

FADE IN:

EXT. SALTICK SALOON - MAIN STREET, TOWN OF SALTICK - NIGHT

Two imbeciles, RANCE & REBUS, teeter drunkenly on the saloon porch, taking potshots with peashooter pistols at a tumbleweed in the middle of the street. BOISTEROUS SATURDAY NIGHT REVELRY echoes from the bar behind.

CLOSE ON the tumbleweed, which refuses to tumble, despite the wayward bullets and generous evening breeze.

REBUS

Damn near a dozen slugs, and that desert shrub ain't jumped yet!

RANCE

That's cuz your aim's all cockeyed.
You're just making holes in the parts done already got holes.

REBUS

Ain't like you roused it either!

Rance snaps his reloaded two-shot Derringer closed, re-aims determinedly with narrowed, rheumy eyes. He FIRES two more times. But still the obdurate diaspose does not budge.

REBUS

See! That bush don't even buck!

RANCE

(eyeing the bush warily)
Reminds me of Madame Toots' lazy, dun-haired whores. Just laying there like a gunny sack while I do all the work.

REBUS

(cackling, firing wildly)
Bet this hairy devil got fewer crab lice in it though!

As the moronic duo continue unloading uselessly...

WIDEN TO REVEAL

A hanging platform further away. A hooded male body swings from the gallows, noose coiled about its neck.

A BRISK WIND suddenly blows the cloth hood off the man's head to reveal...McCULLOUGH, early 40s, a heavily stubbled gunman

with one eye clouded over in a milky white haze. He wakens, groggy but alive, directs his monocular gaze to...

A distorted view of the gallows beam above, where a long CREAKING rope descends from the rafter, a bright-white marbled moon in the night sky. Then down to the sprung trap door below, where his spurred boots disappear into darkness.

The one-eyed gunman shifts his neck within the noose's loose confines, gauging its strangely roomy fit. He bends his knee, raising his boot heel to his cinched hands behind his back, plucks off the spiky spur, uses it to saw through the wrist bindings, which SNAP OPEN after a few deep cuts.

Hands free, McCullough lifts the spur above his head, saws through the thick rope descending from the rafter. It gives way, dropping him through the trap door onto the ground.

McCullough rises beneath the platform, severed hangman's knot loose beneath his chin. He rubs his neck, stretches his aching vertebrae, hears SQUEAKING LEATHER beneath his shirt. He reaches for his side holsters, finds none, hears the WILD PISTOL SHOTS outside the distant saloon, turns to see...

HIS MONOCULAR POV: Two drunk idiots shooting at a tumbleweed.

INT. DEN - HANGMAN'S QUARTERS - TOWN OF SALTICK - NIGHT

Low candlelight flickers as the town hangman, WEISS, early 40s, sits at his dining table sipping hot tea and tying ornate slip knots in a thick hemp rope, greasing the stubborn fibers with tallow. A brief but sharp CRANIAL TREMOR suddenly stops him short.

Weiss rubs his forehead with a lard-slathered hand, reaches to a nearby jar of white willow bark, sprinkles a few more curative wood shavings in his tea. As he begins to sip, a sudden THUD a few feet away turns his gaze.

CLOSE ON a curious leather vest on the floor, a long length of severed rope extending from a metal hoop near the waist. A severed hangman's knot with an obscured loop for sliding up and down the separate long rope drops beside it.

Weiss observes his handiwork with little surprise, glances to the shadowy man in his doorway with less vexation, despite the low-caliber pistol in the man's right hand. He casually reaches for a cloth to wipe his greasy hands until...

MCCULLOUGH
(cocking derringer)
Drop the rag. Hands in the air.

Weiss slowly lifts his shiny palms above his head.

MCCULLOUGH
(nodding to the vest)
The ruse with the noose. Why?

WEISS
For a gentleman who just escaped
certain death, you do not appear
especially relieved.

MCCULLOUGH
Maybe I like to know what I owe a
man before celebratin'.

WEISS
You owe me nothing personally. But
I believe you're due a proper jury
trial rather than the drunken mob
lynching you fell victim to earlier
this evening. Might I suggest
waiting here until morning. Once
the citizens of Saltlick have
sobered and suffered the repentant
pangs of their weekly Sabbath
hangover, you're sure to receive a
fairer verdict for your minor
offense. A casual barroom insult,
was it?

MCCULLOUGH
What if I don't aim to stick
around?

WEISS
Then you'll surely have an angry
posse on your trail for days.

MCCULLOUGH
Maybe you dig a false grave to
match that dummy noose. Then come
morning, they're none the wiser.

WEISS
An inspired notion, but not my
vocation. I am Saltlick's hangman,
not its undertaker. That would be a
unfortunate fellow by the name of
Duane, surely also inebriated in
the local saloon.

McCullough scans the darkened shack with his good eye, spots a bookshelf filled with law books, a Hebrew Bible. Below, an unlit fireplace, a small dirt-caked shovel resting beside it.

MCCULLOUGH

You seem to own a spade. A well-used one from the looks of it.

WEISS

For collecting hearth ashes. Never to bury a man, much less inter his ghost. I assume you came to Saltlick to do your own digging?

McCullough takes a cautious step into the shack, scanning.

MCCULLOUGH

I'm a hired gun, not a prospector. Problem is, all I've got is this peashooter I took off one of two idiots shooting tumbleweeds.

EXT. SALTICK SALOON - MAIN STREET - NIGHT

CLOSE ON the two aforementioned idiots lying dead in the street, stubborn tumbleweed swaying in the background breeze. Rance has McCullough's spur lodged in his forehead. Rebus has a bullet hole from Rance's discarded derringer in his.

INT. DEN - HANGMAN'S QUARTERS - TOWN OF SALTICK - RESUMING

Weiss nods his own shiny forehead soberly, staring down the barrel of Rebus's tiny two-shot derringer.

WEISS

I thought I recognized the purse pistol. I take it Rance and Rebus are no longer among the living?

MCCULLOUGH

If that's the names of the two imbeciles, then yes to both.

WEISS

I see. Well, that could change your present circumstance, give any jury trial you might receive a much less favorable outcome. Though sorely lacking in mental acuity, the dim-witted twins were esteemed in

(MORE)

WEISS (cont'd)
Saltlick...or tolerated at least.
Harmless merry-andrews of a sort.

MCCULLOUGH
Didn't have much choice. A gunman
needs a gun. And somebody made off
with my prized .45 Peacemakers
while I was swinging.

McCullough nods to the bulky, bunched-up rag on Weiss's desk.

MCCULLOUGH
Guessing one of 'em is hiding under
that greasy hand wipe right there.
Question is: Where's the other?

The stuffy atmosphere in the cramped hangman's quarters grows thicker under the weight of accusation. Weiss' greased palms linger in the air, shining in the flickering candlelight.

McCullough's one good eye quickly roves the darkened interior, locks on something else shining...a metal eye hook at the bottom of a far wall, a thin strand of slack string running through the hook and across the floor to Weiss's right ankle. As McCullough realizes, re-aims his derringer...

Weiss JERKS his ankle and the string goes TAUT...BAM! McCullough ducks and rolls, his own .45 Peacemaker FIRING from a mounted position above the door behind him, its trigger activated by the yanked string.

The shot misses McCullough, and Weiss quickly reaches for the second .45 that is, indeed, hidden under the rag on his desk. He swings the gun toward the floor-bound McCullough...until the pistol slips out of his tallow-slathered hands.

Both men watch the greased Peacemaker SKITTER into the middle of the room and come to a rest, too far for either to reach.

McCullough quickly re-aims the derringer at the string-tied Weiss, but Weiss dives from his chair for the floorboard .45, ducking McCullough's shot -- PCHOON! -- and activating another doorway-mounted .45 blast as his ankle string tightens. BAM!

That shot connects with the floorboard .45 just as Weiss reaches it, sending the Peacemaker spinning into the darkness. He looks to the empty space at a loss, glances up to see McCullough return to a stand with peashooter in hand.

The hangman spins and crawls for the .45 in the far corner. Just as he reaches its wooden grip, at the limits of his ankle string slack, a CLICK from above stops him mid-reach.

McCullough hovers over Weiss, derringer cocked close to his neck with one shot left.

WEISS

Shooting a man in the back of the head won't earn you accolades in this town.

MCCULLOUGH

Already been hanged once. What more commendation can a man ask for?

WEISS

Be advised, I possess a hearty occipital. It's possible the purse pistol won't make a dent.

MCCULLOUGH

Worked on Lincoln, didn't it?

BAM! McCullough shoots Weiss in the back of the head, finally silencing the loquacious hangman. He throws the spent derringer to the ground, grabs his preferred .45 Peacemaker from the floorboards, slides it back into his left holster.

He turns and walks for the door, the second .45 mounted above it, begins to untie the string as...a SUDDEN TREMOR, most likely a final death twitch, seizes downed Weiss's leg.

MCCULLOUGH'S POV: The mounted .45's trigger string goes TAUT before his eyes, his own gun aimed directly at his forehead.

He ducks just as -- BAM! -- the shot catches the top of his black Stetson, sweeps it clean off his head.

McCullough slowly stands, steering clear of the mounted .45, glances back to Weiss's motionless body. He snaps the remaining spur from his other boot, saws easily through the thin string, unmounts his .45. He slides the pistol into his right holster, now properly side-armed on both sides.

McCullough approaches the fireplace bookshelf, pulls Weiss's Hebrew Bible. He opens the dusty tome, finds the folded map he suspected might be there smack in the middle of Leviticus.

Hearing DISTANT VOICES, McCullough quickly stuffs the map in his pocket, collects his bullet-strafed Stetson, plops it on his head. He moves for the door, grabbing the leather vest and dummy noose, erasing all evidence of his assisted escape.

EXT. SALTICK SALOON - MAIN STREET - NIGHT

Drunken TOWNSMEN spill boozily from the saloon into the street, laughing and shouting. One of the inebriated bar patrons, DUANE THE UNDERTAKER, 30s, stops short, spying Rance and Rebus's bodies, felled by forehead bullet and flung spur.

DUANE

Damn! This was 'sposed to be my night off. Now I got three graves to dig instead of one!

EXT. HANGMAN'S QUARTERS - TOWN OF SALTICK - NIGHT

McCullough quietly slips behind Weiss's shack, unties Weiss's chocolate-color horse, COCOA BEAN, pops it hard on the fanny. The freed animal happily charges away, making noticeable hoof prints in the dirt before disappearing into the night.

EXT. SALTICK SALOON - MAIN STREET - NIGHT

As Duane bemoans his Sunday digging to come, another drunk Saltlickian, MEAN-EYED JOHN, 40s, glances from the imbeciles' corpses to the hanging platform in the distance, the short length of severed rope swinging from it.

MEAN-EYED JOHN

Make that two. Looks like that hung gunman flew the coop!

The gaggle of drunken men boozily follow John's finger, snap to attention at the sight of the empty gallows. Saturday night mirth quickly turns to mob-like contempt as...

EXT. LIVERY - TOWN OF SALTICK, MAIN STREET - NIGHT

McCullough ducks to the public stable under cover of night, grabbing a swatch of switchgrass on the way. He finds his own horse, ALABASTER, among the others, mounts his mottled white steed. He rides off in the opposite direction of Cocoa Bean, swishing the switchgrass, erasing Alabaster's hoof prints.

EXT. SALTICK SALOON - MAIN STREET - NIGHT

Hearing the HUBBUB outside, SHERIFF TREEHOLD, 60s, Saltlick's sad excuse for a lawman, stumbles out of the saloon in a drunken bluster, tin badge upside down. He spots the two dead imbeciles in the street, then the empty hanging platform.

TREEHOLD
What in tarnation?!

As he begins to mount an impromptu, inebriated posse...

SLOW PAN OVER TO

The tumble-free tumbleweed, still rocking in place in the middle of the street, spent peashooter slugs all around it. A BRISK WIND WAILS from the desert, finally rousing the obdurate diaspore and sending it into the night, revealing the object upon which the tumbleweed first became snagged.

SLOWLY ZOOMING IN ON

The object in question. In the dim moonlight, it's difficult to see but soon becomes unmistakable...a skeleton's bony index finger protruding from the dirt.

Another GUST OF WIND blows away more sand to reveal an entire skeletal hand. Clutched within its deathly grasp is a battered but still functional gold-rimmed pocket watch, its crown freshly wound by the pull of the escaping tumbleweed.

CLOSE ON the ticking pocket watch, its second hand caught in a temporal limbo, ticking one second forward, then one second back like a metronome. As the half-buried timepiece continues ticking in place, keeping questionable time...

OPENING TITLES SUPERIMPOSE: "BULL HEAD & BLIND RAGE"

INT. HANGMAN'S QUARTERS - TOWN OF SALTICK - MINUTES LATER

BOOM! The door to Weiss's cabin swings open as Sheriff Treehold bursts in, pistol drawn.

TREEHOLD
Wake up, hangman! Your last swinger
weren't all the way expired!

Treehold scans the shadowy interior, notes the shiny metal eye hook at wall's bottom, the length of string running from it and ending in a frayed slice near the doorway above.

Confused and suspicious, Treehold grabs the still-lit candle beside the tallow slab on Weiss's table, roams the cabin.

TREEHOLD
Looks like that one-eyed scoundrel
slipped his noose, shot and spurred
Rance and Rebus, then skedaddled.

Treehold ducks his head in the kitchen, the study, glances out the window to the empty, darkened outhouse in the rear.

TREEHOLD

Weiss, you slippery Hebrew, where in the Great Land of Goshen are you?!

Treehold suddenly SLIPS and falls, firing an errant gunshot -- BAM! The toppled candle catches fire at the bottom of his jacket. He GASPS, frantically patting down the flame, then glances to the overturned candle on the floor, now illuminating a small pool of dark black blood where Weiss's body once lay. But the hangman himself is nowhere to be seen.

EXT. DESERT - SEVERAL MILES OUTSIDE OF SALTICK - NIGHT

Beneath a star-speckled, eerily moonlit purple sky, a LONE FIGURE stumbles through the scrub in bare feet. His flapping pant leg snags on passing cacti, yet he keeps trudging.

A ribbon of dried blood snakes from his hairline, staining the collar of his untucked night shirt. Intermittent FLASHES OF COLORED LIGHT pulse at the back of his head, presumably reflections of the full moon on the partially exposed metallic plate at the base of his skull.

Atop a nearby cliff, a SILHOUETTED COYOTE unleashes a LONG, MOURNFUL HOWL to the same desert moon. The howl turns into a PROTRACTED YAWN, followed by a PLAINTIVE SIGH, as the coyote pads down from the rocky cliff and trots over to meet the wayward desert traveler, preempting his sagebrush shuffling.

COYOTE

How far do you plan on traveling tonight, friend?

Groggy Weiss stops in his tracks, thrown to find a scruffy desert canine directly addressing him. He points a blood-crusted finger toward the distant moon.

WEISS

I just need to make it to that far laudanum tablet. Seems I have a doozy of headache.

Weiss redirects the same finger to the rear of his skull, scratches the itchy flesh around the exposed plate. The coyote glances to the far moon, casually back to Weiss.

COYOTE

I'm not sure that pill will cure
what ails you.

Weiss teeters woozily in place, slightly perturbed.

WEISS

Are you some kind of four-legged
physician?

The coyote lifts his hind leg, scratches away a stray insect.

COYOTE

No. But I know a moon when I see
one. And a wound that needs to be
mended soon.

WEISS

This isn't the first time my
skull's impeded the trajectory of a
fired projectile. I have ferrous
reinforcements, you see.

Weiss reaches a fist to the rear of his head, knocks his
metal plate proudly, immediately collapses to the sand as a
result of the destabilizing blow.

The coyote cautiously pads closer, appealing to fallen
Weiss's pinwheeling eyes, offering an upturned paw.

COYOTE

Come back to my cave, and I'll help
tend your injury. There's no honor
in dying alone in the desert.

WEISS

I can think of no better location
to exuviate my mortal shell.

COYOTE

If you are of the same mind come
morning, I will return you to this
spot, let the scorpions and red
ants have their scavenger's feast.

Weiss glances up to the coyote, the moon fat and luminous
behind its angular, lupine head. The dog's offer is the
closest thing to salvation this unforgiving desert's likely
to provide. He reaches for the mutt's slender paw.

CLOSE ON a man's firm, muscled grasp lifting him up instead.