

THE DEER HUNTER

Screenplay by

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FADE IN:

EXT. PENNSYLVANIA STEEL MILL - LIGHT SNOW - DAY

The plant is massive, grime-streaked, squatting in the valley under five massive stacks, each one trailing a black ribbon across the winter sky. Fires can be seen flickering through the windows and long flames weave and dance from the tops of guyed metal flues. Steam rises in clouds from vents and chimneys and the sound of it all -- the hissing, the clanging, the rumbling, the shrieking -- comes faintly, muted by the falling snow.

In the foreground is a street -- COLUMBINE STREET -- which inhabits the bottom of a narrow ravine and plunges directly down the hillside, straight at the mill. Columbine is a sad looking street, a grim-looking street, a street hanging on by the skin of its teeth. Dilapidated stores hug the narrow sidewalks. Battered signs squeak in the wind. Sandwiched between the stores and scattered on twisting roads along the hillside are narrow Victorian houses. These houses, which run to three stories or more in height, all seem on the verge of toppling over, and undoubtedly would, except that they are all connected one to another by a mad arrangement of utility lines which cross and re-cross between them with occasional aid from a leaning pole.

MUSIC COMES UP -- dissonant, rather frightening music -- as we watch a car come charging up through the slush on Columbine Street. As it nears CAMERA the car falters on the slippery grade and slides out of sight. A figure appears, huddled against the driving snow. The figure disappears AS

CAMERA HOLDS ON THE STEEL MILL AT THE END OF THE EMPTY STREET.

MAIN TITLE COMES UP:

THE DEER HUNTER

INT. STEEL MILL - DAY

A white-hot ingot shoots out of an ejecting mechanism and comes ripping down a track. Another ingot follows it, and another and another and another. The ingots are huge, trembling with heat, and they come on with a terrifying rumble.

CREDITS ROLL

UNDER CREDITS we see STEELWORKERS catching the ingots with tongs and deftly swinging them into troughs. The STEELWORKERS wear leather aprons and are stripped to the waist. Warped in heat waves and glistening with sweat they seem like figures in some hellish ballet. Since they all wear goggles it is hard to distinguish between them, but there are three, who are young, who seem to work with particular grace. These are NICK, SAL and MERLE.

CREDITS END. CAMERA CLOSES ON NICK, SAL AND MERLE. The noise is deafening, the heat is unbelievable and the ingots

come on with murderous speed. Taking advantage of a slight pause MERLE jabs NICK and they both make cuckold's horns at SAL.

SAL blushes and waves them off with his hand. MERLE and NICK make the horns again and now SAL puts both hands on his hips, gives a thin smile and studies the corner of the shed. MERLE and NICK begin laughing. SAL can't hold out and he starts laughing too, but now the ingots begin roaring down the track again and they all grab their tongs.

INT. GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH - ALTAR - DAY

A very old PRIEST is making preparations for a wedding ceremony. SAL'S MOTHER hovers around him as he unlocks a cabinet and takes out white tapers and a golden crown which will be used in the service. The PRIEST moves with agonizing slowness and SAL'S MOTHER is in the midst of a bad case of nerves.

SAL'S MOTHER

It's all ready? Everything's ready?

PRIEST

Yes.

SAL'S MOTHER

Are you sure everything's ready?
Are you positive?

PRIEST

Everything. Yes.

SAL'S MOTHER

It would snow... Everything's going to slip. Everything's going to slide... All the cars are going to crash!

SAL'S MOTHER puts her hand to her mouth and bursts into tears.

SAL'S MOTHER

I can't believe this... My own little boy... with a stranger!

The PRIEST smiles. He takes SAL'S MOTHER in his arms and comforts her.

EXT. COLUMBINE STREET - DAY

Another car lunges up the hill, gets about halfway and slides back. As the car disappears, the door to one of the houses bursts open and a group of giggling BRIDESMAIDS begin scampering across the street. They have all been working on their dresses, which are not completely finished, and they all carry ribbons and scissors and pieces of material. As they make their way to the other side of the street they all wave away the snowflakes and grab each other for support. One of the BRIDESMAIDS loses her dress entirely and with everyone laughing she rushes back to

retrieve it in her slip. When the garment is repossessed a door comes open and the BRIDESMAIDS disappear inside.

CAMERA HOLDS ON COLUMBINE STREET. The snow slants across the little stores and piles on the gables of the tipsy little houses. Another car appears, lunges at the hill and slides back. Suddenly the door to the bakery comes open and a group of OLDER WOMEN emerge carrying a huge wedding cake with a miniature bride and groom standing on the top. The WOMEN are all in their fifties and bundled in boots and dark overcoats. They begin moving slowly up the street, in the driving snow, with the great white cake held firmly between them.

INT. STEEL MILL - ENTRY AREA - DAY

The time clocks are lined against both walls. As a whistle screams to mark the end of the shift thousands of men begin checking out. NICK, SAL and MERLE are right up in the front ranks and once they have clocked their cards they gather together along the wall.

NICK
Where's Vince?

SAL
There's Albert!
(calls)
Hey, Albert!!!

ALBERT -- six and a half feet tall and built like an ox -- changes course and plows across the river of homeward-bound STEELWORKERS.

ALBERT
How you feelin', Sal?

SAL
I feel okay.

ALBERT
Feeling hot?

NICK
(arm around SAL)
Humper's ready. Old humper's
hotter'n damn hell!

MERLE
There's Vince!

OTHERS
(calling)
Vince!... Over here! Vince!

MERLE
Get him, Albert. Get Vince!

ALBERT
I'll get him.

ALBERT wades back into the stream of STEELWORKERS, grabs VINCE and they all push out together.

EXT. STEEL MILL - PARKING LOT - DAY

The snow is still falling. It covers the ground. It covers the acres of parked cars. It swirls and tosses and blows. As the five friends come bursting out of a side exit they all stop dead in their tracks.

VINCE

Snow... Holy shit, snow!

SAL gives a look at the others. Something is going on. VINCE is so excited he begins hopping around.

VINCE

... Do you know what this means?
Do you guys realize exactly what
this means?

They all know. They all know damn well. MERLE and NICK exchange looks. ALBERT chortles.

SAL

What are you guys...? Are you guys
going hunting?

The others nod, shrug, shuffle their feet. They are all a little embarrassed.

SAL

Not tonight?... You're not driving
up tonight?

NICK

As soon as you're hitched, Sal.
First we get you hitched.

SAL

(envious)
You guys are crazy. You know that?
I mean you guys are really nuts.

VINCE

He's getting married... and we're
nuts!

NICK

(puts his arm around
SAL)
It's all right. Hey, it's all right.
We'll be right here, right with
you.

A look at the others...

NICK

Won't we? Right? Am I right?

MERLE

Right.

ALBERT

Damn right!

VINCE

What do you think, Sal? Jesus, you think we'd miss this?

Now SAL is embarrassed. He makes a gesture with his hand.

NICK

(with a laugh)

C'mon. C'mon you guys!

They all start into the swirling snow. NICK with an arm around SAL.

VINCE

And we want you to know, Sal, that any help you might need--

ALBERT

Yeah, Sal--

MERLE

Willing fingers--

ALBERT

Extra feet!

INT. V.F.W. POST - DAY

The place is large and drafty and rundown. A huge American flag hangs from the middle of the ceiling. Under it WOMEN are laying white table cloths on trestle tables. Off to one side a half dozen OLD MEN wearing VFW hats are Scotch-taping paper ribbons to the brick wall. Two OLD MEN are on stepladders, two more are bracing the ladders and the operation is under the direction of a pair of World War I VETS standing side by side. Their hands tremble. Their four eyes loom huge behind corrective lenses.

VET 1

Up I would say... What would you say?

VET 2

Up.

VET 1

(signals)

Up ribbon!

One end of the ribbon is moved up. The two VETS study it.

VET 2

Down I would say... What would you say?

VET 1

Down.

VET 2
 (signals)
 Down ribbon!

Suddenly there is a commotion. The WOMEN who are setting up the tables all rush to the door as the OLDER WOMEN come in with the wedding cake. The OLDER WOMEN look half-frozen and as they move toward a table the cake receives a great chorus of Uhh's and Ahh's. Suddenly one of the OLDER WOMEN collapses. Friends rush to her aid, seat her in a chair and give her wine. The WOMAN takes the glass, tosses it off in one swallow and grins. EVERYONE laughs.

EXT. COLUMBINE STREET - BOTTOM OF HILL - DAY

A big, battered old shark-finned black Cadillac approaches, coming fast.

INT. CADILLAC - DAY

NICK, SAL, MERLE, VINCE and ALBERT are all laughing. NICK is at the wheel.

VINCE
 Hit it, Nick!

OTHERS
 Go Nick! Hit it, baby!!!

EXT. COLUMBINE STREET - DAY

The car bangs over potholes and slams into the grade. We watch as it reaches the half-way point, then the three quarter mark...

INT. CADILLAC - DAY

NICK bends forward over the wheel, peering out through the slapping wipers.

GUYS IN THE CAR
 (chanting)
 Do it, Nick! Do it! Go Nick, Go!
 Do it! Do it, Nick! Go!

The car fishtails, loses speed... to a creep.

NICK
 Back! All hands to the rear!

ALBERT and MERLE, who are sitting in front, immediately throw themselves into the back seat on top of SAL and VINCE.

GUYS IN BACK SEAT
 Easy... 'At's it, easy! Easy,
 Nick... Easy!

EXT. COLUMBINE STREET - TOP OF HILL - DAY

The Cadillac inches up the last ten feet, gains level ground and skids to a stop. From inside comes a MUTED CHEER.

INT. BRIDE'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

ANGELA is dressed in her white bridal gown and veil. She is plump, pretty, with a solemn, round face and big brown eyes.

ANGELA leans forward into a mirror.

ANGELA
(sincerely)
I do.

A pause. ANGELA scowls and tries it again.

ANGELA
(heartfelt)
I do.

ANGELA tries it a few more times. It sounds worse and worse.

ANGELA
I do, I do, I do!!!

ANGELA stares at herself. Now she looks desperate and unrelievedly forlorn. Bursting into tears she throws herself on the bed. Someone has slipped a photograph under the pillow. The photograph is face down and as ANGELA pulls it out she sees that something is written on the back:

ANGELA
(reading, slow)
"This is it -- more or less...
Love, Mom."

ANGELA frowns, turns the photograph over. It is a picture of Michaelangelo's "David". ANGELA stares at the figure for a long, long moment...

ANGELA
Oh, wow.

INT. JOHN'S BAR - DAY

The place is packed with boisterous STEELWORKERS drinking boilermakers. Deerheads are mounted in a long row over the bar, and hand-painted murals decorate the walls. The murals depict hunting scenes and display an eerie tone -- at once comical and frightening -- as if the animals held some secret from the hunters, some power beyond their own.

JOHN bangs out from behind the bar with a tray of beer. At the same moment SAL comes in with NICK, MERLE, ALBERT and VINCE. JOHN, who is a great bear of a youth, puts down his tray, wraps his arms around SAL and begins jumping him around the floor, grinning ear to ear. The STEELWORKERS turn, desert their places and swarm around SAL, joking and shouting congratulations.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

LINDA is thin -- a skinny slip of a thing with a hauntingly lovely face. Wearing her bridesmaid's dress she stands

alone in the kitchen, staring at the ceiling. Thumping noises are coming from the room above. The thumping gets louder. There is a crash, then another crash, as if furniture were being thrown around. A MAN'S VOICE begins cursing and there is more thumping and crashing. Suddenly there is a thud... and then silence.

LINDA bites her lip. She crosses to the stove, ladles stew into a bowl, butters bread, pours a cup of tea and puts it all on a tray.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - FATHER'S BEDROOM - DAY

The room is a wreck of broken furniture. Chairs are turned over, lamps are smashed and the pictures hang cockeyed on the wall. In the middle of the room, face down on the floor, is LINDA'S FATHER. His coat is torn, one shoe is missing and he holds a half-empty bottle in his hand. Behind him, through the open window, snow is blowing in.

LINDA comes in with the tray. She stands for a moment expressionless, looking down at her father. Then she sets the tray on the bureau and kneels beside him.

LINDA

Daddy?

FATHER

(mumbles)

Go... fucking hell!

LINDA reaches down, takes her FATHER by the shoulder and rolls him over. It takes some effort and the face that comes up is gray, unshaven and implacably bitter. Saliva dribbles from his mouth, there is a cut with the stitches still in it seaming his forehead and as LINDA looks at him he begins cursing again.

FATHER

Fucking shit... all around, like a sea! Like an ocean!

LINDA gets up and closes the window. She comes back, gets down on the floor beside her father and pushes him toward the bed. Then, hiking up her bridesmaid's dress, she takes him by the shoulders again and heaves him onto the coverlet. The effort is almost too much for her. Tears begin to burn in her eyes, but when he slips back she tries again. The father groans, begins to mumble, and then, when she almost has him on the bed, he suddenly lifts his hand, catches her full in the face and pushes her violently across the room.

LINDA crashes backwards over a fallen chair and smashes into the wall. As she gets to her feet her father advances on her.

FATHER

Fucking bitch... All bitches!

He swings, catches her in the face again, hard.

LINDA
Daddy...! Daddy, it's me!

FATHER
Hate 'em. Fucking bitches!

LINDA'S FATHER swings at her again, loses his balance and falls on the floor. LINDA stands looking at him, holding her jaw. She is crying. Tears are streaming down her face.

EXT. COLUMBINE STREET - TOP OF HILL - DAY

Seven MUSICIANS, carrying their instruments, file silently through the falling snow.

EXT. ALLEY BEHIND JOHN'S BAR - DAY

The WOMEN are all gathered, some fifteen or twenty, ranging from grandmothers to young wives. About half of them wield rolling pins or heavy pans. As the last reinforcements arrive

-- TWO HEFTY LADIES WITH TRUNCHEONS -- a roar of laughter comes from inside.

INT. JOHN'S BAR - DAY

NICK, SAL, MERLE, VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN are dancing. The MUSIC is at top volume and the smoke is thick enough to cut with a knife. Suddenly, from the back, comes a CHORUS OF SCREECHES AND FEMALE RECRIMINATIONS. The door to the alley bursts open and the HEFTY LADIES WITH TRUNCHEONS appear. The STEELWORKERS take one look, gulp their drinks, grab their heads in their hands and rush for the front door.

EXT. JOHN'S BAR - FRONT ENTRANCE - DAY

The STEELWORKERS stream into the snow with the WOMEN close behind. Several blows are delivered and the howls of complaint are met with angry commands to hurry and get dressed for Sal's wedding.

CAMERA CLOSES ON SAL, who emerges with NICK and MERLE. The snow hits him a sobering blow and he comes to a stop.

SAL
Boy, this is it. This is really
it... I mean... here I go.

SAL'S MOTHER hurries out of the alley. She is crying.

SAL'S MOTHER
My beautiful boy! My angel... who
is leaving his own mother.

She throws herself in SAL's arms, sobbing.

SAL
Momma...

SAL'S MOTHER

So cold is your heart to leave
your own mother?

SAL

Momma, I'll be right upstairs.

SAL throws a look to NICK and MERLE. They gesture with sympathy and study the snow flakes.

SAL'S MOTHER

So cruel is your heart? Is your
heart so uncaring?

SAL

(a litany now)

One flight, Momma. It's one flight.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NICK'S TRAILER - DAY

The trailer is a dented two-tone pink and cream job which looks as if it had been purchased third-hand off a construction site. It stands on cinder blocks in a small lot which has been cut out of the side of the hill. A wrecked school bus decorates it to the right. On the left is a bare branched tree. NICK's black Cadillac is parked in front and a light shows from inside the trailer.

CAMERA PICKS UP MERLE who is strolling toward the trailer whistling through his teeth. He is wearing his tuxedo and carries a knapsack and a deer rifle. He mounts the cinder block steps and pounds on the trailer door. NICK opens the door and waves him in.

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - DAY

The place is cramped, littered with camping paraphernalia. A deer head is mounted above the sink and NICK, who is half into his tuxedo, is applying waterproofing to a pair of heavy boots. MERLE smiles, throws his kit on the stove and sits.

MERLE

(indicates the
waterproofing)

You should have put that on last
night.

NICK

I know.

MERLE

That way it sets.

NICK

Yeah.

Pause.

MERLE

I just wait. You know?

NICK

Huh?

MERLE

I just wait. For this... It's what
I wait for... I wait all year.

NICK

So do I.

MERLE

(sharp)
You do?

NICK

(nods)
Yeah.

NICK grins, takes down his rifle and begins wiping the oil
off it.

MERLE

You think about it?

NICK

Yeah.

MERLE

So do I.
(watches Nick for a
minute)
I want to be ready... You have to
be ready... It has to be there, in
your mind.

NICK

The shot?

MERLE

Fucking A.

NICK

I don't think about the shot that
much.

MERLE

(firmly)
You have to think about the shot.
It's the shot. The shot's it.

NICK

(uncertain)
Yeah... I guess.

MERLE

(studies him)
What do you think about?

NICK

I don't know... I guess I think about the deer... Being out, maybe. I don't know. I think about it all. Hell, I like the trees, you know? I like the ways the trees are, all the different ways the trees are too.

MERLE

(with a glance to the window)

I'll tell you something, Nick. I wouldn't hunt with anyone but you. I won't hunt with a yo-yo.

NICK

(laughs)

Yo-yo! Who's a yo-yo?

MERLE

Who's a yo-yo...? Who do you think's a yo-yo! They're all yo yo's. I mean they're all great guys, for Christ's sake, but... The point is, Nick, without you I'd hunt alone. Seriously. I would. That's what I'd do.

NICK

(laughs)

You're a fucking nut. You know that, Merle? You're a fucking maniac!

MERLE

Yeah.

(he grins)

When it comes to hunting, that's true.

Cursing and banging from outside. NICK opens the door. JOHN and ALBERT, both in tuxedos and loaded down with gear, are pounding on the trunk of the Cadillac, trying to get it open.

NICK and MERLE go out.

EXT. NICK'S TRAILER - DAY

NICK

Albert! For Christ's sake... John! Wait a minute, you guys!

ALBERT

It won't open.

NICK

You gotta hit it here. Here, Albert, not there.

ALBERT

Where should I hit it? Just show me where I should hit it.

NICK

Here. Hit it here.

ALBERT hits the trunk in the indicated spot and the lid snaps open.

ALBERT

Hey, that's neat.

NICK nods.

ALBERT

That's new, isn't it?

NICK

Couple of weeks... Listen --

ALBERT

I love this car. Some cars sit, you know? This car, a car like this... grows. I mean you never know, with a car like this, where this car has been.

VINCE comes up, also in tuxedo, and dragging a totally disorganized clutter of hunting gear behind him.

VINCE

Hey, guys...

JOHN

Shhh! Albert's gonna hump the Coup de Ville.

ALBERT looks around at his friends. He surveys the back end of the Cadillac with simian pride. Then he expands his chest, thumps on it with both fists and yodels out a magnificent, mile-carrying Tarzan call. As the echo of it comes back the church bell begins ringing down the street and a group of excited BRIDESMAIDS come, hurrying up.

BRIDESMAID 1

Albert, what are you doing!

BRIDESMAID 2

Hurry up, you guys!

BRIDESMAID 3

Who's got their carnations?

BRIDESMAID 4

Here. They're right here.

BRIDESMAID 1

Look at you! You're all a mess!

BRIDESMAID 3

Put on their carnations!

BRIDESMAID 1

Who's got a pin?

As the BRIDESMAIDS begin straightening ties and putting on carnations, NICK hears someone call his name. He turns to find LINDA standing beside the trailer where she can't be seen. She looks pale and very frightened and she holds a small suitcase in her hand.

NICK

(crosses)

Linda...

LINDA

Hi.

(forces a smile)

Nick, your shoes are soaking.

NICK

Linda, what's the matter?

LINDA

(tries to toss it
off)

Oh... You know...

She fights against it but the tears begin to come. NICK looks around, pulls her inside the trailer.

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - DAY

NICK clears a place on the couch. LINDA sits, holding her suitcase in her lap.

LINDA

(with great effort)

I was just wondering... Nick...
You're going hunting... If I could
use this place to stay, because...

NICK

Sure. Are you kidding? Sure.

LINDA

I'd want to pay you... and I was
thinking --

NICK

(kneels in front of
her)

Linda... Hey, Linda...

LINDA

I would want to pay you, Nick...
and I was thinking --

NICK

Linda, Linda...!

LINDA
 (very small, looking
 into his eyes)
 What?

NICK
 Will you marry me?

LINDA
 (after a long, long
 moment)
 Okay.

NICK
 Would you?

LINDA nods - a solemn nod.

NICK
 You would?

LINDA's lip begins to tremble. Tears stand in her eyes and she gives a little toss of her head.

LINDA
 Who else, dummy?

NICK stares at her. He can still hardly believe it.

NICK
 This is terrific...! This is really
 terrific!

LINDA nods. She is suddenly excited, suddenly radiantly happy. She takes the suitcase off her lap and throws herself in NICK's arms.

NICK
 I don't know what we've been waiting
 for!

LINDA
 (eyes closed, loving
 him)
 I don't know! I don't know either!

INT. GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH - NIGHT

SAL and ANGELA stand facing each other as the PRIEST reads the Holy Sacrament of Marriage.

PRIEST
 "Blessed be the Kingdom... now and
 forever unto Ages and Ages..."

As the PRIEST continues with the Holy Sacrament CAMERA PICKS UP FACES IN THE CONGREGATION. We see SAL'S FAMILY. We see ANGELA'S FAMILY. We see the VETS from the V.F.W. Post. We see the STEELWORKERS from the bar and the WIVES and MOTHERS who chased them home to change. They are hard faces -- working class faces -- but we sense a fortitude

among the congregation, a community of both heart and spirit.

CAMERA PICKS UP NICK, MERLE, VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN standing in a row opposite the BRIDESMAIDS. The guys all look slightly disheveled. Their tuxedos are all too small and their shoes are soaking wet from walking in the snow.

NICK catches LINDA's eye and they hold each other across the intervening space like two children who are amazed.

The PRIEST hands white tapers to the bride and groom. CAMERA CLOSES SLOWLY ON THE PRIEST. The man is impressive -- gentle yet full of power. The PRIEST lights the tapers -- first ANGELA's, then SAL's -- and looks out across the assembled congregation.

PRIEST

"For everyone that does evil hates
the light, and does not come to
the light, lest his deeds will be
reproved."

EXT. COLUMBINE STREET - TOP OF THE HILL - NIGHT

Save for a lone figure trudging home, the street is deserted, left to the gently falling snow. In the background the massive silhouette of the steel mill is plainly visible, lit with fire.

INT. GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH - NIGHT

NICK, MERLE, VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN join with the BRIDESMAIDS to assist the PRIEST in the crowning of SAL and ANGELA.

The PRIEST crowns SAL first.

PRIEST

"The servant of God, Sal, is crowned
for the servant of God Angela, in
the Name of the Father and of the
Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Now ANGELA is crowned.

PRIEST

"The servant of God, Angela, is
crowned for the servant of God,
Sal, in the Name of the Father and
of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen."

Guiding the couple by their joined hands the PRIEST leads SAL and ANGELA around the analoy. The movement is very precise, very formal, a circling to represent eternity.

INT. V.F.W. POST - DANCE FLOOR - NIGHT

The Band is going full blast and the whirling COUPLES, young and old, are laughing.

We see SAL and ANGELA, NICK and LINDA, VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN. The only one of the group not dancing is MERLE. MERLE is drinking, standing alone on the side of the floor chugging beer in tense, rapid-fire gulps. We sense immediately that he feels out of place, at a loss to join spontaneously in the spirit of the party. MERLE finishes the beer, crumples the can and starts on another. As he picks up the second can he notices that a SAD-LOOKING GIRL is sitting against the wall behind him, waiting for someone to ask her to dance. The SAD LOOKING GIRL gives MERLE a smile. MERLE pretends not to see and moves behind a post.

INT. V.F.W. POST - TRESTLE TABLES - NIGHT

The wedding cake that was carried in earlier has now been attacked from all sides, but the miniature bride and groom are still standing in the middle. Unnoticed by each other SAL'S MOTHER and ANGELA'S MOTHER eye the little figures. Both women are in rather teary condition and begin moving toward the cake. Suddenly, as the CROWD shifts, they encounter each other face to face. Smiles are exchanged -- strained smiles, which get stretched and stretched and stretched. Then, in unison, they desert the smiling and remove their respective offspring from the cake. SAL'S MOTHER looks down at her sugar coated groom and ANGELA'S MOTHER looks down at her sugar coated bride. Then they eye each other, burst into tears and throw themselves in each other's arms, moaning and sobbing.

INT. V.F.W. POST - COAT ROOM - NIGHT

Another COUPLE tries to enter the rack. It is pretty full. They finally find an empty place and squeeze in.

INT. V.F.W. POST - DANCE FLOOR - NIGHT

NICK comes off the floor with LINDA and throws an arm around MERLE.

NICK

Sit with Linda, man, will ya?...
Give her a beer.
(to Linda with great
solicitude)
Would you like a beer?

LINDA

(puzzled)
Sure.

NICK

What kind of beer would you like?

LINDA

(laughing)
I don't know.

NICK

(to Merle)
Give her Miller's. Miller's High
Life.

NICK takes off. LINDA sits down at a table and MERLE goes to the cooler to get a Miller's. He gropes around in the tub, finds one and pops the tab. Suddenly he notices that NICK has crossed to the SAD-LOOKING GIRL by the wall. He has stopped in front of her and is asking her something. The SAD-LOOKING GIRL gives a blush, gets out of her chair and NICK takes her in his arms and begins to dance. The SAD-LOOKING GIRL looks transformed. She begins chattering and laughing.

MERLE crosses back to LINDA and gives her the beer. As he pulls up a chair to sit down beside her he stumbles and nearly loses his balance. He is very drunk.

MERLE

Sorry.

LINDA

(laughs)

It's okay, Merle.

NICK swings by with the SAD-LOOKING GIRL and waves.

MERLE

(catching Linda's
expression)

I guess you like Nick.

LINDA

(nods)

Yes.

MERLE doesn't say anything for a moment. He seems to be trying to contain a floodtide of emotion.

MERLE

Fuckin' Nick...

(clears his throat)

Fuckin' Nick... gives.

(he nods, bangs his
fist on the table)

Gives. Fuckin' Nick gives.

INT. V.F.W. POST - COATROOM - NIGHT

The rack is still jammed with COUPLES but the laughing and giggling has now given way to the sound of heavy breathing and low moans.

What light there is comes from the colored glass ball revolving above the dance floor, where the MUSIC is now playing sweet and low.

The front door comes open and a U.S. Army SERGEANT steps into the darkened hallway. The man wears his dress green uniform.

On his chest is a row of battle ribbons and his shoes are brightly polished.

SERGEANT

Pow!

The SERGEANT gives a beery chuckle and moves toward the dance floor.

INT. V.F.W. POST - TRESTLE TABLE AREA - NIGHT

The SERGEANT passes between groups of celebrating GUESTS, plucks a beer from one of the coolers and sits down alone at the end of one of the white trestle tables.

INT. V.F.W. POST - DANCE FLOOR - NIGHT

ALBERT gives his Tarzan cry, suddenly picks his GIRL off her feet and marches around holding her above his head.

GIRL

Albert, what are you doing...
Albert!

INT. V.F.W. POST DANCE FLOOR - ANOTHER LOCATION - NIGHT

VINCE and JOHN are standing together. VINCE is going bananas because his girl, MARSHA, is dancing too close to FRED.

VINCE

Look at that, see... Watch. Wait a minute, watch. There! D'j'u see that? D'j'u see the way he... You know what that guy is doing? That guy is squeezing her ass!

JOHN

Oh, well...

VINCE

Oh well! What do you mean Oh well?! The guy is actually... He did it again! That's what he's doing... He... He's reaching in, John, to her --! I'll kill him! I'm gonna kill him right now.

VINCE marches up and taps FRED on the shoulder. FRED releases MARSHA. MARSHA waits, one hand on her hip, while the two of them exchange words. VINCE turns MARSHA, points to her ass.

FRED turns MARSHA, pints to the small of her back. VINCE is hopping up and down now. So is FRED. MARSHA, who is getting bored, points to the door. VINCE and FRED bang out. As soon as they have gone MARSHA is taken by someone else who puts his hand right back where FRED had it.

INT. V.F.W. POST - TRESTLE TABLES - NIGHT

NICK, SAL and MERLE are standing together, looking at the SERGEANT.

MERLE

Nick, he just came back.

NICK

From Nam?

MERLE

Fucking A. See that ribbon in the left. That's Quan Son. That fucking guy was at Quan Son!

MERLE gestures with his head. NICK and SAL cross with him to the SERGEANT.

MERLE

We, ah... We're going too.

The SERGEANT looks at them and delivers a big, blank smile.

SERGEANT

Pow!

MERLE

What?

The SERGEANT keeps smiling.

MERLE

(to Nick)

What'd he say?

NICK

Pow.

MERLE

Pow?

NICK

Pow.

MERLE

Oh.

MERLE nods.

MERLE

(clears his throat)

Uh... well, maybe you could tell us how it is over there?

SERGEANT

Pow!

MERLE

Pow?

SERGEANT

Pow!

MERLE looks at NICK. NICK looks at SAL. They all begin scratching their heads, trying not to laugh.

MERLE

Well, thanks a lot.

They turn away and then, when they are out of earshot, they all break up, howling.

SAL
Who the hell is he?

MERLE
Who the hell knows!

NICK
Is he from here?

MERLE
Hell no!

NICK
Well, where's he from?

MERLE AND SAL
(in unison)
Who the hell knows!

MERLE
(soberly)
Maybe he's lost.

SAL AND NICK
Lost???

MERLE
(throws up his hands)
Well, I don't know!

INT. V.F.W. POST - NIGHT

The GUESTS have formed in a long double line which extends from the dance floor right out into the street. Everyone is pretty drunk and they are all armed with streamers and bags of rice. As SAL and ANGELA appear from out of a back room there is a great rowdy CHEER. The MUSICIANS strike up a MARCH. Followed by the MUSICIANS, showered with streamers, rice, advice and encouragement, SAL and ANGELA walk the gauntlet toward the street, where a glossy, bright red Pontiac with headers and straight pipes is being revved in a series of ear-splitting crescendos.

EXT. V.F.W. POST - STREET - NIGHT

JOHN, ALBERT, MERLE and VINCENT are standing by the door.

Their tuxedos are stained and torn. Their carnations are squashed and their clip-on bow ties are either missing entirely or dangling from the open collars of their shirts.

VINCE looks the worst, with a black eye and half his pant leg torn away, and they are all guzzling beer.

VINCE
Bullshit! That's bullshit!

MERLE
You wanna bet?

VINCE

I'll betcha! That's bullshit and
I'll betcha! You're fulla shit!

MERLE

How much? How much do you wanna
bet?

OTHERS

Bet him! Bet him, Vince!

VINCE

I'll betcha! I'll betcha... I'll
betcha twenty dollars!

EXT. V.F.W. POST - PARKED PONTIAC - NIGHT

SAL and ANGELA emerge to more CHEERS and a shower of streamers and rice. ANGELA is helped into the Pontiac on the right. NICK throws an arm around SAL and walks him around to the driver's seat.

NICK

Don't worry what it says in the
book.

SAL

Right.

NICK

Just forget that. Forget what it
says in the book.

SAL

I'm gonna start slow... At the
top. Then I'm gonna work down.

NICK

Great. That's great.

SAL

That's my plan.

NICK gives SAL a hug. SAL gets in the car.

NICK

See you Monday.

SAL

See you Monday.

INT. PONTIAC - NIGHT

SAL looks over at ANGELA.

SAL

All set, hon?

ANGELA nods. SAL puts the car into gear and starts slowly off. Fists pound on the car. Rice and streamers shower down.

Suddenly, through the front windshield, MERLE appears, stark naked, running in front of the car with colored paper streamers floating out from his upraised right hand. For a split second SAL cannot believe what he is seeing. He throws a look at ANGELA. ANGELA covers her mouth in amazement and then quickly shifts the hand to cover her eyes.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

MERLE weaves down the street in front of the growling red Pontiac. MERLE is not just running. He is leaping and bounding, as if released from gravity and entered into a realm of pure ethereal space.

NICK, ALBERT, VINCE and JOHN pound down the street behind the Pontiac, ALBERT carrying MERLE's clothes.

GUYS

Look at that! Fuckin' guy! Fuckin'
Merle!... Unbelievable!

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

The road forks, one road going high to a parking area, the other descending to the valley below. MERLE swerves up the incline toward the parking area, while the Pontiac goes straight and disappears down the hill.

ALBERT, VINCE and JOHN stagger to a stop, panting helplessly.

NICK grabs MERLE's clothes from ALBERT and takes off up the hill.

EXT. HILLSIDE PARKING AREA - NIGHT

MERLE stands motionless, looking out across the valley as NICK approaches. The night is brilliantly clear and the fires from the mill light up the sky with an eerie glow.

NICK comes to a stop a few feet away.

NICK

Merle?

MERLE turns. His face has a strange, distant look, and he gives NICK an almost feral grin.

MERLE

You think we'll ever come back?

NICK

(startled)

From Nam?

MERLE

Yeah.

NICK moves up beside him. He doesn't know what to say.

MERLE

I love this fuckin' place... That sounds crazy. I know that sounds crazy, but I love this fuckin' place... If anything happens, Nick, don't leave me there. I mean it. Don't leave me... You gotta promise, Nick. You gotta promise me that.

NICK

(half laughing)
Merle --

MERLE

Promise! You gotta promise!

NICK

You got it.

MERLE lets out his breath. It is as if some great weight had been pressing on him.

MERLE

(with a laugh)
Let's go huntin'. I mean let's do it!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THRUWAY - NIGHT

NICK'S battered old shark-finned Cadillac comes screaming past.

INT. CADILLAC - NIGHT

NICK, MERLE, VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN, all of them still in tuxedos, are jammed in the car between knapsacks, sleeping bags, six packs of beer and deer rifles.

GUYS

(singing)
Let me be free! Let me be free!
If... you... will let me be free...
You'll... always be happy... with
me-e-e-e!!!

ALBERT

(making a trumpet
sound)
Wa-wa-wa!... Waaaaa!!!

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - NIGHT

Tale Cadillac comes blasting by...

INT. CADILLAC - NIGHT

NICK is hunched over the wheel, his eyes gone completely glassy. MERLE and VINCE are on the nod, while ALBERT and JOHN, both half asleep, are having a lead-voiced conversation.

ALBERT
She fucked you?

JOHN
She fucked me.

ALBERT
She fucked me too.

JOHN
She fucked you?

ALBERT
She fucked me too.

There is a long pause. They both struggle to keep their eyes open.

JOHN
She fucked us both.

ALBERT
Yeah.

JOHN
Fucking women, man...

ALBERT
(shakes his head)
I know...

INT. CADILLAC NIGHT

NICK'S head is sunk below the upper rim of the steering wheel. One eye is entirely shut and the open one seems close to death. Suddenly his head snaps up. He slams his foot down on the brake and the Cadillac fishtails, rubber screaming, to a jolting stop.

EVERYONE in the car comes awake ten bleary eyes staring out through the windshield.

There are deer in the road, fifteen or twenty of them standing in the headlights.

EXT. CADILLAC - NIGHT

VINCE, ALBERT, NICK and JOHN pile out with their rifles. VINCE immediately slips and falls down.

VINCE
Get 'em! For Christ sake, get 'em!

JOHN
Who's got the ammo?

ALBERT
Ammo! Get the ammo!

VINCE
I'll get it! Where is it?

JOHN

It's in the trunk!... It's in the trunk! I'm telling you, it's in the trunk!

VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN rush around to the trunk. ALBERT begins pounding on it.

VINCE

There, Albert! Hit it there!

Pushing and shoving each other, VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN rush around to the side of the car. As they pass along the embankment at the side of the road there is a soft sound, like a sigh, and all three of them simultaneously vanish.

NICK, who has been watching, stares at the place where his three friends disappeared. He takes a few steps forward, realizes what has happened and doubles up in the middle of the road, helpless with laughter.

VINCE

(getting out of the car)

Man, let's go hunting!... Where are they?

NICK makes a gesture, a downward pointing of his finger.

VINCE crosses to the side of the road.

EXT. RAVINE - NIGHT

The slope is a good 45 plus. At the bottom, barely visible, three tiny figures flop in the snow.

EXT. CADILLAC - NIGHT

VINCE looks down at the three hunters with an expression of absolute disgust. He looks at NICK -- flat on his back, pounding his feet, howling -- and then he looks at the deer.

The deer are still watching. If anything they have edged closer and their massed expression of polite curiosity throws VINCE into a blind rage.

VINCE

Get out of here, damn you! Go home!... Scat!... Shoo!

VINCE, whose rifle is fully loaded, slams a shell into the chamber and lets off a barrage of shots above the deer.

VINCE

Bastards! Assholes! Get lost!

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS - DAWN

The sky is cold -- first light -- with low, wind-driven clouds. CAMERA TILTS DOWN and we see NICK's Cadillac coming

up a narrow road flanked by precipitous, heavily forested ridges on both sides.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - DAWN

The Cadillac seems minuscule, overwhelmed by the massive, black slopes looming up from the road.

INT. CADILLAC - DAWN

Everyone is eating cold hot dogs, ripping them out of a half dozen plastic packages, dipping them in a jar of mustard and stuffing them down. Hot dog juice has dripped over everything, potato chips are littered everywhere and both beer and milk are being passed around.

ALBERT
Fuel up. Need fuel.

JOHN
Those are mine!

ALBERT
You want 'em?

JOHN
Damn right!

ALBERT
Gimme a Hostess Twinkie, Merle.

MERLE
Here's a Hershey.

ALBERT tears off the wrapper, dips it in the mustard and glomps it down.

JOHN
That's mustard!

ALBERT
(mouth jammed full)
What?

JOHN
You just put mustard on your Hershey bar.

ALBERT
(nods)
Good... Pass the beer.

VINCE
(pointing to a location beside the road)
Here, here! This is it!

MERLE
(milk slopping over him)
Watch it, shithead!

VINCE
 (pounds Nick on the
 shoulder)
 Here! This is it!

ALBERT
 It is not!

VINCE
 It is too! Now you passed it!

MERLE
 It's ahead, by the tree.

NICK
 It's ahead, Vince.

VINCE
 That isn't it! There's no way that's
 it... Unless they changed it. They
 might have changed it.

NICK pulls to a stop on the shoulder.

VINCE
 They changed it. That's what they
 did. This is it but they changed
 it.

EXT. ROADSIDE AREA - DAWN

The sky is just turning grey. A cold wind is blowing,
 moaning in the trees and swirling a fine haze of snow across
 the open roadway. The guys all pile out in their wrecked
 tuxedos.

VINCE
 This is it. Definitely. This is
 it, but they changed it.

ALBERT
 You're full of shit.

VINCE
 Who's full of shit?

ALBERT
 You're full of shit!

VINCE
 I'm telling you, they changed it!

ALBERT
 They did not!

VINCE
 They did too!

ALBERT
 Jesus, it's freezing!

NICK, MERLE and JOHN have the trunk open and are taking stuff out. MERLE strips down where he stands and begins putting on his hunting clothes. ALBERT and VINCE grab their things and follow the example of NICK and JOHN, who are changing on the corner of the seats.

NICK

Whee-uu!

ALBERT

Jesus!

JOHN

Holy shit!

VINCE

Merle, hey Merle, you got any socks?

MERLE, who is crouched down studying the hillside, looks over.

VINCE

(rummaging around
in the mess of
things he has
brought)

Never mind, Merle. Never mind, I got 'em... Where the hell are my pants? Anyone see my pants?... Who the hell took my pants!

VINCE begins plunging around.

OTHERS

Fuckhead! Watch it!

VINCE

Somebody took my pants... I know I brought pants.

VINCE tears into another pile of equipment, comes up with nothing and steps out of the car.

VINCE

All right. All right, you guys. Whoever took my pants, I want 'em back!

EXT. ROADSIDE AREA - DAWN - LATER

Shots are ringing out in the hills. NICK, ALBERT and JOHN stand by the roadside while VINCE and MERLE glare at each other. VINCE is still in his tuxedo pants, is still wearing his dress shoes and is draped in a gigantic red goose down vest that could only have come from ALBERT. MERLE's knapsack lies on the ground in front of him and we can see that it contains a pair of Vibram-soled mountain boots.

MERLE

Sure I got boots. I got boots right here.

VINCE

Then lemme have 'em.

MERLE

No.

VINCE

(both hands in the
air)

No!!!?

MERLE

No.

VINCE

What do you mean, no???

MERLE

That's it. No. No way.

VINCE

Some fuckin' friend... You're some
fuckin' friend, Merle!

MERLE

You gotta learn, Vince! You come
out here... You got no jacket, you
got no pants, you got no knife and
you got no boots. You think
everyone's gonna take care of you!
That's what you always think, but
this time you're wrong. This time
you're on your own!

ALBERT

Merle, give him the boots.

MERLE

No. No boots. No nothin'.

VINCE

You're one fuckin' bastard, Merle.
You know that? You're one fucking
bastard!

MERLE

(snapping it out,
jabbing his finger
at the ground)This is this, Vince. This isn't
something else. This is this!

VINCE

You know what I think? There's
times I think you're a goddamn
faggot!... I fixed you up a million
times, Merle!

(to the others)

I fixed him up a million times!

(MORE)

VINCE (CONT'D)

I don't know how many times I fixed him up... and nothin' ever happens... Zilch! Zero!... The trouble with you, Merle, no one knows what you're talking about! "This is this"? What does that mean, "this is this"? I mean is that some faggot bullshit, or is that some faggot bullshit!!! And if it isn't, what the hell is it???

JOHN

Vince. Hey, you guys --

VINCE

(hopping now)

Take last night...! Last night he coulda had twenty fuckin' deer! More! He coulda had more! And look what he does! I mean look what he fuckin' does!!!

JOHN

Vince!!!

JOHN throws up his hands in a comical way.

JOHN

I'll get the boots.

ALBERT

(in agreement)

Get the boots.

JOHN

(crossing to Merle's knapsack)

I mean let's get going before --

MERLE -- who has remained completely calm throughout VINCE's tirade -- pumps a shell in the chamber of his rifle. JOHN freezes in his tracks and stares at him, his face gone white.

MERLE

I said no.

JOHN looks at ALBERT, who is right behind him, and they both back away. VINCE, who is standing directly opposite MERLE, begins to tremble. His mouth comes open, closes and comes open again. Urine begins trickling out from the bottom of his pants leg, staining the snow. Suddenly, NICK steps forward.

He looks at MERLE, crosses to the knapsack, takes out the boots, walks over to VINCE and throws them on the road.

NICK

(gently, to Merle)

Let's hunt.

INT. BUSTED-DOWN OLD LOGGERS SHACK - NIGHT

The place is about nine-by-twelve. The floor is rotted out, boards are missing from the walls and the entire structure is canted to the right. Hanging from the roof peak is a hissing Coleman lantern which sways in the wind.

VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN are sacked out, sound asleep. Beer cans -- some old, some new -- litter the floor. Wet clothes, most of them bloody, hang from tie-boards and nails. Strung up on the end wall are two deer carcasses, one of them with a knife jammed in it where steaks have been cut out.

Snow is blowing in -- dry, crystal bright. It swirls over everything and settles on the sleeping figures on the floor.

CAMERA DISCOVERS MERLE AND NICK. They are both in sleeping bags, lying on rusted bedsprings at either side of the broken door. The wind gusts and moans. The cabin shudders and then there is a sudden lull.

MERLE

Hey, Nick?

NICK

Huh?

MERLE

Tomorrow I go with Vince.

NICK

Hunt with Vince?

MERLE

Yeah... I mean so he knows... He doesn't even know.

EXT. THRUWAY PITTSBURGH OFF-RAMP - TWILIGHT

Traffic is heavy, an unending flow of cars, a river of headlights suspended on a curved concrete trestle which seems to float in thin air. Behind is the mill, belching steam and ablaze with fire.

NICK's Cadillac appears, horn blaring, weaving through the traffic. The car sits low. Trussed to the hood, to the roof, to the trunk, are the carcasses of five deer. Rope-ends flutter and bang in the wind. The car shudders and thuds.

Inside, grinning maniacally, NICK, MERLE, VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN are all shouting and guzzling beer.

EXT. COLUMBINE STREET - TWILIGHT

The Caddy appears, swerving onto Columbine with tires screaming and NICK still leaning on the horn. The guys are all hanging out the windows, shouting to FRIENDS, whistling at GIRLS and banging a triumphant tattoo on the doors.

ALBERT

Maxie! Hey Maxie wha'd'ya say!

JOHN

Hey Geraldine, let's eat!

VINCE

Nothin' to it, asshole! Piece o'
fuckin' cake!

As the car ascends the grade the mill appears behind it, seeming to loom upward under the pink-streaked twilight sky.

CAMERA HOLDS AS THE CAR COMES TOWARD IT. The headlights blaze white, like huge hungry stars, and the eyes of the dead deer on the fenders glitter gold and green and red.

ALBERT leans out the window and gives his Tarzan call... IT SEEMS TO ECHO, AS IF COMING FROM FAR AWAY, FREEZE FRAME...

EXT. CLOSE-UP OF JUNGLE LEAF - DAY

The leaf is being eaten by an exotic-looking insect. After each bite, the insect lifts its head, produces an exceedingly thoughtful expression, and chews.

WE HEAR THE BUZZ AND CREAK OF OTHER INSECTS, THEN A DULL, FLUTTERING DRONE. THE DRONE GROWS LOUDER...

EXT. HELICOPTER SQUADRON - SOUTH VIETNAM - DAY

There are twenty of them, coming fast and low, just over the tops of the trees. Sunlight gleams on their paint and murderous-looking rockets are packed to their bellies in fat clusters, like eggs.

Suddenly, in unison, they fire the rockets.

EXT. RANGE OF LOW HILLS - SOUTH VIETNAM - DAY

As the rockets streak away the lightened choppers shoot upward, lost to sight. There is an eerie silence and then the hillside explodes, vanishes in a sheet of smoke and flame two miles wide.

EXT. DUSTY ROAD - DAY

A platoon of AMERICANS have been ambushed on the road. The bodies lie helter-skelter -- headless, armless, legless, guts spilled in the dirt. No one moves and there is absolute silence except for the low buzz of flies.

A V.C. LIEUTENANT steps into sight. He gives a brusque command and V.C. SOLDIERS step out of the jungle. The

LIEUTENANT bayonets a few of the fallen U.S. SOLDIERS --

idly, without much interest -- and then cracks a joke as he rubs his finger in the Americans' blood. The V.C. SOLDIERS laugh, spear a few AMERICANS themselves and repeat the joke.

There is a slight sound. The V.C. LIEUTENANT spins and gives a low command. Fifty feet away there are three grass huts.

He signals his SOLDIERS to spread out and then he starts toward them.

INT. GRASS HUT - DAY

South Vietnamese VILLAGERS -- women, children, and a few old men -- sit huddled in the semi-darkness. The WOMEN hold their hands over their BABIES' mouths. Flies buzz and there is a look of stark terror in their faces.

EXT. DUSTY ROAD - DAY

One of the fallen AMERICANS moves. CAMERA CLOSES ON THE SOLDIER. His face is in the dirt and flies are nuzzling at a gash in his temple. The face is unshaven, frighteningly gaunt, but we recognize that it is MERLE.

A WOMAN'S SCREAM comes from the direction of the huts. A shot rings out. MERLE pulls himself to his hands and knees and stands there, on all fours, like a dog.

EXT. GRASS HUTS - DAY

The V.C. roust the VILLAGERS from their huts, smashing them in the back with rifle butts. One of the SOLDIERS emerges from a hut carrying two small BABIES upside-down by their feet. One of the WOMEN cries out. The SOLDIER gives her a kick, swings one of her BABIES in the air and lets it go. The BABY turns over and over against the blue sky. As the BABY comes down ANOTHER SOLDIER catches it through the neck on the end of his bayonet.

EXT. DUSTY ROAD - DAY

MERLE strips a B.A.R. from one of his dead companions, slams a fresh clip in it, jams two extras in his pants and starts for the grass huts. His movements are slow, almost dreamlike, and his face is expressionless, like someone risen from the dead.

EXT. GRASS HUTS DAY

The VILLAGERS -- about twenty of them -- have been formed in a line. As the SOLDIERS look on the V.C. LIEUTENANT walks up and down trying to extract information. The SPEARED BABY lies in the dust between the two groups. The SECOND BABY tries to play with it. The SOLDIER who threw the dead baby in the air squats nearby and yawns.

EXT. GRASS HUTS - ANOTHER ANGLE - DAY

MERLE approaches between the huts. He takes a quick look around the corner, finds the V.C. all bunched in a neat package and draws back.

CAMERA CLOSES ON MERLE'S EYES. They are cold, dreaming things, glittering blankly.

EXT. GRASS HUTS - DAY

MERLE spins out with the B.A.R. on full automatic. The V.C. SOLDIERS go down screaming, arms and necks thrown back, in a thin mist of spraying blood.

ABOVE THE CHATTER OF MERLE'S B.A.R. WE HEAR A GROWING ROAR.

EXT. APPROACHING AMERICAN HELICOPTERS - DAY

There are five of them, coming in low under the tops of nearby trees.

EXT. GRASS HUTS - THE VILLAGERS - DAY

The VILLAGERS stand motionless, staring at the helicopters and frozen with terror. They turn. They start to run. And then they disappear in a roaring wall of burning napalm.

EXT. GRASS HUTS AFTER NAPALM ATTACK - DAY

MERLE stands alone with his B.A.R. surrounded by clouds of billowing black smoke. There is no sound but the rush of heated air and the faint crackle of flames. MERLE'S clothes are burning. Flames are licking up his trouser legs and a blob of napalm is burning fiercely on his helmet.

In front of MERLE the SOLDIERS and the VILLAGERS lie in two charred heaps. The BABIES lie between them. Both are motionless now, like two roasted stones.

An AMERICAN LIEUTENANT steps out from behind one of the burning huts. MERLE and the LIEUTENANT spin on each other and then the LIEUTENANT lowers his carbine.

LIEUTENANT

What the hell are you doing here?

MERLE

(numb)

Saving lives.

MORE AMERICANS appear, some twenty of them, coming out of the trees in a long line. Among them are NICK and SAL.

LIEUTENANT

Move it out, girls! Move it out!

The LIEUTENANT heads down the line. NICK stares at MERLE.

NICK

Merle?... Jesus, Merle!

MERLE turns and looks at NICK. There is no recognition. He seems to be looking right through him.

SAL comes up behind NICK.

SAL

Hey...! Hey, Merle!

A shot rings out. The LIEUTENANT goes down and suddenly the whole line of AMERICANS is caught in a murderous cross-fire.

Grenades rain out of the trees. MERLE, NICK and SAL dive for cover.

Out of the smoke V.C. SOLDIERS begin to appear, more and more of them, swarming out of the jungle in scores.

EXT. CLEARING IN THE JUNGLE - HEAVY RAIN - DAY

We are looking at the ground where three pits have been dug and fitted with bamboo gratings which are held down by stones. The ground is ankle-deep in running mud and the pits are filled with water to within a foot of the bamboo

gratings. In each of the pits are about a half-dozen men --

SOUTH VIETNAMESE and AMERICAN. Their hands grip the gratings and their eyes are hollow. Other than an occasional groan there is only the sound of the falling rain.

A V.C. SOLDIER trudges out of the jungle. As he reaches the pits he notices the hands, curses and begins jumping up and down on the bamboo gratings. The hands disappear. As soon as one comes back, the SOLDIER stomps on it, shrieking with laughter. Then, almost as an afterthought, the SOLDIER pulls down his pants and squats above the center grating.

CAMERA TILTS SLOWLY UPWARD. We see the clearing in its totality. It is a raw hole hacked out of the jungle and contains only two structures. One is a large bamboo "tiger cage" with a few leaves tied to its top. The other is a small hut with a thatched roof. The walls of the hut are open and we can see V.C. GUARDS moving about inside.

A cry comes from the hut. There is the THUD of a rifle butt on flesh and the cry abruptly stops.

INT. THATCHED HUT - DAY

In the middle of the hut is an American kitchen table with a rose-patterned plastic top. At opposite ends of the table are two chairs. A SOUTH VIETNAMESE PRISONER sits in one of the chairs. In the other chair, facing him, is MERLE.

The SOUTH VIETNAMESE has a welt on his head and one of the half-dozen V.C. GUARDS in the hut is screaming at him. In the middle of the table, between the SOUTH VIETNAMESE and MERLE, is a single-action .45 caliber revolver with an American eagle carved on its ivory grip.

MERLE sits quietly, waiting, but his eyes are working, taking in every detail of the scene. The V.C. GUARD gives the SOUTH VIETNAMESE a final cuff, takes up the revolver with a dramatic flourish and loads one cartridge into the chamber.

Immediately the OTHER GUARDS begin placing bets. The GUARDS are a ragged bunch -- wet, half-drunk on captured Budweiser, and it takes some time to straighten things out.

MERLE LOOKS OFF TO HIS RIGHT:

INT. THATCHED HUT - REVERSE ANGLE - DAY

We see more SOUTH VIETNAMESE and AMERICAN prisoners standing against the wall. Most of them have been badly beaten and all have their elbows tied behind their backs. In among them, standing beside one another, are NICK and SAL. NICK looks grey, like a skinny ghost. SAL is out of control, sobbing quietly.

INT. THATCHED HUT - ORIGINAL ANGLE - DAY

The betting is now completed. The V.C. in charge waves the .45 around and calls for silence. Then, closing the cylinder containing the single bullet, he points the revolver at the ceiling and clicks through the empty chambers until the revolver goes off with a ROAR. Bits of thatch flutter down from the ceiling. The V.C. GUARDS shout enthusiastically and grin.

MERLE sits motionless. The SOUTH VIETNAMESE across the table from him begins shaking uncontrollably.

The V.C. in charge now reloads the revolver with one cartridge, snaps the cylinder shut, puts the gun on the table between MERLE and the SOUTH VIETNAMESE and gives it a good spin.

The revolver slows and finally comes to a stop pointing at MERLE. MERLE stares at it for a long beat. Then he picks it up, spins the cylinder, cocks it, puts it to his temple and pulls the trigger. The hammer falls on an empty chamber with a loud CLICK.

MERLE places the revolver back on the table and pushes it toward the SOUTH VIETNAMESE. The SOUTH VIETNAMESE begins to tremble again. Fumbling horribly he finally manages to get the gun in his hand. He spins the cylinder, cocks the hammer and puts the gun to his temple. The gun weaves around. The SOUTH VIETNAMESE closes his eyes and pulls the trigger.

There is a loud CLICK.

MERLE takes the revolver again. He spins it, cocks it -- all in one smooth motion -- puts it to his temple and pulls the trigger. There is another CLICK.

MERLE pushes the gun back across the table. This time the SOUTH VIETNAMESE takes it up with sudden confidence. He spins the cylinder, cocks it, puts it to his temple and pulls on the trigger.

THERE IS A ROAR. THE PISTOL IS FLYING IN THE AIR AND THEN THE MAN'S HEAD, HALF-EXPLODED, CRASHES OVER ONTO THE KITCHEN TABLE.

MERLE doesn't even blink. The GUARDS begin hooting and laughing, wiping pieces of brain from their clothes, and MERLE watches them, watches every gesture, every movement... like a cat.

EXT. THATCHED HUT - LATER DAY

A pile of bodies lie by the steps in the pouring rain. The bodies are both SOUTH VIETNAMESE and AMERICAN. Their heads are all variously blown to pieces and SEVERAL HUGE RATS are already feeding on them.

INT. THATCHED HUT - TABLE AREA - DAY

NICK is at the table now, opposite a SOUTH VIETNAMESE. He holds the pistol by his chin, spins the cylinder. His face is twitching, dripping sweat and both he and his opponent are holding onto each other's eyes as if they had been at it for a long time.

NICK raises the pistol to his temple, CLICKS OUT. The GUARDS murmur. NICK pushes the pistol across the table.

INT. THATCHED HUT - PRISONER END - DAY

There are no Americans left to play except SAL. The sobbing has stopped but SAL is shaking and trembling and his eyes wander around in their sockets as if they been cut loose.

MERLE, who lies on the floor nearby, is trying to talk to SAL. As he does so we hear the CLICKS coming from across the room and the excited MURMURS of the GUARDS as their betting choice survives another round.

MERLE

You can do it, Sal.

SAL

No. No, no.

MERLE

Sal... listen to me, Sal! You have to do it.

SAL

I want to go home, Merle.

MERLE

You have to think about this, Sal. Listen to me, Sal! You have to think about this.

SAL

(tears again)

This is horrible!

MERLE

Listen to me, Sal. If you don't do it they'll put you in the pit. If they put you in the pit, Sal, you're gonna die... Sal, do you understand?

SAL

(nods)

Merle, I wanna go home!

There is an EXPLOSION from the other end of the room. SAL'S eyes go wide and he lets out a whimpering SCREAM. The GUARDS open a path and NICK appears. His knees won't support him and the GUARD who is holding him throws him on the floor.

MERLE

Listen to me, Sal. Do it! You have to do it!

The GUARD who delivered NICK jerks SAL to his feet and drags him of f to the table.

INT. THATCHED HUT - TABLE AREA - DAY

SAL is thrown in the chair. A SOUTH VIETNAMESE is placed opposite him. The SOUTH VIETNAMESE is a kid, even younger than SAL, and he is trembling with terror.

SAL

Hey, listen, you can do it.

(Sal nods, smiles)

Believe me, you can do it. We can both do it. Then we go home, see?

Then we go home!

SAL looks down. The pistol is ending its spin and the muzzle comes up pointing at the SOUTH VIETNAMESE. The SOUTH VIETNAMESE stares at the gun and tears begin to fill his eyes. The GUARDS begin yelling at him, urging him on and then SAL gives him a SMILE OF SUCH UNWAVERING FAITH that the SOUTH VIETNAMESE picks up the gun, fumbles the cylinder around, cocks it and puts it to his temple. For a moment SAL and the SOUTH VIETNAMESE look at each other. THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE IS TAKING HIS FAITH STRAIGHT OUT OF SAL'S EYES AND NOW SAL GIVES HIM ANOTHER ENCOURAGING NOD.

The SOUTH VIETNAMESE BOY squeezes the trigger. THERE IS AN EXPLOSION AND HIS HEAD DISINTEGRATES WITH A ROAR.

SAL sits motionless, his jaw hanging open and his face formed in an expression of terrible puzzlement. Then his face begins to move, begins to twitch, as if the muscles were trying to discover a frown. SAL looks around. He looks back again at the place where his friend was sitting and he begins to cry.

INT. TIGER CAGE - HEAVY RAIN - FOLLOWING DAY

A half-dozen SOUTH VIETNAMESE sit huddled together in the muck on the uphill side. A seventh lies sprawled on his back, DEAD. The rain pours through the few leaves placed on the roof and splashes in great cascades in the middle of the floor.

On the downhill side are SAL, NICK and MERLE. SAL is in a fetal position, gripping his knees and rocking himself back and forth. His eyes are vacant and his face is fixed in an expression of horror, as if he were still watching

the boy at the table blow himself away. Beside SAL is NICK. NICK sits slumped against the bamboo. One knee is raised and he is picking at the threads of his trousers where they have torn at the knee.

MERLE IS STANDING, GRIPPING THE BAMBOO WALLS OF THE CAGE AND LOOKING OUT AT THE "PITS".

EXT. THE PITS - MERLE'S POV - HEAVY RAIN - DAY

The pits are about twenty feet away. Running mud and water gurgle into them, coming out through shallow trenches on the downhill side. There are fewer hands than the day before, far fewer. The nearest pit only has one pair and as MERLE watches he sees that these hands are struggling to keep their grip.

SUDDENLY ONE OF THE HANDS SLIPS AWAY. THE HAND COMES BACK FOR A MOMENT, THEN BOTH HANDS DISAPPEAR.

INT. TIGER CAGE - HEAVY RAIN - DAY

MERLE turns away from the "pits". He looks down at SAL, then he looks at NICK. His expression is one of exasperation, as if he had been having a long argument.

MERLE

I'm telling you, Nick, no one's going to come.

NICK

What are you, God?

MERLE

Listen, asshole, it's up to us!

NICK

They bombed last night, right? Didn't they bomb? If they bombed last night, they could bomb tonight. They could be up there right now!

MERLE

What are you, hoping?

NICK

What else?

MERLE

I thought you might be praying.

NICK

I'm doing that too.

MERLE

I suppose you wish you were somewhere else?

NICK

What do you think?

MERLE

Nick, you're wasting your time...
Listen to me! You're wasting your
time! This is no fucking time for
hoping or praying or wishing or
any other shit! This is it. Here
we are... And we gotta get out!

NICK

You're right... Okay, you're right.

MERLE

(grabs him)
Get off your ass, Nick. Get off
your fucking ass and stand up!!!

NICK

(stands)
Okay, okay!
(he straightens his
shoulders)
Okay. Okay, you're right... What
about Sal?

MERLE

Forget Sal.

NICK

What do you mean?

MERLE

I mean forget Sal... Sal can't
take it, Nick.

NICK

Forget Sal?

MERLE

Forget Sal... Listen to me -- forget
Sal! I've been working on Sal since
dawn, Nick. Sal's in a dream and
he won't come out. LISTEN!!! From
here on you gotta go for you. You
hear me? For you!

NICK

Merle...

MERLE

LISTEN, NICK! GET IT THROUGH YOUR
HEAD OR YOU AND ME ARE BOTH DEAD
TOO!

A shout comes from the thatched hut. The SOUTH VIETNAMESE
whip around in fright. MERLE and NICK turn.

Through the bars of the "tiger cage" we see the V.C. GUARDS
coming down from the thatched hut. The GUARDS are all
drinking beer again and the GUARD IN CHARGE is waving the
pearl-handled revolver.

NICK looks at MERLE. The sight has totally unnerved him.

MERLE

(calm)

We gotta play with more bullets.

NICK

We what?

MERLE

We gotta play with more bullets,
Nick. It's the only way.

NICK

More bullets in the gun?

MERLE

(even)

More bullets in the gun... The
trouble is that still leaves one
of us with his hands tied up, so
that means we gotta play each other.

NICK

(numb)

With more bullets?... Against each
other?... Are you crazy!!! Are you
fucking nuts!!!

MERLE

Nick... NICK!!! It's the only chance
we've got!

NICK stares at MERLE. Rain is pouring off them in rivulets
and the VOICES of the approaching GUARDS are getting louder.

NICK

How many bullets?

MERLE

(watching him)

Three bullets -- minimum.

NICK

(panic)

No way. No fucking way!

MERLE

(evenly, holding
him with his eyes)

I'll pick the moment, Nick. The
game goes on until I move. When I
start shooting, go for the nearest
guard and get his gun.

NICK

No. No way!

MERLE

When you get the AK, open up. You
got me? Open up.

NICK
 (screaming)
 YOU'RE CRAZY!!!... NO WAY!... NOW
 YOU'RE CRAZY!!! YOU'RE COMPLETELY
 CRAZY!!!

The GUARDS begin screaming orders from outside the cage and ONE OF THEM lets off a blast of automatic rifle fire which shreds the bamboo roof just above the PRISONERS' heads. NICK and MERLE grab SAL and drag him to the door.

EXT. CLEARING IN THE JUNGLE - HEAVY RAIN - DAY

As the PRISONERS emerge from the "tiger cage" the GUARDS smash them with their rifle butts, screaming orders. In the melee SAL is separated from NICK and MERLE, both of whom are knocked to the ground by furious blows. When they get to their feet they see that SAL is wandering off alone in the direction of the "pits". One of the GUARDS spots SAL and clubs him down.

SAL gets up and begins wandering off again. The GUARD clubs him down again, turns to the GUARD IN CHARGE and begins complaining. The GUARD IN CHARGE dispatches a SECOND GUARD to help the FIRST and the TWO GUARDS open the bamboo grating on one of the "pits".

MERLE turns to NICK, who is standing beside him.

MERLE
 It's up to you, Nick. Now it's up
 to you.

EXT. CLEARING IN THE JUNGLE - THE "PITS" - DAY

SAL has absolutely no comprehension of what is about to happen to him. His eyes are dreamy, far away, as if he had mentally transported himself to some distant place. There are great gashes in his head from the blows he has received and as he stands waiting in the pouring rain he looks exactly like a very small child who has experienced some terrible confusion.

Suddenly the GUARD standing beside SAL wrenches him around.

We see the pit now, CLOSE UP. There are four bloated CORPSES floating in the muck.

We SAL'S FACE, CLOSE UP. He gives a CRY and tries to turn away.

We see the GUARDS pick SAL up, SCREAMING. We see the SPLASH as SAL hits the water and then we see him surface between the bloated CORPSES, STILL SCREAMING, paddling desperately and trying to find something solid to hold him up.

EXT. CLEARING IN THE JUNGLE - WAITING PRISONERS - DAY

NICK stands motionless, stunned, listening to SAL'S SCREAMS. MERLE has his attention focused on the GUARD IN CHARGE and when he glances in their direction MERLE slugs NICK in the stomach and begins beating him furiously to the ground.

NICK struggles to his feet. MERLE attacks him again and now, as the GUARD IN CHARGE comes over to see what's going on, MERLE begins hopping up and down, pointing at NICK, pointing at the revolver in the GUARD'S hand and screaming.

MERLE

Him and me!!! Him and me!!!

The GUARDS look at each other, interested.

MERLE

Him and me, goddamn it! Him and me!

INT. THATCHED HUT - HEAVY RAIN - DAY

MERLE and NICK sit facing one another across the rose patterned kitchen table. The GUARDS are all grinning and even the SOUTH VIETNAMESE are watching with grim fascination. NICK has the revolver. He is trembling visibly. Already MERLE has managed to draw the GUARDS in closer and as NICK spins the cylinder and cocks the hammer MERLE jumps up and begins pounding on the table.

MERLE

This is it, motherfuckers! Now he's going to do it! Watch! You watch!

NICK almost loses what little control is left and his hand begins shaking violently.

MERLE

Look at him! See! This is it and he knows it!

Side bets begin changing hands.

MERLE

Last chance to lose your money there, guys. Goodbye money! Hurry, hurry. Here he goes!

NICK puts the revolver against his temple and pulls the trigger. There is a dull CLICK.

NICK puts the revolver back on the table. His hand is shaking so badly it falls with a clunk. MERLE grabs it, spins it, sticks it to his temple and CLICKS OUT, talking all the time:

MERLE

This is stupid! You understand stupid? On and on! At this rate we'll still be here tomorrow!

(throws the revolver
on the table)

Wait a minute. I know! Hey, I got it. More! Put in more! You understand more? More! More bullets!

(MORE)

MERLE (CONT'D)

(he mimes with his
fingers)

Three bullets! You understand three?
That way BLAM! BOOM!

MERLE hops up and down, laughing maniacally.

MERLE

KA-POWIE!!! BA-ROOM!!!... 'Cause I
want that bastard! Him I want boom!
Him or me!!!

The GUARD IN CHARGE looks at his COMPANIONS. They all begin shouting for him to go ahead. The GUARD IN CHARGE purses his lips, as if imitating a general coming to a decision, and then nods his assent. The GUARDS all howl. MERLE joins right in.

MERLE

He's terrific! Great fucking guy!

The GUARD IN CHARGE takes the revolver, opens the cylinder and begins sticking in two more cartridges.

MERLE

KA-POW!!! BA-ROOMIE!!!

MERLE hops up and down again, then screams at NICK, jabbing his finger at him, as if in fury.

MERLE

Both of us may have to pull on
this, so get your shit in fuckin'
shape!!!
(to the GUARDS)
Him or me!!! Now we got it, him or
me!!!
(he rubs his hands
and sits back down)
Place your bets, motherfuckers!
Now we're going! Now we got a game!

The GUARD IN CHARGE places the revolver on the table, spins it.

MERLE

Watch! Now watch! He's going to
get it. And then KA-POW! BA-
ROOMIE!!!

The muzzle stops pointing at MERLE. MERLE scowls, looks over at the GUARD IN CHARGE. The GUARD IN CHARGE has lifted the barrel of his AK 47 and is watching him with caution. The OTHER GUARDS, who are totally caught up in the game, are yelling and shouting.

MERLE

You guys think I'm in trouble,
right?

MERLE picks up the revolver, spins the cylinder, cocks it...

MERLE

No way! Never!!!

(he begins to chant)

MERLE IS MIGHTY! -- HA! MERLE IS STRONG! -- HA! MERLE IS MAGIC! -- HA! MERLE LIVES LONG! Lemme hear it. Come on, motherfuckers, lemme hear it!

MERLE starts it again. The GUARDS who are betting on him JOIN IN:

MERLE

(with GUARDS)

MERLE IS MIGHTY! -- HA! MERLE IS STRONG! -- HA! MERLE IS MAGIC! -- HA! MERLE LIVES LONG!

MERLE takes a glance at the GUARD IN CHARGE again. The GUARD IN CHARGE is still eyeing him with caution.

MERLE places the revolver to his temple... and CLICKS into an empty chamber.

MERLE

See! Nothing to it.

He pushes the gun across to NICK. Then he stabs his finger at him, screaming again, as if in a fit of rage.

MERLE

You got an empty chamber and it's in your mind! Just put that empty chamber in the gun!

NICK looks down at the revolver and picks it up. He stares at MERLE for a moment. Then he spins the cylinder, cocks the hammer, Puts it to his head... and CLICKS into an empty chamber.

The GUARDS let out expressions of disbelief. Those betting on NICK begin taunting those betting on MERLE.

MERLE sits motionless, as if stunned, as if utterly defeated, his brow furrowed in a mighty frown.

NICK pushes the revolver across the table. His face is twitching but he gives the gesture a certain flair, as if throwing back a challenge.

MERLE stares at the revolver -- stares at it with an expression of utter gloom. Then he reaches out, takes the revolver in his hand and pulls it toward him, as if he no longer possessed the strength to pick it up.

MERLE

(gloom)

Who's for Merle?

(MORE)

MERLE (CONT'D)
 (he thumps his fist
 on the table)
 Is anyone for Merle???

MERLE roams a glowering eye over the watching GUARDS, as if suddenly discovering himself among traitors. Slowly, he pushes himself to his feet. The gun is still on the table, still in his right hand, and as he gets up he lets his body sag over it.

MERLE
 Who here is for Merle...?

There is absolute silence now except for the drumming of the rain. It is as if the war had disappeared, vanished. The GUARDS stand motionless, hardly breathing, so captivated by MERLE'S performance that they suddenly resemble little children.

MERLE
 Who... here... is for Merle...?

MERLE begins his chant again. His voice is low, very dramatic, and the GUARD IN CHARGE joins right in.

MERLE
 (with GUARDS)
 MERLE IS MIGHTY! -- HA! MERLE IS
 STRONG! -- HA! MERLE IS MAGIC --
 HA!

MERLE snaps the revolver level in his hand and BLASTS the GUARD IN CHARGE, hitting him full in the face. At the same time NICK throws himself into the GUARD who is standing behind him, spins and slams the GUARD'S AK 47 into his chin.

TWO MORE SHOTS BLAST OUT FROM MERLE'S .45 and we see TWO GUARDS crash over the kitchen table. NICK now opens up with AK 47, and as MERLE backs off beside him, also with an AK 47, they GUN the remaining GUARDS to the floor.

It is over in an instant. The BODIES lie in a bloody, tangled

mess under a pathetic paper lantern. The rain drones on -- uninterrupted, undiminished, eternal...

EXT. CLEARING IN THE JUNGLE - HEAVY RAIN - DAY

Barely visible against the dripping foliage -- like a shadow is a startled V.C. SOLDIER. The man takes a half-step forward, unslings his rifle and OPENS FIRE.

INT. THATCHED HUT - DAY

The SOUTH VIETNAMESE PRISONERS are hit where they stand. NICK spins, BADLY WOUNDED. MERLE throws himself on the floor and lets go with the AK 47.

EXT. BAMBOO GROVE - HEAVY RAIN - DAY

MERLE appears carrying NICK on his back. NICK is unconscious and the effort that MERLE has expended to get him this far can be measured in MERLE'S eyes, which burn like dead coals.

As MERLE approaches, traversing the bamboo grove along the side of a steep hill, we suddenly see SAL, stumbling along behind and attached to MERLE by a short rope.

MERLE comes to a stop, unshoulders NICK and lays him on the ground. As MERLE stands looking at NICK, gasping for breath, SAL hunches down and stares at the endless trunks of bamboo with an expression of pure terror.

SAL

Where are we going, Merle? Are we going home?

There is a sound, so faint as to be almost imperceptible. MERLE throws himself on SAL, slamming one hand across his mouth and raising the other in case he has to silence NICK.

For a moment there is nothing -- silence. The rain drones on and we can hear NICK'S breath, which comes in short, shallow rasps.

The sound comes again and suddenly a PLATOON OF V.C. SOLDIERS appear, coming down through the trees. Their passage is almost completely silent and they go by on both sides, moving down the hill.

CAMERA CLOSES SLOWLY ON MERLE'S FACE. His gums are bleeding and his skin is drawn tight so that every bone stands out in his skull. His teeth are bared, his eyes are hollow and he looks within a hair's breadth of being completely mad.

EXT. CRATERED ROADSIDE - NIGHT

A huge battle is taking place nearby. The earth trembles and shakes and gigantic explosions intermittently light the sky.

MERLE staggers down a ravine with NICK, loses his footing and slides to the bottom where he lies in the mud, motionless, too tired to move.

SAL comes down behind. He is hunched over, like a gnome. The rope which MERLE has tied around his neck drags in the mud and his eyes are huge with terror.

SAL

Merle?

MERLE

(a whisper)
Right here.

SAL crouches down in the mud.

SAL
Where are we going, Merle? Are we
going home?

MERLE
(barely moving his
lips)
Right here.

Another explosion lights the sky, this one much closer. In the flash we see that a red American car is stranded in the middle of the road. There is another explosion and another flash. The car is dusty, spattered with mud, but otherwise it appears miraculously unharmed.

NICK'S breath rattles in his throat. MERLE, who lies beside NICK, holding him, has closed his eyes. SAL, who is the only one who has seen the car, stares at it hard, and for a long time, trying it out with one eye and then the other.

SAL
Merle?

No answer.

SAL
Merle?

Still no answer. SAL goes over to MERLE and shakes him.

Getting no response he crosses fearfully toward the automobile. When he gets to within a foot of it, he reaches out and touches it.

SAL
Merle. Merle, a car!

As the flashes continue to light up the sky, SAL peers at the tires and begins kicking them.

SAL
Hey! Hey, gee!

SAL crosses to the window and looks in. There is no damage whatsoever, the keys are dangling from the ignition. SAL pulls open the door and climbs in. He pumps the accelerator, hits the starter...

THERE IS A FLASH OF FIRE, THEN A HUGE EXPLOSION AND THE CAR GOES UP IN A FIREBALL OF FLAME.

EXT. CRATERED ROADSIDE - BURNING CAR - NIGHT

MERLE has dragged SAL from the car and thrown him in the ditch below NICK. SAL is horribly burned and MERLE kneels over him -- out of breath, tears streaming from his cavernous eyes -- howling with helpless rage.

MERLE
Damn it!!! God damn it!!!

MERLE looks down at SAL. SAL'S face in a mass of raw flesh but his eyes look up at MERLE with lunatic, unwavering trust.

MERLE

Sal!

(more gently)

Sal... Goddamn it, Sal, don't you know anything?

SAL

Where are we going, Merle? Are we going home?

MERLE

(nods)

Sure. Sure, Sal. We're going home.

EXT. CRATERED ROADSIDE - FOLLOWING DAY

REFUGEES are streaming down the road in a desperate, frightened human torrent. There is every imaginable means of conveyance -- from bullock carts to motorbikes -- but the vast majority, carrying their meager belongings, are fleeing on foot. The burned-out car is still in the middle of the road and the great human tide streams around it, as if it were an island. In the distance comes the sound of machine gun fire and mortars are coming in nearby. MEDVAC helicopters clatter overhead with wounded strapped to baskets on the skids. Now and then an ARMY CONVOY comes through, blasting the REFUGEES into the ditch.

MERLE sits alone on the embankment by the side of the road. NICK and SAL are gone and the area is littered with fresh bandage packages and throw-away medical supplies. Suddenly a jeep pulls up with a two-star GENERAL in it.

GENERAL

Where's your unit, soldier?

MERLE stares at the GENERAL -- blankly, without comprehension. Finally, after a long moment, he gives a slight shrug.

GENERAL

(to his DRIVER)

C'mon. We'll take him along.

The GENERAL and the DRIVER get out and start up the embankment toward MERLE.

GENERAL

Little R and R and you'll be standing tall again, son... Damn, this is steep!

DRIVER

Uh-oh. Sir.

The GENERAL looks up at MERLE. MERLE is holding the pearl handled revolver and he cocks the hammer with an audible click.

GENERAL

Uh-oh.

The GENERAL and the DRIVER turn tail, scramble back down the embankment and pile in the jeep.

GENERAL

(as they take off)

Y'know, there's more fucking maniacs coming out of this conflict...

MERLE watches them go without expression. On the road below the REFUGEES stream past -- by the hundreds, by the thousands, by the tens of thousands. For a long moment MERLE watches, then he jams the gun in his pants and stands.

EXT. EVACUATION ROUTE - DAY

MERLE is walking with the fleeing REFUGEES. CAMERA PANS, HOLDING ON MERLE as he grows smaller and smaller -- to a speck in the vast human torrent.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. OUT-PATIENT ROOM - U.S. MILITARY HOSPITAL - SAIGON - DAY

The room is tiny, a cubicle furnished with a chair. NICK is alone, standing at the window looking out. He wears ill fitting civilian clothes whose colors are too bright for the pallor of his skin. Around his neck is a piece of plastic on which is stapled a colored paper marker. Departing aircraft thunder overhead and there is the sound of some nearby hydraulic mechanism.

EXT. LOADING RAMP (NICK'S POV) - U.S. MILITARY HOSPITAL - DAY

Black BODY BAGS are laid out in countless rows on the hot concrete TWO PFC's are stacking them on pallets and MORE PFC's, driving hydraulic LIFTERS, are loading the pallets into the cavernous hold of a huge JET TRANSPORT.

INT. OUT-PATIENT ROOM - U.S. MILITARY HOSPITAL - DAY

NICK turns away from the window and sits down in the chair.

Suddenly the door bursts open and a harassed DOCTOR comes in.

DOCTOR

Is your name Solomon?

NICK shakes his head.

DOCTOR

Are you sure?

NICK nods.

DOCTOR

Lemme see this.

The DOCTOR looks at the paper marker on NICK's neck.

DOCTOR
Is this yours?

NICK nods.

DOCTOR
This isn't yours. This can't be yours! I'm going to take this one off and cut it up...
(he extracts a pair of scissors and does so)
Shred it... so no one gets a hold of it. What I'm going to do now, I'm going to give you this one.
(he staples a new marker around NICK's neck)
There. How's that? Does that feel better?

NICK nods. The DOCTOR directs a finger at him.

DOCTOR
That one's yours.

The DOCTOR slams back out the door. Another jet thunders overhead. The hydraulic LIFTERS on the loading ramp shriek and whine...

NICK reaches for the new paper marker on his neck and peers down at it from the corner of his eye. It seems to remind him of something and he takes out his wallet. In his wallet is a PHOTOGRAPH of LINDA. NICK peers at the photograph intently, then closes his wallet and puts it away.

INT. U.S. ARMY TELEPHONE CENTER - SAIGON - DAY

Banks of telephones line the wall. Stretching out from the telephones are long, ragged lines of SERVICEMEN waiting to call home. The room is huge, full of echoes. Re-enlistment posters are plastered everywhere and CANNED LATIN MUSIC is playing.

NICK stands in one of the lines with only one person in front of him. He looks anxious. He takes out his wallet again, peers intently at LINDA'S PHOTOGRAPH, then puts it back. NICK takes a half-step forward -- staring at the telephone --

and then he stops, frozen with fear.

GUM CHEWER BEHIND
Go on, babe. Take it. 'S all yours!

NICK
(mumbles)
You go ahead.

CAMERA HOLDS ON NICK as he turns out of the line and heads for the exit under a long row of CLOCKS.

EXT. BUSY STREET - SAIGON - DAY

NICK comes along the sidewalk in a CROWD OF PEDESTRIANS. He is drunk and he moves aimlessly, as if he had been drifting along for hours. As he comes to a stop, staring at a SOUTH VIETNAMESE who has lost both legs, he fumbles in his pocket for a pint of whiskey, empties the bottle and drops it in the gutter. Suddenly, across the street, something catches his eye.

NICK
(calling)
Sal...! Sal!!!

NICK throws himself into the traffic, headlong, without even looking.

Vehicles swerve and screech to a stop. NICK dodges between them, gains the sidewalk on the other side and claps his hand on the back of a passing SOLDIER. The SOLDIER turns. It is not SAL at all and the resemblance is not even close.

NICK
Sorry... Thought you were someone else.

The SOLDIER continues on his way. The CROWD streams on, a sea of bobbing, brilliant color. NICK gropes in his pocket and produces another pint bottle. He unscrews the cap and downs a long swallow.

INT. BAR - SAIGON - NIGHT

The place is very dark. LOUD MUSIC is playing. Partially-clad BAR GIRLS are dancing with the CUSTOMERS, while above, on a kind of trapeze, NAKED GIRLS are performing obscene contortions.

NICK sits at one of the tables. By now he is very drunk and a BAR GIRL is giving him her undivided attention.

NICK
I love Linda, see. I love Linda more than I can even say.

BAR GIRL
Everybody love Linda.

NICK
That's right. That's exactly what I mean!

BAR GIRL
I love Linda. Myself, I love Linda so much!

NICK
Only, good people love Linda, see. What Linda has, Linda --

BAR GIRL

(in his ear)

How you like to have nice fuck
with Linda? You like that? Special,
crazy fuck just like with Linda?

NICK

(stares at her)

You mean...?

BAR GIRL

I show you. Come. You come.

(pulls him to his
feet)

Linda have special, crazy fuck.
That right?

NICK nods. He looks as if he might be about to cry.

BAR GIRL

I give you special, crazy fuck,
just like Linda. Come. You come.
Linda cry, make crazy moan?

NICK nods.

BAR GIRL

I give you cry, crazy moan. Come.
You come.

INT. CORRIDOR - BAR - NIGHT

The BAR GIRL comes around the corner with NICK, guiding him to a flight of narrow stairs. She has one hand around his waist and the other down the front of his pants.

BAR GIRL

You like to call me Linda now?

NICK

Linda, yeah.

BAR GIRL

You call me Linda, just like home.

Suddenly NICK draws to a stop, staring at a small window at the end of the corridor. He tears himself loose from the BAR GIRL and pushes up against the glass.

EXT. NARROW STREET (NICK'S POV) - NIGHT

Seated on the sidewalk against the wall of the opposite building is an OLD MAN surrounded by a collection of white ceramic elephants. A truck roars by in front of him.

Motorcycles sputter past and PEDESTRIANS hurry in both directions. The OLD MAN sits motionless, like the guardian of some timeless, silent kingdom.

INT. CORRIDOR - BAR - NIGHT

NICK spins away from the window.

NICK
 Hey... Hey, elephants! Look at
 those elephants!

The BAR GIRL stares at him.

NICK
 Linda loves elephants! Linda...
 she loves 'em!

NICK turns and charges back down the corridor with the BAR
 GIRL hot on his tail.

BAR GIRL
 Wait! First I give you special
 fuck!

NICK
 Elephants! Make way... I gotta get
 elephants!

EXT. NARROW STREET - NIGHT

NICK paces up and down in front of the OLD MAN and his
 ceramic elephants.

NICK
 Great... These are great. I wanna
 tell you these are great elephants!
 I'm going home, see... Stateside
 in a few days and my wife Linda,
 she loves elephants. She... she
 has a thing for elephants because
 elephants... Elephants go on. You
 know what I mean? They go right
 on. I don't know if they cry.
 Maybe at night. I mean... What I
 mean is my two best buddies are
 dead, see, MIA, who knows, and
 they would have liked some elephants
 also because... How much are these
 elephants? I mean let's talk
 elephant.

(notices a GROUP OF
 STREET URCHINS)

Hey you guys...! Over here! Come
 over here and carry elephants!

The STREET URCHINS come running. They are ragged,
 malnourished, ranging in age from about six to nine. They
 are covered with sores. One of them as lost an eye and
 another has lost a hand.

NICK
 Everyone take an elephant!
 (to the YOUNGEST
 URCHIN)
 You know how to carry an elephant?
 (the URCHIN nods)
 That's what I thought. Right off I
 figured you as that kind of guy.
 (MORE)

NICK (CONT'D)

Hey, wait a minute, I gotta get change. Take an elephant! Everyone take an elephant and then form up. Right here. Over here, like this, in a nice long elephant line... Good. That's good. Man, look at all these elephants! One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten... eleven elephants!

(surveys them)

Hey, but you gotta stand tall to carry elephants.

(he illustrates)

Better. That's better. I mean... God damn, I mean that's elephants now! Wait. Now you wait while I get change.

NICK dives into a nearby bar.

INT. NEARBY BAR - NIGHT

The place is as dark as the one before. MUSIC BLASTS from a jukebox and two vaseline-covered GIRLS are dancing. As NICK crosses to the bar to get change there is a WHISTLING SCREAM and then the FRONT WALL OF THE BUILDING DISINTEGRATES IN A ROAR OF NOISE.

NICK pulls himself out of the debris. There is absolute silence in the WRECKED BAR but rockets are coming in all over the city and the EXPLOSIONS rumble and roar.

EXT. NARROW STREET AFTER ROCKET EXPLOSION - NIGHT

A nearby building is burning fiercely. The street is deserted except for the sprawled CORPSES of the STREET URCHINS which lie this way and that, like broken dolls.

NICK walks out past the CORPSES. The street is littered with fragments of broken ceramic -- gleaming, pure white, like chunks of snow.

EXT. DESERTED STREET - SAIGON - NIGHT

The sky is alight with fires. Now and then HUGE EXPLOSIONS rock the night and SIRENS wail.

A lone figure appears, walking down the middle of the street.

As the figure approaches we see that it is NICK.

NICK

(toneless, over and over)

Hey, hey, the wind does blow.

Hey, hey, the snow does snow.

Hey, hey, the rain does rain...

NICK swallows, as if to force back some overwhelming emotion.

Then, squatting down under a lamp post, he begins again.

NICK
 Hey, hey, the wind does blow.
 Hey, hey, the snow does snow...

NICK takes out his wallet, opens it hurriedly to the PHOTOGRAPH OF LINDA and peers at it with a kind of ferocious determination, as if this link were the last, as if by staring at it hard he could make it hold.

NICK
 (his voice thin,
 cracking)
 Hey, hey, the wind does blow.
 Hey, hey, the snow does snow --

There is the sharp report of a pistol SHOT and then, as NICK spins, staring at a shuttered building, there is the unmistakable sound of APPLAUSE.

NICK stares at the building for a long moment, then he crosses toward it.

EXT. YARD BEHIND BUILDING - SAIGON - NIGHT

A tiny light glows inside a paper lantern. Lying on the around are three CORPSES, all of them Asian, all of them expensively dressed and all of them with their heads blown off. As NICK stands looking at them a door comes open on the back of the building, and TWO BURLY MEN bring out another corpse. The body is that of a young American. Like the Asians he is expensively dressed and he is dead from a bullet in the right temple.

MAN (V.O.)
 If you are brave and lucky I can
 make you rich.

NICK turns. A MAN is standing in the shadows of a small grape arbor, eyeing him with a look of cold amusement. The MAN'S accent is French. Beside him, on a small white table, is a bottle of champagne and several glasses.

MAN
 You have played?

NICK stares at the MAN, nods.

MAN
 Once you have played it is not so
 hard. Cigarette?

NICK shakes his head.

MAN
 You seem... disturbed.

NICK

I... No. You do this for money?

MAN

Mais certainment... A great deal of money. Naturally I do not do it myself. I myself do not possess the nerve.

(smiles)

But I am always... how do you say... looking out for those who do... It is a thing quite rare. Champagne perhaps? Tch, tch. Don't say no. When a man says no to champagne, he says no to life and that no man must ever do.

(gives NICK a glass)

Where did you play?

NICK

Up north.

MAN

Ah yes. Of course... So few survive.

(smiles)

La creme de la creme... How did you obtain release?

NICK

Playing.

MAN

(raises his eyebrows)

Playing?

NICK

We... Three bullets.

MAN

And then you...

The MAN makes a clicking sound, three times, as if firing a pistol. NICK nods.

MAN

How extremely clever. That is really most extraordinaire... Allow me please to introduce myself. I am Armand... And you are?

NICK

Nick.

ARMAND

Nick. C'est extraordinaire! Do you know that I have a cousin who is called Nicholas and a nephew Nickolai. So you are, comme on dit, en famille. In the family.

There is another SHOT from inside and another round of

APPLAUSE.

NICK

I have to go.

ARMAND

But you must come in.

NICK

No, I --

ARMAND

But I insist.

NICK

I have to go.

ARMAND

You are frightened, no?

NICK nods.

ARMAND

Of what is there to be afraid? The war? The war is no problem. It is a joke, a silly thing. I make one call and get you out.

ARMAND refills NICK's glass. NICK looks at it. The glass is as thin as paper and the sparkling bubbles dance and hiss.

NICK lifts the glass and empties in one swallow.

NICK

See, I'm going home.

ARMAND

Ah yes. Of course.

(smiles)

To the girl who waits.

NICK

(gives him a look
and sits)

Yeah... Do you mind if I sit?

ARMAND

But of course! Please make yourself comfortable. Perhaps you would enjoy some fresh caviar, or une petite glace, or --?

NICK

(weary, shaking his
head)

No. None of that.

ARMAND

Unfortunately I must now go in,
but I leave you my card.

(MORE)

ARMAND (CONT'D)

Naturellement I pay my players
cash American. Just so you know.

ARMAND disappears in the darkness. Then his VOICE comes again.

ARMAND

However, should you prefer German
marks, or perhaps Swiss francs,
this of course can be arranged.
Everything can be arranged.

ARMAND moves around the side of the building and the sound of his FOOTSTEPS fades away. The TWO BURLY MEN come lurching with another CORPSE. Laughter comes from inside the building and there is a glimpse of AN ELEGANTLY DRESSED WOMAN seated at a cafe table. The BURLY MEN return to the door and shut it tight. In the distance the sky goes up in a huge flash of fire and then the sound of the EXPLOSION rolls across the city like a great dead wind.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NICK'S TRAILER - WINTER - DUSK

The trailer is all decked out with bunting and stuck, like a plum cake, with tiny American flags. Stretching from the trailer to the side of a house across the street is a huge, hand-lettered banner which says "WELCOME HOME NICK!" and it whips and it snaps in the cold winter wind.

NICK's battered old shark-finned Cadillac is in the yard.

Alongside it are a bunch of newer cars and PEOPLE are coming from all directions, spilling in and out of the trailer and congregating in excited, foot-stomping, half-frozen groups.

EXT. SERIES OF SHOTS - COLUMBINE AREA - DUSK

We see the OLD PRIEST on his way from the church. We see the OLDER WOMEN, wrapped in shawls and carrying cakes and cookies, trudging up the hill. We see ALBERT, JOHN and a bunch of STEELWORKERS, all of them half-bombed, dragging two cases of beer on a child's sled. We see LINDA peering out the trailer window, pale and anxious-looking. We see VINCE, who is unofficial lookout, jumping up and down at the approach of every car and screaming, "This is it! This is Nick!" and then, when it isn't, saying, "Not yet! Just hold your water, I'll tell you when!"

And we see an empty street into which SIX VETS from the VFW Post come tottering. The VETS are all in their old uniforms.

While three of them attempt to make MUSIC on a BASS DRUM, a FIFE and an old Army BUGLE, the other three attempt to sing.

VETS

Three cheers for the red, white
and blue...!

VET #1

This is hard.

VET # 2

Christ Almighty, it's fifty years!

VETS

Three cheers for the red, white
and blue...

INT. TAXICAB - DUSK

NICK sits hunched forward in the back seat surrounded by unwrapped cartons containing electric appliances he has bought for LINDA. NICK looks nervous, VERY NERVOUS.

Suddenly, as the cab comes over the crest of a hill, the trailer looms into sight, straight ahead, with VINCE hopping up and down in the snow and the OLD VETS all marking time under the flapping banner.

CAB DRIVER

Whadda welcome! Will you lookit...
Whadda welcome!

NICK stares at the approaching trailer.

NICK

That's not it.

CAB DRIVER

What're you, crazy? That's not
it??? You said a trailer. You said--

NICK

That's not it. Keep going. Go
straight.

CAB DRIVER

Hey, now listen. Now you said --

NICK

I'm telling you that's not it! Now
keep going!

NICK throws himself down on the floor.

NICK

Just keep going! Just keep going
straight!

EXT. NICK'S TRAILER - DUSK

LINDA is outside, standing with VINCE and ALBERT.

VINCE

This is him. I'm telling you, this
is Nick!

The TAXICAB comes thudding by. LINDA, VINCE and ALBERT all watch as it disappears over a rise.

ALBERT
(to VINCE)
I thought that was it.

VINCE
So he's in the next one, Albert. I mean take it easy. I mean you're driving everybody nuts!

VETS (V.O.)
(singing raggedly)
Three cheers for the red, white and blue...!

VINCE
(to LINDA)
You okay?

LINDA gives a thin smile.

VINCE
It's gonna be the next one. Okay?

LINDA nods.

VINCE
It's gotta be the next one. I mean it's gotta be! Right, Albert?

ALBERT
Fuckin' A. It's gotta!

VINCE
It's gotta!

EXT. MOTEL - DUSK

A huge neon sign stands against the grey sky, buzzing angrily, as if it were full of bees.

The TAXI DRIVER comes out of one of the units, gets back in his cab and pulls away.

INT. MOTEL - NICK'S UNIT - DUSK

NICK stands in the doorway where the driver has left him. His duffle bag and the cartons of electric appliances are piled along the wall by his feet. His head is thrown back and he is draining a bottle of whiskey, gulping it down in great raw swallows. .

NICK lowers the bottle, catches his breath and goes at it again. This time, as he lowers the bottle, the stark panic is gone, but there is still fear -- blind, nameless fear, like that of an animal run to the ground.

NICK crosses to the window, grips the frame with both hands and looks out.

EXT. THE STEEL MILL FROM THE MOTEL (NICK'S POV) - DUSK

The five great stacks trail ribbons of black smoke across the pale winter sky, Steam billows upward in huge, silver-edged clouds and there is the flash and gleam of fire.

INT. MOTEL - NICK'S UNIT - DUSK

NICK turns back to the room. He stares at it blankly --

stares at the bed, stares at the bureau, stares at the chair, then he picks up the bottle, closes his eyes and begins gulping down whiskey -- gulping it hard, fast, as hard and fast as he can.

EXT. NICK'S TRAILER - NEW ANGLE - DAWN

The banner stretching to the house across the street has been whipped to shreds by the wind. In the yard, parked beside NICK's black Cadillac, is another car of about the same vintage. There is a case of beer on its roof, the windows are entirely frosted over and the engine is running. After a moment TWO STEELWORKERS come down the street and knock on the trailer door. TWO OLDER WOMEN emerge, putting on their coats, and then LINDA comes to the door and tells the STEELWORKERS she has no news. The STEELWORKERS and the OLDER WOMEN start off, but now one of the WOMEN points to the frosted up car.

The STEELWORKERS go back, pound on the roof of the frosted up car, pull open a few doors and go on their way. First thing out is a GIRL. Next thing out is a SECOND GIRL. Their dresses are rumpled and half-undone. Neither one has a coat and the SECOND GIRL is missing a shoe. The GIRLS both plunge back inside the car, where howling and cursing can now be heard.

The GIRLS both retrieve their coats. The SECOND GIRL gets her missing shoe, plus a bra and a pair of panties.

She returns the panties to the FIRST GIRL, puts on her shoe and they both take off at a fast trot. As the two GIRLS leave there is a cascade of empty beer cans and ALBERT, VINCE and JOHN all stagger out -- bleary-eyed, hung-over, half undressed and freezing. LINDA comes out of the trailer with coffee, but just as she emerges the whistle at the mill goes off. ALBERT and VINCE begin yelling at each other, yelling at JOHN and yelling at LINDA. Then they throw themselves back in the car and start off. The case of beer on the roof crashes to the street. They stop, pile out, pick up the cans, heave them in the back seat and take off again.

JOHN says something to LINDA and goes on his way.

LINDA stands in the yard, alone, with the three cups of coffee.

EXT. ADJOINING OVERLOOK - DAWN

NICK stands half-way down a rickety wooden stairway, watching.

EXT. NICK'S TRAILER - ORIGINAL ANGLE - DAWN

LINDA turns and goes back inside the trailer.

EXT. ADJOINING OVERLOOK - DAWN

NICK swallows and starts down the stairway toward the trailer. He hesitates, pulls the bottle from his pocket, drains the last of it and tucks it under the stairs.

Straightening up, he claws at his hair, trying to comb it with his fingers. Then he starts down again.

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - DAWN

Cakes, cookies, six-packs of beer and bottles of wine cover almost every inch of available space. LINDA sits on the little settee, wedged between two cases of Coca-Cola and hunched over a white sweater which she is attempting, with painful slowness, to knit. LINDA is trying not to cry. She is trying her God-damnedest.

There is a knock at the door. LINDA freezes. Then, trying to be totally matter-of-fact, she puts down the sweater, crosses to the door and opens it.

NICK

Guess who.

LINDA stares at him. NICK gives a little laugh and steps in.

LINDA

(throws herself in
his arms)

Nick! Oh, Nick, you're back!

She hugs him for a moment, as hard as she can, then they pull apart.

LINDA

I thought... Oh, Nick, I thought
you were hurt, some accident. Maybe
you fell or maybe some car...

(back in his arms)

I thought someone stole you away!

NICK

No.

LINDA

Oh, Nick! Oh I missed you so!

They pull apart.

LINDA

How are you?

NICK

Fine. I'm fine. How are you?

LINDA

Fine. I just go along, you know.
Down at the market. Back here. I
mean it just seems there's a million
things to do!... Are you sure you're
all right? I mean, what about the
wound?

NICK

(anger)
That was nothing. That wasn't
anything.

LINDA

But --

NICK

It was just the complications. I
mean, you take a little thing over
there and then you get
complications. I mean all the guys
had it.

LINDA

I made you a sweater.
(she gets it)
Here... You have to take that off.

NICK removes his coat. LINDA pulls the sweater over him

LINDA

I couldn't remember your exact
size.

The sweater is huge, a great rumpled thing reaching almost
to NICK's knees.

LINDA

(smoothly)
Oh, that's fine. Perfect... It is
a little too big...
(she pulls the
sweater back off)
... but I can easily fix that.
Easily. One thing about wool
sweaters, they are such a cinch to
fix.

She crosses to a garbage pail out of NICK's line of sight
and stuffs the sweater in it.

NICK

How's the trailer?

LINDA

Great. Fine... Once or twice it
did fall off the blocks. I don't
know what that's from.

NICK

Frost.

LINDA

Is that what it is? I couldn't figure out.

NICK

Did you get hurt? You didn't get hurt?

LINDA

Oh, no. It just kind of goes thump. Would you like a Coke? You don't drink Coke. Or maybe you do. What about champagne? Let's have champagne! I don't think we have champagne. Let's have this. See? Sparkling. I'll get you an opener. Oh, that's right. No opener. Let's just have beer. Do you want some cheese? Or maybe eggs? Maybe we should have coffee.

She begins to sob. CAMERA CLOSES ON HER FACE:

LINDA

Nick? I'm so glad you're alive! I'm so happy! I... I just don't know what to do!

EXT. COLUMBINE STREET - DAY

NICK and LINDA are some distance away. NICK is shaking hands with an ENTHUSIASTIC MAN while LINDA stands to one side, watching his face, and so full of love that she seems about to burst. ANOTHER MAN comes over. LINDA takes the MAN's arm and presents him to NICK.

WE CANNOT HEAR WHAT IS BEING SAID. THE ONLY SOUND COMES FROM THE MILL WHICH LOOMS UP BEHIND THEM OUT THE FROZEN VALLEY BELOW.

INT. PIZZA PARLOR - TABLE BY WINDOW - DAY

NICK and LINDA sit opposite one another. Across the street a coal train is rumbling slowly by and NICK is watching it. The cars are black, interchangeable, and they roll on and on.

Suddenly the last car appears. The car passes and there is silence.

LINDA gives NICK a smile.

NICK

It was all for nothing. Do you know that? It was all for nothing.

LINDA stares at him. She doesn't know what to say, how to respond. NICK forces a grin, gestures with his hand and shrugs. He picks up the check, stands.

LINDA

Nick?... I just want to say how sorry I am about Sal and about Merle. How... I know you loved them and I know it's not the same. I mean now.

NICK

Naw, it's... I mean...

LINDA

Maybe... I don't know, if you want to talk --

NICK

Naw, it's... This guy wants his money.

INT. SUPERMARKET - BACK ROOM - DAY

The place is full of crates and boxes. ONE CREW is unloading a tractor-trailer. ANOTHER CREW is stacking and unpacking.

NICK stands with LINDA and a red-faced, cigar-chewing MANAGER who is pumping NICK's hand, slapping him on the back and shouting orders all at the same time.

MANAGER

You did a good job, kid. Pettruccio, here! You did a good job. Gimme a count on these pears! I think we got 'em now, know what I mean? The pears, the pears! Ask me, we got 'em right by the balls, know what I mean? Have a cigar. The pears, Pettruccio, the pears!!!

He goes off.

NICK

(to Linda)

Does this... I mean, how does this job work out?

LINDA

Oh, it's great. Fine.

NICK nods. A STOCK BOY comes by and whistles.

STOCK BOY

Hi you, hot lips.

NICK

What do they... bother you!?

LINDA

(takes his arm,
laughs)

No-o-o!

NICK
I'll kill 'em. Anybody bothers
you, I'll kill 'em!

LINDA
(gently)
Nick. It's okay... It's okay.
(gives him a squeeze,
kisses him)
I have to go now.

NICK nods.

LINDA
Pick me up at eight.

NICK nods again. LINDA hurries off. The MANAGER comes in from behind, clapping NICK on the shoulder and going for his ear

MANAGER
That's one sweet little piece of
ass. I'm telling you, that's one
sweet little piece of ass. Who's
got these pears, God damn it! Who's
got the count on these goddamn
pears!

EXT. STEEL MILL PARKING LOT - DAY

NICK stands by the entrance to the mill. It is cold and he looks as if he had been waiting for some time. Suddenly STEELWORKERS begin streaming out the doors, heading for their cars. NICK cranes his neck and then he catches sight of ALBERT and VINCE.

NICK
Hey, Albert!

ALBERT turns. He grabs VINCE and pulls him through the departing STEELWORKERS.

VINCE
What the --!

ALBERT
It's Nick!

VINCE
Nick...?
(sees him)
Jesus, Nick!

VINCE grabs NICK's hand, shakes it. Then ALBERT does the same.

VINCE
Where the hell were you? We were
all set -- beer, broads. Right? Am
I right?

ALBERT

Yeah.

NICK

I got delayed. I --

ALBERT

(hugs him)

Hey, Nick! God damn!... What've you been doin', I mean...

VINCE

Fuckin' guy's been shooting slants, Albert! I mean, what do you think?

ALBERT

I know, but...

VINCE

What do you think? You think he's been picking flowers? Fuckin' guy's been saving your ass, Albert. Everybody's ass! Even in Europe!

ALBERT

Yeah. Oh, boy, yeah... Jes', you must be tired.

NICK

I'm fine. Hey, I'm fine.

THEY start for the cars.

NICK

How're you guys... I mean, how've you guys been?

VINCE

Same old thing. Hey, same like always. Nothing's changed. Albert is getting fat.

ALBERT

Look who's talkin'! Jes'! He got married! Vince got married!

NICK

Married?

ALBERT

Tell him, Vince.

VINCE

Yeah. I did. Yeah...What the hell.

VINCE makes a gesture, shrugs.

NICK

(after a beat)

Well, who'd you get married to?

VINCE
Aw, it's a long story!

ALBERT
Tell him, Vince!

VINCE
Well... you remember Cynthia?

NICK
Cynthia! Sure.

VINCE
(nods)
That's who.

NICK
(fast recovery)
Cynthia! Hey, that's terrific. I mean... Great! That's really great!

ALBERT
Show him the gun. Hey, show him the gun, Vince.

VINCE looks around. Cars are streaming out of the lot, horns blaring. VINCE pulls back his coat and shows a .38 Smith and Weston in a holster on his hip.

NICK
What the hell's that for?

VINCE
What's it for??

ALBERT
He's serious. Vince is fuckin' serious!

NICK
You mean...?

VINCE
Hey, Nick, I mean... This here is for the guy that gets caught!

ALBERT
Vince thinks... you know...

NICK
(nods)
Hey... hey, let's drink!

INT. JOHN'S BAR - NIGHT

NICK comes through the CROWD OF STEELWORKERS shaking hands.

The STEELWORKERS treat him with immense respect. There are no cracks; there are no jokes. They squeeze his shoulder, pat his back, reaching out for him, touching him.

STEELWORKERS

Nice going! Good going, Nick! You did good, boy; you did fine! Let him through! Damn good, boy! Let him through! He's all right! Did his part and he did it good! Let him through! Let's make a little room!

JOHN pushes out of the crowd.

JOHN

Nick! Hey, Nick!
 (gives him a big hug)
 Boy! Boy oh boy! Are you okay? You're okay, huh?

NICK

Fine. Hey, I'm fine.

JOHN

Sit down. Here. Right here.
 (calls)
 Albert! Vince!

JOHN pushes them all into a booth. A tray arrives loaded with beer and shots of whiskey.

JOHN

Here. Here we go.
 (he raises a beer)
 Here's to you, Nick!

ALBERT

Fuckin' A!

VINCE

(stands)
 Here's to Nick, you guys. He did his part. He did... what hadda be done... and so he did it... and here he is!!!

INT. JOHN'S BAR - NIGHT - LATER

NICK sits at the bar flanked by VINCE and ALBERT. Both VINCE and ALBERT are completely glassed out. Behind, in the booths, three or four STEELWORKERS are sleeping. JOHN moves around behind the counter wiping things off.

JOHN

Rough, huh?

NICK

Rough.
 (he nods)
 We didn't have to do it, John.

JOHN

No?

NICK

No. How's Angela? How's she taking it?

JOHN

Not so good.

NICK

No?

JOHN

Worse since she talked to him.

ALBERT

(with a dull beery
blink)

Fucking A.

NICK

Worse since she talked to who?

JOHN

Sal.

NICK

Talked to Sal?

(stares at him)

Sal's alive?

JOHN

Kind of. You didn't know?

NICK

(pushes off the
counter)

Sal's alive???

JOHN, ALBERT and VINCE exchange glances, nod.

ALBERT

He's real bad, Nick.

NICK

(stares at them)

Well, where the hell is he!!! I mean what are we all sitting here for!!!

(tears begin
streaming down his
face)

WHAT THE HELL IS THIS???

ALBERT

Nick...

VINCE

Hey, Nick...

JOHN

Nick, we don't know where Sal is...

Nick, Angela won't tell us.

NICK

Why?... What do you mean?... Why???

JOHN

Nick, she won't say why.

NICK

But Sal's mother! What about Sal's mother!

JOHN

She's out of her tree, Nick. She is straight out of her tree.

NICK

(stares at them)

Oh, Jesus.

He walks in a circle and then stops, staring at them.

NICK

Oh, Jesus!!!

NICK turns and goes out.

INT. SAL'S HOUSE - FRONT PARLOR - NIGHT

The room is very dark. ANGELA sits at a lace-covered table by the window where a street lamp illuminates her in an eerie glow. ANGELA holds a portable radio in tier hand, a very tiny one, and she fiddles with the dial, going from one station to another.

There is a sound from the hallway, then SAL'S MOTHER comes in with NICK.

SAL'S MOTHER

I know I know you. So familiar.
Such a familiar face. Oh, I know
now! The toaster man! I'll go and
get it for you.

SAL'S MOTHER goes out. ANGELA lights up a cigarette.

ANGELA

You're back.

NICK

Yeah.

ANGELA

I'm glad. Seriously... I'm very
glad.

NICK

Angela, I just heard Sal was alive.

ANGELA

Sure. Why not.

NICK

Where? Where is he?

ANGELA

Nick, he's fine. He's in a hospital and they're fixing him up.

NICK

You talk to him?

ANGELA

Oh, sure... Twice a day.

NICK

What hospital is he in? Where?

ANGELA

Nick... Sal is very weak. He suffered a severe wound... and right now he doesn't want a whole lot of people to get involved in a whole thing.

NICK

Hey, Angela, Sal and I go back a long way.

ANGELA

He doesn't want people bugging him, Nick!

ANGELA begins to tremble, jabs out her cigarette and stands up.

She stares at NICK for a moment, goes to a telephone pad and writes down a number in a tiny, nearly illegible scrawl. NICK comes up behind her. ANGELA finishes, puts down the pen and stands with her back against the wall. NICK tears off the piece of paper, looks at it, puts it in his pocket.

NICK

Angela...?

ANGELA laughs and gives a strange, twisted smile, avoiding NICK's eyes.

ANGELA

Did you ever think life would turn out like this?

NICK

No.

ANGELA

You know what Sal's got now?... Sal's got... one arm, Nick, and... that's it.

The door to the kitchen bangs open and SAL'S MOTHER comes in with an electric toaster and a screwdriver.

SAL'S MOTHER

Here. This is it. What you do, you stick this in here.

Pushes the toaster in NICK's arms.

SAL'S MOTHER

Then you jab it, see. Jab it good.
Something's in it. Hear? Listen.
Something's in it. What? What's
there?

EXT. RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH - FRONT STEPS - NIGHT

NICK sits on the steps with the toaster that Sal's mother gave him in his lap. It is snowing and from inside the church we hear the CHOIR SINGING. The sound is massive, deep and dark, like a great river rolling through the night.

CAMERA CLOSSES ON NICK. He is staring at something, tears glistening in his eyes.

EXT. ORTHODOX CHURCH - REVERSE ANGLE (NICK'S POV) - NIGHT

We see a lone telephone booth at the curb. The door is half open and snow is blowing in.

EXT. ORTHODOX CHURCH - ORIGINAL ANGLE - NIGHT

NICK closes his eyes, leans his head forward and takes it in his hands.

INT. MOTEL NICK'S UNIT - BATHROOM - NIGHT

LINDA steps out of the shower and begins to dry herself.

LINDA

It just seems sort of strange coming to a motel... Like a honeymoon. Or some kind of parlez vous ... Not parlez-vous!

(she giggles)

What am I saying? That's those cocktails! Parlez-vous!... What I mean is rendezvous. Some kind of rendezvous.

LINDA pulls on a short and very sexy nightie, then looks at herself in the mirror. She is very excited, very nervous. She strikes a pose, pulling up the bottom of the nightie and poking a finger in her mouth.

LINDA

Do you know what I mean?... Nick?

NICK doesn't answer. LINDA pulls the door full open, takes one last look at herself and goes out.

INT. MOTEL - NICK'S UNIT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

As LINDA comes out of the bathroom her face falls and she stops dead in her tracks.

NICK is lying on the bed -- sprawled on his back, one shoe off and sound asleep.

LINDA

Nick?

NICK doesn't stir, doesn't budge. LINDA crosses and looks at him -- hungrily, top to bottom -- then she gives his toe a wistful shake.

LINDA

Nick...? Nick, it's me!

But NICK is out, gone. LINDA lets out a little moan and sits down on the chair beside the bed. Then, almost immediately, she stands and begins taking off his clothes. She takes off his shoes, then both socks. As she goes to undo his belt, his shirt, which is unbuttoned, falls slightly open, revealing a fresh scar. LINDA stares at the scar for a moment, then she slowly exposes the whole of NICK's chest.

NICK'S CHEST IS COVERED WITH A SERIES OF TERRIFYING FRESH SCARS. THE SCARS ARE RAISED; THEY ARE INTER-CONNECTED AND STUDED WITH ANGRY SUTURE MARKS, LIKE A TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP OF SOME UNKNOWN BATTLEGROUND.

CAMERA HOLDS ON LINDA'S FACE.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. STEEL MILL - CASTING ROOM - DAY

NICK stands at the handle of a long metal rod. At the other end of the rod ALBERT and VINCE are attaching metallic strips. When ALBERT and VINCE have secured the strips they signal to NICK and all three of them lower their goggles.

CAMERA PULLS SLOWLY BACK. NICK is standing below a furnace which is seven stories high, towering above him into a maze of cat-walks and monstrous steel-hipped cranes.

ALBERT and VINCE give a signal and the CRANE OPERATOR raises the door at the bottom of the furnace. NICK is now alone, standing like Don Quixote with his lance. As NICK advances toward the base of the furnace with his rod the surface of his asbestos suit begins to smoke and bits of lint which have stuck to it burst into flame. Within reach of the furnace now, NICK pauses. Then, lifting the metal rod, he jams it through the open doorway at the base of the furnace. There is a white flash as the metallic strips explode and then a geyser of molten steel erupts in a huge jet through the doorway, passing NICK at the level of his shoulders and showering him in a great cascade of white sparks.

INT. JOHN'S BAR - NIGHT

NICK sits at the bar, silent, hunched over a beer, lost in thought. All around him STEELWORKERS are shouting, yelling, cracking jokes. After a moment VINCE pushes in, claps him on the back.

VINCE

How's it feel, huh? How's it feel to be back?

NICK
 (forced enthusiasm)
 Great. Feels great... Fuckin' A!

VINCE
 I mean, I guess you still think
 about Nam. Right? I mean --

NICK
 Naw.
 (shakes his head)
 Uh-huh.

VINCE
 Hey, Nick, you ever do it with one
 of those slants?

NICK
 No.

VINCE
 No!

NICK
 Never one.

VINCE
 Oh, Jesus!
 (looks around)
 You're kiddin'!

NICK
 One, Vince... you have to
 understand, doing it with one...
 would be... like nothing. They're
 small, see, so if you're smart you
 get about six or eight. I mean, if
 you want to have any fun.

VINCE
 Six or eight.
 (nods)
 And they go wild?

NICK
 (lowers his voice)
 They have these little sticks,
 Vince. They call them "chomp
 chomps", and when you get these
 girls going, you have to stick 'em
 in their mouths.

VINCE stares at NICK. His respiration is up, his mouth is
 bone dry and his eyes are as big as saucers. For a moment
 his belief is total, then a frown crosses his face.

VINCE
 You're full of shit!

NICK
 (nods)
 Yeah.

VINCE

(pounding him on
the head)

And I believed you! I oughta punch
you out! I oughta...! Hey. Hey,
let's go huntin'! Albert! Hey,
Albert! Let's go huntin'. What do
you say? Nick? What do you say?

NICK

Sure.

ALBERT

Hey! Fuckin' A! Hey!

He spots JOHN passing with a tray of beer.

ALBERT

Hey, John!

ALBERT scoops JOHN into his arms where he holds him from
behind.

JOHN

Yes, Albert?

ALBERT

(into his ear)

John, we're going huntin'.

JOHN

Who's going?

ALBERT

We're all going.

JOHN

Nick's going?

ALBERT

Nick, Vince, Albert and John.

JOHN

No women?

OTHERS

No! No women! Jesus! What are you,
crazy?

JOHN

Take these beers.

They all take a beer. JOHN raises his glass, solemnly.

JOHN

Here's to huntin'.

ALBERT

Hey! Fuckin' A!

VINCE
 (hopping up and
 down)
 Just like always! Just like it
 always was! Right, Nick? Am I right?

NICK
 In the timeless words of Squire
 Albert...

VINCE cracks up, howling.

VINCE
 Squire Albert...

VINCE collapses on the floor.

NICK
 In the timeless words of Squire
 Albert...

ALL
 (in a ragged chorus)
 Hey! Fuckin' A!!!

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - NIGHT

NICK sits on the bed in the back part of the trailer. His hunting gear is piled on the floor, the lights are out and he is staring at the telephone which is illuminated through the window by a street light on the corner. There is a sound outside, then the lights come on as LINDA enters with groceries.

LINDA
 Nick?

NICK
 Right here.

LINDA crosses to the doorway.

LINDA
 What are you doing?

NICK
 Oh. Nothing... Sitting.

LINDA
 You're going hunting?

NICK
 (blankly)
 What?

LINDA
 I see you're going hunting.

NICK looks at the equipment on the floor.

NICK

Yeah... All the guys, we're all going huntin'. Like we did. You know? Like we always used to.

LINDA

That's wonderful. I think you should... fresh air.

NICK gets to his feet, suddenly. His face is twisted with pain and his voice is cracked with emotion.

NICK

You know how sometimes you're going along... You're going along... And that's all...! One thing is right after another, like steps... And you step along.

NICK can hardly breathe. It is as if he were choking.

NICK

I don't know where that is... It's gone! That's gone!

A car pulls up outside. The HORN begins blowing, then VINCE and ALBERT begin pounding on the wall of the trailer.

VINCE (V.O.)

Let's go!!!

ALBERT (V.O.)

Hey! Fuckin' A! Time to roll!!!

NICK

I gotta go.

NICK swings his pack on his back, picks up his rifle and heads for the door. LINDA follows, still clutching her groceries, her emotions so pulverized she can't even speak.

NICK

I'll be... I don't know... Couple of days.

NICK IS GONE. LINDA STANDS MOTIONLESS, CLUTCHING HER GROCERIES, STARING AT THE TRAILER DOOR. IT IS DARK OUTSIDE.

SNOW IS BLOWING IN. THE DOOR CLOSES SLOWLY, WITH A FAINT HISS, AND THEN CLICKS SHUT.

EXT. MOUNTAINS - MIXED HARDWOOD FOREST - DAY

Snow is blowing, swirling past the trunks of stark, ice covered trees. There is no horizon. Sky and earth are bound in a moan of wind, in the faint creak of frozen limbs and the whispering, fitful, spinning flakes.

NICK appears, suddenly, as a gust of wind shifts the slanting snow. NICK is moving easily, heading slightly uphill, following the contour of the slope. As he draws closer we see that he is following a SET OF FRESH TRACKS.

EXT. MOUNTAINS - MIXED HARDWOODS - ROCK LEDGE - DAY

A magnificent SEVEN POINT BUCK stands by a grove of hemlocks, looking down the slope.

NICK appears below, barely visible in the swirling snow.

The BUCK watches NICK for a moment, then turns unhurriedly and vanishes into the trees.

EXT. RIDGE NEAR CAMP - DAY

VINCE is out of breath, clawing his way up a steep slope on all fours. JOHN and ALBERT, who have reached a level area above VINCE, unslung their rifles. SHOTS are going off in every direction and the sound is so magnified by echoes that it sounds like a full scale war.

VINCE

What are you, kiddin'? Are you kiddin' me, Albert? Twenty times I coulda had her! She...! One time she begged me, practically begged me. Listen, I had her tit, which was out, in one hand, and my other hand... You know that mole on the inside of her right leg? Well, I was past that mole, way past that mole, and I was --

JOHN nudges ALBERT. FOUR DEER are coming down the slope, single file. JOHN and ALBERT raise their rifles and FIRE. TWO OF THE DEER FALL AND THE REMAINING TAKE OFF. VINCE, who is just getting to his feet, unslings his rifle, trips and falls down. JOHN and ALBERT drag VINCE to his feet and then rush over to the TWO DEAD DEER.

VINCE

(coming after them)
Nice shootin', you guys. Not bad.
Not half bad.

Leans his rifle on the horns of one of the fallen DEER.

VINCE

'Course how could you miss, right?
Twenty, maybe thirty feet. I mean,
if I'd'a been where you guys were --

JOHN

Psst. Vince!

JOHN signals with his head. VINCE turns. ANOTHER DEER has come out of the woods. The DEER is rattled by the gunfire and peers at VINCE uncertainly. VINCE spins and grabs his gun, which immediately goes off. He slams another shell in the chamber and scrambles to his feet but the rifle sling is hooked on the antlers of the DEAD DEER and another shot ricochets off a nearby rock. JOHN and ALBERT dive for cover.

As they look up, they see the DEER trot down the slope and then VINCE, firing wildly, running after it.

EXT. MOUNTAINS - RIDGE TOP - DAY

The wind is much stronger, moaning in the trees. NICK appears, moving fast, at a near trot. Suddenly he stops, listening. At the same moment there is a snort. NICK wheels.

The BUCK is behind him, bounding away.

EXT. MOUNTAINS - RIDGE TOP - DAY

The BUCK appears, trotting out of the swirling snow. Reaching a deadfall the BUCK pauses, looking back, and then turns sharp left and disappears.

NICK comes out of the snow. He is winded but still going hard.

EXT. MOUNTAINS - DEADFALL - DAY

NICK reaches the deadfall, hesitates, then rapidly springs over. As he touches down on the other side there is a growling sound.

NICK grabs for the deadfall. The wind shifts and we see that he has stepped onto a boulder which is loosely planted at the top of a steep scree slope. As NICK watches, the boulder begins to roll, then to bound, dislodging other rocks and boulders, all of them bouncing and leaping and cracking... and then falling -- soundless -- over a sheer ledge to unknown depths below.

EXT. BUSTED-DOWN OLD LOGGERS SHACK - DAY

ALBERT and JOHN have dragged their TWO DEAD DEER to a log beside the shack. They sit side by side, drenched in sweat, guzzling beer out of both hands.

JOHN

Sweet! Oh, that is sweet!

ALBERT

Hey! Fuckin' A! Just... just like a hot shit... except cold.

JOHN lowers his beer. ALBERT gives him a blank expression, then cracks up. SHOTS explode nearby. At first the shots are scattered but they quickly open into a FULL BARRAGE. ALBERT and JOHN stand up.

EXT. HIGHWAY EMBANKMENT - DAY

The DEER that VINCE was chasing earlier comes hobbling out of the woods pursued by a GROUP OF HALF-DRUNK HUNTERS. VINCE comes barreling through the HUNTERS, shouting and screaming. VINCE's clothes are in tatters, the sole is gone from one shoe and the barrel of his rifle is jammed up with mud and perceptibly bent.

VINCE

I got this one!!! This one's mine!!!

VINCE loses his footing and rolls down the embankment, head over heels.

EXT. DITCH - DAY

VINCE comes up ten feet from the bewildered DEER. He raises his rifle, fires, and the BARREL SPLITS OPEN. SHOTS begin coming in, thudding in the mud and ricocheting off rocks. The DEER wheels out on the highway. VINCE heaves his rifle at the DEER, draws his pistol...

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Cars are parked on both sides of the road. HUNTERS are sitting in the cars, drinking, eating sandwiches and warming themselves at small fires. MORE HUNTERS are up on the embankment.

VINCE

I got this one!!! This one's mine!!!

The panicked DEER bolts down the highway between the parked cars. The HUNTERS ON THE EMBANKMENT open fire. The HUNTERS IN THE CARS dive for cover.

VINCE

Hold your fire! I got this one!!!

VINCE FIRES, FIRES AGAIN. SHOTS are ringing everywhere.

HUNTERS are shouting, running, yelling. A car window goes out, a headlight goes out. The DEER is hit, falls and gets up. VINCE takes aim. A FLEEING HUNTER bowls him over. The DEER bolts for the woods, bullets smashing all around it.

VINCE scrambles to his feet and plunges after it.

VINCE

I got it! I got this one!

EXT. WOODS - DAY

The DEER staggers through the trees, blood pouring from its wounds. VINCE comes stumbling after it. HE FIRES, FIRES AGAIN.

EXT. BUSTED-DOWN OLD LOGGERS SHACK - DAY

ALBERT and JOHN stand with their beers, looking into the woods. A shot zings by, close, and they dive behind a log.

The DEER comes out of the woods, barely able to keep moving.

VINCE appears, reeling. He takes aim at the DEER and there is a DULL CLICK. VINCE jams his pistol back in his holster.

VINCE

Gun! Gimme gun!!!

ALBERT indicates his rifle. VINCE stumbles over to it, rams a cartridge in the chamber.

VINCE
 (looks around,
 bewildered)
 Where's it gone?

JOHN
 Inside, Vince.

VINCE staggers to the cabin door. The DEER is lying on the floor, motionless, DEAD.

VINCE
 I got it! Hey, you guys, I got
 it!!!

EXT. MOUNTAINS - FROZEN LAKE - DAY

The wind is blowing in gusts, slanting the snow first one way and then the other. NICK appears in the distance, a black speck in the endless expanse of shifting white.

As NICK draws closer we see that he is near exhaustion. His clothes are , caked with snow, his breath comes in a shallow gasp and his gait is uneven, favoring one leg. As NICK APPROACHES CAMERA HE FALTERS AND LIMPS TO A STOP. There are no tracks. There is nothing to go by and he hunkers down in the driving snow.

The wind bangs in from one way, then it shifts and bangs in again from another way. Suddenly it stops entirely. In the silence there is a sound -- the click of a hoof on rock.

NICK turns. The BUCK is standing on the shoreline, not thirty feet away, looking down at him.

NICK pushes himself to his feet, raises his rifle and sights down the barrel.

WE SEE THE BUCK THROUGH NICK'S SIGHTS. IT IS A CLEAR SHOT.

NICK'S FINGER IS ON THE TRIGGER. HE HAS ONLY TO SQUEEZE IT.

NICK LOWERS HIS RIFLE. THE BUCK SNORTS, TOSSES HIS HORNS AND DISAPPEARS IN THE SLANTING SNOW.

NICK STANDS MOTIONLESS, STARING AFTER IT, SO WONDER-STRUCK HE HAS FORGOTTEN TO BREATHE.

NICK
 (grins)
 Damn... God damn...

EXT. MOUNTAINS - OVERLOOK - DAY

NICK sits on his haunches with his back against a sheer rock face. As he devours a Hostess Twinkie he looks out over a snow-shrouded landscape of such spectacular beauty that it might be something from a dream.

NICK
 (shouts)
 Hey! Hey... okay!

INT. BUSTED-DOWN OLD LOGGERS SHACK - NIGHT

The Coleman lantern hangs from the rafter, rocking in the wind. NICK is propped against the wall, dozing. JOHN is out cold. ALBERT and VINCE are both drunk and arguing bitterly.

ALBERT
 You're full of shit, Vince! You're
 so full of shit you're going to
 float away!

VINCE
 Who? Who is?

ALBERT
 You, Vince! You! You are! You're a
 crock! You're a walking, talking
 crock!... I mean, what do you know?

VINCE
 I know! I fuckin' know!

ALBERT
 You don't!

VINCE
 I do!!!

ALBERT
 I'm tellin' you she does it, Vince!
 With twenty guys you know!

VINCE
 She does not!

ALBERT
 Then what's the gun for! What's
 this for?

VINCE
 In case!!! The gun's in case!!!

ALBERT
 In case???!!! In case of what? In
 case you stumble on her, suckin'
 cock in the front fucking hall?!

VINCE
 She might!!! She might do it,
 Albert, but you can't fuckin' tell
 me that she does!!!

ALBERT
 She does, Vince! That's what I'm
 telling you! She does!!!

VINCE is sheet-white, trembling. He grabs up the pistol and cocks it.

VINCE
(shrieking)
Say that one more time!... Say
it!!! Go on, say it!!!

NICK is half-way up the wall, still half-asleep, staring at the pistol in disbelief. Suddenly he springs, seizes the gun with one hand and slams VINCE to the floor. VINCE gets up.

NICK slugs him in the face, knees him in the stomach and begins pounding his head against the wall. ALBERT lurches over, pulls NICK away.

ALBERT
Nick! Nick, you'll kill him!...
Easy. Nick, easy! Hey, hey. Vince
goes back a long way.

NICK
(grimly)
Yeah.

VINCE gets to his feet. Blood is streaming down his face.

VINCE
What the hell was that!
(picks up the pistol)
What did you think? Did you think
it was loaded!

NICK
You loaded it, Vince! I saw you!

VINCE
The fuck I did!!!

NICK
The fuck you didn't!... Gimme that!

NICK takes the pistol.

VINCE
What do you think? You think I
don't know!!!

NICK looks at him, then he EMPTIES THE PISTOL INTO THE FLOOR.

For a moment there is absolute silence. The wind moans in the trees, snow curls through the open door and JOHN, who is still soundly sleeping, finds a new note on which to snore.

NICK looks down at the pistol, turns it over in his hands...

NICK
I'm going to throw this fuckin'
thing away.

NICK goes out.

EXT. BUSTED-DOWN OLD LOGGERS SHACK - NIGHT

For a moment NICK stands in the light from the door, listening to the wind. He looks down at the pistol again, then he heaves it into the trees.

The wind gusts. The snow swirls and hisses, slipping through the woods in great streaming wraiths.

NICK watches it for a moment, then he turns and goes back in.

EXT. NICK'S TRAILER - DUSK

The trailer is lonely looking, DARK and cold. VINCE pulls into the yard beside NICK's car and skips to a stop. NICK gets out, says a few words to VINCE and everyone laughs. NICK goes around to the trunk, removes his gear, slams the lid and pounds on the car. VINCE takes off, thudding over the curb with his load of THREE DEAD DEER.

NICK crosses to the trailer and goes inside.

INT. V.A. HOSPITAL - RECREATION ROOM - NIGHT

TWO DOZEN AMPUTEES in wheelchairs are watching a western.

INT. V.A. HOSPITAL - CORRIDOR OFF RECREATION ROOM - NIGHT

In the foreground a NURSE holds a telephone. Beyond the NURSE we see a wizzened figure in a wheelchair coming slowly down the polished corridor. As the figure draws closer we realize it is SAL. SAL is dressed in a white hospital gown, the bottom of which hangs over the front of the wheelchair and trails limply on the floor. Both SAL's legs have been amputated and he has lost one arm. His face is terribly scarred and what expression he displays is centered in his eyes.

SAL takes the telephone. THE SOUNDTRACK FROM THE MOVIE IN THE RECREATION ROOM IS VERY LOUD.

SAL

Hello?

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - NIGHT

NICK sits in a little chair by the window, still in his hunting clothes, huddled anxiously over the receiver.

NICK

Sal? Sal, it's me, Nick.

SAL

Nick. Hey. How's things?

NICK

Oh. You know. How's it with you?

SAL
Same. Hey. Same old stuff.

NICK
(he can hardly hear)
What's that noise?

SAL
What?

NICK
What's that noise?

SAL
John Wayne... Listen, Nick --

NICK
Great. Hey. That's great.

SAL
Listen, Nick --

NICK
John Wayne's great... Listen, Sal.
Jesus. When are you getting out?

SAL
I'm gonna stay here, Nick.

NICK
(hearing it)
What?

SAL
(with everything he
has)
Place is great. Really. One great
place... Basketball, bowling. You
name it. Canasta. Hearts. Lots of
guys are making salad bowls. What
I'll do is make a salad bowl for
you, unless you'd rather have a
pencil holder. The pencil holder's
neat, I mean --

NICK
Wait a minute. Sal. Hold it. John
Wayne's making so much noise I can
hardly --

SAL
I gotta get back, Nick.

SAL looks around in desperation.

SAL
They're passing out popcorn now,
so I'll be talking to you... maybe
next year.

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - NIGHT

NICK holds the receiver, staring into it. There is the SOUND OF WHOOPING, GRUNTING, THUNDERING HOOVES...

NICK
Sal?... Sal?

INT. V.A. HOSPITAL - CORRIDOR OFF RECREATION ROOM - NIGHT

SAL is wheeling himself rapidly down the polished corridor.

At the doorway to the recreation room he pauses, looking back at the DANGLING RECEIVER. Then he turns and disappears into the flickering darkness, where BUGLES are sounding a cavalry charge.

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - NIGHT

NICK listens to the SOUND OF THE BUGLES for a moment, then puts the receiver back on the telephone. He stands, walks around in a little circle - pained, terribly upset. His eye falls on the clock. It is nearly eight o'clock. He turns, hurries out the door.

EXT. SUPERMARKET PARKING LOT - NIGHT

The lot is empty except for scores of abandoned shopping carts which a CLERK is banging together.

NICK gets out of his car and goes in.

INT. SUPERMARKET - NIGHT

Two or three CHECKERS are closing out the registers up front.

CHECKER
She's in back.

NICK
Thanks.

CHECKER
How was huntin'?

NICK
Oh. Fine.

CHECKER
Get anything?

NICK
No.

CHECKER
Too bad.

NICK goes down a long aisle of bright packages. Coming out at the back he finds LINDA sitting in a green plastic chair, crying.

NICK
Linda... Honey, what's wrong?

LINDA
(helpless shrug)
I don't know.

NICK
Hey. Look. There must be something.

LINDA looks at him, tears streaming down her face.

LINDA
I'm just so lonely.

NICK
C'mon. I've got the car.

LINDA
(shakes her head)
I'll be out... Just leave me. I'll
be out. I'm fine. Really. I'm fine.

NICK walks back down the aisle between the bright packages.

INT. NICK'S CAR - SUPERMARKET PARKING LOT - NIGHT

The CLERK is still collecting abandoned shopping carts.
The carts crash and clank as the CLERK rams them together.

NICK sits behind the wheel, watching the clerk. His hands
begin shaking uncontrollably and he gets back out of the
car.

EXT. SUPERMARKET PARKING LOT - NICK'S CAR - NIGHT

NICK watches the lights go out in the market. LINDA comes
out of the door and crosses towards him.

NICK
You okay?

LINDA nods. NICK fumbles for the door.

LINDA
Let's make love, Nick.

LINDA takes him in her arms and holds him tight.

LINDA
Let's make love forever!

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - NIGHT

LINDA is asleep - lying on her back, arms flung out across
the pillows, like a dancer leaping.

NICK stands beside the bed, wrapped in a blanket, looking
down at her. After a moment he draws the covers over her,
fusses with her slippers until they are straight and then
goes to the window.

EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF NICK'S TRAILER (NICK'S POV) - NIGHT

The wind is blowing. Bits of trash skitter and swirl in the frozen ruts and a cat comes by, MEOWING. Suddenly a MAN appears walking slowly down the street. The MAN is elegantly dressed in Western attire, wearing a tailored suit with vest, polished boots and a Stetson hat. As the MAN draws under the light of a street lamp he pauses, looking at NICK's trailer.

THE MAN IS MERLE, OR IF NOT MERLE IT IS A FACE SO STRIKINGLY SIMILAR THAT NICK ALMOST LETS OUT A CRY.

THE MAN UNDER THE STREET LAMP PAUSES, JUST FOR AN INSTANT, THEN HE TURNS AND MOVES ON DOWN THE STREET.

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - NIGHT

NICK backs away from the window. For a moment he stands motionless, hardly able to believe his eyes. He looks over at LINDA, he looks down at a chair, then he pushes his face to the window again.

EXT. STREET (NICK'S POV) - NIGHT

The street is empty. The MAN is gone.

INT. NICK'S TRAILER - NIGHT

NICK hesitates, then he sheds the blanket and pulls on pants, shirt, jacket and jams his sockless feet into a pair of slippers.

EXT. NICK'S TRAILER - NIGHT

NICK comes out into the street. There is no one in sight.

NICK crosses to the intersection of Columbine.

EXT. INTERSECTION OF COLUMBINE - NIGHT

No one. Nothing. A beer can rolling in the wind.

NICK jams himself against a wall, zippers his jacket. He is irked with himself, a little frightened. Suddenly he hears a car door close and an engine start up. A black limousine pulls out of a nearby street and comes past him slowly. A CHAUFFEUR is at the wheel.

The PASSENGER in back appears to be the MAN he saw, but the MAN is looking out the window on the other side and his face is not visible.

As NICK watches, the limousine rapidly gathers speed. The tail lights grow small, then the car dips over a hill and disappears.

INT. V.A. HOSPITAL - RECREATION ROOM - DAY

Sunlight streams through a window. The television is going.

In a far corner SAL sits in his wheelchair, sleeping.

CAMERA CLOSSES SLOWLY ON SAL. His head has fallen to one side and his single arm sticks into the air -- as if he had failed in his grasp of something, as if he were drowning. On a tray in front of him is an untouched breakfast of orange juice, milk and a little box of Wheaties.

INT. V.A. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY STAIRWAY - DAY

Someone is descending the stairs. After a moment the feet appear, clad in expensive cowboy boots. We see expensive, tailor-made trousers, a belt buckle embossed with a six shooter... and then, suddenly, MERLE'S FACE.

MERLE slows in his descent, stops, looking at something.

EXT. V.A. HOSPITAL ENTRANCE (MERLE'S POV) - DAY

NICK is getting out of a cab. He pays the driver and starts toward the building.

INT. V.A. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY STAIRWAY - DAY

MERLE watches NICK for a moment, his face utterly without expression, then MERLE continues down the stairs.

EXT. HOSPITAL GROUNDS - DAY

NICK is pushing SAL down a walkway.

NICK

Sal, we need you. We need you.

SAL

Hey, Nick. How can you need me?

NICK

We do, Sal. We do... You're the heart.

Turns SAL and sits on a bench.

NICK

Sal, you're gonna die! You're gonna sit in that corner watching soaps and you're gonna die!... I'm not saying it's gonna be the same. It's not gonna be the same, but whatever it's gonna be we're all gonna do it, Sal. God damn it we are! We are gonna do it!

SAL

Nick. I'm so scared. I'm so fuckin' scared to go home.

NICK

(nods)

I know. It's like coming from the moon. Or Mars.

SAL laughs.

SAL
Did you go hunting.

NICK
Yeah.

SAL
Did you get one?

NICK
No.

SAL
You didn't get a deer?

NICK
I tracked this one, a big buck.
God, he was such a beauty--! What's
this suitcase here?

SAL
Where?

NICK
Here. Behind you.

NICK pulls a suitcase off the rack behind SAL's chair.

SAL
I don't know.

NICK sets the suitcase on a low wall and starts to undo
the clasps.

NICK
Maybe Angela brought you stuff. I
know she said --

The suitcase slips over the back of the wall.

NICK
Shit!

NICK swings up on the wall and then he freezes. The lid of
the suitcase has popped open and bundles of money are
scattered all down the slope of a steep embankment.

SAL
Mom keeps sending me socks, Nick.
I mean, if it's socks or something
just let 'em go.

EXT. HOSPITAL GROUNDS - EMBANKMENT WITH MONEY - DAY

NICK looks down at the money scattered at his feet. The
bundles are made up of hundreds and they are everywhere.

SAL (V.O.)
Maybe you could use socks, Nick.
(MORE)

SAL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Jesus, I mean, come to think of it
 socks are pretty expensive now.

NICK
 It's not socks, Sal.

NICK bends over the suitcase and begins going through looking for identification. There is nothing. As he straightens up he notices a wadded-up piece of paper lying beside one of the bundles of bills.

The paper is about an inch square. The corners are tattered and it looks as if it had been carried in someone's pocket for a long time.

NICK picks the paper up, realizes it is a calling card and unfolds it.

THE CARD READS "EXHIBITIONS". IT CONTAINS A TELEPHONE NUMBER ON THE LOWER LEFT CORNER AND IS IDENTICAL TO THE CARD ARMAND GAVE TO NICK WHEN HE CAME UPON HIM IN THE GARDEN BEHIND HIS ROULETTE GAME IN SAIGON.

EXT. HOSPITAL GROUNDS - VALLEY OVERLOOK - DAY

NICK leans on a railing watching the black, interchangeable cars of a coal train roll slowly by. SAL sits with the suitcase of money in his lap, utterly bewildered, crying.

SAL
 Who is it, Nick? Who is it? I don't
 understand.

NICK looks at SAL. His head is spinning and he brings himself back with effort.

NICK
 It's Merle, Sal.

SAL
 Merle? ... Merle's alive?
 (NICK nods)
 How do you know?

NICK
 I saw him last night. I thought I
 was dreaming. I thought I was out
 of my mind.

SAL
 Merle gave me this?

NICK
 Yeah.

SAL
 But, Nick... Hey, I mean, where
 would a guy like Merle get money
 like this?

NICK is standing slightly behind SAL, looking down at the money. The reality of what MERLE is doing, has nearly overwhelmed him and it is only with tremendous effort that he maintains a casual tone.

NICK

Oh cards, maybe. Poker... It's getting cold, Sal. I'm going to take you in.

(starts off)

We'll call Angela. The guys can help her bring you home... Did I tell you I was going on a trip?

SAL

(panicked)

Trip? What do you mean, Nick? You said you'd be --

NICK

It's okay. Hey, it's okay! Just a week. Just to see Phantom Mary.

SAL

Phantom Mary?

NICK

Didn't I ever tell you about Phantom Mary?

SAL

(laughs)

No.

NICK

(starts off again)

Well... Phantom Mary's on my mother's side. Naturally no one there admits it because Phantom Mary's pretty weird... You want to hear the whole story?

SAL

(enthusiastically)

Yeah!

NICK

Like I say, Phantom Mary's pretty weird... Lives alone, lives way out in the middle of nowhere with a cat called Pajamas and a cow called Fred. Well, last week I got a call from Phantom Mary, which in itself was very strange...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. TERMINAL BUILDING - U.S. ARMY AIRFIELD - TEXAS - DAY

The place is a madhouse of activity. As jets scream overhead TROOPS embarking for Saigon are being counted and recounted.

SERGEANTS are yelling off names. CLERKS are typing forms and papers. Forklift trucks weave in and out, DRIVERS cursing.

NICK is back in uniform. He stands at a window watching a jet transport being prepared for loading. A CLERK comes by, arguing with a SERGEANT. The CLERK sets down his clipboard to consult the SERGEANT's papers. NICK picks up the clipboard and moves into the CROWD.

INT. TERMINAL BUILDING - ANOTHER LOCATION - DAY

NICK spots a lone SECOND LIEUTENANT sitting on his gear. More OFFICERS are waiting nearby but the SECOND LIEUTENANT seems not to know them.

NICK moves in close enough to read the SECOND LIEUTENANT's name tag.

NICK
(bawling)
Biederman! Where's Biederman!

LIEUTENANT
Here.

NICK
You Biederman?

LIEUTENANT
Biederman, yes.

NICK
I got you on this flight, Biederman.
Is that right?

BIEDERMAN
Correct.

NICK
Follow me, please.

INT. TERMINAL BUILDING - WAREHOUSE AREA - DAY

NICK walks along briskly with the LIEUTENANT at his side.

NICK
Right this way.

INT. TERMINAL BUILDING - WAREHOUSE AREA - DAY

NICK comes to a door, opens it.

NICK
Through here.

INT. TERMINAL BUILDING - UTILITY CLOSET - DAY

The LIEUTENANT walks into the closet and comes to a stop, looking puzzled. NICK comes in behind him, closes the door and picks up a length of pipe.

NICK
Take off the uniform.

The LIEUTENANT stares at NICK, dumbfounded.

NICK
Take off the uniform, Lieutenant!

The LIEUTENANT nods, begins taking off his uniform.

INT. TERMINAL BUILDING - UTILITY CLOSET - DAY

NICK has changed into the LIEUTENANT's uniform and tied him to a chair. The LIEUTENANT is in tears. NICK is going through his orders.

LIEUTENANT
Please! Please mister, please!
This is vital I go to Saigon. This
is very important. Most important.

NICK
(exasperated)
Listen, Biederman, I'm going to
club you into the floor unless you
tell me what the fuck is so
important.

LIEUTENANT
That I must not tell you. Top
secret. You see there. Topmost
secret.

NICK
Biederman!

LIEUTENANT
(stiffly)
I will not betray my country. No.
Ne-ver!

NICK throws down the pipe in disgust, whips a gag around the LIEUTENANT's mouth and ties it.

NICK
When I get to Saigon I'll tell 'em
where you are.

Slams the door.

EXT. SAIGON AIRPORT - TERMINAL BUILDING - NIGHT

Viet Cong SAPPERS have just attacked. A number of jet fighters are burning, bodies are strewn over the tarmac and jeeps with SOLDIERS are racing back and forth.

Out beyond, the jet transport taxis into view, lumbering like a great silver monster out of the night.

INT. JET TRANSPORT - NIGHT

NICK stands in the aisle next to a COLONEL who is peering out the window.

COLONEL
Jesus Christ, they hit the airport!

NICK nods.

COLONEL
Those fuckin' niggers. This time
I'm going to eat balls!... You
ever try 'em?

NICK
Naw.

COLONEL
(leans close)
Not bad fresh, but they don't keep
worth a pig's fart.

NICK nods. EVERYONE starts out.

COLONEL
Lotta guys don't know that.
(winks)
Assholes!

EXT. JET TRANSPORT - DEBARKATION RAMP - NIGHT

A SIREN is screaming in the distance. NICK looks around nervously. The COLONEL is still right in beside him.

COLONEL
Tell you something else. Don't eat
'em in the damn Delta. Unless you
like 'em fishy... Some do. I don't.
I never did.

The scream of the SIREN grows louder. Suddenly a Jeep careens around the corner followed by a huge black Cadillac flying American flags on the fenders. Both vehicles screech to a stop and an MP jumps out of the jeep with a loud hailer.

MP
(amplified)
Lieutenant Biederman! Lieutenant
Biederman report to the ramp!

COLONEL
That's you.
(grabs NICK's arm
and waves)
Right here, Sergeant! He's right
here!

MP
Right this way, Lieutenant.

NICK is hurried to the limousine where a SECOND MP holds the door.

SECOND MP

Quick as you can, sir. We're in a rush.

NICK gets in the limousine. The SECOND MP slams the door, jumps in the front and they take off with sirens wailing.

INT. LIMOUSINE - SAIGON - NIGHT

There are jeeps with MP's ahead; there are jeeps with MP's behind. Seated beside NICK is a gigantic MARINE CORPORAL who stares rigidly ahead.

EXT. CAVALCADE - SAIGON - NIGHT

Pedestrians and bicyclists flee as the cavalcade comes screaming down a wide boulevard.

EXT. AMERICAN EMBASSY - SAIGON - NIGHT

The jeeps peel off to the side. The gate swings open and the limousine enters the compound.

INT. AMERICAN EMBASSY - RECEPTION AREA - NIGHT

A STRING QUARTET is playing. GUESTS in evening clothes are drinking champagne.

NICK enters with the MARINE CORPORAL and is whisked rapidly down a hallway.

INT. AMERICAN EMBASSY - KITCHEN - NIGHT

NICK stands in front of a huge range staring down at a table.

On the table there is a basket of eggs, an omelette pan and a pile of mushrooms. Across from the table six SERVANTS with napkins on their arms stand waiting with plates.

MARINE (V.O.)

Sir?

NICK turns. The MARINE CORPORAL is holding a chef's hat. NICK takes off his cap, puts on the chef's hat. Suddenly a door comes open and the AMERICAN AMBASSADOR and his WIFE come in.

AMBASSADOR

Henri! So good to see you. How are you? How are you? Darling, this is Henri. Henri, my wife Elizabeth.

WIFE

My pleasure.

AMBASSADOR

Henri, we are starved. Six omelettes, s'il vous plait.

WIFE
 (hissing)
 Avec champignons.

AMBASSADOR
 Avec champignons.
 (back to his WIFE)
 Fines herbes?

The WIFE shakes her head. The AMBASSADOR winks.

AMBASSADOR
 Avec champignons.

The AMBASSADOR and his WIFE hurry out. There is dead silence.

NICK pulls the MARINE CORPORAL to one side, points to his crotch.

NICK
 Pee-pee.

INT. AMERICAN EMBASSY - CORRIDOR OFF KITCHEN - NIGHT

NICK comes down the corridor behind the MARINE CORPORAL. As he passes a straight-back chair standing against the wall he picks it up and swings it down on the MARINE CORPORAL'S head.

The blow is ferocious. The chair splinters into pieces and the MARINE CORPORAL goes down with a dull thud.

NICK stands for a moment, looking at him. Then he kneels, removes his pistol and jams it in his belt.

EXT. AMERICAN EMBASSY - WALKWAY TO PEDESTRIAN EXIT - NIGHT

Three MARINE GUARDS are standing at parade rest by an open iron gate.

As NICK appears in his white chef's hat the GUARDS snap to attention and he walks into the CROWD OF ASIANS streaming by outside.

EXT. TELEPHONE BOOTH - BUSY INTERSECTION - NIGHT

NICK takes out his wallet, extracts the tattered calling card that he found with SAL'S money and dials the number. He lets it ring a long time but there is no answer.

EXT. DESERTED STREET WITH SHUTTERED BUILDING - NIGHT

NICK is not sure where he is. Suddenly he stops, recognizing the yard with the little grape arbor where he met ARMAND.

EXT. YARD BEHIND SHUTTERED BUILDING - NIGHT

The yard is grown over. As NICK goes in there comes a low buzz of flies. He trips over something, draws back. Seeing a candle on the little table under the grape arbor, he crosses and lights it.

The yard is full of discarded champagne bottles, red velvet cushions and rotting CORPSES. NICK leans over one of the CORPSES. The skin is falling away and the eye sockets writhe with maggots.

NICK straightens, looks around.

NICK

Merle!!!

The back door to the building is open. NICK draws his pistol and goes in.

INT. SHUTTERED BUILDING - NIGHT

NICK finds his way blocked by a door. He steps back, hurls himself against it. The door gives way with a crash and he staggers into the middle of a small stage hung with red velvet curtains and furnished with a table and two chairs.

Out beyond the proscenium, huddled together in a litter of broken cafe tables, a FAMILY OF REFUGEES stare at him in terror from the other side of a small fire.

NICK

(waves pistol)

It's okay.

The REFUGEES cower back even further.

NICK

(screaming)

It's okay, God damn it! It's all right!

POUNDING and BANGING come from the direction of the front door. NICK crosses...

INT. SHUTTERED BUILDING - FRONT DOOR - NIGHT

NICK readies his pistol, cautiously unbolts the door and jerks it open. The COLONEL FROM THE AIRPLANE tumbles in and falls flat on his back. Standing in the doorway, lit by the headlights of two cars, is a party of U.S. OFFICERS, ARVN OFFICERS and WHORES.

COLONEL

(no attempt to get up)

Hey, good buddy, how you doin'?

(gestures)

This is Biederman, you guys.
Biederman, this is Son Loc, Tu Fon, Huckerbelly and Potts. What's the story here, Biederman? We're looking for... Wait a minute.

He fishes a piece of paper out of his breast pocket.

COLONEL

Here it is. Chez Armand.

WHORE

Chez Armand not here! Chez Armand
has gone to other spot!

COLONEL

(gets up)

Honey, c'mere. Come right here.

The COLONEL opens a brown paper bag he is carrying and presents her with a large red, white and blue dildo.

COLONEL

This is for bein' so smart.

The WHORE shrieks with pleasure. EVERYONE laughs.

COLONEL

(arm around WHORE)

Let's go! Mount up! C'mon Biederman!

The COLONEL throws an arm around NICK and they all start for the cars.

COLONEL

(to NICK)

Boy, do I love this conflict.
Huh?... What the hell were you
doin' in there?

NICK

You know a guy named Merle?

COLONEL

Merle? That's who we're looking
for. Merle.

NICK

Yeah?

COLONEL

Sure! I got eight hundred potatoes
says he goes one more... He retired,
you know.

NICK

Yeah?

COLONEL

Now he's back.

Pulls NICK close so he can whisper in his ear.

COLONEL

He eats 'em... Sure... He eats 'em
raw!

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - SAIGON OUTSKIRTS NIGHT

An elegant house of French design is ablaze with lights. The house is encircled by a stone terrace on which tables have been set up. Over the terrace and strung out for a hundred yards into the surrounding trees are countless

paper lanterns which bob and sway in the wind. GUESTS are everywhere -- wandering in and out of the house, sitting at the tables and strolling under the trees. For the most part the GUESTS are AMERICANS and SOUTH VIETNAMESE. The majority of these are OFFICERS IN UNIFORM, but there are numerous CIVILIANS mixed among them and the CIVILIANS are attired in everything from sports shirts to white linen suits and tuxedos. As to nationality there are no limits. There are FRENCH, GERMANS, BELGIANS, SWISS, CHINESE, BRITISH and AUSTRALIANS. WHORES and MISTRESSES abound. WIVES are not greatly in evidence, except to dog the heels of heavily armed ARVN GUARDS who wander about, glass-eyed, drinking champagne.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - PARKING AREA - NIGHT

Jeeps, personnel carriers, trucks and light tanks are parked side by side with gleaming Mercedes limousines, staff cars from various government agencies and a blitz of civilian vehicles running from sedans to motor scooters.

More vehicles arrive by the minute and exotic couples, like plumed birds, debark in the swirling dust.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - CLEARING IN TREES - NIGHT

A dozen ARVN helicopters have put down between the trees. One has crashed and lies on its side with a broken rotor.

There is a mounting clatter in the distance and another helicopter comes out of the sky. As it sets down a dashing handsome AIR FORCE OFFICER hops out and extends a hand to his WIFE. When his WIFE has descended the OFFICER opens a back compartment in the fusilage and carefully takes out their BABY. He hands the BABY to his WIFE and they stroll off toward the house.

INT. RUBBER PLANTATION - HOUSE - NIGHT

Gambling tables are set up in all the rooms. The betting is heavy, champagne flows like water and the atmosphere is one of reckless abandon, as if money, like love, were good for an hour.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - ROULETTE STAGE - NIGHT

Low bleachers covered in red velvet are set in a semi-circle facing a small stage. The stage is lit with a single, blindingly bright spotlight and is furnished with a table and two velvet-covered chairs. Two CONTESTANTS, both of them VIETNAMESE, sit opposite one another. Between them, lying on the table, is a revolver. Both CONTESTANTS are dressed in tuxedos. Both wear red numbers on their downstage arm.

Although the bleachers are not yet full, eager BETTORS jam the first three rows. Here CLERKS with change trays take the bets, signalling each transaction to a MARKER who chalks the shifting odds on a large board.

CAMERA CLOSES ON NICK, standing in the aisle, staring in disbelief at the evolution of the game he once played.

Now a REFEREE enters the stage carrying two strips of scarlet cloth.

REFEREE
(amplified)
Game number seven. Gentlemen will
please wrap.

The CONTESTANTS wrap their heads with the scarlet cloth.

REFEREE
(as he loads revolver)
One cartridge. Game to be played
to completion. Forfeit automatic
after delay of one minute.

The REFEREE places the pistol back in the center of the table and spins a wheel whose -intervals are alternately marked L and R. The wheel clatters to a stop with the marker on L.

REFEREE
Gentleman on the left will now
commence play.

The REFEREE steps out of the light. A gong sounds. The CONTESTANT on the left picks up the pistol, spins the cylinder, cocks it and places it to his temple. He hesitates, pulls the trigger... and clicks out.

NICK is unable to bear it. He turns, starts around toward the back of the stage. AS NICK MOVES THROUGH THE GUESTS WE HEAR THE SOUND OF THE CYLINDER CLICKING, AMPLIFIED OVER A P.A. SYSTEM. WE HEAR THE CLICK OF THE HAMMER BEING COCKED...

NICK turns. The SECOND CONTESTANT has the pistol to his temple. He pulls the trigger... THE GUN GOES OFF WITH A DEAFENING ROAR and he topples on the floor.

The FIRST CONTESTANT STEPS FORWARD AS THE SPOTLIGHT NARROWS TO CONTAIN HIM ALONE. HE BOWS, CLASPS HIS HANDS ABOVE HIS HEAD AND DANCES AROUND.

NICK stares at the FIRST CONTESTANT celebrating his victory.

He looks around him. BETTORS are screaming and yelling in five languages.

NICK starts off again, hurrying.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - BACKSTAGE AREA NIGHT

NICK comes upon a pile of six naked CORPSES with their heads blown off. Opposite the CORPSES -- sitting, standing, pacing, squatting in the dirt -- are a GROUP OF WAITING CONTESTANTS. Some of these are AMERICAN. Most are SOUTH VIETNAMESE, several of whom have come with WIVES and FAMILIES. A few of the contestants are well dressed, most are in rags. THREE. OF

THE WAITING CONTESTANTS ARE WEARING TUXEDOS.

Suddenly a WOMAN WITH A BABY lets out a shriek. NICK spins.

TWO BURLY MEN appear, bringing the CORPSE OF THE SECOND CONTESTANT. As the WOMAN WITH THE BABY begins sobbing and screaming with grief the BURLY MEN strip the tuxedo off the SECOND CONTESTANT and then, as each article is summarily removed, they begin dressing one of the WAITING CONTESTANTS in it.

ARMAND (V.O.)

If you are brave and lucky I can
make you rich.

NICK turns and finds ARMAND behind him. ARMAND studies him for a fraction of a second and then smiles.

ARMAND

C'est tres amusant... You have
been promoted. And to a Jew... I
am joking of course. Naturellement.
Seriously, Nick, may I hope that
you have come to play?

NICK

I came to see Merle.

ARMAND

Ah. Merle. And you know Merle?

NICK

Yeah.

ARMAND

(studies him)
You are his friend.

NICK

Where is he???

ARMAND

(faint smile)
Merle is under his tree... Beside
the terrace. You can't miss him.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - TREES BY TERRACE - NIGHT

GUESTS are still coming in from the cars, strolling down through the trees in bright coveys and flocks, chattering like birds.

Laughter comes from the terrace. Glass tinkles and the tiny lanterns bob and sway.

NICK appears, hurrying down the steps. Suddenly he stops.

MERLE is sitting at a table under a nearby tree. He is alone, dressed in a tuxedo, watching the arriving GUESTS with an expression of dreamy detachment, as if they were rain drops, or snow flakes, or falling stones.

NICK
 (shouts)
 Merle!

MERLE turns, watching NICK as he crosses toward him. When NICK reaches the table, he stands.

NICK
 Merle...! Jesus! Hey, how are you?

MERLE
 Nick!... I thought you went home.

NICK
 I did. I... This is stolen. I came back.

MERLE
 Sit down.

NICK sits. MERLE's self-possession has thrown him. He doesn't know where to start.

MERLE
 (breaking the silence)
 How's Linda?

NICK
 Fine. She's fine... Merle, what the hell are you doing?

MERLE
 (eyes him)
 I like it, Nick.

NICK
 Merle... Hey, Merle, listen...
 (stares at him)
 Why?

For a moment MERLE doesn't answer. His eyes are pale, like faded robin's eggs, and they seem to look through NICK, as if to some landscape far beyond.

MERLE
 I like it because it's simple.

A BEAUTIFUL VIETNAMESE GIRL steps up and whispers something in MERLE's ear.

MERLE
 (stands)
 I have to go, Nick. We'll have a drink.

MERLE and the VIETNAMESE GIRL move into the CROWD.

NICK
 Merle...! Merle, wait!

NICK starts after them. He can see them ahead, moving rapidly through a GROUP OF ARVN OFFICERS and WHORES.

NICK

Merle!!!

NICK sees he can never overtake them directly. He cuts around to the terrace.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - TERRACE - NIGHT

NICK maneuvers his way down to the end of the terrace.

NICK

Excuse me... Sorry... Sorry...
Pardon.

NICK reaches the end of the terrace. MERLE and the BEAUTIFUL VIETNAMESE GIRL have disappeared.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - TERRACE - NIGHT

NICK sits at one of the tables. The terrace is deserted.

REFEREE (V.O.)

Gentleman on the right will now
commence play.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - HOUSE - NIGHT

The gaming tables are utterly deserted. AS NICK WANDERS

THROUGH THE EMPTY ROOMS THE SOUND OF THE GAME CONTINUES OVER THE P.A. SYSTEM -- THE SOUND OF THE CYLINDER SPINNING, THE SOUND OF THE HAMMER BEING COCKED... AND CLICK AFTER CLICK INTO EMPTY CHAMBERS.

Suddenly NICK can stand it no more. He turns and starts toward the entrance to the bleachers.

A SHOT EXPLODES OVER THE P.A. SYSTEM. NICK freezes, then he runs.

EXT. RUBBER PLANTATION - ROULETTE THEATRE - NIGHT

NICK appears at the back of the aisle between the bleachers.

The CROWD is going wild, yelling and screaming. NICK pushes through a group of BETTORS and then stops. A look of stunned relief spreads over his features.

On the stage a tall figure stands alone in the spotlight, head bowed in acknowledgement of the OVATION.

NICK grins. He begins yelling and screaming along with everyone else.

On the stage the tall figure raises his head, pumps his fists in the air and begins hooting maniacally.

... WE NOW SEE, AS DOES NICK, THAT THE TALL FIGURE IN THE SPOTLIGHT IS NOT MERLE AT ALL. IT IS MERLE'S OPPONENT.

INT. V.F.W. POST - BASEMENT - DAY

Pipes crisscross the ceiling and there is the faint hiss of leaking steam. Seated on a bench and all dressed-up in their uniforms are FIVE OLD VETS. TWO VETS are on the nod. THE OTHER THREE -- rheumy-eyed and ancient -- give patient attention to the SIXTH VET who stands beside the boiler with a bugle, trying to play TAPS.

VET 1

Up a little there... What would you say?

VET 2

Up.

The VET WITH THE BUGLE tries it again, flubs it, starts over...

INT. V.F.W. POST - MAIN HALL - DAY

Three tables have been set up in the middle of the floor. The tables have been laid with white cloth and the OLDER WOMEN are setting out fresh flowers and laying the places for a funeral breakfast. They work in silence, fussing over the placement of each knife and fork.

AS THE WOMEN WORK WE HEAR THE SOUND OF THE CHOIR SINGING AS THE SERVICE PROGRESSES IN THE CHURCH. AT FIRST THE SOUND IS BARELY AUDIBLE, EASILY MATCHED BY THE FAINT NOTES OF THE VET WITH THE BUGLE IN THE BASEMENT BELOW.

BUT NOW THE SOUND OF THE CHOIR GROWS -- A SOUND AS DEEP AS WATER, AS DARK AS NIGHT; A SOUND LIKE STONE.

Gradually, one by one, the OLDER WOMEN stop fussing with the table. They stand motionless, listening.

EXT. GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH - FRONT STEPS - DAY

A HEARSE waits at the curb. The day is windless, cold and grey Snow is drifting down and the gleaming vehicle emits a ghostly cloud of white exhaust.

THE SOUND OF THE CHOIR IS MUCH LOUDER, ASCENDING IN DARK TRIUMPH TO A SUDDEN, FINAL NOTE.

In the ringing silence of the MUSIC'S END the doors to the church swing open. NICK, VINCE, ALBERT and JOHN appear with MERLE'S flag-draped COFFIN. Followed by MOURNERS, they bear the COFFIN slowly down the steps.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Snow drifts down from a leaden sky as the MOURNERS stand together on a steep hillside of tilted, weather-worn headstones. The mill looms behind them, breathing roiling clouds of steam and uttering a dull concordia of clanks and groans.

EXT. CEMETERY - GRAVE SITE - DAY

The PRIEST completes his reading of the 23rd PSALM. The MOURNERS join in the LORD'S PRAYER.

CAMERA CLOSES ON NICK, VINCE, ALBERT, JOHN and SAL. They help SAL to the side of the grave. It is awkward. The chair gets stuck and they have to carry it. THEY ALL pick up a handful of dirt and then, following NICK's lead, they throw it in.

NICK steps back from the grave, nods to the VETS. The VETS come to attention. The VET WITH THE BUGLE steps forward and tremblingly, but perfectly, PLAYS TAPS.

INT. V.F.W. POST - MAIN HALL - DAY

The meal is over. The WOMEN are drinking coffee, the MEN are smoking and putting down the beer. There is muted laughter and conversation.

NICK sits at the head of one of the tables, flanked by LINDA and SAL. He looks stunned. His food is untouched, there are tears in his eyes and he hardly seems to know where he is.

LINDA

Eat something, Nick. Eat a piece of toast.

NICK nods, picks up a piece of toast and then, forgetting all about it, lays it absently on his plate.

VINCE comes up behind NICK, looking somewhat officious in a new blue suit.

VINCE

You want to say a few words, Nick? I think you should. Like that would wind things up.

NICK nods. VINCE raps on a glass.

VINCE

Quiet!... Quiet!!!... Awright, everybody, Nick has a few words.

NICK

(very shaky)

I just... would like to say a few words... about Merle. I guess Merle always wanted something... I don't know... better. That fucking guy, he saved my Life. He saved Sal's... What Merle liked, he liked things right... But then there wasn't any place for that... that he could find.

Tears are streaming down NICK's face and he sits down, looking miserable.

VINCE

(hisses)

John! Play something!

JOHN goes to the piano, hurried along by VINCE. He sits down, casts a quick glance to the ceiling and begins playing "America The Beautiful".

A FEW VOICES being SINGING. OTHERS join in. ALBERT stands up.

Then EVERYONE stands up.

FADE OUT:

THE END