruth stops and rolls down her window.

JOE

I need a couple of things in town.
Mind if I steal the car while you read to your shut-ins?

RUTH

Why don't you come talk to them first? They'd love to hear about your clients.

JOE

Over my dead body. Those old folks give me the glooms.

Joe gets in the passenger seat.

RUTH

You can't fool me, I know you're sympathetic.

INT. HARDWARE STORE - DAY

Joe examines a roll of wire mesh. A BEARDED HIPPIE (25) enters the aisle. Joe watches the hippie with suspicion.

Joe follows the Hippie into another aisle. The Hippie picks out a toilet plunger and walks towards the door. Joe follows. To Joe's surprise, the Hippie pulls out a wallet.

EXT. HARDWARE STORE - DAY

Joe struggles to get the mesh into the trunk but loses his grip. The mesh rolls across the parking lot towards a psychedelic VW van.

To Joe's consternation, the Hippie pops out of the van and picks up the mesh. Joe can hear music from the van as he approaches.

BOB DYLAN (V.O.)

Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.

The Hippie grins.

HIPPIE

Here you go, man.

He hands Joe the roll of mesh. And waits.

JOE

Thank you.

EXT. RETIREMENT HOME - DAY

Joe waits in the car. He glances at his watch and then at the entrance. Annoyed, he gets out and SLAMS the car door.

INT. RETIREMENT HOME, HALL - DAY

Joe marches through the hall, his eyes locked on the glass door of the RECREATION ROOM.

INT. HALL NEAR RECREATION ROOM - DAY

Joe pauses outside and watches Ruth read from one of the Dickinson poems taped to the wall:

RUTH

This is the Hour of Lead --
Remembered, if outlived, As
Freezing persons recollect the
Snow -- First -- Chill -- then
Stupor -- then the letting go.

Joe's face softens with pride. Ruth looks up, pleased and surprised to see him.

A CADAVER ON WHEELS rolls over to Joe, propelled by an ELECTRIC MOTOR. Joe cringes as the Cadaver, yellowed skin drawn over an emaciated face, removes an oxygen mask.

CADAVER

Got a Lucky?

Joe flees.

INT. VOLVO - DAY

Ruth gets in the car as the radio switches from CLASSICAL MUSIC to an AD for ANACIN.

RUTH

Maybe Anacin would work. Or
aspirin. Most people cure their
arthritis with aspirin.

JOE

You can't cure arthritis. You
chase it back from the borders,
you set up a Roman wall to keep it
out. But off in the heather, back
in the glens it's sitting by its
peat fire telling itself that you
mought have kilt it but you ain't
whapped it yet. Then when you
have to pull back the legions to
fight the Helvetians or somebody,
here it comes, sneaking back down
on your wall with black knives to
cut your throat.

RUTH

What on earth is all that about?

Joe gives her a look of absolute misery.

JOE

The only thing that seems to wipe out pain is different pain.

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ruth brings two glasses of water in from the bathroom. She sets one down by Joe, who is in bed, paging through the journal.

JOE

Don't you find all of this a bit long-winded?

RUTH

Oh no! I want to hear every word of this.

JOE

You want your pound of flesh.

RUTH

I don't think that's the purpose.

JOE

No? What is the purpose?

Ruth give him a long look as she pulls back the covers on her bed and plumps a pillow. She starts to get in, then changes her mind. She moves to the side of Joe's bed.

RUTH

Shove over.

Joe looks at her, surprised, but does as he's told. She slips in beside him.

RUTH

Isn't this cozy?

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, PARLOR (1954) - DAY - FLASHBACK

It's the first nice day of spring and there's a celebratory fever in the air. Ruth leans out the window, snapping photos of passing bicyclists.

Astrid and Joe eat breakfast, amused by Ruth darting back and forth from the table to the window, nibbling on a pastry then taking another photograph.

RUTH

We have to go somewhere!

Astrid looks at Ruth, then at Joe.

ASTRID

Would you like to see my little
Ellebacken cottage? And Mister
Allston did want to meet Karen
Blixen. Her house is on the way.

She looks at Joe.

ASTRID

But are you well enough? How are
your EKGs?

JOE

They have their ups and downs.

She frowns. Joe smiles to let her know it was a joke.

ASTRID

Ah, it works so well!

EXT. COURTYARD - DAY

Ruth and Astrid, both in sundresses, wait like mismatched
sisters -- one tall and fair, the other small and dark.

A car HONKS and Joe pulls up in a convertible Mercedes. He
stops beside the women with a flourish.

Ruth hops into the backseat. She points the camera at
Astrid's confused face and takes a photo. Ruth lowers the
camera and grins.

RUTH

Get in. I can take better
pictures from here.

Astrid, suddenly shy, slides in next to Joe.

EXT. OSTERBROGADE HIGHWAY - DAY

The Mercedes joins an exodus of pleasure seekers fleeing
Copenhagen. A car with Swedish plates, full of roaring young
people, overtakes them.

ASTRID

Those Swedes, they are so rigtig,
but when they have drunk some
things they will follow you right
up your own stairs.

JOE

A couple of days of this, and I
might follow you myself.

Joe grins. But Astrid's face is dead serious.

ASTRID

It would not do if you were to
feel too well.

Ruth can't hear but she sees them exchange a long look.

EXT. BEECHWOOD GROVE - DAY

The Mercedes enters a dappled grove of beechwood trees, the light pale green and gold. Both women exclaim as they throw their heads back and look up.

At the far edge Joe whips the car around and heads back through. He drives slowly.

JOE

Fairies must have been invented in
a spring beechwood.

He comes to the beginning and heads back again. They exit the grove, enchanted. Ruth leans over Joe's shoulder and gives him a kiss on the cheek.

RUTH

I never knew you to do a thing
like that before. It was lovely.

ASTRID

Mister Allston is not at all the
way Americans are supposed to be.
Why is he not loud and
insensitive? Why does he not
think all things can be solved
with money? Why does he respond
to beauty?

Joe is embarrassed but pleased.

EXT. KAREN BLIXEN'S HOME - DAY

An ivy-covered farmhouse appears on their left.

ASTRID

Turn in here. Karen said she
would be in the garden.

Joe pulls into the circular drive and stops. They pile out and Astrid leads them towards the back.

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

KAREN BLIXEN (69), a wizened little woman in a huge floppy hat, waves.

They join her and she shows them a stone that is still damp from the earth. It is six inches long, marked with the crooked letters of a dead alphabet.

KAREN

A rune stone.

Her lined, nut-brown face breaks into a smile. Her dark eyes take in Joe and Ruth, then move to Astrid's face. She studies Astrid then pats her cheek fondly but firmly.

KAREN

Lunch?

EXT. TERRACE - DAY

The remains of lunch are on the table.

Karen offers a bowl of fresh strawberries for dessert. Ruth picks one up and tastes it. Her face fills with pleasure. Karen smiles and hands Ruth a basket.

KAREN

Take some. They are in the hothouse.

RUTH

Thank you.

Ruth accepts the basket and leaves.

Joe moves closer to Astrid. Karen takes silent notice.

JOE

You loved Africa.

KAREN

It was life.

JOE

And what's this, then?

KAREN

This? This is safety.

JOE

Is it bad to have a place to come back to? An American, or at least one kind of American, would envy you. He was born in transit, when he moves, he doesn't move back, he moves on. No accumulations. No traditions. A civilization without attics.

KAREN

Or dungeons. Or ghosts.

JOE

Or rune stones.

She studies him.

KAREN

You feel this.

ASTRID

Mister Allston's mother was Danish. From Bregninge, can you imagine? We go there next week, all three of us, to see if that is his safe place.

KAREN

Have you and Eigel decided to be friends then?

ASTRID

He will not be there.

KAREN

Eigel is his father's son, isn't that the trouble?

They hold each other's eyes until Karen looks away. She turns to Joe.

KAREN

You expect that closing a link with your mother's past will make you feel safer in some way?

JOE

I'm not so compulsive about it as we're making it sound.

KAREN

You don't expect to reverse your mother's emigration and come back to Denmark to live?

JOE

Oh no.

KAREN

Why not?

JOE

I guess I find it too small and too tame.

KAREN

You won't find Bregninge tame. That whole estate uses the past to create the future. Astrid's father was a man of tremendous talent, and her brother has inherited a great deal of it.

Karen glances at Astrid with affectionate malice.

KAREN

The old count was the Doctor Faustus of genetics.

ASTRID

Karen, please.

Ruth returns with the basket full of berries. Her smile fades as she senses the tension.

KAREN

Eigel upsets Astrid because he follows their father's practice of seducing peasant girls. It is surely naughty of him, but is it evil?

ASTRID

Karen, this is simply unkind!

KAREN

When did you say your mother emigrated?

JOE

If you're trying to connect me to a distinguished pedigree it won't work. I was born four years after my mother came to the States.

Astrid rises.

ASTRID
If we are to go on to Ellebacken
we must begin.

EXT. MERCEDES - DAY

Astrid and Ruth are seated in the Mercedes. Joe is about to get in when Karen stops him. She presses the RUNE STONE into his hand.

KAREN
Love and safety don't always mix.

INT. MERCEDES - DAY

Ruth leans over as Joe pulls out of the driveway.

RUTH
What did she say to you?

Joe removes the stone from his shirt pocket. He holds it up.

JOE
She gave me this.

ASTRID
That meddling witch!

Ruth and Joe look at Astrid, surprised by her sharp tone.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Astrid broods.

LATER

Astrid indicates a driveway that cuts through a meadow.

ASTRID
We are here!

EXT. ELLEBACKEN COTTAGE - DAY

Astrid has the door open before the car comes to a complete stop. She hops out and runs up the stairs of a half-timbered thatched cottage.

INT. COTTAGE, MAIN ROOM - DAY

Ruth helps Astrid remove dust covers from a few pieces of furniture. Joe opens the drapes and looks towards a small lake with an island in the middle.

JOE
It's beautiful.

ASTRID
It's the place my husband and I
were most happy.

Joe turns to see Astrid and Ruth holding a dust cover between them. They fold it over and over until it is a long narrow rectangle, then they come together to make the final fold.

Astrid smiles brilliantly.

ASTRID
Time to swim!

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - DAY

Ruth and Joe emerge from a bedroom in their bathing suits. Neither knows what to say at the sight of Astrid, whose body is remarkably fit and voluptuous.

Astrid tosses a towel over her shoulder.

ASTRID
Ready?

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Astrid strides straight into the sea, WHOOPING with joy as a wave breaks over her chest.

Joe follows. He GASPS in surprise at the chilly temperature. Ruth goes to the surf and puts a toe in.

RUTH
Joe!

Joe ignores her and swims towards Astrid, but Astrid is a strong swimmer and is soon far out in the choppy sound.

Joe gives up and returns to the beach, shivering.

RUTH
You got what you deserved, you
show off.

Ruth throws a towel over him and gives him a good rub down. When she's satisfied he's dry she stretches out beside him. She takes his hand and closes her eyes.

LATER

Ruth is asleep.

Joe walks along the shore. He stops and sits, his arms around his knees, and looks at the waves.

Astrid emerges from the sea and makes her way up the beach.

ASTRID
Why so gloomy?

JOE
Was I?

ASTRID
Apparently.

JOE
Our son drowned in August.

ASTRID
I'm so sorry.

JOE
He was surfing. A twenty-six year-old beach bum who finally found what he was looking for.

ASTRID
What could that have been?

JOE
The ultimate way to get back at me.

His face fills with pain.

ASTRID
It was a suicide?

JOE
Yes. No. I don't know. Ruth is sure it was an accident.

Joe's voice breaks.

JOE
Which is stronger? A father's love or a father's contempt?

Astrid touches Joe's hand.

ASTRID
A father's love can be too much sometimes.

JOE
Are you speaking from experience?

ASTRID

Yes.

Ruth's eyes open. She sees Joe and Astrid. She gets to her feet and sneaks up on them so she can take a candid shot.
CLICK.

RUTH

What were you two talking about?

JOE

What I want to be when I grow up.

Astrid shoots him a look. Joe looks back, willing her to keep their secret.

RUTH (V.O.)

So you did tell her.

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BEDROOM (1974) - NIGHT

Ruth gets up and goes to her dressing table. She opens a jar of cold cream and rubs it into her face. She watches Joe in the mirror.

RUTH

Why? Why would you tell her when you wouldn't ever talk about it with me? I was dying to know how you felt.

JOE

Well now you know.

Ruth screws the lid on with such force it cracks.

RUTH

Look what you made me do!

JOE

Come on, Ruthie, it's just a story, something that happened to people who only vaguely resemble us. One of those queer little adventures the life tourist runs into.

RUTH

You can say whatever you like, Joe. But it's not just a story. You think your existence doesn't matter and yet you have always been the one to narrate our lives. Your version of a story is what gets told until it's a nice little package with Joe at the center. Maybe I should have kept a journal.

JOE

Maybe you should have.

RUTH

I was too busy trying to live my life!

JOE

Maybe I should stop reading if you find the narrator so untrustworthy.

RUTH

No. I want to find out exactly how untrustworthy he was.

EXT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, COURTYARD (1954) - DAY - FLASHBACK

The Mercedes is parked in the courtyard with the trunk open. Astrid, dressed in her best tweed suit, helps Joe tuck in a bag. Joe starts to close the trunk lid.

RUTH (O.S.)

Wait!

Ruth approaches carrying a hat box.

RUTH

It's not often I visit a castle.

Astrid smiles but Joe frowns. He struggles to find room in the crowded trunk. Astrid leans in next to him and moves a suitcase. Joe drops the hat box neatly into place.

EXT. OREBYSLOT, DRIVE - DAY

The Mercedes passes a tidy, well-groomed cottage. Up ahead looms a massive stone and iron gate.

INT. MERCEDES - DAY

Orbyslot, a vast Dutch Renaissance castle, becomes visible in front of them.

RUTH
I had no idea.

Astrid, in the back seat, reaches forward and puts a hand on Joe and Ruth's shoulders.

ASTRID
Thank you! It is good to be back.

EXT. OREBYSLOT - DAY

The tires CRUNCH on perfectly raked gravel as the Mercedes comes to a halt in front of the castle entrance.

Ruth gets out and Astrid follows, bounding up the stairs into the arms of MANON (43), a tall, strained woman with a long, aristocratic face.

Joe removes a suitcase from the trunk. Astrid rushes back.

ASTRID
Gerda will take care of that.
Come, meet Manon.

Astrid grabs Joe and Ruth's arms and drags them up towards Manon, who regards Astrid with bemusement.

INT. OREBYSLOT, GRAND STAIRCASE - DAY

Joe and Ruth follow, GERDA, a sturdy middle-aged maid with a suitcase in each hand, up a grand staircase. Joe leans close to Ruth.

JOE
The downstairs boy goes upstairs.

Astrid and Manon whisper together at the bottom of the stairs. Astrid's face grows serious and she hugs Manon.

INT. GUEST SUITE - DAY

Heavy curtains block out most of the light to a suite of rooms.

Joe flips a light switch. A forty-watt bulb in a plain ceiling fixture whimpers to life.

JOE
Why are Europeans, even in
castles, incapable of adequate
lighting?

Ruth looks around the beautifully decorated room.

RUTH

Why are you incapable of simply enjoying things? Say what you will, you are not going to ruin this for me.

INT. OREBYSLOT, VARIOUS - DAY

Astrid guides Joe and Ruth from one room to another, her bearing as regal as her surroundings.

INT. OREBYSLOT, LIBRARY - DAY

Astrid leads Ruth and Joe into a library stocked floor to ceiling with books.

ASTRID

My father's collection.

Joe goes to a shelf and reads several titles.

JOE

Impressive, but horticulture and game management are not my strength.

ASTRID

My father had a romantic side as well.

Astrid takes Joe by the arm and leads him to a collection of European poetry. Manon enters and joins them.

Joe scans the shelves and takes down a first-edition of Goethe.

JOE

Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan.

Astrid gives Joe an approving nod as Manon's reserve melts.

MANON

"The eternal feminine leads us upward." It is our job, yes, Mister Allston? To lead men, to show them what is right?

JOE

Lead on.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Manon walks next to Joe, pointing out significant family heirlooms. Astrid, her arm through Ruth's, stops by a statue of a nymph.

ASTRID

When I was a little girl, I thought I could hear her speak.

RUTH

What did she say?

ASTRID

She said that I would have very nice friends.

She squeezes Ruth's arm.

Astrid eyes the end of the long table where six places are set. She drops Ruth's arm and hurries towards Manon, a look of panic in her eyes.

ASTRID

Who?

MANON

Grandmama. She shouldn't but she wants to see you and to greet your friends.

ASTRID

And?

Manon lifts a thin shoulder in a helpless shrug.

As if on cue, a very pregnant woman, MISS WEIBULL (40) enters. She has a broad country face but sharp amber eyes.

Manon indicates Astrid, whose look is stony.

MANON

(in Danish)

You remember Astrid?

Miss Weibull snorts, loudly.

MISS WEIBULL

Naturligvis. Velkommen.

ASTRID

God dag.

Manon turns to Joe and Ruth.

MANON

Miss Weibull.

Ruth sends a frantic look to Joe: "Don't say anything!" Joe shoots a look back: "I'm not stupid."

JOE

God dag.

RUTH

God dag.

The group stands around in silence but the air is thick with tension. Tension that Miss Weibull seems to enjoy, her flat feet planted, her arms crossed.

Joe looks at the bowls of lilacs that line the table. He smiles at Miss Weibull.

JOE

Aren't the lilacs marvelous?

MISS WEIBULL

Jeg taler ikke Engelsk.

Joe sniffs deeply, looks at the lilacs, sniffs again and places a hand over his heart.

JOE

Smukke Blomster.

MISS WEIBULL

Ah, oui.

Miss Weibull looks towards the door. Joe's eyes follow.

Gerda escorts an ancient woman, GRANDMAMA (98), whose face is like a spiderweb with two eyes. Her bearing is ramrod straight but each step takes an eternity. Finally, she arrives.

Astrid and Manon jump to help Gerda settle Grandmama into a chair at the head of the table.

Grandmama's alert eyes snap over the group as she turns her face up to Astrid for a kiss, giving her a fond, sad smile.

MANON

Grandmama, here are Astrid's friends, Mister and Missus Allston.

GRANDMAMA

You are very welcome here.

Manon directs Joe to a place between Miss Weibull and Astrid. She indicates the chair next to herself for Ruth. Ruth and Manon sit but neither Astrid or Miss Weibull do. They both look at Joe.

Joe hesitates then pulls the chair on his right out for Miss Weibull. He turns to seat Astrid but she is already in her chair, not happy.

LATER

A Male Servant pours a glass of wine for Joe. Joe picks up his glass and skaals Astrid. Their eyes lock, for one moment too long. Miss Weibull snickers.

Joe turns to Miss Weibull and skaals her with a flourish. He proceeds to skaal each woman in turn, starting with Grandmama and ending on Ruth, who is not amused.

LATER

The Servant clears the main course plates while Gerda sets out cake.

RUTH

It's humiliating but pleasant for Americans to travel in a country where everyone seems to speak English.

GRANDMAMA

Astrid's father often said that if a Dane fell into the sea and washed up to the south, he'd have to know German. To the west, English or French and if to the north or east, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish or Russian. So every Dane is compelled to prepare for the day he falls into the sea.

MANON

If Mister Allston fell into the sea he would come up speaking anything he needed to.

ASTRID

But that's because his mother was a Dane.

She turns so Grandmama can hear.

ASTRID

Mister Allston's mother was born
in Bregninge. Isn't that
interesting?

GRANDMAMA

Here?

ASTRID

Here in Bregninge, yes.

GRANDMAMA

What family? Are we related?

JOE

Oh no. She worked on one of the
farms.

GRANDMAMA

One of our peasants?

Joe meets her eyes.

JOE

Yes.

GRANDMAMA

How fascinating. What is her name?

JOE

Her name was Ingeborg Heegaard.

Miss Weibull's brow furrows.

GRANDMAMA

I remember no one by that name.

JOE

I'm sure the family had run out.
She was brought up by a family
named Sverdrup.

Astrid and Manon share an astonished look. Grandmama's eyes
shrink to tiny dots. Miss Weibull grins.

MISS WEIBULL

Ja, Sverdrup!

Manon rises and motions to Gerda, whose face is sharp with
worry. Manon and Gerda assist Grandmama to her feet.

Joe and Ruth, watching the activity with incomprehension,
scramble up while Miss Weibull struggles out of her chair.
Grandmama attempts a smile in Joe and Ruth's direction.

GRANDMAMA

We must talk again. It has been
very... pleasant. Now I must rest.

Manon and Gerda practically carry the old lady from the room.

MISS WEIBULL

Ingeborg Heegaard -- elle était?

JOE

My mother. Min moder.

MISS WEIBULL

Hun var min moders veninde!

She grins at Astrid with malice, then leaves.

JOE

What in God's name...

ASTRID

It is complicated. It is
incredible.

JOE

What does veninde mean? Friend?

ASTRID

Yes.

RUTH

And who is Miss Weibull?

ASTRID

Her mother was a Sverdrup.

RUTH

Is that bad?

Astrid's face fills with distress.

JOE

Perhaps we should leave.

ASTRID

No! Manon and Grandmama would be
miserable. I too.

Ruth sees Astrid's desperation.

RUTH

I think I'll rest upstairs.

ASTRID

Yes. Good.

She turns to Joe.

ASTRID

I will explain all to you later.
Please, you wanted to see your
mother's house. It is the cottage
we drove by on the way in.

Astrid takes Ruth's arm and steers her out leaving Joe alone
with the servants.

EXT. OREBYSLØT - DAY

Joe walks down the drive lined with flowering lindens.

EXT. SVERDRUP COTTAGE - DAY

Joe slows as he approaches the cottage. He stops at the
white painted fence and studies the stone house and garden.
They are neat and homey, not a place one would want to leave.

The door opens and a buxom YOUNG WOMAN emerges from the
cottage. Joe releases his grip on the fence and steps away.

The barefoot Young Woman reaches behind and under her blouse
to fasten her brassiere. She giggles when she realizes she
has an audience but finishes the procedure with a wriggle.

YOUNG WOMAN

God dag.

JOE

God dag.

She bursts into laughter and goes back inside.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

Joe approaches an ancient stone church. He pushes open the
massive wood door.

INT. CHURCH, VESTIBULE - DAY

The light is murky and Joe almost walks into a giant poor box
made from the trunk of an oak. He fishes a coin out of his
pocket and drops it in. It THUDS, lonely at the bottom.

Hearing a soft SHUFFLE behind him, Joe turns to find a wispy
young CLERGYMAN in a black robe and an old-fashioned ruff.

JOE
Min Moder...

CLERGYMAN
Your mother, yes?

JOE
I was wondering if you had birth
records for the village?

The Clergyman points to a huge leather-bound book on a stand. Joe opens it and pages back through the years to 1884. He runs his finger down a list of faded names until he finds: "Ingeborg Heegaard."

Joe is deeply moved. The Clergyman smiles with compassion.

CLERGYMAN
Go inside, sit for a moment.

INT. CHAPEL - DAY

Joe enters a bright room with stone walls and a sturdy alter. Dozens of ships' models hang from the ceiling.

Joe sits in a middle pew and looks up at the ships. They float above him, moving slightly on their wires.

The Clergyman sits beside Joe.

CLERGYMAN
Beautiful, yes? From people who
have survived the sea.

JOE
What do you have for those who
didn't?

CLERGYMAN
Memory.

JOE
Not prayer?

CLERGYMAN
To me, they are the same.

EXT. SVEDRUP COTTAGE - DAY

Joe walks past the cottage. He hears a DOOR CLOSE and the GATE UNLATCH. He glances back and sees a MAN come through the gate. Joe turns away and picks up his pace.

FOOTSTEPS behind him grind into the gravel.

EIGEL

Du!

Joe bristles and stops. He turns to see EIGEL RØDDING (44), elegant in a corduroy jacket and jodphurs.

Eigel's eyes rake over Joe.

EIGEL

Hvad behøver Du?

JOE

I don't behøver anything. I am taking a walk.

Eigel laughs.

EIGEL

Of course, of course, you're the one with Astrid. American are you? How are you enjoying Denmark?

JOE

Charming country.

EIGEL

You and your wife are living with Astrid?

JOE

Yes.

EIGEL

That must be cozy.

JOE

We've become very good friends.

Eigel allows his attention to drift to a flight of starlings. He turns his amber eyes back on Joe and jerks his head towards the castle.

EIGEL

I was unable to greet you.

JOE

We understood you weren't home.

EIGEL

I was instructed not to be.

Eigel rocks in his boots, a bundle of unfocused energy.

EIGEL

I don't suppose you play tennis?

JOE

Why would you suppose that?

EIGEL

You don't look like a tennis player.

JOE

I used to play some.

EIGEL

How about a game now?

JOE

This minute?

EIGEL

There aren't many tennis players on the island. I have to pick up a game when I can find it.

JOE

Thanks much, but I haven't played in months. I'm all out of shape.

Eigel nods.

EIGEL

It's up to you. You know your capacities better than I do.

A competitive flame flickers in Joe's eyes.

EXT. TENNIS COURT - DAY

Joe, dressed in tennis whites and a pair of too-small canvas shoes, stands ready to receive Eigel's first serve. Eigel slices the ball deep and wide into the forehand court, out of Joe's reach.

EIGEL

Ace!

LATER

Joe and Eigel rally the ball from the baseline. Eigel is in control while Joe, already winded, can barely keep the ball in play. Eigel approaches the net and puts away a volley.

Joe slumps, breathing hard.

EIGEL
Feeling okay?

JOE
Terrific.

LATER

Joe readies to serve a new game. He gives Eigel an appraising look.

JOE
Love serving three.

Joe serves the ball. Eigel returns it -- just where Joe wants it. Joe sends it back, this time a little wider. Eigel can't wind up on it and his shot carries beyond the baseline. Joe smiles with satisfaction.

JOE
Long.

Eigel glares at Joe.

LATER

Joe moves the increasingly frustrated Dane around the court, mixing his shots to keep Eigel off-balance. Joe hits a backhand winner to take the point.

EIGEL
Advantage out.

Eigel fires a rocket down the middle. Joe winces as he hits a perfect cross-court forehand that just stays inside the line.

Joe hobbles to the side of the court and sits in the grass. He peels off his shoe and examines his foot.

EIGEL
What is it?

JOE
Blister.

Eigel smacks the net with his racket.

EIGEL
We can't stop now, it's one set apiece!

JOE
I'll have to default.

Eigel looks like he's going to burst a gasket. Then, just as quickly, his disappointment passes.

Eigel sits next to Joe, his face red and happy.

EIGEL

You know, you're too modest by half. You really are a tennis player.

JOE

For a peasant.

Eigel laughs.

EIGEL

I like peasant vigor. Why don't you stay a month and we'll play every day.

JOE

I don't think your sister would approve.

EIGEL

Astrid likes to play the martyr.

Eigel springs to his feet.

EIGEL

Come, we'll shower and I'll drive you back.

EXT. TENNIS PAVILION - DAY

Joe and Eigel, in their regular clothes, walk towards a Volkswagen Beetle.

INT. VW - DAY

Eigel drives past perfect rows of crops.

JOE

Is there anything you haven't touched? Some little corner of wildness breeding in the hedgerows?

EIGEL

Nothing. It's the most scientifically run estate in Denmark. My father made things, new things.

EIGEL

Our pointers are desired all over the world. We ship two varieties of apples he developed. So it goes all over the estate.

JOE

Karen Blixen says your father was the Doctor Faustus of genetics.

EIGEL

He was the greatest man in Denmark!

Joe grips the side of the seat as they bounce across a field.

EIGEL

And they hounded him as if he were the Antichrist.

He SLAMS on the brakes.

EIGEL

Khhhh! That's the bastard with the bad horns.

A stag grazes at the edge of a field. Eigel reaches into the back and pulls a rifle out from a pile of blankets. Joe's eyes widen.

EXT. VW - FIELD - DAY

Eigel slips from the car, puts the gun to his shoulder and takes careful aim. His eyes flick to Joe, who stands by the open passenger door.

EIGEL

Would you like to take the shot?

Joe looks at the magnificent creature and back at Eigel.

JOE

I...

The stag stirs and bolts towards the woods.

EIGEL

Damn!

JOE

I ought to get back.

INT. VW - OREBYSLOT - DAY

Eigel rolls the VW across the gravel and stops in the shadow of the castle.

EIGEL

You must have been ranked.

Joe grins.

JOE

College. Doubles.

EIGEL

I knew it!

Eigel pumps Joe's hand in farewell.

EIGEL

Come again. You're always welcome.

EXT. OREBYSLOT - DAY

Joe rounds the corner to see a Morris Minor parked next to the Mercedes. He climbs the castle stairs and pulls the bell.

Joe waits, surprised when Astrid opens the door.

ASTRID

Where have you been?

JOE

Is everything alright?

ASTRID

My Grandmother -- she's had a stroke.

She steps outside.

ASTRID

I'm sorry.

JOE

Why are you sorry?

ASTRID

Because it is all so terrible.

Joe can't bear the look of distress on Astrid's face. He pulls her into a hug. Their eyes meet and their faces move toward each other. Astrid stops.

ASTRID

There's a little inn in the village. It is best if you stayed there. It's all been arranged.

Joe lets her go.

JOE

Countess.

INT. MERCEDES - DRIVEWAY - DUSK

The windshield wipers SWEEP away a fine rain. Joe and Ruth sit side by side. Ruth's hat box bounces on the back seat.

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BEDROOM (1974) - NIGHT

Joe, nervous, looks over at Ruth in her bed. She's asleep. He puts the journal down and turns off the light.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Joe reads from a huge medical reference book. Ruth hurries in, coat on and ready to go. She glances over his shoulder and sees the entry for "rheumatoid arthritis."

JOE

The unexamined disease is not worth having.

RUTH

The untreated disease is not worth dying from. Promise you'll take it easy?

JOE

Don't you have some spinsters to fleece?

RUTH

It's bridge, not poker. Can I get you anything before I go?

JOE

You might bring me a razor blade so I can open my veins.

RUTH

That would trump everything, wouldn't it?

She grabs her purse and leaves, SHARPLY closing the door.

LATER

Joe notices the bird feeder resting in the corner and retrieves it. He tops it up with bird seed.

EXT. DECK - DAY

Joe carries the feeder outside and drags a patio chair under the hook in the overhang. He stands on the chair and re-attaches the feeder, then loses his balance and falls.

He gets up slowly and sits on the chair, shaken.

INT. FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Joe reclines in an easy chair, an infrared lamp heating his ankles and feet. With binoculars he watches linnets and golden-crowned sparrows chase each other off the bird feeder.

A car horn BLARES. Joe points the binoculars towards the driveway.

He sees a Chevy Impala station wagon with a red wood shredder hitched behind. Ben helps a white-haired man get out of the passenger side.

JOE

Damn.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

Joe hurries down the drive.

He finds Ben being shooed away as TOM (65) unhooks the trailer hitch. Ben shrugs at Joe. Joe tries not to stare at Tom's waxen skin and gaunt face above a tracheotomy patch.

Tom finally gets the hitch undone.

TOM

H'morning... H'Joe. Where do you... h'want this... h'rig?

JOE

Let's just put it right here.

Joe pats the machine.

JOE

I've been wanting to try one of these.

TOM

H'it's a... hell of a good...
h'machine. H'like a mechanized...
h'mouth. But don't put your...
h'foot in it.

They all laugh. A strong gust of wind rustles the trees.
Tom shivers.

BEN

Ready, Tom?

TOM

H'set.

Tom folds himself into the car. Ben jumps in and HONKS once
as he drives away. Joe salutes.

JOE

Thanks.

Joe lifts the shredder and wheels it a few feet to the edge
of the drive.

He hesitates, then pulls the starter cord. The shredder
comes to life. Joe feeds a stick into the machine.
CRUNCH -- out comes a small pile of mulch. Joe grins.

LATER

Joe, jacket off and sleeves rolled up, feeds several tree
limbs into the shredder. More mulch spits out onto a now-
sizable pile. Joe stuffs in another branch.

He doesn't hear Ruth pull up behind him in the Volvo. Ruth
leaps from the car and yells at him over the DIN of the
shredder.

RUTH

Joe!

Joe feeds one more branch into the shredder then shuts it off.

RUTH

For crying out loud, you complain
about your joints and then you do
exactly what you shouldn't.

JOE

Why get upset? What are we saving
me for?

RUTH

Me!

JOE

You?

RUTH

In case you haven't noticed, we're the only ones we have left.

She heads towards the car.

JOE

The infrared lamp made me feel much better.

This stops her.

RUTH

You actually used it?

JOE

Snug as a bug in a rug. I was under it when Ben and Tom dropped this off.

RUTH

Why did they bring it over?

JOE

Tom's giving it to us.

RUTH

What for?

Her face fills with awful comprehension.

RUTH

Why didn't you tell me?

JOE

Because there was nothing you could do.

RUTH

Is that why you've been so out of sorts? Thinking about Tom and not wanting to tell me?

JOE

I almost wish it was. That would make me look good instead of just crabby. Every week the mailman brings nothing but junk mail and death announcements.

JOE

Doesn't it bother you to think of her living off her brother's charity, feeding her helpless harelip?

RUTH

So this is about Astrid?

JOE

It's about everything. Each generation thinks it will be different for them, but getting old always boils down to aches and pains and becoming irrelevant just at the time one's most desperate to find meaning in one's life.

Ruth takes in the enormity of Joe's hopelessness. Then she looks at the shredder.

RUTH

Turn it on.

Her voice is so low, Joe can barely hear her.

JOE

What?

She points at the bright red machine.

RUTH

Turn it on.

Joe, confused, pulls the cord and the shredder comes to life. Ruth struggles to lift a branch, but it's too heavy. Joe helps her and they feed it into the shredder together.

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BEDROOM - NIGHT

Joe sits in his chair, journal in hand. Ruth sits opposite, kneading one of his feet.

JOE

Ready?

RUTH

I'm not sure.

JOE

Do you want me to read it or not?

RUTH

I was just getting oriented.

JOE
Aren't we all.

EXT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, BACK STAIRS (1954) - DAY - FLASHBACK

Joe picks up a jar of yoghurt and a bottle of milk.

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, KITCHEN - DAY

Joe puts the milk in the ice box and sets the yoghurt next to five identical unopened jars. He closes the ice box and joins Ruth at the table.

JOE
She could at least contact us.
What do I tell the milkman?

RUTH
I'm sure she has more pressing
concerns.

Joe harrumphs. Ruth gives him an inviting look.

RUTH
Besides, I'm enjoying having the
apartment to ourselves.

JOE
It must have been strange growing
up in that castle. All those
servants.

RUTH
And peasants.

Joe looks at Ruth sharply, then sees that she is gently teasing.

RUTH
Did Eigel ever explain what
happened to the father?

JOE
Just that he thought his father
was a great man who was treated
unfairly.

RUTH
There must be a book about him, a
Danish "Who's Who" entry or some
such. If it will help you stop
gnawing on this bone, why don't we
go somewhere and look him up?

Joe looks at Ruth with surprise.

INT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - DAY

A few Students SCRIBBLE and SIGH over their work. Joe and Ruth sit at a table under a window, a pile of reference materials in front of them.

Joe pulls the dictionary from his briefcase to translate from a thick book.

JOE

Landgreve Aage Karl Rødding.
First wife died early, no
children. Second wife, Anna Marie
Krarup, a cousin. Children:
Eigel Johan, and Hannah Astrid.

Joe reads more.

JOE

Lots of stuff about the castle ...
scene of many brilliant social
gatherings and the center of much
scientific work. Blah, blah, not
a hint of anything amiss.

Joe scans the reference entry.

JOE

See if they have an obituary.
June thirteen, nineteen thirty-
eight.

RUTH

Remember when you used to visit me
at school?

Joe's face softens as he watches her walk away.

LATER

Joe pours over a stack of yellowed newspapers, Ruth watching. He finds something and reads intently. He double-checks his Danish-English dictionary.

JOE

Rødding shot himself.

RUTH

How awful!

JOE
 At Ellebacken. Says he's buried
 there. And that the wife died the
 previous year.

RUTH
 We were there and Astrid never
 said a thing.

JOE
 Suicide is never something one
 wants to discuss.

Ruth stands up so that she's eye to eye with Joe.

RUTH
 Curt didn't kill himself! Our son
 drowned. Can't you accept that?

Ruth clamps her hand over her mouth and hurries from the room.

EXT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - DAY

Joe sees Ruth rushing around a corner. He starts after her
 but then slows down. He changes direction and walks
 purposefully away.

INT. AMERICAN EMBASSY, ANTECHAMBER - DAY

Joe waits in the reception area. MR. BURCHFIELD, pasty and
 paunchy, enters.

MR. BURCHFIELD
 I understand you're looking for
 the resident gossip.

Joe stands to shake Burchfield's hand.

MR. BURCHFIELD
 Burchfield. Public Affairs.

JOE
 Allston. Tourism.

MR. BURCHFIELD
 Don't you mean literary agent?

Joe looks surprised.

MR. BURCHFIELD
 You listed it on your entry visa.

Burchfield slaps Joe's back and indicates the way to go.

INT. BURCHFIELD'S OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Burchfield sits under a photo of Eisenhower.

MR. BURCHFIELD
So what can I do you for?

JOE
Are you familiar with the name
Landgreve Karl Rødding?

MR. BURCHFIELD
Sure. The one who slept with his
daughter.

Joe frowns.

JOE
Rødding, Landgreve. The Count,
from Lolland.

MR. BURCHFIELD
Yes. The biologist. Blew his
brains out sometime before the
war. I guess he couldn't face the
scandal.

JOE
Are you sure? How long have you
been here, anyway?

Mr. Burchfield stiffens.

MR. BURCHFIELD
Long enough. Incest makes pretty
juicy gossip.

JOE
Maybe that's all it was?

MR. BURCHFIELD
Rødding never denied it. Must
have been insane - had to be - but
no other sign of it than this
taste for his daughter. Somebody
very high up was supposed to have
told him to send the girl away.
And he did, to Paris. But some
time later he brought the girl
back.

Mr. Burchfield leers.

MR. BURCHFIELD

I guess he really liked her.

Joe looks stricken.

EXT. COPENHAGEN STREET - DAY

Joe wanders a rainy street in a daze. He sees a bar and stumbles in.

INT. BAR - DAY

Joe sits alone in a corner and gulps a double whiskey.

EXT. BEACH - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Astrid, in her bathing suit with the wind ruffling her long damp hair, lightly touches Joe's hand.

ASTRID

A father's love can be too much
sometimes.

INT. BAR - DAY

Joe, morose, stares across the empty room. He slowly pushes himself up.

EXT. HAVNEGADE STREET - DAY

Joe stumbles on a slippery cobblestone.

EXT. QUAY - DAY

Joe passes the produce boat where the poodle patrols up and down. Joe GROWLS. The poodle WHIMPERS and recoils, startling a flock of pigeons into flight.

INT. ASTRID'S APARTMENT, PARLOR - DAY

Ruth holds a loop up to her eye and scans a black & white photo contact sheet. She pauses at an image of Joe and Astrid on the beach, studying the way their eyes meet.

The front door BANGS open and Joe makes a beeline for the sideboard, where he pours himself a large glass of whiskey.

Ruth tosses down the contact sheet and intercepts Joe.

RUTH

Is it guilt? Or revenge? I can't
tell.

JOE
Revenge for what?

RUTH
For Curt not being the person you
wanted him to be. I don't care
what you say, it was an accident!

JOE
No one would surf alone on a day
like that unless they had a death
wish.

Neither of them sees Astrid, looking pale and exhausted,
enter the apartment holding a pretty pink cake box.

RUTH
All he wanted was your acceptance.
Was that so much to ask?

JOE
He wasn't willing to earn it. So
he ran away instead. God help me,
I loved my son, but he was a
coward!

Joe slurps from the glass as Ruth looks at him in disbelief.

RUTH
You're drunk.

JOE
Not yet. But I intend to be.

Joe notices Astrid standing frozen in the hall outside the
parlor. He looks at her, making sure to catch her eyes.

JOE
People can resist their fathers.
Sometimes it's a moral imperative
to do so.

Astrid drops the box with a loud CRASH. Ruth, startled,
notices Astrid frantically trying to clean up the cream
splattered all over the floor.

RUTH
Astrid! We didn't know when you
were coming back.

Joe refills his empty glass. He raises it and looks directly
at Astrid.

JOE
 To unhappy families. Or was yours
 a terrible type of happy?

Ruth turns on Joe.

RUTH
 What is wrong with you?

ASTRID
 So you found out? From Eigel? He
 is so stupid in his pride.

RUTH
 Found out what?

Ruth looks from Astrid to Joe and sees a secret so powerful
 that it burns their eyes into similar pools of distress.

RUTH
 What?

Astrid indicates the ruined cake.

ASTRID
 I had hoped to explain in a more
 civilized fashion.

JOE
 There is nothing civilized about
 what you did.

Astrid abandons the clean-up and moves into the parlor
 beneath the portrait of her father. She slumps into a chair
 and her eyes lock on Ruth's.

ASTRID
 Where shall I begin?

JOE
 How about with the truth?

Ruth glares at Joe.

ASTRID
 My father. He was a very great
 scientist but he made a terrible
 mistake. Not for any sordid
 reasons. To him it must have
 seemed perfectly logical.

JOE
 And to you?

ASTRID

To me, he was like a god and I did
as he told.

JOE

Did you like it?

Astrid looks at Joe, whose face is frozen in disgust.

ASTRID

I thought our friendship would
have made some sort of difference.

JOE

It makes it worse!

Ruth sees the devastation on Joe's face. She looks at Astrid
with fear.

RUTH

What's going on?

ASTRID

There was a rumor, a terrible
rumor, that my father and I
were... intimate.

Ruth tries to cover her shock.

RUTH

Why would people believe such a
thing?

ASTRID

Because I let them.

JOE

Because it was true!

Astrid flinches. Joe smiles grimly in anticipation.

ASTRID

My father's first wife was barren,
a problem with the aristocracy.
My father did what a breeder would
do, he introduced a hardier line.
He chose Helga Sverdrup.

JOE

"My mother's friend."

ASTRID

Yes. I think my father must have paid your mother's passage. She would have been in the way.

JOE

So Miss Weibull is...

His face fills with comprehension.

JOE

Your sister.

ASTRID

My half-sister. Her name is Margaret. There were also boys. Those he sent away very young, they never knew.

RUTH

Why did he keep Margaret?

ASTRID

He... she...

Joe regards Astrid with remorse.

JOE

She's the daughter he slept with.

ASTRID

Yes.

RUTH

But what about your mother?

ASTRID

My father married my mother after he started his experiment. He loved her very much, but he was a scientist, so he continued. And now Eigel does the same.

RUTH

With Margaret!

ASTRID

And others.

JOE

The girl I saw coming out of the cottage?

ASTRID
Yes, his daughter. She is now of
breeding age.

JOE
Good God.

RUTH
How... wrong.

JOE
But I don't understand. Why
didn't you stop the rumors?

ASTRID
Like Eigel, I loved my father very
much. It seemed best not to
disclose there were illegitimate
children. Mother was terrified
they would take everything from us.

RUTH
She let you take the blame?

Astrid's face spasms.

ASTRID
I think it's why she took the
pills.

RUTH
And your husband...

ASTRID
It hurt him very much. But he was
weak, and my father paid him
generously.

RUTH
Oh, Astrid, what a bitter, bitter
life!

Astrid struggles to her feet.

ASTRID
I do not believe in self-pity.
But this week, with my
grandmother's death, and now, the
idea of losing you both...

Astrid, overcome with grief, collapses into the arms of the
nearest person to her -- Joe. As he comforts her, Ruth
regards them with mounting distress.

Ruth moves towards them and gently but firmly disengages Joe's arms from Astrid and takes over soothing her.

Over Ruth's shoulder, Joe searches Astrid's eyes, asking for, and receiving, forgiveness.

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BEDROOM (1974) - NIGHT

Joe closes the notebook with a snap.

RUTH

How much more is there? Let's finish it tonight.

JOE

There isn't anymore.

RUTH

What do you mean there isn't anymore? It can't end there! It's such an anticlimax.

Joe shows her the last page.

JOE

That's it, some scribblings. Flight times, a few phone numbers.

Ruth grabs the journal to see for herself.

RUTH

But... that can't be all. We stayed for another month.

JOE

I guess I stopped writing when we found out all her secrets.

Ruth frowns at Joe. He meets her eyes, then turns away.

JOE

All this reading's made me stiff. I'm going to take a shower.

Joe heads into the bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Joe turns on the shower.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ruth is beside herself with anger. She hurls the journal onto the floor and storms out of the room.

EXT. ALLSTON HOUSE - NIGHT

Ruth stumbles down the path in the moonlight.

INT. JOE'S STUDIO - NIGHT

Ruth flips on the light and looks around. She sees a pile of mail on the dusty typewriter. The bottle of bourbon. And the photo of Joe and Astrid on the beach, tacked to the bulletin board.

She notices the open shoe box filled with photos and the RUNE STONE. Ruth picks up a photo. It is of Joe and Astrid at a nighttime bonfire.

EXT. ELLEBACKEN, DENMARK (1954) - TWILIGHT - FLASHBACK

Ruth SNAPS a photograph of Joe and Astrid in front of a huge bonfire. LOCAL DANES WHOOP as they swig from bottles and toss more wood on the fire, sending up a shower of SPARKS.

Ruth lowers her camera and observes Joe and Astrid exchange an intimate look. The chemistry is much different from that tense reunion in Copenhagen, and Ruth is now the odd one out.

Astrid glances at Ruth and perceives her discomfort. She pulls Ruth down next to her and squeezes her hand. Ruth smiles politely and looks away.

INT. ELLEBACKEN COTTAGE, GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

A copy of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's "Gift from the Sea" rests on a bedside table. Ruth wakes and reaches for the book as she switches on a lamp. The light reveals Joe's empty bed.

Ruth jumps out of bed and goes to the door.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Ruth hurries down the hall and peers in the open door to Astrid's room. The bed is empty. Ruth is devastated.

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BATHROOM (1974) - NIGHT

Steam from the running SHOWER fogs the mirror as Joe, still dressed, stands in the middle of the room. His eyes are distant.

EXT. ELLEBACKEN COTTAGE (1954) - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Joe pulls the door shut and walks across the lawn in the luminous silver light. He stops at the edge of a cypress grove.

EXT. CYPRESS GROVE - NIGHT

Joe looks back at the moon hanging loose and lonely above the chimney. The cottage door opens and a pale figure steps out.

Joe's face is anxious until the figure resolves into Astrid, wearing a sweater over her nightgown. As she approaches, Joe steps out from the trees.

ASTRID

Mister Allston? Is that you?

JOE

Who else?

ASTRID

You startled me.

JOE

Couldn't you sleep either?

ASTRID

Midsummer night is never a good night for sleeping. Things are at loose ends.

JOE

Like us.

ASTRID

Yes.

Astrid passes him.

JOE

May I join you?

ASTRID

If you like.

They walk through the grove. Astrid stumbles and Joe shoots his arm out to steady her. He doesn't let go and she doesn't pull away.

ASTRID

Do you remember the day when you turned the car around and drove us through the young beechwoods?

JOE

It was the first day I really felt well.

ASTRID

It was the day when I began to
know you.

They continue towards the lake. Her face fills with emotion.

ASTRID

You know why I couldn't sleep?
Because you are leaving.

He stops her.

JOE

Must we go? Why must we?

ASTRID

Because you have obligations.

JOE

I could give all that up tomorrow.

ASTRID

You are not the kind who shirks
things.

She gently takes his hand from her arm and walks towards the
edge of the lake.

EXT. LAKE - NIGHT

Astrid takes a flashlight from her pocket and illuminates an
old rowboat.

JOE

Where are we going?

Astrid points to the vague outline of an island.

ASTRID

Just over there.

JOE

Get in. I'll row.

Astrid shoves the boat into the water and gets in. Joe jumps
in and give the oars a strong tug. The boat shoots forward
into swirls of mist.

EXT. ELLEBACKEN ISLAND - NIGHT

Joe grounds the boat on shore. Astrid leaps from the boat
and steadies it as Joe gets out.

Astrid offers her hand to Joe. She leads him to a small gravestone.

JOE
Your father?

Astrid nods as she squats to remove some leaves. Joe looks down at the nape of her neck.

JOE
What are you going to do when we leave? How will you live?

She doesn't look up.

JOE
Erik?

ASTRID
I don't know. No, of course not.

Astrid stands.

ASTRID
And yet, he is so miserable, an outcast.

JOE
But think what it would do to you.

ASTRID
Would you tell me to shirk?

JOE
You're coming with us. I can give you a job or find you something better. You can't stay here and rot. You're too special.

ASTRID
Do you think I have not dreamed of such a thing? It is not so easy as it was for your mother. It must be wonderful to have the freedom of the poor.

JOE
Freedom? Your father forced her to leave her home. She died twenty-eight hard years later, falling down stairs still wet from her scrubbing.

Joe grabs her by the shoulders.

JOE

He has ruined enough lives. I won't let him ruin yours. You can live with us, we'll be your sponsors, anything.

ASTRID

You say "we." Have you talked about this with Ruth?

JOE

I don't have to. She's very fond of you.

Astrid pulls away.

ASTRID

I know. She is my dear friend and I love her. And she is your wife, and she wants to get you away from here and away from me, and she is right.

The full force of Astrid's longing and regret hit Joe.

JOE

Astrid, I can't leave you.

ASTRID

You said my name. I wondered if you ever would.

JOE

I love you.

Astrid reaches out to touch Joe's face.

ASTRID

And that's why you must go.

Joe takes her hand and pulls her towards him. He kisses her with everything he has. She responds in kind, their bodies fused together.

INT. ALLSTON HOUSE, BATHROOM (1974) - NIGHT

The room is filled with steam. Joe comes back to the present. He turns off the shower and goes into the bedroom.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Joe finds the room empty and the Denmark journal splayed open on the floor.

JOE

Ruth?

He glances outside and sees his studio light on.

INT. JOE'S STUDIO - NIGHT

Joe, out of breath, opens the door and finds Ruth sitting in the chair studying the RUNE STONE.

JOE

What are you doing here?

RUTH

Seeing for myself.

She indicates the dusty typewriter.

RUTH

You haven't worked on any memoirs, have you?

JOE

That's none of your business.

RUTH

Maybe, except you deceived me. Or maybe you're deceiving yourself.

JOE

What are you talking about?

RUTH

You never put down what really happened, what we were reading for.

JOE

What if there wasn't anything to put down?

RUTH

Midsummer Night, after we'd stayed up late to watch the bonfires. I woke up and you were gone. I went to her room, and so was she.

JOE

I couldn't sleep. I went for a walk.

RUTH

With her?

JOE

No, by myself. I ran into her.
We took a walk and when we came to
the lake we got into an old
rowboat and rowed to the island
where her father is buried. She
showed me his grave. Then we came
back to the cottage.

RUTH

That's all?

Joe's face fills with pain and his body trembles with emotion.

JOE

No. That isn't all. I kissed
her. Once! If that's what you've
been wanting to talk out, now
we've done it!

Joe lurches from the studio leaving a shocked Ruth in his
wake.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Joe staggers down the driveway, his eyes ablaze.

EXT. ELLEBACKEN ISLAND (1954) - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Astrid pulls her face away and gently pushes at Joe's chest.
Joe lets her go. He turns from Astrid and stares at the
lake, unable to look at her.

Joe slowly walks to the rowboat. He pulls it around and
points it to the far shore. Finally, he looks back.

Astrid stands where he left her, her eyes on him.

JOE

We should go.

ASTRID

Yes.

EXT. LAKE - DAWN

Joe and Astrid row silently towards the shore.

EXT. CYPRESS GROVE - DAWN

Joe and Astrid stop at the edge of the field. They look at
each other for a long moment, as if willing a different
outcome.

JOE

Astrid.

ASTRID

You first.

Joe walks across the grass.

EXT. COTTAGE, BACK DOOR - DAWN

Joe opens the door and enters. He starts to pull the door closed then stops. He looks across the lawn.

EXT. CYPRESS GROVE - DAWN

Astrid puts her head in her hands and bends from the waist, a wild abandoned movement as purely physical as if she were vomiting.

EXT. COTTAGE, BACK DOOR - DAWN

Joe pulls the door closed.

EXT. JOE'S STUDIO (1974) - NIGHT

Ruth leaves the studio and peers up and down the driveway.

EXT. CULVERT - NIGHT

Joe stands next to the culvert. He hears the CRUNCH of feet on gravel and looks up to see Ruth walking in his direction.

Joe wipes tears from his eyes and tries to compose himself. He walks towards her.

RUTH

I thought maybe I'd better... I didn't know where you were.

JOE

Just walking. Want to?

Ruth takes his arm. They walk a bit.

RUTH

I'm sorry.

JOE

I'm the one to be sorry. I should have told you.

RUTH

I was determined to force it out of you. I don't know why.

JOE

You wanted the pebble out of the shoe.

RUTH

No, it was my vanity. My God, after all this time! I could see it happening, there at the end, and I knew I couldn't compete with her.

JOE

You compete all right.

RUTH

She was extraordinary. If you hadn't fallen at least a little bit in love with her I'd have thought something was wrong with you.

She laughs.

RUTH

Then when I saw you were doing it I couldn't stand it. The truth is, I may have pushed you a bit.

JOE

What for?

RUTH

I suppose part of me wanted to see if I had any family left.

Joe's face constricts with pain.

RUTH

I always thought you must hold a grudge against me for making you come home. I was sort of surprised you came.

JOE

You shouldn't have been.

RUTH

No. I should have known you wouldn't avoid your obligations.

JOE

It wasn't obligation that made me come. I made a choice.

RUTH

Then why? In there... just now?

JOE

I don't mean it was easy. I hated leaving her behind. I would have liked her company the rest of my life. In other circumstances, if you hadn't existed, I'd certainly have tried to marry her. And I think she might have had me. But if I'd played the game the way some people seem to expect, and jumped into the Baltic, all for love and the world well lost, and cut myself off from you and what you and I have had together, I'd have regretted you the rest of my life.

Joe sees years of doubt in Ruth's eyes. He takes her into his arms and kisses her. Not the everyday kiss of a long marriage but a deep intimate kiss. When they finish she hugs her head to his chest.

RUTH

Isn't it better to have it all talked out, and over?

JOE

Marvelous. Like after a sauna, all wrapped up in towels.

Ruth shivers. Joe hugs her tight as they walk up the driveway.

EXT. JOE'S STUDIO, COASTAL OAK TREE - DAY

A pair of wrens fly in and out of the tree, delivering bits of grass and string as they work together to build a nest.

Inside the studio, Joe sits at his desk, typing.

JOE (V.O.)

It is something -- it can be everything -- to have found a fellow bird.

JOE

A bird you can look after; one who
will patch your bruises and
straighten your ruffled feathers
and mourn over your hurts when you
accidentally fly into something
you can't handle.

FADE OUT:

THE END