

EXT. MCGEE FARM - AUTO REPAIR YARD - DAY

1981. Dallas, Georgia. A large run-down family farm with a cash-in-hand auto repair business on the side.

A section of the farm between the fields and the farmhouse is strewn with assorted broken-down cars, trucks, and lawnmowers, plus engines, parts, and tools, etc.

Mississippi native HENRY CHARLES "CHUCK" GAINES, JR., 34, works on a rusty 1970 Dodge Challenger. He's dressed in old work clothes and looks about as ready for the scrapyard as the old Dodge.

Chuck has the hood propped up with a piece of wood. He pokes about in the engine, knows what he's doing.

There's the distant sound of a YOUNG GIRL'S LAUGHTER. The sound gets louder until it distracts Chuck.

He goes to the driver's side, gets in. He jerks the ignition key, over and over, drowning out the girl's laughter. The engine chokes painfully but fails to start.

He gives up and gazes out the window. Eventually, he gets out of the car, goes back to work on the engine.

ELMER, JR. (O.S.)

You gonna get the car working today?

Chuck glances over at two kids: ELMER, JR., 10, and JULIE, 8, both dressed in muddy dungarees. The kids stand near the car, stare at Chuck.

JULIE

Pop says it's broke for good.

Chuck glares at Julie.

CHUCK

Yeah, is that what he says? Well, you go tell your pop he's full of shit.

The kids exchange uncomfortable looks.

CHUCK

I mean it. Get the hell out of here!

Chuck slaps away the wooden prop. The hood SLAMS DOWN. The kids jump in fright. Chuck watches them run off.

After a moment, he picks up the piece of wood, carefully props open the hood and goes back to work on the engine.

GOOSE (O.S.)

Hey, Chuck!

Chuck hangs his head, takes a moment before he turns to face ELMER "GOOSE" MCGEE, 34, who ambles towards him. Goose is also dressed in work clothes and has the general demeanor of a man who's content with his lot in life.

GOOSE
Quit telling my kids I'm full of you-know-what, will ya?

Goose reaches Chuck, shoots him a lop-sided grin.

GOOSE (cont'd)
I mean, even if I am, I'd rather they found out on their own.

Chuck glances at the kids, who laugh as they try to climb large oak tree near the farmhouse.

CHUCK
I yelled at them some.

Goose looks at his kids, shrugs.

GOOSE
Looks like they're over it.

Goose peers into the engine of the Dodge.

GOOSE (cont'd)
Getting anywhere with this old thing?

Chuck shrugs, no.

CHUCK
Change the carburetor, maybe.

GOOSE
Nah. Just be a waste of a carburetor. I'll call Frank. Tell him his pride and joy's about dead and done.

BETTY-ANNE (O.S.)
Hey, Elmer!

Chuck and Goose look over to the farmhouse. Goose's heavily pregnant wife, BETTY-ANNE, 33, stands on the porch.

BETTY-ANNE
Quit messing with that piece of junk! Come have dinner with your family.

GOOSE
(to Chuck)
Pretty sure she means the car.

CHUCK

Yeah.

Goose chuckles, ambles away towards the house.

CHUCK (cont'd)

Heading to Mitch's later?

Goose shrugs without turning around.

Chuck watches as Goose reaches the house. He puts his arm around Betty-Anne, lightly rubs her belly. Goose calls to the kids. They run over. The family enters the house. The door closes.

Chuck turns back to the Dodge, considers it for a moment, then closes the hood.

EXT. MCGEE FARM - CHUCK'S TRAILER - DAY

Chuck crosses a patch of rough ground on Goose's farm. He heads for a weather-beaten double-wide trailer.

INT. CHUCK'S TRAILER - DAY

Inside, the trailer is both sparse and a mess. Single unmade bed, galley kitchen, table and chair, threadbare recliner. Fast food wrappers on the counter, unwashed cups and plates in the sink. Pile of dirty t-shirts and jeans on the floor.

On a hook by the front door hangs a green Air Force field jacket. The insignia have been crudely ripped off, leaving parts of it frayed.

Chuck enters, closes the door behind him.

In the kitchen, he retrieves a cigarette from one of the drawers, lights it on the gas hob. He smokes a little and paces the floor, agitated.

Finally, he walks over to his jacket, reaches into the breast pocket, pulls out a creased wallet-size photograph.

He carries it over to the recliner, sits. He steels himself before he looks at the picture. There's a burst of a YOUNG GIRL'S LAUGHTER.

The photo shows a clear, sunny day on a California beach. Chuck, aged 28 - fit, tanned, happy - poses with his wife, JANICE "SUMMER" SHAW, 25, beautiful with long blonde hair. Summer is about eight months pregnant, happy and radiant.

Chuck puts away the picture, smokes some more. He looks around at where he is now - literally and figuratively thousands of miles from that day.

EXT. MCGEE FARM - FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Chuck trudges up the path to the farmhouse. He wears his frayed Air Force jacket over his old work clothes.

It's dark outside, but the McGee house glows with light and life. Chuck bangs on the door.

The living room curtains are partly open. Through the window, Chuck sees Goose, Elmer Jr and Julie sitting around the coffee table enjoying a lively game of Operation.

Chuck watches for a moment then turns and trudges back down the path into the darkness.

The front door opens. Betty-Anne watches Chuck walk away.

BETTY-ANNE

Yeah, you keep walking, Chuck. All
the way home to your own family.
Leave mine alone.

The door slams shut. Chuck ignores her, keeps walking.

INT. MITCH'S BAR - NIGHT

A roadside drinkers' bar. Soft rock plays at low volume. A hockey match flickers on the TV, volume muted.

Chuck sits alone at the bar, sips coffee. He still wears his Air Force jacket. Owner MITCH, 50s - short, tough, in shape - stands behind the bar.

Mitch keeps an eye on a table of FOUR ROWDY GUYS, early 30s, ex-military types. Their "leader" is KURT. There are two empty pitchers on the guys' table. A third is quickly going the same way.

MITCH

(to Chuck)

You seen them before?

CHUCK

Not my type.

The guys suddenly let out a RAUCOUS ROAR. Chuck balls his fists, his whole body tenses...

INT. OFFICERS' MESS - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

1969. A rowdy officers' mess on Bien Hoa airbase in Vietnam.

A HALF DOZEN AIR FORCE PILOTS sit at a table, drinking and joking around. ROY MOON, 27 - tall, Texan, full of swagger - holds court.

Each pilot wears a purple scarf as part of his casual uniform. As well as their military flight wings, all have the same insignia on their jackets: United States Air Force and 12th Special Operations Squadron (a.k.a Ranch Hand).

The door opens. Chuck and Goose, both 22, enter. They too wear Air Force jackets, with the same Air Force and Ranch Hand insignia. Roy sees them.

ROY

(to the table)

Well look, boys! We got us a couple of short-timers about to head on back Stateside. C'mon on in, fellas. Y'all look 'bout old enough, I reckon!

(to the bartender)

Hey, Johnny, set these two up, will ya? On me. We got plenty of sending off to do tonight!

GOOSE

Gee, thanks Roy. Better make mine a ginger ale. The hard stuff ain't agreeing with me much these days.

CHUCK

Yeah, thanks Moony.

Chuck and Goose pull up chairs. Chuck sits next to Roy, who clamps a heavy, fatherly hand on his shoulder.

ROY

(to Goose & Chuck)

You can be proud of what you did here, fellas. Real proud.

Goose nods, touched. Chuck shrugs it off. The drinks arrive.

ROY (cont'd)

Now. A toast. To old Chuck and Elmo here getting on that sweet Freedom Bird home...

The men raise their glasses.

ROY (cont'd)

And not looking the fuck back!

The guys all cheer, bang the table in agreement. Chuck toasts Goose, smiles. The revelry continues...

INT. MITCH'S BAR - NIGHT

The rowdy guys' LAUGHTER CONTINUES. Chuck stares at the bar, tries to block it out. Mitch puts a bowl of nuts next to Chuck, tops off his coffee. They watch the hockey game.

Kurt gets up, comes over to the bar, stands by Chuck.

KURT
(to Mitch)
Hey, pops, fetch us another pitcher.
And how 'bout getting some beer in
there with the suds this time, huh?

He slaps a \$5 bill on the counter. Mitch glowers at him, fills up the pitcher, puts the money in the register.

Kurt glares at Chuck, who glares back. Kurt reaches into the bowl of nuts by Chuck, runs his fingers through the contents before he eats a handful.

KURT (cont'd)
(to Chuck)
At ease, solider.

Kurt smooths Chuck's lapels, leaving a patch of grease on one side. Kurt picks up the pitcher, holds it up and studies the contents, nods at Chuck and Mitch.

KURT (cont'd)
Ladies...

He returns to his buddies.

MITCH
Asshole. We used to get guys like
that back in Korea, I tell ya --

Chuck ignores Mitch, slips off the bar stool, heads for the men's room. He takes a route that avoids the table of guys.

INT. MEN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Chuck stares at his reflection under the stark fluorescent light. He leaves the bathroom. The light goes off.

INT. MITCH'S BAR - NIGHT

Chuck strides back through the bar, stops in front of the table of guys. They look at him, amused. Who's this clown?

Mitch watches on from the bar.

KURT
What the fuck do you want? We got no
spare change for you, bum.

The guys laugh.

Chuck grabs the full pitcher of beer, chugs about half, then pours the rest out on to the table. The guys cuss, scramble to avoid the spreading pool of beer.

Kurt jumps to his feet, squares up to Chuck.

KURT (cont'd)
Oh, you're looking for a fight,
soldier boy. Missing the action, huh?

CHUCK
Let's go.

Mitch strides over, puts himself between Kurt and Chuck.

MITCH
(to the table)
Okay, fellas. Out. Now.

KURT
Why we gotta leave, huh, old man?
(re, Chuck)
He's the one who's messed up in the
head, thinks he's still in the 'Nam
killing them Viet Cong.

He mimes firing a rifle, ducking incoming fire. The other guys laugh, egg him on.

MITCH
Yeah but it's my fucking name on the
door. So, like I said, time to go.

Kurt glares at Chuck. Mitch stands his ground, holds out a \$5 bill. Kurt snatches it.

KURT
Place is a real dump anyway.
(to the group)
Let's go find us a real bar.

The others mumble in agreement, get up from the table.

KURT (cont'd)
(to Chuck)
War's over. Or didn't you hear? We're
all back in the real world now.

Kurt wipes his hand across the table, still slick with beer, and flicks it at Chuck, who doesn't react.

Kurt leaves the bar with his buddies, upending a couple of chairs on the way out. Chuck watches them. He keeps watching the door, even after they're out of sight.

MITCH

Hey, you alright, Chuck? Want me to
brew up another pot?

Chuck continues to stare at the door.

CHUCK

(quiet)
I fixed planes, asshole.

MITCH

Leave it alone, man. Come sit down.

Mitch puts a hand on Chuck's shoulder. Chuck brushes it off, strides to the door.

CHUCK

Hey, I fixed planes, asshole! I
didn't kill no-one.

MITCH

Damn it.

He rushes to the bar, reaches for the phone, dials.

EXT. MITCH'S BAR - NIGHT

Kurt takes the lead laying into a submissive Chuck. The other three take turns. Chuck takes heavy blow to the face, crumples to the ground, continues to take the punishment.

MITCH (O.S.)

Hey!

A baseball bat SMASHES into metal garbage cans. The guys take a break from the beat down, see Mitch wielding the bat.

MITCH

Now it's about even, I reckon. Least
till the cops come.

Mitch steps forward, draws the bat back. Two of the guys rush Mitch, who takes a swing, gets one of them on the arm. The other two keep working over Chuck.

Mitch does his best to hold the guys at bay until they all become aware of an APPROACHING SIREN. The guys run off.

Mitch drops the bat, kneels by Chuck.

MITCH (cont'd)
What you doin' to yourself, huh, man?

Chuck closes his eyes.

CHUCK
Why d'you stop them?

INT. GEORGIA HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Chuck lies in bed, hooked up to drips. Machines beep by his bed. His face is swollen and bruised. He slowly opens his eyes, tries to move but is held back by gripping pain.

GOOSE (O.S.)
Hey, take it easy.

Chuck takes a moment to focus on Goose, who stands near the doorway. Goose leans out into the corridor.

GOOSE
He's awake! Nurse!

A severe FEMALE NURSE bustles into the room, fusses around the bed. She looks over Chuck, scribbles on the chart.

NURSE
You're a lucky man, Mr. Gaines. I'll
get the doctor to look you over.

The nurse leaves. Goose closes the door, takes a few steps towards the bed. He's upset, tries to hold it back.

GOOSE
Those sons-of-guns really did a
number on you. Lucky Mitch was there.

CHUCK
Lucky all around.

GOOSE
I should've come to the bar with you.
I told Betty --

Chuck reaches for Goose's hand, shakes his head, "no".

CHUCK
On me.

Emotion starts to overwhelm Goose.

GOOSE
You nearly died, man.

Goose steps away from the bed, paces.

GOOSE (cont'd)
I mean, for a while there, it was
really touch and go...

Goose glances back at Chuck, chews his bottom lip, building up to something. Chuck shrugs, "what?".

GOOSE (cont'd)
It's just... I figured I ought to let
someone know. From back there in
California.

Chuck shrugs again, urges Goose to spit it out.

GOOSE (cont'd)
So, I called up your apartment.

Chuck shifts in the bed.

CHUCK
You talk to Summer?

GOOSE
No. There was no-one answering at
your place. But then I remembered you
telling me about Summer's folks over
there in that... Pasadena, so I got
on to the operator --

Chuck rolls his eyes, impatient.

GOOSE (cont'd)
Anyhow, I got talking to her pop.

Chuck closes his eyes, leans back.

CHUCK
What'd he have to say?

GOOSE
Well, that's the weird thing.

Chuck opens his eyes.

CHUCK
What d'you mean?

GOOSE
Well, when he picked up, first thing
he yelled was, "Summer, is that
you?". Real urgent, like maybe he
ain't heard from her for a while.
Course, I put him straight and when I
said your name, he got real mad --

CHUCK

No shit.

GOOSE

Then he said, you'd better hope nothing bad's happened to them. Then he cussed and told me to stay off the line. Hung up on me.

CHUCK

What...? Something's happened to 'em? That what he said?

Goose shrugs, no answer.

GOOSE

Sounded kinda fishy, is all I know.

Chuck thinks another moment, then thrashes around, struggles to get out of bed. Goose steps forward to restrain him.

GOOSE (cont'd)

Hey! Steady, now.

Chuck tries to fight him but Goose is stronger, holds him down. Chuck quickly fatigues, Goose loosens his grip.

GOOSE (cont'd)

See, this is why I was in two heads about telling you.

Chuck is frantic but too weak to do anything about it.

GOOSE (cont'd)

She probably just took off for a while, forgot to tell her folks.

CHUCK

What about Jennifer?

GOOSE

If she's with her momma, I'm sure she's just fine.

Chuck gets a second wind, struggles to get out of bed, pushes through the pain. Goose steps in but Chuck summons more strength, fights him off. The IVs get dislodged from Chuck's arm.

Goose does his best to hold him, yells out for help. A LARGE MALE ORDERLY runs in. The orderly and Goose overwhelm Chuck, restrain him until he tires and quietens.

CHUCK

Where in the hell are they?