

The Last Good Summer

Otis A. Maxwell

Registered WGA/w
Copyright © Otis A. Maxwell

311 Steiner St.
San Francisco, CA 94117

SYNOPSIS: Karen and Mike, newlyweds, go on a High Sierra backpacking trip for their honeymoon. Seeking privacy, they enter an area that has been closed to the public. They soon realize they have made a mistake as they encounter horrors of both the animal and the human varieties.

This document includes the first 20 minutes of the script for the reading pleasure of my friends on the Web. If you'd like to know what happens next, please drop me a note at otis@otismaxwell.com

FADE IN:

INT. KAREN'S PARENTS' HOUSE - DAY

It's Karen and Mike's wedding day. The wedding reception is in progress at Karen's parents' home, a comfortable tract house in the suburbs of Los Angeles. A couple of dozen WELLWISHERS are gathered to fete the happy couple. We've arrived just in time for the cutting of the WEDDING CAKE.

TIGHT ANGLE ON THE CAKE A knife slices past the little statuettes of the bride and groom, down through the layers of frosting and sponge. The crowd applauds.

The slice of cake goes onto a plate, and we watch it travel upward until the faces of KAREN and MIKE AUSTIN, the newlyweds, are revealed. They're a nice-looking couple in their mid twenties.

MIKE is athletic, wiry and sunburned. He appears a little uncomfortable and constrained in his rented tux. The kind of guy who would do almost anything to avoid putting on a tie.

KAREN, at first glance, isn't an obvious match for Mike. She's soft and contemplative, and the frilly wedding gown makes her look feminine but also fragile. Yet Karen has inner strength and a sense of humor that reveals itself in flashes - -

-- like right now, when she force-feeds Mike the cake so he ends up with a frosting goatee. The guests murmur with approbation.

MIKE

(happily)

Hey, who needs forks?

KAREN

(mock-catty)

See, ladies? I told you I'd have him eating out of the palm of my hand.

KAREN'S FATHER, a middle-aged man, raises his glass in a toast.

KAREN'S FATHER

To the happy couple. Karen...and
Mike...AUSTIN!

Glasses clink. Karen kisses some of the frosting off Mike's face.

ANOTHER ANGLE

In a corner of the room, three or four JOCKS are huddled sniggering. Buddies of Mike's from the football team. Now they stifle their grins, as Mike strolls into view.

MIKE

Hey, guys. Get some cake.

JOCK #1, their reluctant spokesman, is pushed forward by the others.

JOCK #1

Um, Mike...the guys got together and we
bought you this.

He holds out a wrapped PRESENT.

MIKE

Oh, this is nice. Lemme get Karen over
here and we can open it together.

The Jocks collapse into merriment, holding each other up.

JOCK #2

I don't think you should do that...

MIKE

(onto the joke)

Oh, really?

He's opening the package. It's a little box with tissue paper. Now he pulls back the tissue paper and lifts out the contents: a giant JOKE CONDOM the size of a knee sock. He unfurls the rubber to its full length as the Jocks contort themselves with glee.

MIKE

Thanks, guys! And it's even the right size...

ANOTHER ANGLE

Meanwhile, in an opposite corner of the room, Karen is enjoying her own chuckle with three GAL PALS who look like they might be the girlfriends of Mike's cronies.

KAREN

Come on. Where you go on the honeymoon is supposed to be a secret!

GAL PAL #1

I bet it's Las Vegas.

GAL PAL #2

They're going to...Disneyland!

GAL PAL #3

Now come clean. I know you always wanted to go to Hawaii. That's where he's taking you, right?

Karen looks oddly intent. We get the feeling there's more to this than a simple desire to keep a secret.

KAREN

You'd never guess in a million years.
Believe me!

EXT. OUTSIDE THE HOUSE - DAY

Karen and Mike emerge into the sunlight, ducking under a shower of good-luck rice tossed by the wedding guests. They've changed into casual clothes.

At the curb, a teenage KID has been decorating Mike's car, a 4 WHEEL DRIVE STATION WAGON, with good-natured wedding graffiti. He's just finished painting "Just Married" on the roof and he scrambles down as the newlyweds approach.

KAREN'S FATHER

Now, Mike. Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

KAREN

Oh, you dirty old man...

They climb in to the accompaniment of gales of laughter and wave farewell to the crowd. Now begins a TITLE MONTAGE which follows them on their progress to their honeymoon destination. The visuals

might be accompanied by a saccharine WEDDING SONG that suggests this blissful mood is entirely too perfect to last.

EXT. AN L.A. FREEWAY - AFTERNOON

Seen from overhead, the crowded freeway looks like a parking lot. The Austins' vehicle is easily recognizable by the "Just Married" on its roof.

In the car, Mike drums his hands impatiently on the steering wheel. Now another vehicle pulls up next to his. It's a chopped Chevy decorated with pink pom-poms.

As the cars come alongside each other, Mike makes eye contact with his counterpart in the Chevy: a rakish and heavily mustachioed HISPANIC GROOM in a pink tuxedo. The pink tuxedo gives him a thumbs-up sign, and Mike responds in kind. This puts everyone in a better mood.

EXT. A HIGHWAY IN THE DESERT - AFTERNOON

We're making progress. Again seen from above, Mike's car is moving at a good clip through moderate traffic. The setting is the high desert, a region of auto junkyards, closed military bases, and failed housing developments.

Now the 4WD pulls over to the shoulder. They're going to change drivers. Karen and Mike meet at the front bumper and exchange a passionate kiss. The passing drivers honk and wave.

EXT. A DESERT ROAD - LATE AFTERNOON

More time has passed and the city has been left far behind. Seen from above, the 4WD is in light traffic on a two-lane stretch of u.s. 395. The landscape is open desert, with sparse brown vegetation on either side of the highway.

Inside the car, Karen is driving and Mike studying a map. Karen looks over and says something to him, but he doesn't hear. He's too intent on his task. Karen smiles fondly, understandingly, and returns her full attention to the road.

EXT. THE SIERRA FOOTHILLS - SUNSET

The landscape has changed again. We're in a region of scrub brush and volcanic rocks. The ground slopes noticeably toward the foothills on either side of the highway. The 4WD, again seen from

overhead, is one of the few cars on the road.

Inside the car, Mike is driving while Karen takes a nap. He slows in preparation for a turn.

Seen again from overhead, the car turns onto a narrow corrugated access road that leads toward the foothills. The vehicle kicks up a cloud of dust as it goes. The road extends straight as an arrow toward the mountains on the horizon. As far as the eye can see, Mike's is the only car on the road.

Inside the car, Mike nudges Karen awake. He wants to show her something.

We see it now, from their point of view looking out the window. It's the magnificent pinnacles of the high Sierras, snow capped and pink in the fading sunlight. The mountains look beautiful but also forbidding.

Reacting to the view, Karen is somber. She puts her head on Mike's shoulder. TITLE MONTAGE comes to an end.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN ROAD - NIGHT

The car is laboring through a long uphill stretch, on a washboard surface that challenges the suspension and causes Karen and Mike's voices to vibrate.

MIKE

We-e're al-most the-ere.

KAREN

Tha-ank Go-od...

Seen through the windshield, the road now goes around a bend. As the vehicle negotiates it, a scrawny FOX is revealed standing in the middle of the road. The animal scowls into the headlights but refuses to move.

MIKE (V.O.)

Look. Your first wildlife.

KAREN (V.O.)

What's wrong with him?

MIKE (V.O.)

Who knows? Probably some range disease.
Hope it's not catching, ha ha.

He edges the vehicle closer to the fox and revs the engine. Finally, reluctantly, the animal moves. The vehicle resumes its journey. After a few seconds, we see a sign that says "SAWMILL CREEK CAMPGROUND". The car turns in at the sign.

EXT. SAWMILL CREEK CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

Inside the car, Mike is intently studying the terrain. He's looking for a campsite.

Now we see the campground from Mike's point of view, illuminated by the headlights. It's an open area with numerous semi-improved campsites, each consisting of a concrete pad, a parking place, and a picnic table. The campground is completely unoccupied and looks very empty.

MIKE (V.O.)

Looks like we're the only ones here.

KAREN (V.O.)

A private honeymoon suite. I like that.

The vehicle pulls into a parking space.

Inside the car, Mike turns off the engine.

MIKE

Okay. Let's get the things out. We want to make an early start in the morning.

Karen opens the door, then immediately slams it shut.

KAREN

Jeez. It's cold out there!

MIKE

Better get used to it. The higher we go, the colder it gets.

Karen eyes him seductively. She wets her lips.

KAREN

Couldn't we just sit here in the car a little longer? You know...like we used to do?

Mike's being coy.

MIKE

What exactly did you have in mind?

KAREN

You know.

She kisses him. They embrace awkwardly across the gearshift.

KAREN

I'm a little nervous about my first backpacking trip...

MIKE

Don't worry. I'm gonna take good care of you.

They're touching each other's bodies now, getting interested in this.

KAREN

I love you, husband.

MIKE

And I love you.

Now they're necking in earnest. Karen's buttons are starting to come undone. After a moment, she pulls back.

MIKE

What?

KAREN

I thought I heard something...

But she decides it was just her imagination, and returns to the embrace. Another moment passes. Clothing is starting to come off. And now comes a very startling RAPPING at Mike's window. It is a flashlight whose beam illuminates the interior of the car as Karen and Mike scramble for decorum.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Mike rolls down his window to reveal HIRAM WORMSER, the summer ranger in charge of this camp. Wormser is a slovenly type in a dirty uniform who looks like he could be the product of some diligent inbreeding. He scowls into the vehicle.

MIKE

Jesus, you scared us.

WORMSER

Driver license.

Mike gives him the license.

MIKE

Can I ask what's the problem?

WORMSER

You're trespassing. Campground's closed.

KAREN

(with sympathy for his likely disappointment)

Oh, Mike...

Wormser moves his flashlight beam, as if noticing her for the first time. Even though she's repaired her attire, Karen looks pretty sexy and disheveled.

WORMSER

You pick her up in town?

MIKE

(he's starting to get mad)

She's my wife...

WORMSER

Can I see your license, miss?

With an "I can't believe this is happening" expression, Karen gets her driver license out of her purse and passes to him.

WORMSER

How come you have a different last name?

KAREN

We just got married. We're on our
honeymoon.

Wormser mulls this over. He seems to be making an internal decision that softens him a little.

WORMSER

(to Mike, accusingly)

So you brought her up here on your honeymoon.
Where you headed?

MIKE

Bear Creek.

Wormser spits on the ground.

WORMSER

Bear Creek. Jesus. Nice place to take a woman.
Anyway, it's closed. This entire area is closed.

MIKE

Mind if I ask why?

Wormser doesn't answer right away and, when he does, it sounds like he's covering something up.

WORMSER

Fire hazard.

(a beat)

Okay. I tell you what. Symmes Creek's open,
that's about 75 miles north of here. You should
be able to get there by midnight. Check in
with the ranger in the morning. He can tell you
about some nice day hikes.

The confrontation's over. Wormser steps back from the car.
Mike starts the engine.

MIKE

Thanks, Ranger.

WORMSER

(not meaning it)

Have a pleasant evening.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN ROAD - NIGHT

Inside the vehicle, Mike is studying the terrain intently as he proceeds slowly down the road.

MIKE

What an asshole. Just loves to throw his weight around.

KAREN

Mike, I'm so sorry. I know you had your heart set on this trip. I know how much you wanted to take me fishing at Bear Creek.

MIKE

"Fire hazard", bullshit. Did you see how green everything is? There's a near-record snowpack this year.

KAREN

What do you think it is, then?

MIKE

Who can guess the mysteries of the Forestry Department? Probably giving the area a little rest from overuse. That's the usual reason...

He spins the wheel.

The car lurches onto a side road.

Seen through the windshield, the road is actually no more than a track. Desert brush skritches against the sides of the vehicle as they go.

KAREN (V.O.)

What are you doing?

MIKE (V.O.)

I saw this road as we were coming up...
looks like it goes down to the stream...
yeah, there it is.

The brush outside the vehicle now gives way to a grove of quaking aspens. Mike proceeds under the trees and stops the car next to the stream.

EXT. AT STREAMSIDE - NIGHT

Mike climbs out of the car and surveys the surroundings. Karen gets out more slowly, wondering what is going on.

MIKE

The trees'll hide the car from the road...this is perfect!

KAREN

Mike, what are you doing?

Mike's face is a bit manic.

He's grinning from ear to ear.

MIKE

Karen, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity.
We'll have the back country all to ourselves!
No Boy Scouts. No Sierra Club tours.

KAREN

But won't we get in trouble?

MIKE

Who's gonna know? Who's gonna care?

He opens the tailgate of the car and starts unloading backpacking gear.

MIKE (cont.)

Come on. We should hike in a mile or two
while it's dark.

A THUNDERCLAP sounds.

KAREN

(whimpering)

Oh...and it's gonna rain...

MIKE

Even better. Then Ranger Smokey Bear will stay
inside his cave instead of looking for us.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN SLOPE - NIGHT

Rain is coming down in sheets. Two forlorn figures, illuminated by occasional flashes of lightning, make their way across a rocky plateau.

Now we see them closer. Of course, it's Karen and Mike and they look absolutely miserable in their heavy, wet ponchos.

KAREN

This isn't exactly the way I planned
to spend my wedding night...

MIKE

Years from now, we'll laugh about this.

KAREN

Seriously, can I ask you something?
Shouldn't we have told someone where
We were going?

MIKE

You didn't tell anybody?

KAREN

No. It's our honeymoon. But I read your
guidebook. You're always supposed to
leave a description of your trip with a
responsible party.

(a beat)

I take it you didn't tell anyone...

MIKE

(macho)

I never tell anyone.

Mike stops and studies her, appraisingly, the water dripping off
his chin.

MIKE

All right. I saw a telephone when we
drove through town. We can go down
there and call your dad. Think he's a
responsible party?

KAREN

You know that would take us hours...

MIKE

You're sure, now?

KAREN

(resignedly)

Come on. Let's keep going. I just want to
put up the tent so I can get out of
this rain.

MIKE

Karen, I'm gonna take good care of you.
Don't you worry about a thing.

He turns around and resumes walking. We're surprised to see a little smile on his face. He's enjoying this.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN MEADOW -- NIGHT

The rain has just now ceased. The night is full of soft water noises: water dripping down the conifer branches, water coursing along the ground in little rivulets. The fat, full moon is just coming out from behind a cloud, and it illuminates Karen and Mike as they arrive at a campsite near a stand of trees.

Mike studies the site, decides it is satisfactory.

MIKE

This should do.

KAREN

Thank goodness.

They shrug off their packs.

MIKE

The storm may not be over. We should put up a tent. You remember how?

KAREN

(as if he needs to ask)
Of course.

MIKE

I'll go rig a bear bag. You got any food?

KAREN

No...

MIKE

You're sure now.

KAREN

(mischievous)
No, no food.

MIKE

All right then.

Mike picks up a nylon rope and two stuff sacks containing their provisions. We follow him out of the camp and into the night.

Standing on a boulder above the campsite, Mike scans the hillside

and sniffs the night air, contemplating the best place to rig the bear bag. We can almost see the trappings of civilization falling away. He's feral, alive, and very much in his element.

Now Mike sights the perfect tree for his bear rig: a lightning-scarred dead pine with a high branch that juts far out from the trunk, silhouetted against the moonlight.

Next he needs a rock to get the rope over the tree branch. He rummages among the rocks on the boulder with the toe of his boot. He finds a baseball-size chunk that's to his liking. He picks it up, hefts it, grunts with satisfaction.

Again we see the tree branch in the moonlight, from Mike's point of view. He makes a good toss. The nylon line snakes in the moonlight as the rock arcs over the branch and drops down on the far side, carrying the rope with it.

Now, he ties the first of two stuffsacks onto the end of the rope. He pulls the other end of the rope to elevate it into the tree, and ties on the second stuffsack. Finally, he picks up a long stick and uses it to push the second stuffsack high in the air so both bags are suspended below the branch.

Mike stands back and inspects the result. He's pleased with his work. It's an excellent example of a well-hung bear rig.

ANGLE ON THE TENT

While Mike was away, Karen has erected a little backpacker's dome tent. A soft lantern light glows from inside as Mike returns to the clearing.

MIKE

I'm coming in.

KAREN

(seductive, from inside the tent)

Not with those old wet clothes, you aren't.

EXT. INSIDE THE TENT - NIGHT

The interior is cramped but cozy. Awkwardly, Mike backs through the small low entryway into the tent. Before coming all the way in, he pauses to unlace his muddy boots. He leaves them just outside the entryway, under the rain fly.

Within the tent, Karen has already tucked herself into their double sleeping bag. She watches lovingly as Mike finishes taking off his boots. She is buck naked.

KAREN

I have a little surprise for us.

MIKE

Yeah? What?

Now we see that she's arranged a clever little serving area. She's using a bandanna as a tablecloth and has set this "table" with two Sierra Cups and aluminum forks. She produces a split of champagne and uncorks it.

MIKE

You brought that all the way up here?

KAREN

(pleased with herself)

Yeah, and it was pretty heavy too.

And look what else.

She reaches around behind her back.

(humming the Wedding March)

Da dum de dah...

She brings out two aluminum plates with slices of wedding cake on them. The little bride and groom are on top of one slice. She beams at her new husband, eager for approval. But he is not happy.

MIKE

(chiding)

Karen. . .

KAREN

(taken aback)

what?

MIKE

I specifically asked you if you had any food for the bear bag and you said you didn't.

KAREN

(trying to laugh it off)

Hey, remember what it tasted like at the reception? This is definitely not food.

MIKE

I'm serious. Every night we put up a bear bag. Inside the bag, we put our food. Do I need to go over all our camp rules again?

KAREN

(she's getting angry)
I didn't exactly see you following the rules
about telling somebody where you were going.

MIKE

Karen, I've been coming up here for a lot longer
than you have. Am I right?

KAREN

Well, yeah, since this is my first time.
What's your point?

MIKE

With all due respect, when I ask you to do
something, I expect you to do it.

Karen's jaw drops.

KAREN

I can't believe this. I married Attila
the Hun!

MIKE

You think I'm being unreasonable?

Like a slice of wedding cake left in the rain, Karen is starting to
crumble. Her lip trembles and she dissolves into tears.

KAREN

I'm tired, I'm cold, I'm wet, and now
I find out I'm you're little slave girl.

She's looking for a receptacle for her anger. She sees his boots by
the flap. She picks them up and throws them out into the darkness.

KAREN

I hate you. I want a divorce!

EXT. A MOUNTAIN MEADOW - MORNING

It's one of the most gorgeous mornings in the history of the world.
The rain has deposited a dusting of new snow at the higher
elevations and left the meadow fresh and vibrant with new
wildflower growth.

Karen sits on a rock shelf outside the tent, having none of this.
She shivers inside her poncho and stares moodily at the water which

is about to come to a boil in the pot on their little white gas stove.

Across the clearing, Mike fusses with his pack. He's looking for an opportunity to make up with her.

MIKE

You know, maybe this trip wasn't the greatest idea. Maybe we should just go down to a motel.

KAREN

In your dreams, Attila.

So much for that attempt at reconciliation.

MIKE

Be right back.

Feeling glum, Mike climbs up into the rocks after the bear rig. He's deep in his thoughts, not paying a lot of attention to his surroundings. But now he arrives below the tree where the bags are hanging, and his face drops.

We see the tree from Mike's point of view. Something dreadful has happened here. The tree's sparse bark has been torn off and lies in sheets around the clearing, clumped with skin and fur. There is blood on the tree trunk, as if some crazed animal wounded itself trying to get the food.

However, the double hung bags are still in place. Mike did his work well. Now he picks up a branch to retrieve them, acting a little tentative, maybe thinking whatever did this might still be around.

Meanwhile, back at the campsite, Karen has just finished breaking down the tent. She straightens up and glares at Mike as he emerges from the trees.

MIKE

(hesitant)

Got the bear bag...

KAREN

Good.

He starts to say more, then stops himself. He's decided he's not going to start another fight by telling her what he saw by the tree.

MIKE

Well, we better get going...

KAREN
(brisk)
I'm ready any time.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN MEADOW - DAY

In a MONTAGE of spectacular scenes, we follow the couple's progress up the mountainside and also get an introduction to the rugged, unforgiving terrain of the Eastern Sierra. The lyrical setting makes an ironic counterpoint to their spat, which continues as they climb.

As they set out, the alpine meadow where they spent the night spreads before them in a carpet of wildflowers. This is what the old-timers called a "sky parlor" meadow, perhaps because its natural orderliness and graceful composition reminded them of a Victorian sitting room.

LOW ANGLE Two pairs of boots stride purposefully through a bright profusion of cinquefoil, lupine, paint brush and corn lilies.

Mike, leading, looks back hopefully at Karen.

Karen's face is impassive. If she's enjoying this beautiful morning and the setting, she's not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing it.

Now they reach the edge of the meadow, and a series of rocky switchbacks begins. The trail climbs for a few yards in one direction, then doubles back on itself. It makes for hard work which can be extremely frustrating, because sometimes it seems the switchbacks will never end.

LOW ANGLE
Mike's boots kick up small rocks as he negotiates the dusty trail. This is tough going.

Karen, a few yards behind, stops briefly and gasps for breath. Then she resumes her forward progress. She's not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing she's winded, either.

EXT. A LAKE - DAY

Like most of the eastern escarpment of the High Sierra, this trail passes a series of pater noster lakes...sparkling little bodies of water that cascade down the mountainside like a string of beads. You climb for awhile, reach a lake, then climb some more. But each lake is an opportunity to rest briefly on flat ground and enjoy the

view -- that is, if the trekker is so inclined.

Just now, Mike rises into view as he comes up the trail and arrives beside the lowest in this chain of lakes. He waits a beat before Karen comes into view. She's fallen behind a little.

MIKE

Maybe we should take a little break here.

KAREN

Why?

She brushes past him.

EXT. A ROCKY SLOPE -- DAY

LOW ANGLE

More switchbacks, more elevation to be conquered. A pair of boots are climbing a good-sized boulder in the middle of the trail.

Karen, still in the lead, is revealed as the owner of the boots. She's having trouble navigating this rocky stretch with the heavy pack on her back.

Mike, just behind, watches her with impatience.

MIKE

Never step on anything you can step over.
Never step over anything you can
step around.

KAREN

Is that another one of your "rules", Attila?

But now she approaches another rock and she takes a detour around it. She realizes this really is easier.

KAREN

(reluctant to give him credit)
Hmf.

EXT. A LAKE NEAR TIMBERLINE - DAY

There's a noticeable change in the ecosystem now, as they approach yet another lake. The grassy meadow has been left far behind, and wildflowers grow in sparse pockets of soil that cling to the rocky hillside. The trees are few and stunted. We're getting close to timberline.

Karen, still leading, picks her way along the trail that follows the contour of the lake. Her expression is unreadable.

Mike, following, looks a little tired. When is she going to stop?

At the end of the lake, Karen pauses briefly to survey the trail ahead.

[to be continued...]