

(NOTE: French, the official language in the Timbuktu region of Mali, has been replaced by English)

EXT. SAHARA - DAY

(C.U.) A shiny black "Gang-Gang" desert bug that looks like a miniature bulldozer, pushes a camel turd over rippled sand, leaving an intricate trace on pristine surface. View expands to vast sandy desert with dunes as sensuous shapes on far horizon.

Tiny specks appear between those dunes amidst a rising dust-cloud, approach rapidly with faint din of engines, then five commercial logo-covered all-terrain racers fill scene, engine noise is deafening as they roar past, then disappear in distance. Silence returns over deep, ugly tracks in sand.

DISSOLVE TO:

MONTAGE OF ANIMATED MAP WITH SUPERIMPOSED BURNING RACE CARS IN DESERT

On map of Europe and Africa a line travels from Paris to Marseille - across Mediterranean to - Algeria - crisscrossing the Sahara - Niger - Lake Chad - Mali - Guinea - Senegal - Mauritania - back to Senegal, ending in Dakar.

SPORTS COMMENTATOR (V.O.)

The main body of the eighth Paris-Dakar, the most dangerous, grueling motor race in the world has reached the middle of the Sahara. Only halfway through the eight-thousand mile track, more than three-hundred of the original five-hundred-sixty-eight contestants have been eliminated, four people have already died, scores wounded and countless vehicles will remain as burned-out wrecks in the desert. After the tragic crash that claimed the life of the organizer, Thierry Sabine, the race organization is in complete disarray, but the mad dash through the Sahara continues...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SAHARA DUNE - DAY

Flying off a dune's steep leeward slope, three worn-out all-terrain cars, one of them number 253 with "AEBI" logo, get stuck amidst a dust cloud. A fourth shoots across same dune, lands on others with a BOOMING CRASH. More racers, jumping the dune, swerve past the pile-up.

Cursing drivers and navigators, most in racing outfits with sponsor logos, scramble from cars, some through windows because doors are jammed.

Fifty-year old, rugged-looking American, ERNST, in jeans and T-shirt, kicks open door of "AEBI" car, gives "finger" to occupants of car on his roof who can't get out. Together with forty-year old navigator, CHRIS, he shoves it off, occupants still inside, jumps back into his car, now with busted windows and partially caved-in roof. He revs engine, the wheels spin, Chris pushes. When car is free, Chris also jumps in. They race on without checking how others fare.

EXT./INT. INSIDE RACING CAR - DAY

In an oasis, seen through cracked windshield, Ernst tries to avoid a camel that, hobbling out of car's path, drags flour sacks that have fallen off its back. A sack gets hit. In the exploding flour cloud, camels, goats, donkeys and villagers scatter.

CHRIS
(yells in French accent)
Off track!!!

ERNST
Duh!

CHRIS
West! West!!

Ernst tears towards setting sun, barrels through a vendor's clay jar display. Yelling, furious villagers lob rocks. Another of still intact car windows shatters.

ERNST
Thanks!! Asshole! Just bought
your junk!

Ernst grabs from center console a handful of small bills, throws them out, races on among fluttering bills.

Chris holds "RACE ROAD BOOK" close to face, taps compass, types furiously into "Tripmaster" on dashboard. Engine's roar, springs' and shocks' groaning are deafening.

ERNST

The track?... Damnit!

Chris points towards row of dunes, car yaws, almost topples as Ernst tears towards them.

Ascending a steep, huge dune, engine chokes from strain, car slides back down. Ernst re-starts, guns engine to a howling scream, backs away from dune, furiously shifts gears as he re-mounts. Just before engine chokes again, car crests.

ERNST

Wow!!!... Now?

CHRIS

South!!!!

The car stops on top of dune.

ERNST

Shit! West, South... East, North!
You got us fucking lost!

CHRIS

Big deal! Worst we'll hit the
Niger river, maybe Timbuktu.

ERNST

You crazy! 's gotta be more 'n 300
friggin' miles through this shit.

Ernst stabs at dunes ahead.

ERNST (CONT'D)

Fuel?

CHRIS

Aw, we'll make it.

Strain shows as they take off again, fly over beautiful dunes painted by long blue shadows in low, red evening sun.

TITLE AND CREDITS OVER AERIAL VIEW OF SOLITARY CAR RACING
THROUGH BEAUTIFUL DESERT AS NIGHT FALLS

FADE TO:

INT./EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

In headlights, a giant dune looms in front of car.

CHRIS (V.O.)
Big baby. Gotta mount her fast!

ERNST (V.O.)
Duh!

With howling engine they crest dune, the car flies through air on precipitous lee side, flips. Both brace frantically.

ERNST (CONT'D) (V.O.)
OOOOOh Shiiiiit!!!!

EXT. SLOPE OF GIANT DUNE - NIGHT

Car flies, bounces down dune, explodes in ball of fire.

FADE TO:

EXT. HUGE SAND DUNE (WHERE CAR CRASHED) - DAY

Ernst's body is partially covered by sand drift. A grotesque-looking Gang-Gang dung beetle pushes a camel turd across his blood-encrusted face. He pries open blood-shot eyes, notices burned-out car wreck. A swollen foot prevents getting up. He crawls to wreck.

He burns hands on charred wreck, finds Chris' blood-smeared helmet, scans surroundings of sand dunes reaching to horizon.

ERNST (CONT'D)
(Yells, croaking voice)
Chris!... Chris!!!

Ernst checks contents of pocket; Swiss Army knife, lighter, signaling mirror, four photographs, a wad of money.

He aims signaling mirror at an airplane's condensation streak in sky, grimaces, makes a circling motion with index finger alongside temple, pockets everything, burns butt on hot sand.

He props up torn-off car roof for a shade shelter, crawls under, notices a scorpion also seeking shade, casually crushes it (shows this is the least of his worries).

ERNST (CONT'D)
Chris! Where...

FADE TO:

EXT. DUNE WHERE CAR CRASHED (A DAY LATER)- DAY

Blinding sun. Ernst's face is still blood-crusted, now swollen with cracked lips and vicious sunburn. He lobs shoe at a lizard, misses, tears on a clump of desert grass, discovers juicy marrow between segments, starts feverishly slicing stems with Swiss Army knife for the tiny morsels which he eats.

FADE TO:

EXT. DUNE WHERE CAR CRASHED (ANOTHER DAY LATER)- DAY

With a huge pile of shredded grass stems next to him, Ernst scans surroundings, sees nothing but dunes for 360 degrees.

He contemplates pictures of his four grown children, three girls, one boy, waves hand over grass-pile.

ERNST (CONT'D)
Guys, Dad croaked as a cow.

It is so quiet, he hears his heart beat. Clearly in pain, now with very swollen foot, he buries head in hands, weeps.

FADE TO.

EXT. DUNE WHERE CAR CRASHED (YET ANOTHER DAY LATER)- DAY

A shadow crosses the partly sand-covered sleeping figure of Ernst. A black foot with fissured, cracked skin nudges him.

Ernst opens eyes, sees foot, tries to jump up, collapses next to a small twelve-years old boy in threadbare rags with head wrapped in a flimsy black turban. A goatskin water pouch hangs from shoulder. The boy looks at Ernst's swollen foot, at car wreck, roof shelter, torn-apart desert grass, shows open hands, a questioning motion. The boy is BOUDJEMA.

ERNST
Speak English?

Boudjema stares, offers goat skin, motions to drink. Ernst drinks a little, the boy motions to drink more. Ernst points at pile of torn-apart grass.

BOUDJEMA

Pa-pa-pa-pa-pa.

ERNST

Right... pa-pa-pa.

Boudjema points to wreck, to Ernst, at Chis's bloodied helmet near it and to south. Ernst notices the boy's tracks.

ERNST (CONT'D)

My buddy?

With no answer from the boy, Ernst shrugs, crawls to wreck, places both helmets like grave markers on burnt-out car seat, scratches an arrow on chassis in direction of track.

Boudjema hoists Ernst's car roof shelter over his head, motions Ernst to follow him. Ernst points at foot, Boudjema understands, drops the roof and offers himself as a support. With Ernst leaning on the tiny boy, they wobble off in direction of track.

FADE TO:

EXT. DESERT WITH SPARSE DESERT GRASS TUFTS - DAY

Boudjema lurches, pounces on a lizard. Unsupported, Ernst tumbles, lizard buries into sand. The boy watches like a stalking cat. When sand moves imperceptibly, he pounces again, pulls lizard out. He unwinds ragged turban, displays one lizard already tied into fabric, makes motions of eating.

Ernst raises eye brow, winces because grimace hurts.

EXT. SAHARA VILLAGE (ARAWAN) - EVENING

Cresting a dune, Boudjema practically drags Ernst along. Below them are thirty dismal mud huts drowning in sand. Children with bloated bellies, emaciated old men, all in threadbare rags, stare vacantly from between crumbling walls.

No vegetation, no domestic animals, indicate what villagers might be living on. Whining clouds of flies hover over everything.

ERNST

(Mumbles deliriously)

Palm trees, dancing girls.

Boudjema drags Ernst towards a minuscule banco (a kind of adobe) dwelling.

INT. BANCO SHACK - EVENING

A blind woman sits on sand floor of eight foot x eight foot, only partially roofed shack. Flies buzz. Ernst drops onto a pile of dried camel turds. Boudjema brings the woman a rusty can with water from a clay jug, offers one to Ernst.

Seen through tiny door, people gather outside house. A bearded Arab, forty-five-year old KHADAR, well dressed and well-fed, pushes through, enters, interrogates Boudjema brusquely in Sorai, scrutinizes Ernst.

KHADAR

Boom?

ERNST

Yeah. You speak English?

KHADAR

(clicks tongue)

La.

Ernst points at himself, pantomimes another person with him, makes questioning gesture with open hand.

KHADAR (CONT'D)

(holds up one finger)

Timbuktu.

ERNST

Chis 's already in Timbuktu?

All stare at Ernst uncomprehending who looks "out of it".

ERNST (CONT'D)

Wash?

Trembling, he makes awkward motions of washing hands.

KHADAR

(to Boudjema)

Yakata heri.

Khadar strides out, Boudjema hands Ernst another a little sardine can of water.

ERNST

No, wash!

Ernst now pantomimes washing whole body, groans, passes out into the pile of (cooking fuel) camel turds.

EXT. SANDY PLAIN (DAYS LATER) - DAY

Accompanied by ten babbling kids, Boudjema and two other small boys support Ernst (looking like hell) who drags himself towards a trough from which clear water overflows into sand. A little way off stand a few solar panels.

ERNST

I'll be...

Ernst gulps water, scrubs blood crusts and dirt. Nearly naked, he makes the kids, Arabs and Blacks, uncomfortable. Trying to cover themselves better, they look tragically comical because they wear nothing but flimsy rags.

Ernst contemplates water disappearing in sand, scans surrounding, crumbling mud shacks, destitute kids.

ERNST (CONT'D)

(mumbling)

Could grow food with that... sure
looks like they could use it.

Clearly feeling better after drinking and washing, he fidgets, swats at flies.

ERNST (CONT'D)

Timbuktu the end of the world...
ha!

Clearly trying to snap out of his funk, to amuse the kids, Ernst demonstrates a headstand. When one attempts also, his dropping rags expose privates. Embarrassed laughter ends headstands.

The sand is littered with bleached camel bones. Ernst, hobbling, tries to throw a rib like a boomerang but it simply plops to ground. Fidgeting, like a kid playing in a sandbox, he sticks bones into the ground, collects camel turds (hard, marble-like pellets), scatters them inside bone-enclosed circles. The kids watch, puzzled.

ERNST

(Mumbling)

Garden. Easy... water, camel
shit... makes soil... Seeds!...
ah, I'll send some from Timbuktu
when I get there...

Kids copy Ernst, babbling, chattering.

INT. BANCO SHACK (SAME AS EARLIER) - NIGHT

Boudjema's grandmother, roasts two lizards over a smoldering camel dung fire. The boy makes her eat one, offers other to Ernst. After a small bite, Ernst returns it, pantomimes about not being hungry.

ERNST

You.

Boudjema smiles, eats.

EXT. BETWEEN DUNES (DAYS LATER)- DAY

Wet rags in hand, GIRAGE (fourteen, a bit dopey), SALIM and BABILI (both twelve, very emaciated) and Boudjema, sneak up to a crude shelter of dried goat skins, tear it away, with rags slap down resting migratory birds who'd been seeking its shade.

Girage notices locusts nearby, pounces, clumsily knocks over bird-catching trap, but gets several locusts.

The kids show catch to Ernst who sits nearby. His leg is less swollen.

In awe of Ernst's lighter, the kids use it to make a camel dung fire, roast birds and locusts. The boys giggle happily over Ernst's funny faces while he eats with them.

BOUDJEMA

Helou.

ERNST

Yeah....

A long camel caravan loaded with salt bars, crests a nearby dune. Boudjema points to it.

BOUDJEMA

Timbuktu.

Ernst hobbles in a rush towards caravan.

EXT. DESERT (SEVERAL DAYS LATER)- DAY

In a threadbare blue bou-bou, Ernst limps alongside salt caravan. Forty camels are tied together, jaws to tails. A nomad, walking alongside Ernst, pulls down the closest camel's ear. The camel roars but lowers head.

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For the complete script please contact Jennifer Brooks at
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