

GREETINGS FROM SHANGRI-LA

By

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Inspired by true events

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FADE IN:

TITLE OVER BLACK SCREEN:

*Vincit qui se vincit.*

[He conquers who conquers himself.]

-- Columbia Military Academy Motto

**EXT. RUSSELLVILLE, ALABAMA - DAY (1951)**

A small town in the Deep South. Fifties cars pass on the main street. A hot day by the look of TOWNSFOLK on the sidewalks.

TITLE OVER:

Russellville, Alabama - 1951

Clean-cut HUGH SPRUELL (13), sporting a hip Aloha shirt, takes in UNCLE SAM RECRUITMENT POSTER -- I WANT YOU FOR U.S. ARMY

Hugh jogs to catch up with his dad, DOC SPRUELL (44), smart in his three-piece suit, striding with purpose despite the heat.

**HUGH**

(dogs Doc)

-- I don't want to go --

**DOC**

I don't want to hear it --

BANKER (50s), portly, seersucker suit, rounds a corner --

**BANKER**

Afternoon, Doc.

**DOC**

John, how are you?

Banker takes out a handkerchief to wipe his brow.

**BANKER**

A sight better, thanks to you.

(to Hugh)

Your daddy's a good man.

Hugh nods. He looks hot and impatient.

**BANKER**

Lil' Hugh, what you gonna be when you grow up?

**HUGH**

I'm gonna be a surgeon like dad.

**BANKER**

Well you got mighty big shoes to fill.

Doc smiles as Hugh searches for a comeback.

**BANKER**

You come see me now when it's time  
to send this boy to Harvard.  
(shakes Doc's hand)  
You're gonna need some cash.

**DOC**

Don't strain yourself, Frank --  
Doctor's orders.

Banker shakes his head and LAUGHS as Doc and Hugh walk off, past  
NEWSPAPER RACK -- HEADLINE -- REDS SILENT, WORLD WAITS.

**EXT. RUSSELLVILLE, ALABAMA - MINUTES LATER**

Doc and Hugh at a plain, one-storey brick building. A sign reads  
SPRUELL SURGICAL CLINIC

**DOC**

(still hounded by Hugh)  
-- Listen, son, just because you  
live with me doesn't mean you're  
off the hook. You're the *man* of  
that house --

**HUGH**

You don't know what it's like bein'  
stuck with a bunch of women --

Doc stops at the door. His tone is sharp. Hugh flinches.

**DOC**

You're gonna go see your mama and  
that's all there is to it.

Whipped, Hugh follows Doc inside.

**INT. SPRUELL CLINIC - DOC'S OFFICE - LATER**

Military and civic citations and awards. Doc, at his desk, shelves  
of medical books and photos of Doc with adoring patients or family  
behind him. Hugh studies ANATOMICAL MODEL OF HEART on Doc's desk.

**DOC (O.S.)**

She's 67. Obese. She complains of  
abdominal pain after fatty meals.

Doc hands an X-ray to a tall INTERN (24) sitting opposite.  
The intern looks down his nose as Hugh peeks at the X-ray.

**INTERN**

Gall bladder?

Doc smiles.

**INT. SPRUELL CLINIC - SCRUB ROOM - LATER**

Doc and the intern scrub for surgery. Hugh joins them as if it's routine practice. The intern smirks condescendingly.

**OPERATING ROOM - MINUTES LATER**

Gowned, gloved, and masked, Hugh takes his position at an operating lamp. The intern merely observes.

**DOC**

Aim the light over here, son.  
(then to his nurse)  
Scalpel?

As Doc's SURGICAL NURSE hands Doc a scalpel, their eyes meet, briefly intimate.

**DOC**

The initial incision should only penetrate the dermal layer.

Doc cuts into the patient's belly --

Hugh watches keenly, but the intern's eyes widen until

The intern suddenly **KEELS OVER** and hits the floor with a **THUD!**

Doc continues to work as if it's no big deal. Hugh looks over his shoulder at the intern curled up on the floor.

**DOC**

Keep the light steady, son.

**HUGH**

Is he -- dead?

**DOC**

He'll come around.

Soon the intern **MOANS**. He gets to his knees. He stands unsteadily. Then he bolts for the door to **VOMIT** in the next room.

**SCRUB ROOM - LATER**

Doc and Hugh find the intern at a wastebasket.

**DOC**

Don't worry about it. It's pretty common for a first observation.

The intern glances at sturdy little Hugh and hangs his head.

**EXT. RUSSELLVILLE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT - SUNRISE**

Terminal building and runway. Foreground, a windsock flutters as  
A small propeller airplane SOARS into the rosy-fingered RED SKY.

**INT. DOC'S AIRPLANE - CONTINUOUS**

Doc flies at dark clouds on the horizon. Hugh sulks behind him.

**DOC**  
(over his shoulder)  
-- C'mon, bud', it's only two days.  
Tell you what, how 'bout we go  
campin' next weekend?

**HUGH**  
You'll just have to work.

**DOC**  
We'll do it. We're a team, right?

**HUGH**  
(not much team spirit)  
Yeah.

As Hugh gazes at the patchwork landscape below them --

**DOC**  
You wanna take over for a bit?

**HUGH**  
(suddenly charged)  
Really?

**DOC**  
Go ahead.

Hesitantly, Hugh reaches for the tandem joystick.

**DOC**  
Just hold her steady. See, you've  
got her now. Go on, take her up.

**HUGH**  
(hesitant)  
That's okay.

**DOC**  
Go on. Don't ever be afraid to try,  
son. No guts, no glory.

Hugh looks thrilled as the plane climbs for a heady moment.

**DOC**  
I remember the first time I got to  
fly. It was a helluva --

The engine suddenly SPUTTERS -- Then it QUILTS!

**HUGH**

I didn't do anything.

Doc checks his instruments. His brow crinkles at

FUEL GAUGE -- It's empty!

WIND RATTLES the plane. It seems quiet without the engine.

**DOC**

It's okay, son.

Doc looks around. He banks toward a field bounded by

Taut POWER LINES strung between STEEL LATTICE TOWERS.

As the plane descends, WIND BLOWS it over the power lines!

Two REPAIRMEN on the ground frantically wave their arms as the plane skims the power lines.

Doc braces for disaster --

But the plane *lands* on the power lines! Its wings slide along the lines until it gently BUMPS to a stop against one steel tower.

As the plane sways on the power lines, 50 feet off the ground

Doc leans to look below. He shakes his head.

**DOC**

You okay?  
(checks Hugh)  
Sit tight for a minute.

**EXT. DOC'S AIRPLANE - CONTINUOUS**

The cockpit door swings open. As Doc steps out to climb onto the tower, the plane sways on the power lines.

When Doc has a good footing --

**DOC**

Okay, son, c'mon out.

The plane sways again as Hugh exits.

**DOC**

Just keep your eyes on me.

Naturally, Hugh looks down -- It's a dizzy height!

On the ground, the repairmen watch in alarm.

**DOC**

(to Hugh)  
Give me your hand.

Doc grabs Hugh's arm and pulls him onto the tower.

**EXT. RURAL ALABAMA FIELD - MINUTES LATER**

Doc looks overdressed as he climbs off the tower with Hugh and confronts the repairmen.

**SHORT REPAIRMAN**

(to Doc)  
You some kinda daredevil? You know  
you both could've been killed.

Hugh takes in the standoff between Doc and the repairmen.

**TALL REPAIRMAN**

How'd you know the power was out?

**DOC**

I didn't.

Doc looks up at his stranded plane and scratches his head.

**DOC**

(to Hugh)  
I guess we better go get Dick to  
help out --  
(to the repairmen)  
Any chance you've got a crane?

**INT. CADILLAC COUPE DE VILLE - LATER**

Doc speeds down a highway with Hugh, who trades looks with black handyman DICK NEWSOME (44) 5'8" of pure muscle in coveralls.

**DOC**

(to Hugh)  
Don't you say a word about this to  
your mama, you hear me?

**DICK**

Miss Lucille prob'ly have a fit --

**DOC**

Yeah, I guess so.

Doc LAUGHS. He looks at Hugh, then Dick -- They're not laughing.

**DOC**

I didn't think about the gas.

Dick glances nervously at a FUEL DRUM on the back seat.

**DICK**

If we was to have a accident, Doc'  
Spruell --

An idle patrol car suddenly WAILS as they pass it.

**EXT. RURAL ALABAMA HIGHWAY - MINUTES LATER**

A redneck DEPUTY (40s) ambles up. He eyes Doc in his ritzy ride.

**DEPUTY**

Now why are you in such a gall-darn hurry?

**DOC**

I'm sorry, officer. I'm a physician --

The deputy spits tobacco.

**DEPUTY**

They your patients?

Hugh watches the deputy stare down Dick. Dick loses.

**DEPUTY**

(nods at fuel drum)  
Uh-huh, and what's that?

**DOC**

It's airplane fuel. My plane ran out of gas --

**DEPUTY**

Let's jus' have a look at that.

Doc obliges, and the deputy sticks his head in the car.

**DEPUTY**

*Hundred proof fuel* I bet --

The deputy gets a big whiff and COUGHS. He reels and SPLUTTERS.

**DEPUTY**

What the hell is that shit?

**DOC**

I told you -- It's airplane fuel.

They lock eyes. The deputy bursts into LAUGHTER.

As Doc drives away, Dick glances back at the deputy.

**DICK**

I thought sure we was goin' to jail.

**DOC**

(sings boldly)  
They do call it good ol' mountain dew.

The car kicks up dust as it rockets down the road.



**INT. SPRUELL HOME - DEN - DAY**

LION BOOKENDS guard the top shelf of a tall bookcase. At center, INDIAN CHESSBOARD with maharajas and elephants for game pieces.

As Hugh stands on a chair to reach the chessboard he sees

DOC'S WAR JOURNAL -- a dog-eared notebook, brown with age.

Hugh is drawn to it. He flips through faded pages and finds

NEWS CLIPPING -- SOMEWHERE IN HELL, SURGEON'S JUNGLE RESCUE.

Doc surprises Hugh.

**DOC**

What've you got there?

**HUGH**

It's your journal -- from the war.

**DOC**

That old thing? I thought you wanted to play chess.

**PORCH - LATER**

CICADAS CHIRP loudly in the yard as Doc studies his chessboard.

DAN, a German shepherd, naps nearby. His ears prick as

Hugh uses a POCKETKNIFE to open a soda.

**HUGH**

Do you wish you could go back?

**DOC**

Where?

Doc moves his white knight, an Indian riding an elephant.

**HUGH**

India.

**DOC**

I 'spose. But it was different then.  
We lost a lot of young men over there.

As Hugh moves his black queen, the PHONE RINGS in the house.

**DOC**

And I sure learned a lot about  
doctoring.  
(yells to Dick O.S.)  
Dick, will you get the phone?

**HUGH**  
I learned a lot from you --

**DOC**  
Not everything. Check mate.

**HUGH**  
Hey, no fair. You tricked me.

**DOC**  
No I didn't. You just need to focus.

Dan's ears prick again, just before Dick appears.

**DICK**  
Doc' Spruell, you got to get over to  
the Hargetts' -- Miss Carol been shot.

**DOC**  
(to Dick)  
Get the car. I'll get my bag.  
(at Hugh's keen look)  
Okay, c'mon --

**INT. HARGETT HOME - PORCH - MINUTES LATER**

On a table, a glass of iced tea sweats beside

GREETING CARD

A stork delivers a baby bundled with a tag -- SPECIAL DELIVERY!

**PELHAM**  
I was just showin' her --

Doc kneels to examine a very pregnant CAROL HARGETT (26), lying on the floor. Her eyes plead over shallow breaths.

Her husband PELHAM (29) and Dick watch anxiously. Hugh stares at REVOLVER, on the floor near Carol's head.

Doc's look says it all, as he takes Carol's hand to comfort her and she GASPS her last breath.

**PELHAM**  
Oh God, no --

**DOC**  
There isn't much time --

Doc checks his medical bag. Then he seizes Hugh's arm.

**DOC**  
Hugh, give me your knife.

Hugh pulls out his pocketknife, and Doc grabs it.

**DOC**

Pelham, get me some clean towels.

Doc moves Carol. He cuts her dress and exposes her belly.

**PELHAM**

(confused, then angry)  
What're you doin'?

**DOC**

She's gone, Pelham. Do you want me  
to save the baby?  
(at Pelham's nod)  
Then get me some towels.

Pelham comes to his senses and darts away as Doc goes to work.

Doc's surgery is hidden from view, but Hugh stares in awe when

Doc holds up a CRYING BABY BOY!

A stunned Pelham returns with towels and breaks down.

Doc wraps the baby and hands him to Pelham. Then Doc covers Carol,  
wipes the knife, and returns it to Hugh, who gawks at the knife.

A tear streaks Pelham's face and falls on the baby's head.

**DOC**

We need to get to the hospital.

As they turn to leave, Hugh glances back at Carol's body.

**INT. SPRUELL HOME - HUGH'S BEDROOM - NIGHT**

A model FLYING TIGER airplane grins over Hugh's bed as Hugh  
studies his pocketknife. Doc pokes his head in the room.

**DOC**

Goodnight, bud' --  
(at Hugh's look)  
You okay?

Hugh nods. Doc sits on the edge of the bed.

**HUGH**

Are you afraid of dying?

**DOC**

Everyone's afraid, son. Learning to  
live with death is part of living.

**HUGH**

Guess I wouldn't make such a good  
doctor --

**DOC**

Why do you say that?

**HUGH**

How you saved that baby, I couldn't do that --

**DOC**

You can do anything you put your mind to -- But Life and death are in God's hands. Some things you can't change, and you just have to accept it.

Hugh is silent. Doc tousles his hair.

**DOC**

We'll talk about it tomorrow.

**HUGH**

What time are we leavin'?  
(at Doc's look)  
You forgot.

**DOC**

I'm sorry, bud', I can't go camping. I've just got too much to do. How 'bout we go flying on Sunday after church?

**HUGH**

I've got Scouts, remember?

**DOC**

Okay, we'll take everybody up.

Another look from Hugh.

**DOC**

Why don't you go on with Dan and I'll try to catch up?

**HUGH**

Like last time.

**DOC**

Work is work, son. We've all got a job to do. I have to look after my patients, and you have to get an education. Do you want to go on without me or not?

Hugh nods half-heartedly. Doc grins encouragingly.

**DOC**

Okay, get some shut-eye. Dick'll drop you at the lake tomorrow, and we can defy the sky on Sunday.

**INT. RUSSELLVILLE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - DAY**

An impressive stained-glass window depicts JESUS AS GOOD SHEPHERD. Hugh looks bored stiff as a lackluster MINISTER (40s) sermonizes.

**MINISTER**

He that hath an ear, let him hear what  
the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Doc prods Hugh to sit up straight and pay attention.

**MINISTER**

To him that overcometh will I give to  
eat of the tree of life, which is in  
the midst of the paradise of God.

Hugh can't help but change his tune as they stand to sing.

**DOC**

(sings terribly off-key)  
So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,  
Till my trophies at last I lay down.  
I will cling to the old rugged cross,  
And exchange it some day for a crown.

What Doc lacks in tone, he makes up in conviction.

The whole CONGREGATION shares Hugh's amusement at Doc's noise.

**EXT. RUSSELLVILLE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT - DAY**

In a Boy Scout uniform, Hugh kicks up dust with his shoe as Doc's plane crests tall pine trees in the distance.

**EAGER SCOUT**

He's back.

Hugh watches the plane do a loop and land to scattered APPLAUSE from eight other SCOUTS. Dick is with them in his Sunday best.

Doc exits the plane with his rattled passenger, NERVOUS SCOUT. Doc dips his hand in his vest to check his POCKET WATCH and smiles.

**DOC**

Who's next?

Hands go up, but Doc's smile fades when he sees Hugh sulk.

**DOC**

(teases)  
Dick, what do you say?

**DICK**

Doc' Spruell, I know how you drive.

Doc spies another victim.

**DOC**

Your turn, Billy.

**BILLY**

That's okay --

**DOC**

Oh, c'mon, don't be a chicken.

Doc coaxes squeamish BILLY HESTOR (13) into the plane.

Hugh sulks as the plane disappears over distant pine trees.

As the sun sinks, the scouts stroll restlessly.

Hugh angrily twiddles his hair as he searches the sky.

**HUGH**

Where'd he go?

**DICK**

You know your daddy.

An ODD SOUND disturbs the quiet. Dick's smile vanishes.

**NERVOUS SCOUT**

Look!

Hugh turns. He stares at

DISTANT PLUME OF SMOKE on the horizon.

**INT. FORD TRUCK - MINUTES LATER**

The truck lurches onto a highway shoulder.

Dick throws open the door. He looks at Hugh.

**DICK**

You stay here, you hear me.

Dick sprints toward a FIRE encircled by SHOUTING MEN.

WAILING AMBULANCE arrives.

Hugh can't resist -- He slides to the open door.

**EXT. COTTON FIELD - A MOMENT LATER**

Work boots trample tilled soil.

Men rush past as Hugh gazes at

FIRE

As the flames cough oily smoke at the sunset

The smoke shifts and reveals

PLANE CRASH

Smoke and flame engulf the small propeller airplane.

**SHOUTING MAN**

(to another man)

We couldn't get to the boy.

As Hugh moves around the crash he sees

BURNED CORPSE on the ground -- one arm juts skyward.

Hugh stares in confusion.

Then it hits him --

The plane's fiery reflection in Hugh's eyes.

**INT. RUSSELLVILLE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - DAY**

A CHURCH ORGAN STRAINS. MOURNERS stare at Hugh as he follows his

WEEPING SISTERS AND MOTHER

ANDREA (11), her impish face puffy from tears.

NANCY (15), chin up but barely holding it together.

MARTHA ANN (17), devastated but buoyant by necessity as

She supports her mother, LUCILLE (46), anguish dulled by alcohol.

Hugh approaches the altar.

The stained-glass JESUS AS GOOD SHEPHERD rises above him.

Hugh's eyes smolder at the God who took his father from him.

**INT. SPRUELL HOME - FOYER - LATER**

Glimpses of modest living and dining rooms and staircase as Dick descends with a storage box but stops when he sees Hugh with Dan.

**LUCILLE (O.S.)**

Mind you don't drop that, Dick.

Dick shakes his head but smiles as he gets a good look at Hugh.

**DICK**

You's the spittin' image of yo' daddy.

Nancy and Andrea carry boxes past them.

**ANDREA**

Mama, Lil' Hugh's not helping.

**DICK**

(nods sympathetically)  
You go on with your mama now. Don't worry, I'll take good care of Dan. He's gonna like workin' the river.

Dick offers an encouraging look before he totes his box outside.

**LUCILLE (O.S.)**

Hurry up now, Lil' Hugh, we've got to get on home to Memphis.

Hugh looks at Dan. Dan WHIMPERS. Hugh bolts outside.

**LUCILLE (O.S.)**

Lil' Hugh!

**EXT. SPRUELL HOME - CONTINUOUS**

Hugh runs down the street. He runs until he's out of breath.

**EXT. MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE - DAY (1954)**

An older Hugh (16), ducktail haircut, pack of cigarettes rolled up in his T-shirt sleeve, he looks tough as he tramps down the seedy side of Beale Street, humid and dripping with primal allure and the strains of a BLUES-WAILING STREET MUSICIAN (30s).

TITLE OVER:

Memphis, Tennessee - 1954