

P I E C E S

A lot of this is true.

*"A journey is a person in itself;
no two are alike.."* -John Steinbeck
(over black)

FADE IN:

INT. LIBRARY - LOWER EAST SIDE, NEW YORK -- LATE AFTERNOON

We are CLOSE ON a PAIR OF BLACK HANDS chomping away at the keys of an OLD LAPTOP COMPUTER. As they continue typing...

We move to a worn SPIRAL NOTEBOOK open on the TABLE. Taped to the page is an old B&W photo of FDR sitting in a wheelchair on his porch. His dog on his lap. A School Girl by his side..

The hands move from the computer and begin turning the pages of the notebook... One hand holds the book as the other flips through B&W cutouts of paralytic adults, disabled boys and girls with metal braces on their legs... We even glimpse Elvis holding a sign that reads 'Join March of Dimes'...

Finally, the hand flips to a FADING PHOTO of a BLACK KID, 6, on crutches... A caption below reads, "Edris 1945." The hand touches the photo almost reverently as we WIDEN to see ERICK COATES, 28, black, handsome, a man consumed by his thoughts, staring down at the old childhood photo of his father.

After some moments Erick sighs, closes the notebook and piles it on top a STACK OF BOOKS ON POLIO...

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Sir?

Erick turns to the voice. There, standing a few feet away is a young FEMALE LIBRARIAN with a cart full of books. She reaches into her cart, pulls out a SMALL BOOK.

FEMALE LIBRARIAN

Earlier you asked me if we had a certain book in our catalog...
You're in luck...

(passes over the book)
Someone just returned it...

ERICK

Thank you...

FEMALE LIBRARIAN

My pleasure... Good luck with whatever you're working on.

ERICK

Thanks.

The librarian nods, smiles and carts the books away...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. STAIRWELL, TENEMENT BUILDING -- LATER DAY

Erick lumbers up the stairwell feeling for his keys...

INT. HALL -- CONTINUOUS

Erick walks down a dimly lit hall, backpack slung over one shoulder... Humming vacuums and crying babies fill the air...

Up ahead an attractive YOUNG LADY with the look of a woman chasing sleep, steps out of her unit... Her cute toddler waddles out behind. She locks the door, takes her son by the hand and smiles a sad Mona Lisa smile at Erick in passing...

Erick stops in front of his Unit, L70... Looks down at the keys dangling from his hand, then sneaks a peek up the hall at the woman and her son turning the corner...

And as Erick rotates the 'L', signage to the '7' that it truly is...

INT. FRONT ROOM, ERICK'S APARTMENT -- CONTINUOUS

TIGHT on the New York Times. A photo of New York Governor Mario Cuomo graces the front cover. As we hear Erick's key work its way into the lock, the NEWSPAPER is suddenly lowered to reveal EDRIS COATES. The black lad from the notebook, now an old man in his 72nd year of life. Edris sits back on the sofa. Scarred from Polio as a child, he must use a cane to ease his steps.

The front door opens. Erick enters heavy... his chagrin felt.

EDRIS

Didn't expect you back so soon.

Erick closes the door... Tosses the keys on a nearby TABLE.

ERICK

No point in just sitting there.

He removes his jacket... sets his backpack down by the door.

EDRIS

Able to get any good writing done?

ERICK

Depends on your definition of good.

Erick walks over to the sofa, flops down, drops back, groans.

ERICK (CONT'D)
What am I doing...

EDRIS
Whaddya mean what are you doing...?
You're doing what you love, you're
writing...

ERICK
Nothing worth keeping...

EDRIS
C'mon now...

ERICK
Read what I wrote... You'll agree.

EDRIS
Can't be that bad...

Erick scoffs.

ERICK
Just take my word for it...

Edris folds up the paper... sets it on the sofa by his CANE.

EDRIS
Tell me something...

Erick groans, turns to his father and eyes him sharply.

ERICK
Tell you what? That I'm
overthinking things? There's
nothing to tell because you already
know... I know it, too. Alright? So
whatever lecture you're planning
just save it...

EDRIS
Alright. No lecture... But can I at
least ask why you're overthinking?

ERICK
It's obvious. I'm stuck... I don't
know what to do, where to go, or
how to even go about doing whatever
it is I should be doing...

A beat.

EDRIS
Did it not come naturally before?

ERICK

Did what come naturally?

EDRIS

The story...? This story... All your stories... Eventually, in their own time, don't they usually piece themselves together?

ERICK

I mean yeah... but I still gotta write em.

EDRIS

You know what I mean...

A beat... Edris staring at Erick.

ERICK

Yeah, I guess...

EDRIS

So help me understand why you're thinking this time around will be any different?

ERICK

I'm not saying it's gonna be different --

EDRIS

-- Then what are you saying?

Erick and Edris level looks at one another.

ERICK

Nothing... It doesn't matter.

EDRIS

Of course it matters. This is the process, you know. Always has been. Always will. Respect the process, am I right? Your mother used to drill you with those words, remember?

(off Erick's slight nod)

So tell me, why aren't you respecting it now?

ERICK

I am respecting it. Why don't you think I'm respecting it?

EDRIS

Because you're not. You're not respecting it... If you were, you'd understand these creative slowdowns if you will, are nothing new. You'd realize today you could be stuck in one direction and tomorrow free to go in another... Think back, it was the twist and turns that enabled you to create something great once, remember? I do. And I still have faith in you. More faith than you have in your self. So if you don't believe yourself, at least believe me when I say, you'll do it again... Trust me. You will. And it will be great.

Erick stares straight ahead with the trademark look of defeat. Who knows if he heard anything his father said.

EDRIS (CONT'D)

What about the book, any luck?

ERICK

What book...?

EDRIS

The book I told you about... They have it at the library or what?

ERICK

Oh... yeah I got it. Haven't looked at it yet, though...

Edris watches Erick rub at his exhausted face.

EDRIS

Go lie down. Give your brain a rest.

Erick nods. Starts to get up, stops, turns to his father...

ERICK

Thought you said you weren't gonna lecture me...?

EDRIS

72 years of hindsight instructed me otherwise.

(off Erick's half-smile)
Sweet dreams.

Edris smiles, returns to his paper, WHIPS the crinkles out. Erick gets up, slugs down the hall to his room and eventually closes himself off to the world...

EXT. COBBLE HILL BROWNSTONES, UPPER EAST SIDE -- SAME

Beautiful 19th century BRICK ROW HOMES. Trees shedding their autumn foliage onto the pavement. A picturesque fall avenue.

INT. WALK IN CLOSET, BROWNSTONE HOME -- CONTINUOUS

We're CLOSE ON an Abyssinian Kitten rubbing itself against the wooden legs of a small stool... The stool moves slightly and the cat DARTS off scared...

WIDEN to a pair of feet, arched up on its' tiptoes atop the stool. The old white feet belong to CHERYL EASTON. A charming, 68-year old lady easily mistaken for a woman fresh in her 50's...

Cheryl is reaching up high on a shelf... dusting off the years when she mistakenly knocks off a vintage SLIPPER BOX...

She tries to catch the box, but is unable to, thus the box crashes to the floor... OLD B&W PHOTOGRAPHS, and TEA-STAINED LETTERS spill across the floor... Cheryl stands very still... Staring down on the letters as if caught in some trance... as if the letters held her most painful memories within them...

AND THEN THE PHONE RINGS... STARTLING HER...

INT. STUDY -- CONTINUOUS

Cheryl hobbles into the study, pulls the string on an ornate LAMP atop a round table... Soft light fills a room overrun with books... Cheryl grabs the phone off the DOCK... and with a sweet, fading British accent she answers:

CHERYL
Cheryl speaking...
(recognizing)
Good... How are you?... Tonight?
No, nothing as of yet... Sounds
lovely... What time?

Cheryl's voice tapers off as we move toward a FRAMED PHOTO on the table by the phone dock. The fading image shows four people. A slightly younger CHERYL, a FRAIL MULATTO WOMAN, a YOUNG AFRICAN GIRL and an OLDER WHITE MAN.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM, APARTMENT -- LATER EVENING

Edris wears a gentlemen's tweed cap on his head. He's writing a short message down on a piece of paper... Once finished, he folds the paper in half and leaves it on the coffee table. Edris stands to his feet and grabs his cane. He is sharply dressed off to somewhere special...

INT. ERICK'S BEDROOM, APARTMENT -- AN HOUR LATER

Erick's knocked out... lightly snoring with his mouth open... SUDDENLY THE ALARM SOUNDS... Erick groans, blindly feels for the clock on the bedside table.. He finds it... RED DIGITS show, 6:45." He hits it hard... the beeping stops.

INT. HALL, APARTMENT -- MOMENTS LATER

Erick's bedroom door opens. He steps out in a drunken stupor. Wobbly... rubbing his eyes... feeling his way down the hall.

INT. LIVING ROOM, APARTMENT -- CONTINUOUS

Erick walks into the living room, looks around, calls out...

ERICK

Dad?

INT. EDRIS'S BEDROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Erick looks around his fathers bedroom... It's very neat.

ERICK

Yo dad, you in here?

Mounted on the wall is a PICTURE of a BLACK WOMAN... She's smiling, but looks sad. Traces of regret cling to her eyes. A caption below reads, "In Loving Memory of Charlotte Coates."

INT. LIVING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Erick finds the note left on the table... reads it aloud.

ERICK

Went to visit a friend... Keep in mind, the nature of all things is to work its' way together. Allow nature to do its' thing. Be back tonight... Love dad.

Erick sets the letter down on the table, stretches, yawns.

CUT TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD, UPPER EAST SIDE -- EVENING

Pedestrians roam the Upper East Side blocks with dreamlike grace... CLASSICAL MUSIC carries us into the...

INT. STUDY, CHERYL'S BROWNSTONE -- CONTINUOUS

A RECORD spins on an antique Crosley player. The door has been left open... and the MUSIC gracefully flows into the:

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

The CAT eats from a bowl on the floor. Cheryl's back is to us. She wears a red apron as she cooks over a hot stove.

The DOORBELL RINGS... Cheryl lowers the flame on the burner, wipes her hands with a towel... and goes to answer the door.

INT. KITCHEN, APARTMENT -- SAME NIGHT

Erick carries a bowl of ginger snaps, and coffee into the:

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

He sets the food down on the coffee table... moves to his bag by the door... He pulls out the aforementioned book and brings it over to the sofa. He flops down, pops a few cookies into his mouth AND CRACKS OPEN THE BOOK...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE CENTRAL AFRICAN JUNGLE -- NIGHT 1956

The MOON on a foggy night... It hangs high over the River Congo that intersects the dense jungle to the horizon..

"BELGIAN CONGO, 1956"
(caption)

In graphic slow-motion the fog lifts... Warm color bleeds in slowly... And as night gives way to day, birds begin to chirp and soar overhead the iridescent river where FISHERMAN paddle along in their long pirogues...

INTERCUT with Erick turning to the next page...

... PUSH THROUGH a lush paradise. Divine light, drooping liana vines, exotic birds chanting, and swooping from tree to tree...

...Under the medley of jungle vibrations is the sound of twigs BREAKING and leaves CRACKLING...

AND THEN WE SEE THEM... PYGMIES. Small-statured men with TIN CANS in their hands... Tracking across thick brush with ease.

...And as the men furtively push through the underbrush... in time they come to a series of NETS strung up in the bush surrounding tall trees. The LEADER of the group raises his hand... the men, and the forest hang in the balance until... THE HAND DROPS.

AN EXPLOSION OF SOUNDS. THE MEN SHOUT AND POUND AGAINST THE TIN CANS... TREES RUMBLE... BIRDS CHIRP AND SCATTER WILDLY... SOMETHING MASSIVE IS COMING... WE CAN HEAR THE GRUNTS... THE HOOTING... THE SCREECHING... IT ALL CRESCENDOES TO A MASS EXODUS OF TERRIFIED CHIMPANZEES... DRIVEN OUT FROM THEIR NIGHT ROOSTS IN THE TREES DOWN INTO THE WAITING NETS BELOW...

Erick's interest builds as he flips to the next page...

...Half a dozen CHIMPS tug wildly on the fixed frames of the cages that entrap them. Familial cries echo out from the wind-whipped jungle beyond as the Pygmies scramble to load the cages onto two 50's-era diesel trucks waiting nearby...

FADE TO:

EXT. LINDI, BELGIAN CONGO -- HOURS LATER

Several wind-whipped BELGIAN FLAGS roll against the frame... Pan to the right to see the flags mark the entrance to a well-developed CAMP... A large timberland camp sweltering under the sepia-toned African sun...

A distant GROAN builds... African woman seen exiting the camp cover their faces and move to one side as the diesel TRUCKS roar into camp, kicking up clouds of dust in their wake...

... And as the trucks descend down a narrow road, deep into the recesses of the unknown camp, we rise to see a Bamboo Sign arched overhead that reads, "CAMP DE LA LINDI - POLIO MISSION CENTRE D' EXPERIMENTATION ENTREE INERDITE."

INTERCUT with Erick, blindly reaching for his mug, unable to take his eyes off the book... He takes a few careful sips... sets the mug back down on the table, TURNS THE PAGE...

... Palm tree fronds flutter in the changing winds... A wind-whipped flagpole comes into view, as does the LABORATOIRE MÉDICAL. A 50's, fortress-like, raw concrete building.

"LABORATOIRE MÉDICAL STANLEYVILLE 1957"
(caption)

INT. CORRIDOR, LABORATOIRE MÉDICAL -- DAY

We follow a LAB ASSISTANT... He walks down the dimly lit gypsum walled hall holding a SMALL CONTAINER with both hands... Under his echoing footsteps are depressed voices... He comes to a door. Opens it...

INT. SMALL LABORATOIRE -- CONTINUOUS

The assistant closes the door... We turn with him as he walks across the faded turquoise lab, passing busy PHYSICIANS in white coats...

He carries the container over to a long table scattered with equipment... TONGS, PIPETS... several SYRINGES. The physician sets down the container. And as he prepares the ORGAN inside:

A different HAND wearing rubber gloves reaches for one of the syringes and pokes it into a VIAL... An EXTRACT is drawn out from the vial and into the syringe... The MALE PHYSICIAN raises the syringe against the sun light, flicks it twice, gives it a slight test squirt. As he pivots toward the container...

EXT. LOOKING IN THROUGH A ROW OF WINDOWS -- CONTINUOUS

We see the physicians gather round. All eyes on history in the making as the syringe is driven into a CHIMP KIDNEY...

BACK TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM, ERICK'S APARTMENT - "PRESENT" -- NIGHT

Erick marks his place in the book, closes it. He wipes at the fatigue quickly creeping onto his face, looks up when he hears a LIGHT KNOCK at his front door...

Erick sets the book on the table, moves to the door... He looks through the peephole...

(POV) OF THE PEEPHOLE

the young lady with the Mona Lisa smile stands in the hall...

Erick opens the door... She looks up.

YOUNG LADY

Hi...

ERICK

Hey...

A moment. Each gazing back at one another in silence.

YOUNG LADY

Um, I was wondering... could you give me a hand real quick. I know it's random, but I'm having trouble with my smoke alarm. Can't seem to figure it out...

(off Erick's silence)

That is if you aren't busy...

EXT. COBBLE HILL BROWNSTONE NEIGHBORHOOD -- LATER NIGHT

We rise above a TAXI idling curbside to Cheryl's Brownstone. Suddenly her FRONT DOOR opens... Edris limps out awkwardly... Cheryl stands framed in the doorway...

EDRIS

(turns around)

Thanks again for having me...

CHERYL

Thank you for the company...

Edris smiles. He wants to say more. Do more... but...

EDRIS

Good night Cheryl...

CHERYL

Good night Edris...

And that's that... Edris turns, slowly limps his way down the stairs toward the waiting Taxi...

INT. YOUNG MOTHER'S APARTMENT -- EVEN LATER NIGHT

The TODDLER is dressed like a cape crusader. He stands beside his mother. They are both looking up at Erick, up on a step stool, reaching at the smoke detector on the ceiling.

The lady and her son cover their ears and grimace as a LOUD PIERCING BEEP reverberates throughout the apartment...

TODDLER

Mommy, what's dat sound...?

YOUNG LADY

Don't know sweetie...

(looking up at Erick)

Is everything alright? That didn't sound so good...

ERICK

Just a test beep. All finished now.

The lady smiles... puts her hands together appreciatively.

YOUNG LADY

Thank you, thank you, thank you...
That thing would've kept me up all
night...

Erick steps down... wipes his hands off on his pants.

YOUNG LADY (CONT'D)

You saved me...

Under their smiles lies a subtle interest in each other...

YOUNG LADY (CONT'D)

Shame on me, I'm LISA by the way...

ERICK

Erick...

Erick and Lisa shake each others hand...

LISA

Nice to meet you Erick...

ERICK

You, too, Lisa...

A beat. They release hands as the toddler howls like a sleepy
wolf. Lisa and Erick look down at the boy... mouth wide
open... caught in a massive YAWN...

LISA

Looks like someone's ready for bed.

ERICK

Is he your son...?

LISA

(nods)

Yes he is. My little sweetheart....

ERICK

(looking down at toddler)

What's your name?

The bashful boy looks up at his mom.

LISA

Don't be shy. Tell Erick your name.

SHELDON

(shyly)

Sheldon...

ERICK

Sheldon?
 (off Sheldon's head nod)
 What kind of Superhero are you,
 Sheldon?

SHELDON smiles, cowers behind his mother's leg, rubs his sleepy eyes...

LISA

The bashful kind.
 (re: to Sheldon)
 Sweetheart, you can't save the
 world being timid.

A HARD KNOCK AT THE DOOR wipes the calm smiles off Erick and Lisa's faces...

LISA (CONT'D)

Wonder who that could be...

Lisa moves to the door... looks into the peephole, turns back to Erick with a look of consternation.

LISA (CONT'D)

That's strange...

ERICK

What?

LISA

It's the police...

Lisa unlocks the deadbolt and opens the door to reveal TWO UNIFORMED OFFICERS standing in the hall with austere looks... Chaotic static pours out of their shoulder radios as we...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. LOWER EAST SIDE -- DAY

A wide view of historic NYC blocks and snow-filled avenues...

"SIX MONTHS LATER"
 (caption)

INT. HALL, ERICK'S TENEMENT BUILDING -- SAME

It's as if a vacuum is always humming and a baby always crying... Nothing is out of the ordinary here until we see...

Cheryl walking up the hall in her winter coat... She slowly passes unit after unit, glimpsing the signage on each door...

Finally Cheryl comes to Erick's unit and stops. She knocks several times... No one answers immediately and so Cheryl adjusts her coat and waits...

SHELDON (O.S.)
Beat you to the door!

LISA (O.S.)
Sheldon...!

Cheryl looks to her right as a slightly taller Sheldon, dressed in winter gear, RACES up the hall... She smiles at the child... Lisa holds groceries as she comes up the hall, shooting Cheryl a leery side-glance in passing to her door...

LISA (CONT'D)
(beat)
If you're looking for Mr. Pope. I'm afraid you're a little late. He's no longer with us...

CHERYL
(regretful)
Sadly, I'm aware...

Lisa eyes Cheryl, surprised... vets her authenticity.

CHERYL (CONT'D)
I'm told he had a son...
(off Lisa's silence)
I was hoping to speak with him... I have something I would like to give him...

LISA
He's not here...

CHERYL
Would you happen to know where I could find him...?

LISA
I know he leaves early in the morning... Where he goes is anyone's guess...
(beat)
We don't speak much these days...

Cheryl feels Lisa's sadness... Lisa's horrible at hiding it.

SHELDON
Mommy, I'm hungry...

LISA
 (re: to Sheldon)
 Okay sweetie...

CHERYL
 Well, I best be on my way... Thank
 you for your time...

Cheryl turns, starts to walk off...

LISA
 I do remember him saying he liked
 to write...

Cheryl turns back around...

LISA (CONT'D)
 His name's Erick by the way... He's
 the quiet type so I would check the
 library... With any luck maybe
 you'll find him there...

CHERYL
 I'll do that... Thank you...

Cheryl starts to walk off again...

LISA
 You never said who you were...

... And again Cheryl stops and turns.

CHERYL
 My name is Cheryl Easton...

LISA
 You originally from around here?

Cheryl holds her gaze at Lisa.

CHERYL
 No... Not originally...

Cheryl nods farewell... Lisa watches Cheryl disappear down
 the hall... And then Lisa too disappears into her apartment.

CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY -- LATER DAY

INTO A BRIEF MONTAGE Cheryl floats around the hushed library,
 taking her time like the old gal she is...

...She moves up and down the quiet reference aisles...

...She peeks into the vision panels into the archive rooms...
 ...She weaves through the cluster of public computers...

Lastly we see Cheryl check the dim corners of the library...
 Quiet places where people often lose themselves to thought,
 but she finds no one with the likelihood of being Erick...

INT. WOMEN'S BATHROOM, LIBRARY -- MOMENTS LATER

A toilet flushes and a stall door opens... Out comes Cheryl,
 fixing her clothes as she moves toward the sink...

INT. LIBRARY -- CONTINUOUS

Cheryl steps out of the bathroom drying her hands with a
 towel... She disposes the towel in a nearby trash bin,
 adjusts the handbag slung on her shoulder, and turns:

(POV) OF CHERYL

at the far end of the library, a MAN sits facing the window..

CLOSE ON THE WINDOW

Outside cars blur by in both directions. People walk and
 laugh, birds perch on the naked branches of trees... All this
 life outside, as if to underscores Erick's lifeless
 reflection playing off the window... He's slumped back in an
 upholstered barrel chair, expressionless... Laptop wedged
 between the cushions... Adrift with the eyes of a castaway
 searching a thousand miles nowhere...

We see Cheryl's reflection as she approaches from behind...

CHERYL

Erick?

He blinks... A subtle sign of life...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. KITCHEN, ERICK'S APARTMENT -- NEXT MORNING

Filthy dishes are piled high in the sink and countertop. Open
 pantry doors reveal empty shelves... A ROACH scurries across
 the greasy linoleum floor...

INT. LIVING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

A similar disaster situation spills into the living room...

And at the end of the hall we once again see Erick's bedroom
 door open... Erick steps out, already dressed, a heaviness
 hangs over his eyes...

INT/EXT. ERICK'S APARTMENT -- MOMENTS LATER

Erick quietly steps out of his apartment into the murky hall. He wears a thick jacket, backpack slung over one shoulder...

Erick locks the door and wiggles the knob... He pulls several, "Past Due" notices off the door, balls them up...

Erick starts to walk off when out of the corner of his eye he notices a WHITE ENVELOPE lying on the floor...

Erick looks down at the strange envelope... thinks on it... A DOOR CLOSES... Erick looks up the hall at a MAN heading off to work.... Erick turns back to the envelope... Ponders on it a bit more... Pondering, pondering, pondering as if it were gearing up to explain itself... Erick looks around once more, decides to grab the envelope and slip it inside his bag...

INT. PUBLIC BUS -- A LITTLE LATER

Erick boards the bus and pays his fare... He moves down the aisle with his eyes lowered and finds a seat in the back...

INT. BACK SEAT, MOVING BUS -- MOMENTS LATER

Erick gazes out the window... A rising sun warms his face...

INT. LIBRARY -- AN HOUR LATER

We now see Erick move through the library with the ease of someone who knows exactly where they're going...

ALCOVED AREA, LIBRARY -- CONTINUOUS

Erick finds his spot, sets his bag down, removes his jacket..

INT. BATHROOM, LISA'S APARTMENT -- SAME

Lisa stands before the mirror, disheveled, rubbing sleep from her eyes... She opens the mirror to reveal a medicine cabinet full of ORANGE PRESCRIPTION BOTTLES...

INT. BREAKFAST NOOK, CHERYL'S BROWNSTONE -- SAME

Cheryl sits at a table alongside a wall of windows and takes her collection of old lady medicine with her morning TEA...

INT. ALCOVED AREA, LIBRARY -- HOURS LATER

Erick's slumped in a chair, paralyzed in dead thought. He's staring ahead at shelves teeming with books when he recalls the envelope and reaches into his bag. He produces the envelope, opens it. Folded inside is a LETTER...

Erick carefully unfolds the letter. Jittery handwriting and splashes of BLOOD cover the page...

ERICK
(under breath)
What the...

The top of the page reads, "March 25th, 1996." The letter begins with...

DYING WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
Dear Aunt Cheryl, I'm fading. I
write this final letter to you with
what remains of my mind...

FADE TO:

EXT. A SLEEPY VILLAGE, SOMEWHERE IN UGANDA -- NIGHT (1996)

A cold, hard rain falls over SCATTERED HOMESTEADS of low, round thatch roof huts. There are no people here, no animals, no movement... no nothing...

INT. THATCH ROOF HUT -- CONTINUOUS

Dreary in every sense of the word. A tiny BRAZIER throws light onto the wall... Strained, hollow squeals of a person struggling to breathe takes us over to a WOMAN'S FRAIL HAND making slow progress writing a LETTER...

The unknown woman coughs... then coughs again and again... In the throes of her racking cough, she spews up BLOOD onto the letter...

CUT TO:

INT. ALCOVED AREA, LIBRARY - "PRESENT" -- NIGHT

A MALE STAFF stands before Erick with a cart full of books...

MALE STAFF
(lightly nudges Erick)
Sir... Sir...

Erick looks up... jerked from a deep sleep...

MALE STAFF (CONT'D)
We closed thirty minutes ago...

Erick looks at the staff in disbelief... searches for the nearest window for proof... A DEEP BLACK NOW FILLS THE CITY SKYLINE... Erick sighs, rubs his face.

MALE STAFF (CONT'D)
Please pack up your things and exit
the library immediately...

Groggy, with eyes half closed... Erick nods okay...

INT. HALL, TENEMENT BUILDING -- LATER NIGHT

Erick lumbers down the hall digging in his pocket for his
keys... He comes to his door, starts to let himself in...

A DOOR OPENS TO...

... Erick facing us with a grim look on his face.

LISA
(surprised)
Erick.

A beat.

ERICK
Mind if I...?

LISA
No... Of course not... Come in.

Lisa steps aside, allows Erick to enter.

INT. LISA'S APARTMENT -- CONTINUOUS

Erick stands like a person uncomfortable in their own skin as
Lisa makes quick work of clearing a spot on her dingy sofa...

LISA
Please excuse the mess... Wasn't
expecting any company...

Lisa finishes...

LISA (CONT'D)
There... Much better.

... motions for Erick to have a seat.

Erick sets his bag on the ground and takes a seat... Lisa
carries the bundle of junk off to another room... After some
moments Lisa returns seemingly vitalized by Erick's company..

LISA (CONT'D)
So, can I get you something to
drink? Water? Juice? I have just
about every flavor of juice...
(MORE)

LISA (CONT'D)
I'm sure Sheldon won't mind you
having some...

Lisa smiles. Erick sits with his trademark pensive mood.

LISA (CONT'D)
Y'know what, scratch that. I have
an even better idea. Be right back.

Lisa walks off into the kitchen. We stay with Erick looking
around the place... Faint clinking leads to Lisa returning
with TWO GLASSES AND A BOTTLE OF LIQUOR.

LISA (CONT'D)
Writers drink Scotch right...?

A half-smile flickers across Erick's face... Lisa hands Erick
a glass as she takes a seat beside him on the sofa...

LISA (CONT'D)
(works off the lid)
I've had this bottle forever...
Pretty sure it was a Christmas
gift...
(brief pause)
Or maybe not... I don't even
remember anymore. I do know I was
pregnant with Sheldon at the time
and wasn't about to chance him...

Lisa fills Erick's glass and then her own...

LISA (CONT'D)
Funny how things work out. Now I
get to share it with a writer...
(smiles, raises her glass)
Cheers.

Erick meets his glass with Lisa's... "Clink". They sip. Lisa
grimaces at the strength of the whiskey...

LISA (CONT'D)
Ugh... Jesus. How do you writers
drink this stuff? Taste awful...

A moment. Erick looking down into his drink...

ERICK
I wouldn't know...

LISA
Know what?

ERICK

How writers drink this. I'm not a writer...

LISA

Whaddya mean you're not a writer?

ERICK

Just what I said. I'm not a writer.

Lisa sets her drink down on the coffee table...

ERICK (CONT'D)

I can't remember the last time I wrote anything. Not a single word.

LISA

But I thought you loved writing...

ERICK

I don't know what to think anymore.

Erick lowers his eyes, exhales heavily.

ERICK (CONT'D)

I still haven't visited his grave. Not once...

(glances at Lisa)

It's like I'm physically unable to. And I don't know why. At night I tell myself tomorrow's the day I'll go see him...

(shakes head regrettably)

Tomorrow rolls around as it does and it just becomes another day of the same routine... He's been gone six months already. Can you believe that?

Erick glances at Lisa. She sighs, lightly shakes her head...

ERICK (CONT'D)

I can't see a way out, Lisa... I feel like I'm trapped in a box and the walls around me are all the same. Same color. Same texture. Same everything... And there's no way for me to tell what's what... It must sound crazy, but that's what it feels like...

(lowers his eyes)

Lisa gently places her hand atop Erick's. Erick looks up.

LISA

First of all, you are a writer. The love's still there, it's just slightly covered up. And secondly, the way you feel doesn't sound crazy at all. It makes a lot of sense, actually. I've been there. Believe me. More times than I like to remember. I've had my dark moments. Still do, at times. But I deal with them in my own way. The way only I know. All grief is personal, Erick. You'll be surprised at how much is discovered in dark places. So stop being so hard on yourself. You'll be able to visit your father soon. I know you will. And before you know it, you'll be writing again, too.

Erick looks up at the comforting smile on Lisa's face...
After some moments Lisa says:

LISA (CONT'D)

Oh yeah, I meant to tell ya. Some strange lady came by the other day looking for you. Said her name was Cheryl... Easton. If you ask me she looked lost, but she knew about your father's passing...

Erick looks at Lisa baffled.

ERICK

She knew about my father?

LISA

Yeah. Said she wanted to speak with you, though. Said she had something to give you. I told her...

Suddenly a thought HATCHES in Erick's mind...

LISA (CONT'D)

(off Erick's movements)

What is it?

Lisa watches inquisitively as Erick reaches down into his bag and pulls out the LETTER...

ERICK

This was outside my door this morning.

Erick hands the letter to Lisa... She gently unfolds it.

LISA
(taken aback)
Is this blood?

ERICK
Looks like it to me.

LISA
(examines the letter)
Whoa. Looks old. Mind if I read it?

ERICK
No. Go ahead...

For some moments we watch Lisa's eyes scroll back and forth across the page... In time, she looks up a bit lost...

LISA
I don't get it, what is this?

Erick shrugs.

ERICK
A letter from her niece I guess...

LISA
I wonder why she gave this to you?

Erick pulls out his laptop.

ERICK
You said her last name was Easton,
right?

LISA
Uh-huh. Why? You gonna look her up?

ERICK
Yeah... Maybe we can find out some
information on who she is.

LISA
That may be a little difficult...

Erick looks up at Lisa.

ERICK
Why's that?

INT. LIVING ROOM, ERICK'S APARTMENT -- MOMENTS LATER

The front door is open. Across the hall we can see Lisa's door has been left open as well...

PULL BACK to see Lisa and Erick sitting shoulder to shoulder on the sofa, looking at the computer screen.

ERICK

It's 2014... Who doesn't have internet?

LISA

From now on I'll just steal yours.

Erick grins. Lisa smiles. Something deeper than friendship is developing...

ERICK

Think I found something.

LISA

Yeah...?

ERICK

Assuming there's only one Cheryl Easton...

Lisa scrunches closer to Erick... He stiffens up.

LISA

Relax. You're not really my type...

Lisa smiles a cryptic smile at Erick...

LISA (CONT'D)

So what does it say?

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. DEVONPORT, ENGLAND -- SUMMER DAY 1958

Naval ships and large vessels fill the waters. The South Yard of the largest naval base in Western Europe is busy...

"NAVY DAY, DEVONPORT DOCKYARD 1958"
(caption)

Officers in Royal uniform stand at ease... Children, some lame, with braces fixed to their legs, point in awe... Men and women peruse booths erected throughout as the dockyard is open to the general public...

Amidst all the excitement a YOUNG CHERYL(mid-20's) cuts through the crowd to a clearing... She holds down her floral dress as a gust of wind blows her hair... She looks around... There's an innocence to her that renders her beautiful... Eventually, her eyes rest on who she is here for. She smiles radiantly and waves her hand in the air...

HENRY (PRE-LAP)

It was very lonely without you.

EXT. PARK -- LATER DAY

Cheryl smiles as she walks... She pulls in the strong arm of HENRY EASTON(27), a tall, handsome, Naval officer. Together the two love birds traipse through an avenue of trees...

CHERYL

You mean to say during all your excursions there were no women who offered their company?

HENRY

No... There were plenty. Ample actually.

Cheryl scoffs, hits Henry in the arm. Henry smiles...

HENRY (CONT'D)

Ow... What was the reason for that?

CHERYL

Haven't you ever heard of flowery speech...?

HENRY

Yes... I have.

CHERYL

Then in the very least you should know I wasn't expecting an answer. Certainly not one so honest.

Henry stops walking. Cheryl doesn't realize and continues onward... In time, she does and turns around a bit peevish...

CHERYL (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

Henry looks at Cheryl, telegraphing his love to her...

HENRY

You realize other than the sea...
and maybe my psychotic mother,
there's nothing else in this world
that matters more to me than you...
(off Cheryl's look)
Is that doubt I'm sensing...?

CHERYL

Just a mote...

HENRY

Even a mote of doubt is far too
much.
(sighs)
I'm afraid you leave me no
choice...

Henry drops to one knee... Cheryl's EYES WIDEN as he produces
a lovely ENGAGEMENT RING.

INT. WEDDING DAY, WATERS EDGE -- MONTHS LATER

Crowds have gathered as waves break in the near distance...
Cheryl looks like an angel in her wedding dress. Henry dons
his Royal uniform like a gentlemen. Together the two happily
walk through an archway of swords...

SHEDLON (PRE-LAP)

I had a bad dream.

INT. ERICK'S APARTMENT - "PRESENT" -- LATER NIGHT

Erick looks up from his computer. There, in the doorway, half-
sleep, rubbing his eyes, is Sheldon.

ERICK

A bad dream?

Sheldon nods... Erick shuts his laptop.

ERICK (CONT'D)

Come on over here buddy...

Sheldon stumbles over. Erick lifts him up on his lap. Lisa's
asleep and unconsciously adjusts her position on the sofa...

ERICK (CONT'D)

It's okay. We all have bad dreams
sometimes...

INT. TAXI, CURBSIDE - "DREAM" -- NIGHT

Erick wakes in the backseat of an empty Taxi. He looks out the window surprised to see Edris limping out of a CORNER STORE. Out of nowhere an antsy BLACK MAN rolls up on Edris. He's animated. Edris shakes his head, starts to move around the man but is held up by the man's arm...

ERICK

Aye!

We see the man knock Edris's cane to the ground. Erick YANKS AND PULLS on the doorhandle...

ERICK (CONT'D)

What the hell? Aye! Somebody open this door!

Erick KICKS at the door, BANGS on it with his fist... eventually realizes he's trapped inside.

The man FORCES his way into Edris's pockets...

ERICK (CONT'D)

AYE! GET YOUR HANDS OFF HIM! AYE!

The man finds Edris's WALLET, opens it, rummages through it..

LOOKING INTO BACKSEAT WINDOW OF THE TAXI

Erick's silent SCREAMS, WALLOPS AT THE WINDOW and then...

BAM-BAM... Gunshots. Erick FREEZES. WIDE EYES FULL OF SHOCK. In SLOW-MOTION Edris collapsing to the ground plays on the backseat window...

INT. ERICK'S APARTMENT - "PRESENT" -- NEXT DAY

Midday light spreads over Erick's face. He slowly wakes to find he is still on the sofa. Sheldon and Lisa have left...

Erick sits upright, rubs his eyes. And as he looks ahead, he sees another WHITE ENVELOPE slid partially under the door.

CUT TO:

INT. TAXI - MOVING -- LATER DAY

Erick looks out the window as his taxi pulls up curbside to the Cobble Hill Brownstones...

ERICK

You sure this is the right spot?

DRIVER
268 Court Drive.

EXT. SIDEWALK, COBBLE HILL BROWNSTONE -- MOMENTS LATER

The taxi pulls away and Erick starts toward the Brownstone, climbing the dozen stairs up to Cheryl's door. He rings the doorbell, waits. Erick glances over his shoulder at a couple passing along the sidewalk. After some moments Erick decides to walk back down the stairs, but is halted by a LOW VOICE...

CHERYL (O.S.)
Who's there?

INT. STUDY, CHERYL'S BROWNSTONE -- MINUTES LATER

Erick sits on a flower tapestry wing chair, looking around. Cheryl enters holding a tray with TWO HOT CUPS OF TEA on top.

CHERYL
Despite the glaring signs that you are a man, and a very handsome one at that, can I presume you've had Lady Grey before?

She holds the tray before Erick. He shakes his head...

ERICK
No, I haven't.

...takes the CUP with both hands.

CHERYL
Hmm. Well, the flavor's a lot like Earl Grey...
(suddenly pauses)
Please tell me you've had Earl Grey before?

ERICK
I have.

CHERYL
Good. I would have hated for this to be our first and last meeting.
(off Erick's look)
My attempt at humor. Bad humor. But humor nonetheless.

Cheryl smiles, takes a seat in the adjacent wing chair. She motions for Erick to drink... Erick obeys and takes a sip.

CHERYL (CONT'D)
What do you think of it...?

ERICK
 (nodding)
 It's good. Taste a bit citrusy.

CHERYL
 One of the subtleties which make it special. Perhaps that's why it's called Lady Grey...

Cheryl smiles, sips her tea... As does Erick.

CHERYL (CONT'D)
 Truthfully, Lady Grey was named after Mary Elizabeth Grey. The wife of Prime Minister Charles Grey, who would later ascend to the rank of Earl... Hence the name. My husband Henry and I would often sit together like this. We believed a *cuppa* tea could solve any problem.

Cheryl sips her tea, clears her throat, looks up...

CHERYL (CONT'D)
 Apologies. Seems my manners are out of sorts. My name is Cheryl Easton. I imagine you were able to deduce that much from the letters.

Erick nods...

CHERYL (CONT'D)
 As good fortune would have it, your father and I became quite acquainted with one another.
 (off Erick's grimace)
 He never mentioned my name, did he?

ERICK
 No. Not once...

CHERYL
 Doesn't surprise me. I wasn't able to be what your father had hoped for... Edris was a good man. My heart aches for your loss...

Erick reacts like a person who's yet to come to terms...

CHERYL (CONT'D)
 Erick, no one is immune to loss. I would say once you realize that grief gets easier, but in reality it doesn't...

(MORE)

CHERYL (CONT'D)

The more loss you record, the more unavailable to life you become... At least that's how it was for me for an awfully long time... Took half my life to realize life wasn't meant to be lived numbly... You know, your father and I spoke about you an awful lot. He mentioned your talent for writing. Told me what you were working on...

ERICK

Talent?

(shakes head)

My father had a innate propensity for delusion... There's no talent here... Just a once-upon-a-time stroke of good luck...

Cheryl silently observes Erick for some moments then sets her cup down on the table...

CHERYL

Would you excuse me for a moment...

Cheryl gets up and walks off... After some moments she returns with the shoe box, hands it to Erick...

CHERYL (CONT'D)

Open it.

Erick removes the lid, glimpses the SHEAF OF LETTERS inside. Cheryl slowly returns to her wing chair and sits...

ERICK

I don't understand. Why are you giving me these letters?

CHERYL

Makes sense now... I've had those letters for most of my life. What a life it was. Never felt the need to part with them until recently. Read them. There's no rush. But once you're finished, come back and see me. Alright?

Cheryl smiles cryptically.

INT. ALCOVED AREA, LIBRARY -- LATER DAY

Erick sits comfortably reading a LETTER with great focus.

YOUNG CHILD'S VOICE (V.O.)
 Mother said they were Rwandans and
 that they were running away...

FADE TO:

EXT. CYANGUGU TERRITOIRE, RWANDAN -- DAY 1959

A lush countryside populated by a SEA OF AFRICANS...

"RWANDA 1959"
 (caption)

Bare chested men, women in *khangas*, children with short hair.
 Their sweaty foreheads glistening under the fierce sun....

In the midst of this great crowd are two WHITE PHYSICIANS,
 smiling in pith helmets... Immersed in the great task of
 vaccinating against the dreaded POLIOMYELITIS VIRUS...

A VILLAGE WOMAN cradles her CHILD before the female
 physician... The doctor smiles comfortingly and goes to
 vaccinate the child... BUT IS HALTED BY TERRIFYING SCREAMS
 REVERBERATING THROUGHOUT...

The physicians look around sensing something is afoot...

A BUZZ builds as villagers look over their shoulders at other
 villagers now FRANTICALLY FLEEING FROM...

A PACK OF WILD HUTU MEN WIELDING PANGAS EXPLODE OUT FROM THE
 SURROUNDING FOREST...

INTERCUT between the horror and Erick's disturbed expression.

ERICK
 (sotto voce)
 ... Jesus...

Men, women and children are HACKED TO PIECES... The weak are
 KNOCKED to the ground and TRAMPLED OVER in the chaos...

ONE OF THE PHYSICIANS
 (to other physician)
 Secure the vaccine! Hurry!

Amid the mayhem, the physicians manage to escape with their
 supplies... But the countryside is not so lucky. Homesteads
 are torched, limbs hacked off. The blue sky fills with black
 smoke as the first of many HUTU/TUTSI mass uprising comes to
 a bloody, fiery end...

EXT. SOMEWHERE IN UGANDA, SOMETIME LATER -- DAYS LATER

Puffy white clouds drift across the blue sky...

"UGANDA DAYS LATER"
(caption)

DROP DOWN to see:

A young MULATTO GIRL chases after a fluttering butterfly. Not far behind, her dark-skinned MOTHER trails.

Swahili dialogue in **Bold** type.

MOTHER

**Esther! Stay where I can see you.
Don't go off too far...**

The mulatto girl whom we now know as ESTHER, is mesmerized by the butterfly's beautiful gossamer wings and ignores her mother's calls, continues her pursuit deeper and deeper into the forest... Her mothers calls grow faint...

The elusive butterfly takes Esther on a ride to the bank of LAKE VICTORIA. A beautiful, freshwater lake now contaminated with DOZENS OF DISMEMBERED TUTSI BODIES BOBBING UP AND DOWN.

Esther's mother comes up behind Esther and looks down at the dead. Their final terrified moments sealed on their faces.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

See what happens when you disobey..

Esther's mother covers her daughters young eyes. But Esther's curious and removes her mothers hands. She then gazes out. Up ahead Rwandan woman and children, Tutsi Refugees, quietly plod through brush along the water's edge...

CUT TO:

The SAME LETTER. The last line reads...

ESTHER (V.O.)

I'm afraid aunt Cheryl. I think a lot of bad will come here soon...

WIDEN to see we're:

INT. CHERYL'S HOME, ENGLAND -- DAY 1959

Cheryl presses the letter to her chest in disbelief...

HENRY (O.S.)

Cheryl... Cheryl...

Cheryl snaps out of her daze, turns to Henry.

CHERYL

Yes...?

A bespectacled HENRY sits on the other wing chair... Legs propped up on an ottoman with the Daily Telegraph in his hands... The front page reads, "Salk Polio Vaccine Success!"

HENRY

Are you alright...?

CHERYL

Yes.... I'm fine.

Cheryl folds the letter, places it inside the shoe box with the other letters... puts the lid overtop.

Henry folds up his newspaper... Removes his glasses.

HENRY

Now before you say anything... just hear me out, alright?... How does the name Liam sound to you...?

CHERYL

Liam...?

Henry nods. Cheryl's response lags, her mind still reeling.

HENRY

Now I know it's a little early given our history n' all but I have a really good feeling this time. It's going to be different for us. Heaven knows, we're due for it.

Cheryl takes a deep breath...

CHERYL

Yes...

HENRY

Yes... as in... you like it?

CHERYL

Yes I do. It's a splendid name.

HENRY

Really?

CHERYL

Yes. Really.

Henry and Cheryl both smile.

CHERYL (CONT'D)
If I recall correctly, my first
kiss was with a boy named Liam...

HENRY
Thought I was your first kiss?

CHERYL
And if we end up having a girl, we
will call her "mail"...

HENRY
You aren't really considering
naming our daughter mail, are you?

Cheryl shrugs, smiles... AND IS SUDDENLY GRIPPED BY PAIN. SHE TWITCHES, GRUNTS AND GRABS AT HER LOWER STOMACH... THERE'S A TERRIBLE SCOWL ON HER FACE...

HENRY (CONT'D)
(sits upright)
What is it?

Cheryl stands and bumps into the coffee table, knocking over both her and Henry's cups of tea as she RUSHES OFF...

INT. TOILET -- CONTINUOUS

Cheryl SLAMS the door, LOCKS IT... leans back against it... We hear Henry on the other side TUGGING at the doorknob.

HENRY (O.S.)
Cheryl, what's going on in there?

Cheryl presses against her lower stomach... SHE GRIMACES AT THE SHARP PAIN AND QUICKLY MOVES TO THE TOILET. Cheryl pulls down her panties, we glimpse BLOOD, lots of it... Cheryl rolls up her dress and sits on the toilet seat...

HENRY (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(somber, understanding)
It's happening again isn't it?...
Sweetheart, I'm so sorry...

Tears stream down Cheryl's cheeks as we hear a DEAD FETUS drop into the toilet bowl...

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR -- LATER DAY

Teeming with DOCTORS, NURSES and PATIENTS walking with IV's.

INT. OPERATING ROOM, HOSPITAL -- SAME

Cheryl's face looks numb. She lies in the childbirth position with her head to one side. A white sheet covers her body as an off screen MALE DOCTOR performs a "D and C."

DOCTOR (O.S.)

Mrs. Easton this may hurt a little.

She flinches as the lining of her uterus is scraped...

FADE TO:

EXT. READING, ENGLAND - WEEKS LATER -- DAY

The sky swirls with grey clouds over the Borough of Reading.

WOMAN'S VOICE (PRE-LAP)

Cheryl...?

A series of SOFT KNOCKS takes us to:

INT. HALL, READING HOME -- CONTINUOUS

A HAND turning a doorknob... Fine china clatters on a tray held by the other hand.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

...I'm coming in.

The door slowly opens:

INT. DIMLY LIT BEDROOM -- CONTINUOUS

ROSE WATSON(62), the affable mother of Cheryl enters holding a TRAY with two HOT CUPS of tea resting on top...

ROSE

Cheryl, it's well into the afternoon. You must sit up now... C'mon. I've prepared your favorite tea. Best drink it while it's nice and warm...

Rose sets the tray on a beside table... looks over at the bed. Under several sheets, a FIGURE lies motionless...

ROSE (CONT'D)

You're going to develop bed sores if you don't move.

Rose draws back the sheets to reveal a dejected Cheryl, sulking in her woes...

CHERYL
Please... just leave me alone...!

Cheryl pulls the sheets back up...

ROSE
You uttered those very words a
fortnight ago...

Rose draws the sheets down again...

ROSE (CONT'D)
How much time must one grieve for?

And once again Cheryl pulls the sheets back up...

CHERYL
As long as is required... Of all
people, I would think my own mother
would be most sympathetic...

Rose rests her hands on her hips... AND THEN:

ROSE
Alright... That's it...

Rose RIPS THE SHEETS OFF THE BED...

ROSE (CONT'D)
This has gone on for far too long..

... Cheryl sits up ANNOYED.

CHERYL
Mother! What are you doing? Bring
them back...!

Rose carries the sheets over to a closet and shoves them
inside... She then moves to the WINDOW...

ROSE
It's time you accepted what's
happened...

... AND DRAWS BACK THE CURTAINS. A RUSH OF DAY LIGHT POURS
IN... Cheryl turns away, covers her eyes... Sits upright,
squinting. Days of crying has left her face swollen.

ROSE (CONT'D)
(beat)
You should see yourself...

CHERYL
I am well aware of how I look.

ROSE

And that doesn't concern you...?

Cheryl sighs, flops back down, turns the other way...

Rose sits down on the edge of the bed...

ROSE (CONT'D)

Listen to me... You are not the first woman to have a miscarriage.

Cheryl faces her mother with a look of UTTER DISMAY.

CHERYL

A miscarriage...? Just one...? Is that what you think this is? Me overreacting from having a miscarriage?

(scoffs)

My God mother, you should learn to keep better count. If only I were so lucky to have lost just one child maybe I wouldn't to be here.

Cheryl shakes her head, her face starts to wrinkle, crumble to the point where she begins to cry...

Rose sighs, rubs Cheryl's back.

ROSE

Cheryl, you are my daughter and I love you. So please forgive me for being callous... But you and I both know you can't remain this way. It's unhealthy. You'll only get worse... And what about Henry, huh? How long are you going to avoid him? You and I both know he doesn't deserve this... He's not at fault.

EXT. CAMBRIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD - ENGLAND -- LATER DAY

Wind-whip trees. A dark sky. A storm brewing...

PAN DOWN to see...

Cheryl walking along the granite footpath that follows the curve of the Brown Brick Terraces...

She turns off the path and crosses a small green lawn toward one of the HOMES... She rings the doorbell... looks around and happens to catches her unsightly reflection playing off the window by the front door... For some moments Cheryl just looks at her disheveled appearance, her red inflamed eyes...

And then the DOOR OPENS to an attractive WOMAN cradling a NEWBORN. Her afternoon dress sags to one side.

WOMAN
Cheryl... Hi.

CHERYL
Hello Katherine...

The WOMAN whom we now know as KATHERINE rocks her newborn.

KATHERINE
Excuse my appearance. Just finished nursing. Would you like to step in?

CHERYL
No... I'm fine.

A beat. Cheryl austere... Katherine still rocking her baby...

KATHERINE
Well then, to what do we owe the visit?

CHERYL
I need to have a word with Michael. Is he around?

KATHERINE
Yes he is... I'll go get him.

As if to underscore Cheryl's plight, Katherine walks off whispering sweet nothings to her baby... We hear her call out... "Michael, your sister's at the door..."

Cheryl waits in the raw, chilly air...

Not before long MICHAEL(30's), a handsome, dark haired man comes to the door... His first words are delayed and harsh.

MICHAEL
What are you doing here?

AND WITHOUT WARNING... Cheryl SLAPS Michael across the face.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
(grabs his face)
What the bloody hell was that for?

CHERYL SLAPS MICHAEL AGAIN... He grabs his face, roiled.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
That's enough!

CHERYL SWINGS AGAIN.. But this time Michael shields his face.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Cheryl, what the hell's gotten into
you?

Cheryl lets Michael have it... SWINGS REPEATEDLY WITH BOTH
HANDS. Michael grabs a hold of Cheryl's wrists.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Quit it! That's enough!

Cheryl struggles to break free... crying, an emotional wreck.

CHERYL
Let go of me...! Let go...!

MICHAEL
Are you going to calm down and tell
me what's going on?

CHERYL CONTINUES FIGHTING. YANKING AND PULLING...!

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Cheryl, I said STOP...!

AND MICHAEL SHOVES CHERYL DOWN TO THE GROUND. SHE FALLS HARD.
The ESSENTIALS in her purse scatter... As if to add emphasis
to the moment, THUNDER RUMBLES and Katherine RUNS out...

KATHERINE
Christ Michael! What's going on?

MICHAEL
It was an accident...

Katherine RUSHES pass Michael to Cheryl's aid.

KATHERINE
My God Cheryl, are you alright?

CHERYL
I'm fine...

KATHERINE
(looks up at Michael)
Michael! Don't just stand there and
watch. Come help!

But Michael just stands still... Katherine shakes her head
loathingly, helps Cheryl to her feet... Cheryl pats down her
dress, eyes Michael with a futile half-smile on her face...

CHERYL

Not sure if mother's told you, but I lost another one... Mother can't seem to keep up. I understand with there being so many now...

Cheryl shakes her head... stands with a precarious tenure.

CHERYL (CONT'D)

But you, loss doesn't mean anything to you, isn't that right? At least that's what your actions say...

Katherine's in the dark and turns to Michael...

KATHERINE

Michael, what's Cheryl talking about?

CHERYL

You abandoned her. You could have brought her back with you... Instead you left them. Why? I don't understand... Why desert them?

KATHERINE

Desert who?
(looks at both)
Would someone explain to me what's going on...?

The sky GROWLS AND A THUNDEROUS WHIP CRACKS... The baby's CRIES echo out... Katherine is forced back inside...

A light drizzle quickly turns into a DOWNPOUR... Rain soaks all through Cheryl, her hair clumps together along her cheeks. She's glaring at Michael, her cheeks flushing. Michael stares back in regret... Neither move an inch.

CUT TO:

INT. ALCOVED AREA, LIBRARY - "PRESENT" -- LATER DAY

Erick sits back in his chair reading the LETTER in his hands.

CHERYL (V.O.)

I'll never forgive your father for what he did. Never. I can't. I'll write again soon. Love always, Aunt Cheryl...

A beat. Erick sighs and folds up the LETTER. He slips it back inside the envelope, returns it to the shoe box when...

OUT OF NOWHERE...

CHILD'S VOICE (O.S.)

Boo!

Erick JUMPS, STARTLED. He looks over his shoulders at Sheldon, snickering.

ERICK

Aye! What are you doing back there?
Get over here, scaring me like
that.

Erick playfully grabs Sheldon and lifts him up onto his lap.

ERICK (CONT'D)

You here by yourself?
(Sheldon shakes his head)
No? Then where's...

Erick turns to his left. There's Lisa. Smiling. Casually approaching with her hands in her pockets.

LISA

He said he wanted to see you... You weren't home so I figured there's only one other place he could be...

ERICK

I'm that predictable?

Lisa shrugs, smiles...

Erick smiles as Sheldon points to his nose...

SHELDON

What's dat?

Erick looks down...

ERICK

What?

... At the same time Sheldon FLICKS Erick up under the nose.

SHELDON

Gotcha!

Sheldon is in STITCHES... He laughs so hard that we hear him RIP A MEAN FART!

ERICK

(plugs nose, looks away)
Whoa! What was that?

LISA
(looks around embarrassed)
Sheldon!

Sheldon chuckles...

SHELDON
Oops!

ERICK
It's probably all in my jeans, too.

The TRIO gives themselves to LAUGHTER...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BRYANT PARK -- LATER DAY

New Yorkers enjoy the Great Lawn of Bryant Park. The LIBRARY and the Manhattan SKYLINE make for the perfect backdrop...

LISA (O.S.)
Look at him...

DROP DOWN to Erick and Lisa sitting together with their butts on the lawn. They're watching Sheldon on his knees. He's making war sounds as he plays with his SUPERHERO TOYS.

LISA (CONT'D)
... So sweet and innocent... I almost hate to see him grow.

ERICK
Why's that...?

LISA
Cause I know he'll make real mistakes. Get in trouble. Have his heart broken. We're all casualties to life in some way. One day life will taint him and he'll no longer be my innocent little boy...

ERICK
But he'll always have a good heart.

Erick looks at Lisa. She smiles.

LISA
I suppose you're right.

And as Lisa's eyes cling to Erick:

FLYER MAN (O.S.)
 Sorry to bother ya'll..

They both look up over their shoulders at a MAN carrying FLYERS... The man circles around, gives each a flyer.

FLYER MAN (CONT'D)
 Special show tonight at the
 Birdland Jazz Club over on 44th. No
 cover before 7. Always a nice
 crowd. Great way for a beautiful
 couple to spend a night out.

Erick and Lisa peek at one another...

FLYER MAN (CONT'D)
 Come check it out.

The man walks off seeking who to approach next. Erick and Lisa glance at the flyers, then each other...

ERICK
 Whaddya think? Wanna check it
 out..?

LISA
 What about Sheldon? Who's gonna
 watch him?

EXT. COBBLE HILL BROWNSTONE -- LATE AFTERNOON

The TRIO climbs the steps to Cheryl's Brownstone...

LISA
 You sure about this?

ERICK
 No... but it's worth a shot.

Erick rings the doorbell... turns to Lisa.

ERICK (CONT'D)
 Look. Just follow your heart. We'll
 all spend some time together and if
 you still don't feel comfortable
 then we just won't go...

Lisa levels a look with Erick...

LISA
 But I want us to go...

The two stare at one another as we hear a DEADBOLT unlock...

EXT. BIRDLAND JAZZ CLUB -- NIGHT

A NEON SIGN at the front of the club reads, "Birdland, Jazz Corner of the World."

INT. BIRDLAND JAZZ CLUB -- SAME

On the stage, Kenny Garrett, a black jazz saxophonist plays, "Before It's Time To Say Goodbye," a sad but lovely piece...

Not far from the stage Erick and Lisa sit at a small table. A white tablecloth draped ovetop... Candlelight plays against the joy on their faces... Lisa looks around at the gentle, upscale atmosphere...

LISA

It's nice here. It feels good...

ERICK

It does. I'm really happy we came.

LISA

So am I...

Lisa blushes. Erick smiles... They both turn their eyes to the drink menus laid out before them...

ERICK

You know what you're gonna drink..?

LISA

I'm leaning toward a Scotch. What about you?

ERICK

This freshly squeezed orange juice they have is sounding kinda nice...

They both sneak peeks up at one another and laugh ever so softly at each other's sarcasm...

DISSOLVE TO:

LATER NIGHT

Erick and Lisa laugh on the edge of drunkenness... The stage is being cleared, only a few people remain at the club. Their WAITER, a college-aged black male returns with the black bill holder, sets it on the table...

WAITER

Whenever you're ready...

Erick pulls out his credit card, hands it to the waiter.

WAITER (CONT'D)
I'll be back with your receipt.

ERICK
Thanks...

As the waiter walks off, Lisa slides a few small BILLS across the table...

ERICK (CONT'D)
What are you doing...?

LISA
Contributing my portion...

Erick slides the bills back toward Lisa...

ERICK
Your contribution's no good here...

LISA
Says who?

ERICK
A gentlemen to a lady...

Lisa blushes. The waiter returns with the receipt and hands it to Erick.

WAITER
Is there anything else I can get for either of you?

Erick lightly shakes his head, glances at Lisa.

LISA
No thank you...

WAITER
You two have a wonderful evening.

ERICK/LISA
You, too. Thank you.

The waiter turns, starts off. Erick signs the receipt, but we notice the waiter drags his feet and eventually turns back...

WAITER
I'm sorry, but I gotta ask... are you Erick Coates, the writer?

Lisa looks up at the waiter a bit taken aback... She then eyes Erick... For some reason, Erick's very still.

WAITER (CONT'D)
I didn't want to say anything, but
I noticed the name on your card...

Lisa looks at Erick for his response... it never comes.

LISA
(re: to the waiter)
Yes, he is Erick Coates and he is
indeed a writer...
(re: to Erick)
Erick, say something...

WAITER
(relieved)
I wasn't sure, but was like what
the hell, I gotta ask... I got the
book here with me. Would it be too
much to get a signature...?

Erick's caught in a trance... stares down at the receipt.

LISA (O.S.)
Erick?

A moment. Erick looks up...

LISA (CONT'D)
He wants to know if you could sign
his book...

ERICK
Sure... No problem.

WAITER
Thank you so much. I'll be right
back.

The waiter hustles off... Lisa looks at Erick with delight.

LISA
Erick, that's amazing! I didn't
know you wrote a book. Why didn't
you tell me...?

A harbored sadness drowns out Lisa's praise. The waiter
returns holding a PAPERBACK with crumpled edges... He sets
the book down in front of Erick... The title reads, "Brown
Sugar Ain't So Sweet, written by Erick Coates."

WAITER
My apologies about the books
condition...

LISA

Looks like you got some good use
out of it...

WAITER

Who you tellin'... Had to have read
it over a hundred times...

Erick flips back the front cover. The first page reads, "For
my mother, Charlotte Coates."

ERICK

Who should I make it out to?

WAITER

My mother, Tasha Lamar Riggs.

LISA

(to Waiter, hinting to
Erick)

He never mentioned a book to me.
Must be a pretty good read.

The waiter takes a deep breath... shakes his head as if the
book once saved his life...

WAITER

Y'know honestly, it all depends on
the interest of the person. But for
me, this book was a gift from God.
I, too lost my mother to heroine.
And when I say it messed me up, I
mean it literally messed me up. I
was heading down a path of ruin.
Found this book in a dumpster, in
some random alley of all places...

LISA

(somber)

Wow...

WAITER

Right... Guess it's true when they
say one man's trash is another
man's treasure. It was fate.
There's no other way to explain how
this book literally saved my life.

Erick closes the book, hands it back over to the waiter.

ERICK

Here you go...

WAITER

Thank you so much, brotha. You have no idea how much this means to me.

Erick and the waiter shake hands.

WAITER (CONT'D)

If you don't mind me asking, are you working on anything else at the moment...? Something I can look forward to...

And because Erick is reluctant to answer...

LISA

He's working on a book about his father...

The waiter nods his head, intrigued.

WAITER

Word..? A book about your pops?

ERICK

I don't know. It's a mess right now.

WAITER

Y'know it be like that sometimes, though. Just gotta let things play out the way nature intended...

Erick nods graciously...

WAITER (CONT'D)

(smiles, shakes his head)
Here I am giving Erick Coates advice on writing... Anyway, I better get back to the salt mines. Really appreciate this. You're a great writer. I'll keep an eye out for your future book...

The waiter walks off with the book curled in his hands... In the bg we see Lisa reach over the table for Erick's hand...

EXT. CHERYL'S BROWNSTONE -- LATER NIGHT

The front door OPENS. Erick walks out with Sheldon asleep in his arms... Lisa and Cheryl follow out behind smiling.

LISA

Again, I hope he wasn't any trouble...

CHERYL

Lisa, Sheldon couldn't be further from trouble. He's a lovely child. You're lucky to have him.

LISA

Thank you, Cheryl.

The two embrace like old, cherished friends. Erick turns and faces Cheryl... She notices Erick's a bit off...

CHERYL

Everything alright?
(off Erick's slow nod)
Remember. We still need to meet...

Erick nods subtly... He and Lisa start down the stairs, toward the street, and into the TAXI idling curbside... Cheryl watches from the doorway.

INT. SHELDON'S BEDROOM, LISA'S APARTMENT -- LATER NIGHT

Erick lies Sheldon down in bed, spreads a superhero blanket overtop his tiny figure. Erick regards the peace on Sheldon's face before pulling the string on a bedside lamp...

INT. LIVING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Erick enters into the living room...

ERICK

He's knocked out...

... Joins Lisa on the sofa...

LISA

Thank you for being so good with him.

ERICK

There's no need to thank me. I like Sheldon.

LISA

He likes you, too.

A moment... Lisa picks up on Erick's unusual behavior.

LISA (CONT'D)

You alright?

ERICK

Yeah, I'm fine... Just tired. It's late. I should probably get going.

LISA
 (disappointed)
 Sure...

Erick stands to his feet. Lisa gets up and follows behind rather closely... So close that as Erick spins back to bid Lisa goodbye, their LIPS unexpectedly touch...

ERICK
 I'm sorry. I didn't mean...

And off the look in their eyes...

LISA'S BEDROOM -- MOMENTS LATER

Erick and Lisa fall down onto the BED. Entangled in the throes of passion. KISSING, STROKING, REMOVING each others clothes when...

LISA
 (panting)
 Erick, wait, wait. I can't.

Erick PAUSES... catches his breath.

ERICK
 Can't what?

LISA
 This. I can't do this. I'm sorry.

A moment. Erick starts to dismount, Lisa grabs his arm.

LISA (CONT'D)
 Erick... It's not you...

A moment.

ERICK
 Then what is it?

All Lisa can do is level a regretful look at Erick...

Erick nods, silently dismounts Lisa and leaves the room. Lisa looks up at the ceiling, sighs...

The sudden RUMBLE OF THUNDER takes us to...

FADE TO:

A WINDOWPANE

PUSH THROUGH rain drops running down to see we're:

INT. STUDY, CAMBRIDGE HOME - ENGLAND -- NIGHT 1960'S

The heavy drone of rainfall calms a dimly lit study...

We find Michael sitting pensively on a leather divan, languidly sipping whiskey out of a small glass. He looks up at Katherine standing by the door with her arms folded across her chest...

KATHERINE
(half-grin)
He's counting sheep now...

Michael, in his meditative stupor, nods perfunctorily...

KATHERINE (CONT'D)
Feel like talking at all...?

Michael emits a heavy breath...

MICHAEL
Suppose we should...

Michael drains the last few inches of whiskey from his glass, rises to his feet and walks over to an ornate wall table with several half-full DECANTERS on top...

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Care for a drink?

As Katherine takes a seat on the divan...

KATHERINE
Are you suggesting that I'm going to need one...?

No answer. After a moment of fixing two new drinks, Michael walks back over to the divan, hands Katherine her glass, sits down beside her...

KATHERINE (CONT'D)
Dare I ask what this is?

MICHAEL
Highland Cream... Was once my father's favorite...

They toast and sip... The disgusted grimace on Katherine's face slightly humors Michael...

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
It takes some getting used to...

KATHERINE

A lifetime...

Katherine sets her glass down on the table... silence fills the room... Michael holds his glass with both hands, he's staring into it... Katherine lovingly places her hand on Michael's leg...

KATHERINE (CONT'D)

Whatever you say, it won't change us... It happened in the past. We evolve and grow. And I've grown to love you. Always will...

Michael looks at Katherine... regret glazed over his eyes.

MICHAEL

I haven't a clue where to begin...

KATHERINE

What do you remember most...?

MICHAEL

(a thinking beat)

I remember it was her birthday. She was so excited...

Off the interest displayed on Katherine's face we...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WHITE HIGHLANDS, CENTRAL UPLANDS OF KENYA -- DAWN

A 19th century BRITISH COLONY situated amongst rolling hills.

"WHITE HIGHLANDS, KENYA"
(caption)

INT. COMMON AREA, WOOD FRAME HOUSE, CENTRAL KENYA -- DAWN

TIGHT on a CALENDAR of the era. The month reads, "March." Year is "1953". A MAN'S HAND draws a slash across the "24th, denoting that today is the 25th."

WIDEN TO see...

Michael stands close to the calendar on the wall... He crosses his arms, sighs as the sound of small, FAST-MOVING footsteps build to a SMALL CHILD CRASHING into his leg...

Michael looks down at ESTHER... the young mulatto girl from before, looking up excitedly with sleep in her eyes. Michael looks vaguely displeased... He reaches down and lifts Esther up into his arms...

MICHAEL

What did I say about running in the house...?

ESTHER

But today...

MICHAEL

But nothing... What did I say?

Esther speaks beautiful English with the accents of two vastly different worlds...

ESTHER

Only domesticated animals run in the house...

MICHAEL

And what are you?

ESTHER

A human being...

Michael kisses his baby girl on the forehead...

MICHAEL

And no matter what, don't you ever forget...

ESTHER

But you forgot what today is...

Esther turns to her dark-skinned MOTHER entering the room...

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Did you forget, too mom...?

The woman moves toward Esther and Michael... She speaks with a thick Swahili accent.

ESTHER'S MOTHER

I forgot to give you this...

Esther's EYES light up at the LEASH her mother holds out.

ESTHER'S MOTHER (CONT'D)

Happy Birthday.

Michael lowers Esther, squats down and makes a 'clicking sound' with his teeth...

MICHAEL

Come here boy...!

AND WE SEE A PUPPY... STILL AWKWARD ON IT'S FEET... CLUMSILY BURST OUT FROM THE BACK...

The corners of Esther's mouth turn upwards as the puppy jumps into her arms... licking and slobbering all over her face...

Michael rises back to his feet... Puts his arm around the woman... Together they watch Esther fasten the leash to the puppy's collar and rush toward the door...

ESTHER'S MOTHER

Don't go off too far. You have school today.

ESTHER

I won't...!

Esther opens the door and is immediately pulled outside...

EXT. HOUSE -- CONTINUOUS

The puppy EXPLODES off the blocks like a sprinter...

ESTHER

Whoa... Slow down!

Esther's mother and Michael step outside. They stand by the door... Smiles draped over their faces as they watch the galloping puppy drag Esther up the well-worn dirt road...

MICHAEL

(loudly spoken)

Think of a suitable name...!

ESTHER

I will...!

And on Esther's innocent, echoing voice...

WE RISE high above the waking settlement... European Men in waistcoats trickle out onto the streets... Black Kenyan's have already begun working the arable Crown land...

WE RISE EVEN HIGHER to see the snaking tracks of the Ugandan Railway and the Great Rift Valley, an intra-continental ridge system that runs through Kenya from the north to the south...

And as a GOLDEN SUN peaks it's head up over MOUNT KENYA:

EXT. LOOKING UP AT THE SKY -- LATER DAY

The bright SUN at it's apex in the sky. THE SOUND OF CHIRPING CICADAS IS INTENSE...

DROP DOWN to see...

EXT. KWA RONO COFFEE PLANTATION - KENYA -- DAY

Row after row of Coffee Trees. Glistening under the sun... At close range we see plump, red beans at the height of harvest.

The sound of leaves rustling and children laughing brings us to the next row over...

INT. ROW -- CONTINUOUS

Three rural village CHILDREN. Nothing more than the tattered clothes on their backs, laugh while picking the worlds coffee beans, and collecting them into tin cans...

CHUNKY CHILD

I'm hungry...

TALL CHILD

Tell us something we don't already know.

The THIN CHILD chuckles...

THIN CHILD

I have a solution. You should eat the food already in your stomach...

The CHUNKY CHILD grows angry, glares at his thin friend...

Looking to the TALLER friend:

CHUNKY CHILD

Where is he? Why has he not come?

TALLEST CHILD

He will come.

CHUNKY CHILD

How do you know...?

TALLEST CHILD

Does he not come everyday...?

AND THEN WE HEAR HIS ECHOING VOICE...

TRADER'S VOICE (O.S.)

Mandazi!

The children FREEZE and look to each other grinning.

TRADER'S VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Come get Mandazi!

AND THEY'RE OFF...

Tin cans fall to the ground, beans scatter... The Trader's voice echoing... "Mandazi!".. "Mandazi here!"... The children race. Cutting across rows, dipping under low hanging trees... All caught in the fervor of excitement.

Meanwhile...

EXT. ELDORET PRIMARY SCHOOL, ENGLISH SETTLEMENT -- SAME

TIGHT on CLOCK HANDS of a large CLOCK... The time reads, "11:10"...

PULL BACK to see the CLOCK TOWER rises at the center of the beautiful, ELDORET SCHOOL. A white, two-story, U-shaped building with Spanish roofing and open walled halls.

INT. CLASSROOM, ELDORET -- SAME

A FEMALE TEACHER writes "cursive script" on a chalk board. The voices of other teachers spill over into the classroom which is full of diligent BRITISH FEMALE STUDENTS... Among them is Esther. She stands out like a lone black mole on a white face...

INT. MASTER BEDROOM, HOME - ENGLISH SETTLEMENT -- LATER DAY

Michael carries folded clothes over to a suitcase atop a bed... He places the clothes neatly inside. In the bg, Esther's mother comes into view, stands by the door...

ESTHER'S MOTHER
Where are you off to...?

MICHAEL
(packing)
Nairobi.

Esther's mother folds her arms... not liking what she hears.

ESTHER'S MOTHER
Nairobi? Didn't you just return
from there...?

MICHAEL
Now I must go again...

Riled, Michael moves across the room to a wardrobe...

ESTHER'S MOTHER
How long will you be away for this
time...?

MICHAEL

A few days...

ESTHER'S MOTHER

A few days...?

Michael turns and levels a hard look at Esther's mother.

MICHAEL

Yes Nabirye, a few days! Do I have your permission...?

The woman who we now know as NABIRYE lets the outburst pass..

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Why must we go through this bit every time I leave for business? Tell me, why?

NABIRYE

Because we see so little of you. These days I feel you are more of a passing guest than a member of this family... I get the feeling you'd rather be somewhere else...

(off Michael's reticence)

Esther misses you... I miss you.

Michael walks over to Nabirye, takes her into his arms...

MICHAEL

And I'll miss both of you as well. Be of no doubt, these trips, though frequent, they aren't easy for me... But they're for us. And this is the last, I promise...

NABIRYE

You've made that promise before.

MICHAEL

This time I promise. No more...

(smiles)

Now wish me safe travels.

And as Nabirye levels a disconcerting look at Michael...

EXT. KENYAN STEPPE -- EARLY EVENING

(POV) VILLAGE CHILDREN

a SHANTY VILLAGE looms in the fg as sunlight wanes...

Angle on the three coffee pickers... Walking without shoes across rugged terrain... The chunky kid savors the last of his Mandazi which we see is fried bread...

CHUNKY CHILD

Mmm... Y'know I could eat this every day, right?

THIN CHILD

(re: to tall child)

Loan me a few coins...

TALLEST CHILD

No.

THIN CHILD

C'mon I will pay you back... You know my mother... She'll feed me to the lions if she finds out I earned nothing...

TALLEST CHILD

You should have thought of that before...

The thin kid shoves the tall kid. The chunky kid licks his sticky fingers...

CHUNKY CHILD

We're skipping school again tomorrow right...?

EXT. KIBERA SLUM -- MINUTES LATER

The children return to a DYSTOPIA...

Heaps of trash rise high, small black fires smoulder... The putrid smell of burning feces wafts into the many tin and thatched roof, shanty homesteads that comprise the insanely crowded, Kibera Slums...

The children cross over abandoned Railway tracks and go their separate ways... We hang with the thin child as he weaves his way through the filthy alley ways and eventually into his shanty home...

INT. SHANTY HOUSE -- CONTINUOUS

The child enters and is immediately accosted by his three younger SIBLINGS... They sniff him like hungry dogs.

YOUNGER SIBLINGS

Mandazi. Did you bring us any?

The thin child is quiet. He turns to his ailing MOTHER(30's) who looks like she's forgotten how to smile... She stitches a ragged T-shirt while nursing a DEFORMED INFANT...

MOTHER
(unceremoniously)
**What do you have to show for
skipping school today?**

All the thin child can do is look back at his fed up mother:

EXT. SHANTY HOUSE -- CONTINUOUS

SHOUTING leads to the thin child forced out of the house...

EXT. DEEP BAMBOO FOREST, ABERDARE RANGE -- NIGHT

Huddled around a FIRE with *pangas* are the MAU MAU, the ethnic Kikuyu people of Kenya... Circling around the men like a primal beast, peering into their angry eyes is KIMANTHI, the tenacious, red-eyed leader of the militant group. He prepares his men in their native Bantu language...

KIMANTHI
We should have never allowed the
foreigner to come here and get rich
off our land! He must return to
where he came from! We must regain
our independence! The prophet Kamba
said that a long narrow snake would
move from the coast to the setting
sun, bringing with it a rush of
people with skins like raw meat.
The prophet foresaw this and still,
it is our own people who choose to
shut their eyes to the truth. If
our own people refuse to take the
oath, then they, too must bleed...!

CUT TO:

EXT. GOVERNMENT ROAD, DOWNTOWN NAIROBI -- NIGHT

HALOGEN HEADLAMPS of a FORD MODEL A crosses the frame along Government Road... A lively thoroughfare, teeming with finely dressed Europeans, Asians in turbans... Even some black Kenyans stroll the attractive blocks where Bars, Clubs and the NEW STANLEY HOTEL pulsate...

SOME EUROPEAN MAN'S VOICE (V.O)
If Kenyatta's one of em then it's
only fit he stands trial...!

INT. BAR, NEW STANLEY HOTEL -- CONTINUOUS

A MAN plays the piano in the corner. The melody fills the busy room... As we move over to the bar, we find two DRUNKEN EUROPEANS on Safari, talking about the tension in Kenya...

EUROPEAN #1

I mean my God, they should be
thanking us, not warring with us...

The man drains the last few inches of his pint... beckons for the BARKEEPER.

EUROPEAN #1 (CONT'D)

Barkeeper... Another round for my
friend and I...

(re: slurred to friend)

Say your name again...

EUROPEAN #2

William...

EUROPEAN #1

Ah yes, William, that's right...
It's like this William, all I'm
saying is a little appreciation is
in order. For Christ sakes, they
owe a debt to us. Nairobi was
nothing more than a seasonal swamp
at the edge of a forest inhabited
by a bunch of Goddamn animals...

(counts with his fingers)

We gave them the railway...
tourism... commerce, a place in
this world... At the very least are
we not deserving of a few acres of
arable land...?

The barkeeper places two fresh pints before the men...

EUROPEAN #1 (CONT'D)

Cheers...

The men toast, take large swallows...

EUROPEAN #1 (CONT'D)

We mustn't forget though, beasts
have a natural proclivity for
violence... They do not take kindly
to domestication and we'd be
foolish to think otherwise of these
spear-chuckers...

We slide down to where Michael sits at the bar, overhearing the conversation... He SLAMS his glass down on the bar countertop... The drunken men turn their attention to Michael walking out with his suitcase...

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM, HOME - ENGLISH SETTLEMENT -- LATER

Esther lies on her stomach on top her bed... Her feet scissor kicking the air as she tears open an ENVELOPE with great anticipation... Drop down to the floor where the puppy licks it's small paws...

INT. MASTER BEDROOM -- CONTINUOUS

A cool breeze BLOWS IN curtains...

Nabirye carries dry laundry, sets it down on the bed... She then moves over to the window, latches it shut...

Nabirye moves back over to the bed where she begins folding clothes, undershirts and underwear... She carries the folded clothes over to the dresser... She opens a drawer, places the folded clothes neatly inside...

Nabirye starts back toward the bed... BUT THEN STOPS. She turns back to the dresser and begins PULLING OPEN DRAWER AFTER DRAWER AFTER DRAWER... They're all empty except for a LEATHER POUCH in the last drawer... Nabirye removes the pouch, unclasps it. She pauses at the large amount of MONEY inside...

THE SOUND OF SMALL, FAST-MOVING FOOTSTEPS BUILD TO...

ESTHER (O.S.)

Mother! Mother! Look...!

Nabirye WHIPS around, startled by Esther... She's waving money in the air for her mother to see.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Aunt Cheryl sent me money for my birthday!

The puppy runs into the room as we...

EXT. TRACKS, NAIROBI RAILWAY STATION -- A LITTLE LATER

Steam billows out from the smokebox of a STEAM LOCOMOTIVE...

EXT. PLATFORM -- CONTINUOUS

A CONDUCTOR checks tickets as PASSENGERS board the train...

INT. RAIL CAR, STEAM LOCOMOTIVE -- SAME

Michael sits in a row by himself... gazing out the window.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
You holding this seat for anyone?

Michael turns... A MALE PASSENGER waits in the aisle with a small carry-on bag...

Michael shakes his head...

MICHAEL
No.

MALE PASSENGER
Cheers mate.

The passenger situates himself in the adjacent seat, turns to Michael, makes small talk...

MALE PASSENGER (CONT'D)
Sure is nice to get out every now
and then... You heading back on
holiday?

And as Michael takes a deep breath we hear the trains "STEAM TRUMPET", and the conductor yell "All Aboard...!"

SHARP CUT TO:

EXT. A VILLAGE IN LARI, KENYA -- NIGHT

THE SOUNDS OF TERROR...

A FIRE RAGES. The burning Kikuyu village lights up the night sky. Kimanthi barks orders over the SICKENING CRIES for help.

KIMANTHI
Kill everyone! No traitor sees the
light of day...!

And the Mau Mau militants descend upon the sleeping village like something from hell... Villagers flee for their lives as men with pangas storm inside huts... Traitors are dragged out by their scalps and hacked to pieces... Pregnant women are disembowelled... Innocent children murdered in cold blood...

The slaughtered come to blanket the ground as we CUT BACK TO:

A WINDOWPANE

PUSH THROUGH rain drops running down to see we're:

INT. MICHAEL'S HOME - ENGLAND -- NIGHT 1960

Empty decanters. Michael sits with his head in his palms...

MICHAEL

It became known as the 'night of
the long knives...'

KATHERINE (O.S.)

Jesus Michael...

Michael looks over at Katherine rising to her feet. She folds her arms protectively across her chest and leaves the room...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A RURAL VILLAGE IN UGANDA, ANOTHER TIME -- DAY

CHILDREN pour across the frame, laughing, chasing after a soccer ball. Their bare feet kicking up clouds of dust...

A few yards up ahead, Esther sits against the wall of her HUT... She's writing a letter.

NABIRYE (O.S.)

(faint)

Esther...

ESTHER

Coming mother...

Esther folds the letter and hides it under her dusty dress... She stands to her feet, pats herself down and quickly enters inside.

NABIRYE (O.S.)

**Esther there is someone I want you
to meet... This is ISAAC. He's a
trader of garments. He'll be living
with us from now on.**

ESTHER (O.S.)

Hello, sir...

UGANDAN MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Hello Esther...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. KITCHEN, ERICK'S APARTMENT - PRESENT DAY

TIGHT on WATER shooting out of the faucet. A soapy dish is rinsed then placed in a drying rack. WIDEN to a series of HARD KNOCKS at the front door.

Erick turns off the water, reaches for a HAND TOWEL and crosses out of a remarkably clean kitchen...

INT. LIVING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Erick wipes his hands dry as he crosses a neat living room toward the door...

THE FRONT DOOR OPENS WITH...

An unhappy, older Jewish man, standing in the hall with his hands in his pockets. He speaks with a thick Jewish accent.

ERICK

Mr. Pascal...

MR. PASCAL

You're three weeks past due, Erick.

ERICK

Yes, I know... and I'm gonna get it to you real soon, Mr. Pascal...

MR. PASCAL

You still owe me for last month. And that came out of my pocket, remember?

ERICK

I do. And I really appreciate you helping me, Mr. Pascal. Believe me, I do.

Mr. Pascal takes a deep breath... slightly shakes his head.

MR. PASCAL

I'm giving you three days.

ERICK

Three days? Mr. Pascal, I need more time...

MR. PASCAL

Three days Erick. If I don't have the rent by then, I'm changing the lock on the door...

ERICK

Changing the lock? Don't you think that's a bit much...?

MR. PASCAL

No. I don't. I can't keep bending
the rules for you. I'm sorry Erick,
but no one lives anywhere for free.

Mr. Pascal walks off. Erick steps out into the hall, throws
his arms up in the air hoping for a break.

ERICK

C'mon Mr. Pascal... Mr. Pascal!

INT. WAITING AREA, ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL -- SAME

Lisa sits with her legs crossed... A handbag hangs on her
shoulder... She's looking down on an OPEN BOOK in her lap.

NURSE'S VOICE (O.S.)

Lisa Brown?

Lisa looks up... The weariness in her eyes is troublesome.

LISA

Yes...

The NURSE by the door adjusts the clipboard in her hand.

NURSE

The doctor will see you now.

Lisa closes the book. We glimpse the cover. It's Erick's
book... Lisa tucks the book inside her handbag, stands to her
feet. The nurse smiles warmly as Lisa makes her way over...

NURSE (CONT'D)

Right this way.

INT. HALL, TENEMENT BUILDING -- LATER NIGHT

Erick walks up the hall feeling at his sore arm. GAUZE is
wrapped around the inside of his elbow... He's returning home
from having just given blood...

Erick stops at Lisa's unit... knocks on her door and waits.

ERICK

Hey, Lisa you in there? It's me
Erick...

Lisa never answers because the reality is:

INT. LIVING ROOM, LISA'S UNIT -- SAME

She lies curled on the sofa under a blanket. A faraway look
glazed over her face...

On the coffee table in front of her, are all sorts of comfort food; chocolates, potato chips, pastries... not to mention a WHITE PRESCRIPTION BAG...

INT. ERICK'S APARTMENT -- MOMENTS LATER

Erick enters his apartment, closes the door, flops down onto the sofa... He digs a RECEIPT and some CASH out of his pocket, sets it on the table. For some moments Erick just stares at the items, thinking... Suddenly he decides to re-pocket the cash and grab the shoe box before stepping out...

EXT. COBBLE HILL BROWNSTONES -- LATER NIGHT

Erick climbs the stairs to Cheryl's brownstone as his Taxi drives off in the bg... At the front entryway, Erick rings the doorbell, and waits... He blows warm air into his cold hands. Some moments, Cheryl's faint voice behind the door:

 CHERYL (O.S.)
Who is it?

 ERICK
Mrs. Easton, it's me... Erick.

A deadbolt unlocks and we hear the door squeak open...

INT. BREAKFAST NOOK, CHERYL'S BROWNSTONE -- MOMENTS LATER

Erick and Cheryl sit at a small table. The shoe box on top. Erick hold his warm cup of tea with both hands... Cheryl blows softly into her cup. Twilight glows through the wall of windows which surround them.

 ERICK
Sorry for showing up unannounced...
I know it's late, but I wanted to
return the letters... I read them
all like you asked...

 CHERYL
Quite the series of events,
wouldn't you say...?

 ERICK
Extraordinary... It's hard to
believe all that actually
happened...

 CHERYL
Believe it. Cause it happened.

Erick nods understandingly.

ERICK

To be honest with you Cheryl, I still can't figure out why you wanted me to read them...

A moment.

CHERYL

I read the book you wrote about your mother's addiction...

Erick's discomfort in hearing about his mother is evident.

CHERYL (CONT'D)

Your father gave me a copy a while back...

Cheryl eyes the box...

CHERYL (CONT'D)

Way before these letters fell back into my life.

(looking to Erick)

Truthfully, your book was no easy read... But Erick, you write beautifully. The pain in your words and the way you wrapped them with love. Your father was absolutely right. You are talented. And I want you to do the same with these letters.

ERICK

You want me to adapt the letters?

CHERYL

Esther's story deserves the honor of a book, not trapped in some box.

ERICK

I agree. But you know, there's a million other writers who would do a much better job than I would...

CHERYL

There's always someone better. But I want you to write it.

ERICK

I'm honored. Really... But why me?

CHERYL

Because only you can write like Erick Coates.

(MORE)

CHERYL (CONT'D)

And while I'm uncertain if you
perceive it yet, your fathers'
story could very well be the
beginning of Esthers...

Cheryl regards Erick as he think on her proposition...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. A FACTORY SOMEWHERE ACROSS TOWN -- NEXT DAY

A minority majority workforce sit behind sewing machines in a large garment factory... Each running machine has a number attached to it... We begin to PULL BACK to the point where we find ourself in an office on a higher floor...

INT. UPPER OFFICE -- CONTINUOUS

A MAN stands silhouetted before a one-way glass window... His hands rest on his hips as he gazes down at the production on the ground floor. In the fg, a second MAN stands, but we only see the clip board he holds...

MAN WITH THE CLIPBOARD

We still need to relieve three
more...

SILHOUETTED MAN

(sighs over his burden)
What about her?

MAN WITH THE CLIPBOARD

Which one?

The silhouetted man points with his finger...

SILHOUETTED MAN

Her... Number 28.

The man points to station 28, Lisa's station. She's decided to take a breather at the wrong time.

INT. SUPERVISOR OFFICE -- A BIT LATER

Lisa enters the office. Her SUPERVISOR sits behind his desk.

SUPERVISOR

Please close the door behind you
and have a seat...

Lisa does as she's told, closes the door, takes a seat... The Supervisor immediately glances over Lisa's file.

SUPERVISOR (CONT'D)

So Ms. Brown it says here in your
file that you were hired on as a
temp...

With a heavy breath, Lisa capitulates to the looming news...

INT. APARTMENT UNIT, TENEMENT BUILDING -- LATER DAY

A FIST knocks against a door... Some moments and the door
opens to Mr. Pascal, wiping food from his mouth with a
napkin.

MR. PASCAL

Erick... What can I do for you?

Erick looks hopeful with the WHITE ENVELOPE in his hand.

ERICK

Nothing. You did enough already,
Mr. Pascal...

(hands over the envelope)

Here... It's all in there. Last
month's, too.

Mr. Pascal swallows the last remnants of food in his mouth...

MR. PASCAL

(surprised)

I'm almost afraid to ask how you
managed to come up with all this...

ERICK

Don't. It's a long story...

Mr. Pascal peeks inside the envelope... looks up at Erick
back pedaling with a smile larger than life...

ERICK (CONT'D)

We good on not changing my locks
now, right...?

EXT. LISA'S UNIT, HALL -- MOMENTS LATER

Sheldon waits by Lisa's side as she unlocks the door... She
starts to open the door when...

SOMEONE UP THE HALL PURPOSEFULLY CLEARS THEIR THROAT...

Lisa turns, sees Erick approaching...

SHELDON

Ewick!

SHELDON GOES RUNNING DOWN THE HALL AFTER ERICK... Erick squats down and scoops the little guy up into his arms...

ERICK
What's up buddy? How are ya...?

SHELDON
Good.

ERICK
I missed you.

SHELDON
Me, too...
(suddenly excited)
Mommy got me a new superheewo!

ERICK
(matches excitement)
She did?

Sheldon nods.

SHELDON
Wanna see it?

LISA
Sheldon inside... Now!

Erick glances up at Lisa a bit taken aback by her tone.

SHELDON
(wines)
But mom I wanna show Ewick my
superheewo...

LISA
But mom nothing...! Go inside. And
wash your hands with soap before
touching anything...

On the verge of tears, Sheldon drags his feet into the apartment. Erick rises... looks at Lisa.

ERICK
What was that all about...?

Silence fills the air. Lisa stands still, almost statuesque.

ERICK (CONT'D)
Is everything alright...?

Lisa emits a deep breath... looks up trying to hold back tears... her response is delayed.

LISA
 (shaking her head)
 Truthfully... No, Erick.
 Everything's not alright. Past few
 days haven't been the greatest for
 me...

ERICK
 I'm sorry to hear that...

LISA
 That makes two of us...

ERICK
 Is there anything I can do to help?

LISA
 No. I'll get through it... Not like
 this hasn't happened before.
 Tomorrow's another day, right?

ERICK
 In more ways than one...

Lisa shakes her head slightly... manages a half smile.

LISA
 So, what's new with you writer...?

ERICK
 Funny you ask. I have some good
 news...

LISA
 Good news sounds nice...

ERICK
 Remember those letters Cheryl asked
 me to read...?
 (off Lisa's head nod)
 She commissioned me to turn them
 into a book. Pretty cool, huh?

LISA
 Congratulations. That is good news.
 I'm happy for you...

ERICK
 Thanks...
 (beat)
 Y'know she paid me an advance so if
 you want, I can go grab us
 something nice to sip on...
 (MORE)

ERICK (CONT'D)
 We can talk about whatever's
 bothering you...

Lisa smiles slightly...

LISA
 That's sweet of you. But I'm gonna
 have to take a rain check
 tonight... Sorry.

ERICK
 It's cool... I should probably
 start strategizing this book...
 (beat)
 Anyway, good night Lisa...

Erick turns, starts to walk away...

LISA
 Erick...

... He pauses, turns back around.

LISA (CONT'D)
 About what happened the other
 night...

ERICK
 Don't worry about it... I'm not
 your type, remember.

Erick forms a half smile, walks off. Eventually, Lisa enters
 her unit.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. MANHATTAN -- DAWN

A golden sun rises over the Manhattan skyline... The city
 begins to stir. Restaurant signs flicker to life. Horns blare
 as the morning traffic crosses in front of the LIBRARY...

INT. LIBRARY -- CONTINUOUS

Early MORNING LIGHT stretches long shadows across the atrium.

INT. ARCHIVES, LIBRARY -- CONTINUOUS

The LONG LASHES of Erick's eyes looking at a computer
 screen... He rubs at them, and we move to the screen where he
 scrolls through grainy, B&W MICROFORM IMAGES...

"...A chimp sits on a branch by the Camp Lindi Sign."
 "...African men in white coats dismember a dead chimp."
 "...A white woman vaccinates a "Sea of black Africans."
 "...A child, fearfully receives an injection in her arm."
 "...A smiling doctor in a white coat, touts two canisters."

We've seen these moments before... Erick scrolls down further. A caption below the last image of the doctor reads, "SALK'S VACCINE WORKS."

Erick fervidly jots down a few notes...

HALL -- MOMENTS LATER

Erick exits the archives room, proceeds down the hall...

Gradually the hall opens to a busy atrium. Seniors. Mothers. Children. A few homeless drifters. Erick makes a pit stop at the Reference Desk...

REFERENCE DESK

The female librarian who helped Erick once before sits behind the counter with her head down... reading.

ERICK

Excuse me.

She looks up...

FEMALE LIBRARIAN

Yes... What can I--

(recognizes Erick)

--Oh hey... It's you. What can I do for you?

ERICK

I sent a few things to the printer.

FEMALE LIBRARIAN

Sure... Let me grab them for you.

The librarian walks off to the back. After some moments she returns with Erick's COPIES in her hand.

FEMALE LIBRARIAN (CONT'D)

Fifteen black and white copies?

ERICK

Yes...

FEMALE LIBRARIAN

Alright, black and white copies, 20 cents a page, that's gonna be...

(MORE)

FEMALE LIBRARIAN (CONT'D)
 (hesitates)
 ... y'know what, just take em.

ERICK
 You sure?

FEMALE LIBRARIAN
 Yeah, don't worry about it. It'll
 satisfy my good deed for the week.

ERICK
 Thank you. Really appreciate that.

FEMALE LIBRARIAN
 No problem.
 (holds out hand)
 I'm JUDITH by the way.

ERICK
 (shakes Judith's hand)
 Erick.

JUDITH
 Nice to meet you Erick. You're here
 an awful lot. Mind my asking what
 it is you're working on...?

ERICK
 A book.

JUDITH
 (interested)
 A book? Really?

ERICK
 Yeah.

JUDITH
 That's awesome!

ERICK
 I guess. Honestly, sometimes it
 feels like a journey of a thousand
 miles.

JUDITH
 I bet it does...

A still moment.

ERICK
 Well, I should probably get back to
 it... Thanks again for the copies.

Judith smiles as Erick walks off...

INT. TABLE NEARBY WINDOWS -- MOMENTS LATER

Morning sunlight spills in through floor-to-ceiling windows. Erick sits amid a mess of research material TYPING AWAY with a renewed passion...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A CHEAP MOTEL - TRUCK STOP, UGANDA -- DAWN

A seedy RED MOTEL looms like a lifeless strip joint. The early morning COCKEREL CALL says we're no longer in the city.

"LYANTONDE DISTRICT, UGANDA 1977"
(caption)

INT. THE RED MOTEL - CONTINUOUS

Esther is now in her 20's. She wears a disgusted grimace on her face as she rocks up and down in rhythm with the grunts of the BURLY MAN on top of her building to an orgasm "uh, uh, uh, uh, ahhhh!

The man's post-coitus panting and moaning mix with the sounds of sex in the nearby rooms. He slowly rolls off of Esther, lies on his back, laughs languorously to himself...

BURLY MAN

**Incredible. My God! Who are you?
And where did you come from?**
(looks over at Esther)
**You are a treasure in every sense
of the word. Not to mention, quite
the bargain.**
(lays his hand on Esther)
**Here. Most women charge extra for
spending the night together...**

Esther's still. The man OPENS his hand to reveal 200 Shillings(\$2.50) curled up inside.

BURLY MAN (CONT'D)

**Take it... You deserve it. It's
left over bribe money, anyway. Buy
yourself something nice.**

Esther slowly reaches for the money.

ESTHER

Thank you.

BURLY MAN

No. Thank you.

The PROPRIETOR BANGS ON THE DOOR and the man rises from the filthy cot. His ass looks like two shriveled raisins pressed together... He quickly dresses, then glances over at Esther. A faraway look is glazed over her face...

BURLY MAN (CONT'D)

With any luck we will meet again.

The man smiles suggestively, retrieves his keys off a bedside table and leaves the room...

EXT. THE RED MOTEL -- A LITTLE LATER

The SUN breaks over the horizon...

Esther exits the motel wearing a dress... TRUCKS move out along the dirt road ahead. Prostitutes roam the streets like tumbleweed. Shop owners prepare to open... Esther pulls a shawl across her chest and begins her long journey home...

EXT. RURAL ROAD, SOMEWHERE -- LATER DAY

A simple dirt road amid jungle. Buzzing insects. Chirping birds and Esther's brisk pace...

THEN ESTHER STOPS ABRUPTLY and looks back over her shoulder. Down the road a distant GROAN builds. Popping gears, rough shifting, a grinding clutch...

Esther quickly moves off the road and hides in the forest. She waits, looks out through the brush and sees a Jeep full of Idi Amin's unruly soldiers, barrel by.

EXT. VILLAGE, SOMEWHERE IN RAKAI DISTRICT -- HOURS LATER

Midday. Sweaty and tired. Esther returns to her repressed village. A dismal cluster of SHANTY HOMESTEADS...

Esther weaves through and we get the sense that something is tragically awry. The balance is off... No one communicates. A bleak wind blows sick children along... Village elders till the gardens, lumber with jugs of water and bundles of fire wood... Even the animals are thin, emaciated and lethargic...

And yet Esther passes by all this numbly...

INT. HUT -- MOMENTS LATER

A wooden door OPENS...

Daylight SPREADS over the dire situation. An old Nabirye lies supine on a grass mat... Painfully thin. Her breaths raspy. She's suffering from the ravages of a terrible disease...

Esther sits down beside her mother. Regards her gaunt body...

ESTHER

Mother...

Nabirye opens her sticky, red eyes... She struggles to speak due to a build up of thrush inside her throat.

NABIRYE

Esther... Where were you...? I was worried.

ESTHER

I'm here now. There's no need to worry anymore...

Nabirye tries to swallow...

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Water?

(off Nabirye's nod)

Okay. I will bring some.

Esther rises to her feet, steps outside...

EXT. HUT -- CONTINUOUS

Esther closes the door, turns to find:

ISAAC standing a few feet back. Thin as a rail. Hunched over, holding a bottle of Waragi (Ugandan gin).

ISAAC

(drunken slur)

You never came home... I looked everywhere. Couldn't find you...

Esther glares back at Isaac who smiles wryly and draws his finger across his lips.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

My lips are sealed.

(sniffs)

But you reek of it. Shame on you.

Leaving your sick mother alone...

(scoffs, takes a swallow)

And you call yourself her daughter.

ESTHER

I know what I am. I'm her daughter.
But you, I have no idea what you
are...?

ISAAC

Little girl have you forgotten? I
am the one who gives you life...

ESTHER

Life? You spend your days hugging a
bottle and your nights rolling
under the blanket with loose women,
all while my mother dies. And
that's your idea of giving life? My
mother needs water. Food. Medicine.
You don't give life. You give
nothing but pain. The more I look
at you, the more I see you're
afraid.

ISAAC

(scoffs)

Afraid...?

(smug laugh)

Tell me, what am I afraid of?

ESTHER

That soon you'll be lying on that
mat... Just like my mother.

A moment. Rage BUILDING behind Isaac's narrow, drunken eyes.

SUDDENLY ISAAC CHUCKS THE BOTTLE. IT SHATTERS AS HE CHARGES
IN AND GRABS ESTHER BY THE BACK OF THE HEAD.

ISAAC

You little bitch!

Isaac pulls Esther down. She struggles to break free.

ESTHER

Let go of me...!

ISAAC

You think you know so much. Let me
explain something to you. That
whore you call a mother, she
brought this onto herself! This is
what becomes of those who coalesce
with foreigners... You think it's
normal for a woman to be childless?

(scoffs)

You're an outcast!

(MORE)

ISAAC (CONT'D)

You are the well from which this village draws it's whispers. And this curse, this Slim, it lives and breathes in you. You will die childless... In case you didn't already know.

Isaac looks down fiercely on Esther, she's bent back in an awkward position... A tear rolls down her cheek.

The last remaining villagers look on as Isaac pushes Esther to the ground and stumbles inside...

TIME LAPSE:

THE SUN SETS AND DARKNESS DESCENDS UPON THE VILLAGE...

EXT. SOMEWHERE WITHIN THE VILLAGE -- EVENING

A group of MEN gather around a small fire. Their faces unknown. All we see is the BOTTLE of liquor passed around.

MALE VOICE #1 (O.S.)

You are mistaking possibility with improbability my friend.

MALE VOICE #2 (O.S.)

It is possible. I've seen it performed.

MALE VOICE #1 (O.S.)

Performed? How?

MALE VOICE #2 (O.S.)

With a virgin.

Some of the men blow off the idea...

MALE VOICE #3 (O.S.)

A virgin, you say? That's just an old village myth. A virgin is good for one thing only, a tighter fit.

Some of the men laugh...

MALE VOICE #2 (O.S.)

It's no myth. The cure is in their blood... I assure you.

The bottle lands in a new set of hands. We rise with the bottle to see Isaac. Three sheets to the wind. A terribly dreadful look in his eyes...

INT. HUT -- NIGHT

Esther pours a little water into Nabirye's dry mouth. She coughs up most of it... Esther dries her mothers mouth. Nabirye breaths are labored. Perpetually short on air.

NABIRYE
(strained)
Did you check on the children?

ESTHER
Not yet. I will go later.

NABIRYE
No, now... You must go now.

ESTHER
I need to be here with you now.

Nabirye shuts her eyes... GROANS out loud.

NABIRYE
**Esther, do you not feel what's
happening here? Can you not see it?**

CUT TO:

EXT. VARIOUS AREAS IN THE VILLAGE -- MOMENTS LATER

Esther walks through a quiet village washed over by the glow of the moon...

NABIRYE (V.O.)
**Black seeds have been sown. Evil
seeds with unimaginable
repercussions...**
(coughs)
You must look after the children...

Silhouetted trees loom large. Insects buzz. Distant voices fill the air...

And as Esther follows the curve of a well-worn path, she finds a YOUNG BOY squirming on the ground, MOANING and CLUTCHING his stomach...

ESTHER
Oh God no!

Esther RUNS OVER to the boy...

ESTHER (CONT'D)
Taban! What happened? Who did this?

She drops to her knees and lifts up 10-year old TABAN's head.

TABAN
He stabbed me and took Kabiite...

We glimpse the fresh, dark BLOOD around his abdomen...

ESTHER
Who took Kabiite? Where is she?

Taban points. Directs Esther eyes to a dark HUT up ahead.

LITTLE GIRLS VOICE (O.S.)
 (innocent and faint)
No... Please stop... It hurts...

FAMILIAR MALE VOICE (O.S.)
 (low and firm)
I said quiet...!

The INNOCENT CRIES of a little girl awaken a fire in Esther. She gently sets Taban's head back down on the ground, rises to her feet, rushes over to the hut.

ESTHER BURSTS INSIDE AND IMMEDIATELY SCREAMS:

ESTHER (O.S.)
NOOO! GET OFF HER!

FAMILIAR MALE VOICE (O.S.)
 (to little girl)
Come back here...!

KABIITE, 5, escapes out of the hut holding a DOLL... She runs over to Taban with tears in her eyes... Taban takes his sister tight into his arms...

TABAN
Are you okay...? Did he hurt you?

Kabiite's eyes dart to the ground... The BLOOD on the edges of her dress tells Taban all he needs to know...

ESTHER (O.S.)
HOW COULD YOU DO THIS?

FAMILIAR MALE VOICE (O.S.)
 (to Esther)
BITCH...! I've had enough with you!

... AND A FIGHT BEGINS.

INT. HUT -- CONTINUOUS

FLASHES OF THE DARK DEADLY FIGHT BETWEEN ESTHER AND ISAAC.

...Isaac GROWLS like a rabid dog, CHARGES Esther...
 ...Esther SLAMS hard against the wall, her head WHIPS back...
 ...Isaac one-two's Esther... BAM-BAM... BAM-BAM... BAM-BAM...
 ...The barrage of blows tire Isaac, he pauses, leans over...
 ...Esther keels over, dazed, bloody, glimpses a BOTTLE...

OUTSIDE

Taban and Kabiite's WIDE EYES are locked on the hut, waiting.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. SOMEWHERE IN THE VILLAGE -- MOMENTS LATER

Kabiite stands numbly, holding her doll... She watches as...

... Bit by bit Isaac's greyish-blue carcass is dragged across the dirt, GLASS FRAGMENTS wedged in his bloody skull...
 Esther's badly beat up. She pulls one leg... Taban pulls against the other...

...The two dump the dead body in a patch of high grass...
 Isaac's lifeless legs hit the ground in a dull THUMP...

Taban stares down at the body, adrenaline masking his pain.
 Kabiite moves by Esther's leg, stares down at the man who defiled her. Esther wraps her arm around Kabiite... All three now stand together as ONE...

FADE TO BLACK.

CHILD'S VOICE (PRE-LAP)
 Mommy wake up. Mommy... Wake up.

FADE IN:

(POV) LISA'S EYES OPENING

We glimpse faint, hazy images of light and Sheldon's face.

INT. BEDROOM -- DAWN

Lisa groans, slowly wakes with Sheldon hovering overtop.

SHELDON
 Wake up, mommy.

LISA
 (rubbing her eyes)
 I'm up baby... I'm up...

Daylight peeks in through curtains drawn across a window...

LISA (CONT'D)
 What time is it?

Sheldon shrugs his tiny shoulders.

LISA (CONT'D)
 Right... Bad question.

Lisa lifts her head from her pillow, combs her fingers through her tossed hair... Glances at her phone...

LISA (CONT'D)
 Ugh...

She drops her head back down on the pillow...

SHELDON
 Mommy, no...! It's time to get up.

LISA
 Okay. Okay... I'm getting up.

INT. BATHROOM -- MOMENTS LATER

Lisa opens the medicine cabinet. The shelves are lined with PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION... She rotates a few BOTTLES, reads the labels, grabs the BOTTLES she needs...

INT. LIVING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Sheldon is on his knees, pointing a remote to the TV, futilely pressing buttons. Some MORNING NEWS SHOW plays and Sheldon is unable to change the station.

Lisa crosses toward the kitchen, Sheldon calls out:

SHELDON
 (frustrated)
 Mommy, the wemote is bwoken...

Lisa stops midway...

LISA
 What's wrong with it...?

Sheldon shrugs...

LISA (CONT'D)
Nevermind... Here, lemme see it.

Sheldon gives the remote to Lisa. She tries it... nothing.

LISA (CONT'D)
Think the batteries are dead
sweetie...

Lisa OPENS the back cover, checks the batteries when...

THERE'S SUDDENLY A BREAK IN THE SHOW FOR A NEWS DEVELOPMENT..

A MALE AND FEMALE NEWSCASTER APPEAR ON THE TV SCREEN.

NEWSCASTER #1
Good morning everyone. I'm Terry
O'Donnell.

NEWSCASTER #2
And I'm Vanessa Mitchell... After
spending six months of a life
sentence behind bars in federal
prison, the man charged with the
death of 72-year old Edris Coates
speaks for the first time.

Lisa looks up at the TV screen...

NEWSCASTER #2 (CONT'D)
In an exclusive interview we sit
down with Devon Hill to learn what
was going through his mind that
fateful day...

A LIVE FEED OF DEVON HILL IN FEDERAL PRISON - A BLACK MAN(35)
in an orange corrections uniform appears on the TV screen.

DEVON HILL
What was goin' through my mind dat
day...?
(sighs regretfully)
Man... to be honest... it's hard to
say. All I was really tryin to do
was get well...

INTERVIEWER (O.S.)
Can you explain what you mean
exactly when you say, get well?

DEVON HILL
Exactly what it sound like. When
you sick, whaddy do? You take
medicine, right?
(MORE)

DEVON HILL (CONT'D)
 Tylenol, Robitussin... Y'know,
 whatever you gotta do to feel
 better... Same goes for an addict
 like me. Gettin' well is gettin' yo
 hands on just enough dragon to keep
 dat sickness from comin' over...

INTERVIEWER (O.S.)
 But why kill an innocent man? One
 who happened to be handicapped...

Devon scoffs.

DEVON HILL
 You ask me dat like I meant to kill
 him... Like it was premeditated or
 something. I just needed some and
 had no way of gettin' it... Ask any
 addict, they'll tell ya. When that
 urge starts bittin' and you ain't
 got no way of addressin' it...
 (blows air out his mouth)
 (BEEP) it's like being underwater
 with no oxygen. You know what that
 feels like...?

INTERVIEWER (O.S.)
 No, I do not.

DEVON HILL
 You ever drown before?

INTERVIEWER (O.S.)
 Have I ever drowned before...? Of
 course not. I wouldn't be doing
 this interview with you if I had.

DEVON HILL
 I have... It's ugly... All you
 tryin' to do is breathe and in
 those moments, you'll do anything
 for air... I regret what
 happened... I do. As much as I wish
 I could take it back, I cain't. And
 I gotta live with dat...

Lisa raises the remote to the TV. Oddly, this time it works.
 The screen goes black... Sheldon stares at the black screen,
 gripped by the short interview just as much as Lisa was...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SIDEWALK, SOMEWHERE IN QUEENS -- MORNING

A tall STONE WALL covered in GRAFFITI...

Erick walks alongside the wall, his backpack slung over one shoulder. In time, the wall ends at a cast IRON GATE. Erick pushes on the gate, it squeaks open and he passes through...

EXT. VARIOUS SPOTS, ACACIA CEMETERY -- CONTINUOUS

The old and the frail haunt these grounds like sad ghosts... A woman parked in a wheel chair dries her eyes with a tissue. A vet, shaken by loss, stares down at his wife's tombstone. He holds his World War II cap to his chest...

And like a rain cloud moving in, a sad beauty hangs over Erick as he lumbers along the well-worn dirt pathways...

A ROW OF TOMBSTONES RISE in the fg... In the bg, we glimpse Erick drifting pass stone after stone after stone...

Suddenly, Erick stops. His eyes drawn to a stone... We circle around the stones jagged edge to read the engraving on the front, "Edris Allen Coates 1939-2014."

EDRIS'S TOMBSTONE

Erick drops his bag and sits on the ground. For a while Erick sits with his elbows on his knees, staring at his fathers' stone. A breeze rustles several overgrown wildflowers. Erick takes a deep breath and at long last he speaks to his father.

ERICK

Two hundred and forty days dad.
That's how long its been. Can you
believe it? Doesn't seem that long
when you break it down like that...

(sighs)

Honestly though, it feels like you
been gone forever. I tried coming.
Believe me, I did... Honestly... I
just... I couldn't pull myself to
it. I don't even know how I'm here
right now. But I'm here, finally...

Erick looks down, exhales, it takes him a moment to continue.

ERICK (CONT'D)

I know we all don't last forever,
but I wasn't ready for you to go...
You just left me man... out of
nowhere you were gone. And I was so
angry at you for that... When I
needed you, you weren't there.

(MORE)

ERICK (CONT'D)

I need you now and where are you...
A million miles away...

(wipes teary eyes)

God, so much has happened since you
left... I would tell you about it,
but I'm sure you can see it...

Erick looks up, tries to fight away the tears, but he can't.
They come hard, he loses it and it pains us to see him cry.

ERICK (CONT'D)

If this is what you meant by nature
doing its' thing, then how do you
expect me to respect it...?

(emotional, jumbled)

I feel like... I feel like I'm
drifting in the sea and I swear to
God the next storm could be it for
me... So please, let this be it...
Alright? Just let this be it...
Please... I can't lose anyone else.

Erick stares at the tombstone... still in disbelief.

A prolonged moment. Erick stands up, kisses his fingers and
gently touches the edge of the tombstone...

ERICK (CONT'D)

I love you...

Erick reaches down, grabs his backpack and walks off...

DISSOLVE TO:

JUDITH (PRE-LAP)

Hey. It's me....

EXT. REFERENCE DESK, LIBRARY -- LATER DAY

Judith sits behind the counter talking on the phone...

JUDITH

Quick question. You know if Brent's
looking for material?... No, not
for me. For this guy I know...

Judith looks up at Erick, sitting by the window, CHOMPING
AWAY AT THE KEYS...

MALE BRITISH BROADCASTER (PRE-LAP)

Martyn Butler and his friends have
seen the slow death of Terrance
Higgins...

OLD SONY TELEVISION SET - LATE 1979

BBC NEWS FOOTAGE of GAY MEN dancing in a Night Club.

MALE BRITISH BROADCASTER (V.O.)
 ...One of the first British victims
 of this new bizarre disease. Now
 they are raising money to promote
 research and health education for
 those most at risk...

More FOOTAGE of GAY MEN moseying about in Greenwich Village.

MALE BRITISH BROADCASTER (V.O.)
 In New York, this is Greenwich
 Village. Here, the killer disease
 has taken it's greatest tool of
 death and fear among a vast
 community of Gay men who walk in
 it's shadow.

PULL BACK to see:

INT. LIVING ROOM, BRITISH HOME - UK -- DAY (1979)

Henry sits back watching TV. Cheryl reads a LETTER.

A SUDDEN EXPLOSION OF GUN FIRE, BOMBS, BRUTAL SOUNDS OF WAR:

EXT. VARIOUS AREAS, UGANDA -- VARIOUS TIMES IN 1979

Tanzanian, Ugandan, Libyan and Palestinian Troops battle on
 Ugandan soil. AK-47's, Chinese Tanks, Soviet Rocket
 Launchers, RPG'S and Tu-22 Bombers rip apart the countryside.

"UGANDA-TANZANIA WAR/LIBERATION WAR"
 (caption)

Huts are torched, entire villages burnt. Clouds of black
 smoke blot out the sun as 4,200 lie dead in the high grass...

FADE TO:

EXT. BANANA GROVES, VILLAGE - UGANDA -- DAWN 1980

TIGHT on a CLUSTER OF ROTTEN BANANAS, perilously hanging on
 to a palm tree. Suddenly, a BANANA drops down to...

...A shaded clearing below. Stones piled on top DOZENS OF
 GRAVES. Crosses jut out from raised mounds. A few yards back,
 a FAMILY weeps on their knees...

WIDEN to see Taban and Kabiite sit beside two BURLAP BAGS. They've lost a lot of weight. Beside them, Esther's eyes are closed as she kneels before her MOTHER'S GRAVE.

TABAN (PRE-LAP)

Tired?

EXT. EDGE OF VILLAGE -- DAY

The smoking VILLAGE diminishes as the TRIO travel away on foot...

TABAN

Want to ride on my back?

Taban looks over a Kabiite. She silently nods yes. They stop momentarily. Taban hands his BAG over to Esther. He squats down. Artillery shelling has left large HOLES in the dirt road. Kabiite hops up on Taban's back...

TABAN (CONT'D)

How's that? Better?

Kabiite nods silently... Esther smiles at the show of love.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. DARK ROADSIDE -- NIGHT

The TRIO walks under moonlight...

Esther carries a sleeping Kabiite. Taban lugs both bags on his shoulders, looks ahead at the arching glow of lights emerging over the rise...

TABAN

Is that where we are going?

ESTHER

Yes, it is.

Suddenly Kabiite wakes... her sleepy eyes gaze ahead as the distant ROAR OF LONG HAUL TRUCKS takes us to...

EXT. TRUCK STOP, LYANTONDE -- LATER NIGHT

The roar is right in front of us. A line of LONG HAUL TRUCKS pass along the road ahead, dust surging in their wakes...

The trio stand at the edge of town like lost sheep, Passerby's shoot side glances in their direction...

Taban sets the bags down. SCRATCHES HIS BACK and watches the trucks slowly turn off the road into a DIRT LOT attended by PROSTITUTES... Some climb up into the trucks sleeper cabins, others wait down below to be escorted into the many sleazy motels. A fair amount of the women wear similar trendy T-shirts...

Kabiite looks up at Taban... He sees the fear in her eyes.

TABAN

**Don't worry... I won't let anything
happen to you again.**

Kabiite reaches for Taban's hand as a motorcycle taxi SPEEDS by... kicking more dust up into the air...

Taban and Kabiite fan the air around them...

TABAN (CONT'D)

Where are we?

Taban looks up at Esther. Her eyes are fixed across the road.

TABAN (CONT'D)

What is it...?

ESTHER

Wait here.

MOMENTS LATER

Kabiite and Taban sit on the roadside with the burlap bags...

WIDEN TO see Esther crossing the main road toward the same infamous, Red Motel she was once gainfully employed...

EXT. THE RED MOTEL -- CONTINUOUS

Esther regards the motel. A river of prostitutes flow in and out with truckers on their arms...

Esther pushes onward toward a food stand...

FOOD STAND

The once BURLY MAN is now gaunt and stands beside a skinny TUTSI WOMAN...

BURLY MAN

(to food vendor)

Two Rolexes...

The VENDOR throws eggs, sausage and Chapatti onto a fry pan... STEAM RISES AS THE FOOD BEGINS TO SIZZLE...

The man leans in toward the Tutsi woman. Whispers into her ear and grabs a firm hold of her backside... He looks around as they wait for their pre-sex snack, when out of the corner of his eye...

He GLIMPSES Esther standing a few feet away...

The man turns. Grimaces, then realizes and smiles... And while Esther and the burly man exchange vastly different looks, it is the Tutsi woman who has the strangest look of all, as if she's seen Esther ages ago...

CUT TO:

EXT. LAKE VICTORIA, A TIME LONG AGO -- DAY

Tutsi women and children plod along the water's edge when a young TUTSI GIRL in the group suddenly PAUSES... She turns over her shoulder and looks across a narrow strait of the red-hued Kagera River at a woman(Nabirye) standing behind her light-skinned child(Esther). Esther removes her mothers hands from her eyes and shares a moment with the young refugee...

BACK TO:

EXT. THE RED MOTEL -- SAME NIGHT

The burly man gazes at Esther. The vendor taps the man on the shoulder. He turns, the vendor holds out two steaming hot Rolexes...

VENDOR

150 shillings...

The burly man pays the vendor, receives the food and unconsciously hands it over to the Tutsi woman...

ACROSS THE MAIN ROAD -- CONTINUOUS

Taban watches the burly man leave the Tutsi woman for Esther.

TABAN

He must not know what he wants...

Kabiite just watches in her deep-seated reticence...

FRONT OF THE RED MOTEL -- CONTINUOUS

The man stands before Esther, amazed by his good fortune...

BURLY MAN

It can't be. It's really you. After all this time, we meet again.

(POV) KABIITE AND TABAN

Esther pointing. The man looks across the road.

TABAN

I wonder why she is pointing at us.

FRONT OF THE RED MOTEL -- CONTINUOUS

The man turns back to Esther perplexed.

INT. HALL, RED MOTEL -- MOMENTS LATER

The man leans against the wall in the hall, waiting...
Prostitutes and Trucker cross by in route to their rooms...

WIDEN to see:

DOORWAY, ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Esther squats before Taban and Kabiite. Both looking ahead.

ESTHER

I'll be in the next room over.

(pained look)

See you in the morning.

Esther rises. PAN around to see the tiny, fleabag room. A bed, a chair, a hole in the ground for a toilet...

Esther leaves the room and closes the door. The sounds of adult activity permeates from the adjacent rooms as we rise up to see that the walls do not reach the ceiling. Looking into the many partitioned rooms below we glimpse women earning a living on their backs.

CUT TO:

EXT. SIDEWALK - "PRESENT" -- NIGHT

TIGHT on a MAN asleep on the sidewalk, cocooned in blankets.

A few COINS are dropped into the PLASTIC BOWL before him.

WIDEN to see Erick move away from the man and continue walking on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets, steam surging from his mouth... In the bg, the LIBRARY'S interior lights shut off one by one until it goes BLACK.

SUDDENLY A LADY'S VOICE CALLS OUT... "Erick...!"

Erick pauses, looks back over his shoulder and sees a girl moving quickly on her feet...

After some moments the female catches up... it's Judith.

JUDITH
 (smile, catching breath)
 Hi...

ERICK
 Hey...

A moment. Judith looking at Erick with her rosy red cheeks.

JUDITH
 Mind if I walk with you...?

INT. HALL, TENEMENT BUILDING -- LATER NIGHT

Erick lumbers down the hall, passes Lisa's door without looking in her direction...

Erick steps to his door... wedges his key into the lock...

(POV) PEEP HOLE

Erick in the hall opening his door... He steps into his unit and peeks across the hall before shutting the door...

PULL BACK to see we're:

INT. LISA'S APARTMENT -- CONTINUOUS

Lisa moves from the peep hole, leans against the door, sighs.

EXT. LYANTONDE -- PRE-DAWN - NEXT DAY(1980)

It's still more night than day as we look down on Cheap Motels, People and Trucks moving out along the main strip.

ESTHER (PRE-LAP)
 (soft voice)
Kabiite...

INT. ROOM, RED MOTEL -- CONTINUOUS

Extreme lassitude hangs over Esther's eyes. She leans over Kabiite, gently nudges her back to consciousness...

ESTHER
Wake up. It's time to open your eyes...

Kabiite groans in sleepy protest. Esther smiles, moves to the other side of the bed where TABAN sleeps on his stomach...

ESTHER (CONT'D)
C'mon Taban. Time to --

A SUDDEN PAUSE. Esther's eyes fixed on Taban's back.

Esther moves in closer. Taban's quiet snores. She lightly peeks under his shirt and CRINGES at the sight of:

FESTERING ABSCESSSES BLANKETING TABAN'S BACK.

Aghast. Esther grimaces. Covers her mouth, looks at Kabiite crawling out of bed as the PROPRIETOR BANGS ON THE DOOR...

EXT. A TOWN, SOMEWHERE -- LATER DAY

Esther trudges into a small town, both bags draped over her shoulders, sweat glistening on her forehead. She looks up exhausted at a mud and brick CLINIC just a few yards ahead...

Esther takes a deep breath, drops the bags, looks back over her shoulder at Taban and Kabiite lagging a few yards behind.

INT. MUD AND BRICK CLINIC -- MOMENTS LATER

Skeleton heads turn as the TRIO enter...

A HORRIFIC scene. Hordes of moribund VILLAGERS sit on benches. Grim and quiet. A raspy cough here, a infant's faint cries there. All afflicted by the same mysterious disease...

Esther sets the bags down by a thin Woman battling a nasty Shingles outbreak on her face.

ESTHER

Wait here. I need to go find the nurse.

Kabiite sits beside the woman. Avoids eye contact. Taban sits on the floor.

Esther's visage draws much attention as she stoically marches up the tight HALL, past emaciated men, women and children.

A DOOR OPENS UP AHEAD:

A NURSE steps out reviewing a clipboard, looks up at Esther.

NURSE

Jeje Okello...?

Esther shakes her head. The nurse looks beyond Esther, scans the hall.

NURSE (CONT'D)

Where is Jeje Okello? The doctor is ready to see you now.

Esther turns over her shoulder, watches the Okello tribe, a Man, Woman and Newborn rise to their feet. Wasting away with a plethora of infections, they move slower than molasses...

ESTHER

(turns back to nurse)

Nurse. I have two children who need medical attention.

NURSE

Are they on the list?

ESTHER

No.

NURSE

What are their names?

ESTHER

Taban and Kabiite Atubo.

The nurse scribbles their names on her clipboard...

NURSE

We will call you when it's time.

The nurse motions over the family... They lumber pass Esther and leave a horrible odor of infection in their wake...

FADE TO:

INT. HALL, CLINIC -- LATE EVENING

A new NURSE denies entry to the SICK gathering outside.

NURSE #2

(shaking her head)

No more! Come back tomorrow.

PULL BACK to see Taban and Kabiite watching. Esther looks up the hall at a Mother and Child, severely wasted, covered in ABSCESSSES, lurch down the hall like sick animals.

Some moments and the original Nurse steps into the hall. She looks worn out. She glances at her clipboard, looks up:

NURSE

Taban and Kabiite Atubo. The doctor will see you now...

INT. DOCTOR'S ROOM -- A LITTLE LATER

We are CLOSE ON Taban's crater-like back. He sits shirtless.

WIDEN to see DOCTOR DAVID OKELLO(40's), a bespectacled man, examining the nasty SORES.

Nearby, Esther observes, Kabiite has her head down.

The doctor circles around the wooden cot that Taban sits on, presses a stethoscope to his chest, listens to Taban's internal sounds. In the process of listening, he notices Taban's old knife wound... Now a keloid scar.

The doctor removes his stethoscope, rubs at his tired eyes.

DOCTOR DAVID
All finished Taban.

Taban puts his shirt back on, sits by Esther and Kabiite. The doctor returns to his seat behind his desk, sighs.

Esther looks ahead, waits for the doctor's prognosis.

DOCTOR DAVID (CONT'D)
You say you knew the mother and father, yes?

ESTHER
I knew their mother. We were friends. Their father was a miner in South Africa and was away a lot.

The doctor nods, slowly turns to Kabiite, smiles at her doll.

DOCTOR DAVID
(re: to Kabiite)
She's beautiful. What's her name?

Kabiite doesn't respond, instead lowers her eyes once again.

ESTHER
She doesn't speak. Hasn't in years.

An understanding moment.

DOCTOR DAVID
I'm going to give you some Amphotericin for the fungal infection on Taban's back. It's strong as are the side-effects, but it will buy you some time...

Esther looks confused...

ESTHER
Time? Time for what...?

The doctor PAUSES, holds his gaze on Esther, then CALLS OUT.

DOCTOR DAVID

Ritah...

The worn down Nurse enters the room.

DOCTOR DAVID (CONT'D)

Please, take the children outside.

The nurse nods. Taban and Kabiite leave with the nurse. The doctor leans over his desk, interlocks his hands.

DOCTOR DAVID (CONT'D)

**It's time to start making
preparations...**

ESTHER

Preparations for what?

DOCTOR DAVID

**To live out what time remains
positively...**

Esther doesn't follow. And so the doctor removes his glasses.

DOCTOR DAVID (CONT'D)

**The scar around Taban's abdomen...
a knife wound, am I right? And
Kabiite's refusal to speak came
about from what preceded Taban's
futile attempt at protecting his
sister?**

The doctor shakes his head, takes Esther's silence as tacit admittance...

DOCTOR DAVID (CONT'D)

**You'd be shocked at the number of
times I've seen this exact
situation walk into this clinic. So
many men actually regard that old
village legend as truth. It's mind-
boggling. But then again, despair
can make man behave in ways one
could never imagine...**

(a moment)

**My wife says I've been given a
gift... for having such a keen eye
for the imperceptible. I keep
telling her, it's no gift, but a
curse... A curse no different than
this Slim...**

(MORE)

DOCTOR DAVID (CONT'D)

Whatever this monster is, it's long lived inside both children. It just hasn't progress as far with Kabiite as it has with Taban. But it will. Eventually...

ESTHER

What are you suggesting?

DOCTOR DAVID

I'm not suggesting anything. I'm telling you. You must prepare. This will get much worse before it gets better...

ESTHER

(firm)

I refuse to bury these children!

The doctor shakes his head ruefully, sighs...

DOCTOR DAVID

Naturally, someone will have to...

And with that grim realization we...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. FRONT ROOM, LISA'S APARTMENT -- EARLY MORNING

Lisa slips a NOTE into her back pocket, squats down and pulls the zipper up on Sheldon's jacket. He stands by the door, grumpy, sleepy, dressed for school, dwarfed by a large superhero backpack strapped to his back...

SHELDON

(whiny)

I don't wanna go to school...

LISA

But school wants you... You're a necessary piece sweetie...

(pauses, loving look)

Listen, sometimes in life, we have to go places we don't wanna go, in order to get what we need. Okay?

(squeeze Sheldon's cheeks)

Okay?

Sheldon just stares back numbly.

Lisa smiles, kisses Sheldon and rises to her feet. She unlocks the deadbolt, turns the knob, pulls open the door to see:

ERICK IN THE HALL

He's wiggling the knob on his own door.

SHELDON

Ewick!

Erick WHIPS around. Sheldon BURSTS OUT LIKE A CANNON. Crashes into Erick and wraps his arms around his legs.

ERICK

(looking down at Sheldon)
Hey buddy.

Sheldon looks up with a BEAMING smile... Sniffs.

SHELDON

Mmm. You smell good...

Erick smiles, not quite sure how to respond.

ERICK

Thanks.

SHELDON

Wanna see my super-hee-wo toy?

LISA

Not now sweetie. We're late...

Sheldon ignores Lisa, stolidly holds his innocent gaze on Erick... Erick glances over at Lisa, shaking her head, but smiling at the same time...

ERICK

Uh... Yeah, sure buddy.

Sheldon wiggles off his backpack, BOLTS back inside. Lisa looks at Erick, smiles...

ERICK (CONT'D)

My bad...

LISA

It's fine. He really dotes on you.

Erick smiles. A quiet moment.

LISA (CONT'D)

So what are you still doing here?
Figured you'd be at the library by
now.

ERICK
I'm actually meeting someone today.

LISA
Cheryl...?

Erick lightly shakes his head...

ERICK
No. Someone else.

Lisa nods, she knows, call it intuition. A beat..

LISA
Well, since you're here...
(digs into her pocket)
Might as well give it to you now.
Was gonna be mysterious and slide
it under your door...

Lisa pulls out the NOTE, hands it to Erick. He glances at it, looks up.

ERICK
You wrote me a letter?

LISA
(half-smile)
I did. Wanted to tell you some
things, but didn't know how to say
them. It's nothing really. Not half
as good as your writing so don't
expect to be wowed or anything...

ERICK
(scoffs)
My writing doesn't wow anyone...

LISA
Why do you do that?

ERICK
Do what?

LISA
Lessen yourself. It's like the
people around you believe in you
more than you believe in you... I
read your book by the way. I now
see why that waiter said what he
said. You're a really good writer,
Erick. Your words... I really felt
like I knew Charlotte.

(MORE)

LISA (CONT'D)
 (a moment to herself)
 Anyway, read it if you want...

ERICK
 I'll definitely read it. Thank you.

QUICK FOOTSTEPS build to Sheldon returning with his superhero action figure exalted in his hand.

SHELDON
 Sowry, I couldn't find him...

Erick is truly excited to see the toy.

ERICK
 Don't be sorry... Is this him?

Sheldon nods, smiles... sleep no longer lingers in his eyes.

ERICK (CONT'D)
 Can I hold him?

Without the slightest hesitation, Sheldon hands Erick his toy. Erick regards the toy with a true awe felt by all...

And with her arms folded across her chest, Lisa watches longingly...

FADE TO:

INT. SMALL CAFE, DOWNTOWN -- A LITTLE LATER

Erick sits at a table by the window. He's looking outside.

WAITRESS (O.S.)
 How are we doing today?

Erick turns to the upbeat WAITRESS standing before his table.

ERICK
 Good...

She sets down a MENU...

WAITER
 Can I start you off with anything to drink?

ERICK
 Just a water for right now...

WAITER
 Sure thing... I'll be right back.

The waitress smiles, walks off...

Erick reaches into his pocket, pulls out the NOTE... We see it's folded origami style... Erick unfolds the first crease and two illustrations of puzzle pieces come apart. Erick smiles, continues unfolding until the note is completely open... As he reads the letter, it's read aloud by Lisa.

THE NOTE - LISA (V.O.)

Erick. I want to apologize for the way I was the other day. As I said before, it was a rough one...

INT. LAB - "**FLASHBACK**" SEVERAL DAYS AGO

A look of defeat on Lisa's face as a LAB TECH draws blood.

THE NOTE - LISA (V.O.)

Doctors say it's a pretty common occurrence so I guess I should be thankful. I mean to date it's only happened twice...

INT. SUPERVISOR'S OFFICE, FACTORY - "**FLASHBACK**" SAME DAY

The Supervisor watches as Lisa signs LAYOFF forms.

THE NOTE - LISA (V.O.)

But when it rains it pours...

INT. BATHROOM, LISA'S APARTMENT -- "**FLASHBACK**" SAME NIGHT

Lisa arranges NEW MEDICINE in her medicine cabinet. We glimpse names like, Epzicom, Viread and Atripla...

THE NOTE - LISA (V.O.)

And after the rain dries, you start all over again...

INT. SMALL CAFE - PRESENT -- DAY

Erick's pensive eyes sweep left and right across the letter..

THE NOTE - LISA (V.O.)

About six years ago I found out I was pregnant with Sheldon. The guy I'd been seeing was in and out of my life. We were up and down like the tide. I don't know what we were thinking, but somehow we thought if two negatives came together, perhaps something positive could emerge. A child was definitely not what we had in mind.

(MORE)

THE NOTE - LISA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

It really is true what they say, just knowing you are going to have a child changes you. I changed 360. At one time I was heavy into some not so good things. But the moment I knew, that was it... Everyone was supportive in the beginning. For years my parents had been asking when I was gonna find a decent man to settle down with. When I told my mother I was pregnant, she cried. She couldn't stop. She cried so much my father had to take the phone. Our conversation didn't go so well. He knew who I was at the time...

WAITRESS (O.S.)

Here's your water.

Erick looks up. The waitress sets the WATER on the table...

ERICK

Thank you...

WAITRESS

Of course. Are you ready to order or do you need more time?

ERICK

I'm actually waiting on another person...

WAITRESS

No problem... I'll come back.

The waitress smiles, walks off. Erick returns to the letter.

THE NOTE - LISA'S (V.O.)

Time passed and before I knew it I was in my final trimester. I couldn't wait for my son to be born. In a way I felt like I, too was being born into a new purposeful life...

(pause)

I remember it was warm that day. I went in to see my doctor with the chills and a terrible headache I couldn't shake. My doctor suggested I have some blood work done. I'd thought nothing of it. A few days later I was called back in and told that I tested positive for HIV.

Erick exhales a heavy breath...

ERICK

Whoa...

THE NOTE - LISA'S (V.O.)

Words can't describe how I felt.
All I could think of was Sheldon. I
never prayed before that day.
Thankfully God answers prayers.
Since the virus was detected early,
I was able to take medication to
ensure Sheldon was born free of the
virus.

(sighs)

That was then and this is now. You
wanna know what really hurts?
Despite all the medical advances,
and the normal lives people with
HIV are living, there's no
medication for stigma. Those three
letters carry so much weight.
People still see it as a death
sentence. So after I had Sheldon, I
left. I distanced myself from
everyone. It was tough at first,
but like most things, you adjust.
It was us against the world for a
long time until I knocked on your
door...

INT. LIVING ROOM, LISA'S UNIT - "**FLASHBACK**" LATE NIGHT

Lisa sits comfortably on her sofa writing THE LETTER.

THE NOTE - LISA'S (V.O.)

It's hard to feel loved when you
have something that scares so many
people. I don't know what will come
from all this. Maybe nothing will.
And that's fine, y'know. But I had
to share what's on my heart to the
person who has it...

A QUOTE at the bottom of the letter reads, "Life is like a
puzzle, hard to piece together but beautiful when all the
right pieces come together. Love Lisa..."

JUDITH (O.S.)

Sorry I'm late...

Erick looks up. Judith approaches, a bit disheveled. Erick
folds up the letter, pockets it. Judith doesn't notice...

JUDITH (CONT'D)

Whenever you need a taxi in this city it's like they're never around... Were you waiting long?

ERICK

Just a few minutes...

JUDITH

That's not too bad.

Judith removes her purse from her shoulder, takes a seat, catches her breath.

JUDITH (CONT'D)

So...

ERICK

So...

Judith smiles lightly, says...

JUDITH

I come bearing good news...

INT. LOOKING DOWN ON COMPUTER AREA, LIBRARY -- LATER DAY

A cluster of computers, the hairy tops of heads. It's quiet except for the clicking of fingers at computer keys...

A PUBLIC COMPUTER

Erick looks at the computer screen with great focus.

COMPUTER SCREEN

ROWS OF IMAGES. Old digitized newspaper clippings from media outlets around the world. The varying IMAGES have correlating captions beneath them. One by one they read:

"..Rare Cancer in 41 Homosexuals in New York and California."

"..Britain Threatened by Gay Virus Plague."

"..Homo Terror..."

"..AIDS Scare Kills Off Haiti's Tourist Industry.."

"..AIDS Is The Wrath Of God Vicar Says.."

"..LIFE -- How No One Is Safe From AIDS.."

"..AIDS Is Germ Warfare By US Against Gays And Blacks.."

"..Actor Rock Hudson Is Dead.."

"..The AIDS War.."

"..Blueprint For Battle On AIDS.."

"..THERE IS HOPE.."

WE PUSH TOWARD the word "HOPE"...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A ROADSIDE IN SEMBABULE DISTRICT, UGANDA -- DAY 1980'S

A once sleepy dirt road, now jam-packed with vehicles.

"LOCATION OF THE CURE"
(caption)

Standstill traffic in both directions. Thousands of vehicles.
A sand storm of dust. Esther and Taban wait on the roadside..

We see Taban's steadily wasting. He strains to speak over CAR
HORNS and EUPHORIC VILLAGERS, SHOUTING OUT THEIR WINDOWS. Who
could imagine all these people were at deaths doorstep...

TABAN

Why is there so many people...?

Esther looks down at Taban. His hair is thinning on top.

ESTHER

**A woman has discovered special
medicine... These people have all
come for it.**

TABAN

Are we here for the medicine, too?
(off Esther's nod)
**Is she going to sell medicine to
all these people?**

ESTHER

No. She is giving it away for free.

TABAN

Really?

Esther nods. Taban ruminates on the notion as Kabiite walks
over, fixing her dress, having just peed behind a bush...
Esther looks down at Kabiite, returns her doll.

ESTHER

Feeling better...?

Kabiite takes her doll, silently nods...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE SMALL VILLAGE OF NKUTU -- A LITTLE LATER

CROWDED. A COMMOTION OF COUGHING AND LIMPING PEOPLE. Dying African's from all four corners of sub-Saharan Africa have flocked to this very spot. Much like the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The huge crowds have attracted vendors. Drinks, roasted meats and bananas are sold from makeshift shops. Esther gives a bit of her hard earned money to a VENDOR selling ripe bananas...

MOMENTS LATER

Esther wades her way through the zombie-like apocalypse, brushing shoulders with skeleton children and feeble adults.

TAIL END - 3 MILE LONG LINE

Esther rejoins Taban and Kabiite standing with the bags. She offers each a banana. Kabiite accepts, Taban does not.

ESTHER

You need to eat something...

TABAN

I'm not hungry...

ESTHER

You need strength... You must eat.

TABAN

It doesn't matter...

Taban stares ahead despairingly at all the people queued in line...

WE RISE UP to see the long snaking line leads to a MUD AND WATTLE HUT. Behind the hut is a large CRATER-LIKE HOLE where several bare-chested MEN are digging out the MIRACLE DIRT.

TIME LAPSE:

THE SUN SETS. AN ORANGE SKY DARKENS TO A SPECTACLE OF STARS.

DROP DOWN to the:

EXT. MUD AND WADDLE HUT -- NIGHT

A FAMILY limps out of the hut. THREE BAGS OF BONES move like senior citizens. The FATHER corrals a FOLDED BANANA LEAF. A little DIRT spills out the side as they lumber down the line.

LINE

A new ghastly looking family enters into the hut. The line slowly shifts ahead. Esther picks up the bags. Taban and Kabiite take several steps ahead...

Now just moments away...

FADE TO BLACK.

BROADCASTER'S VOICE (PRE-LAP)

The tragedy unfolding in the central African nation of Rwanda keeps getting worse...

FADE IN:

THE SCREEN OF A SMALL ANALOG TELEVISION SET

A WESTERN BROADCASTER reports on the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

BROADCASTER

UN secretary Boutros Ghali said today there is strong evidence that both sides in the vicious civil war are preparing new massacres of civilians. He called for the use of force. Large numbers of UN troops to stop the slaughter...

A TOPOGRAPHY MAP of Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania...

BROADCASTER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Terrified Rwandans are fleeing in every direction. To Zaire in the west, Uganda in the north and Tanzania in the East... Here's ABC's John McWethy...

FOOTAGE of SPRAWLING REFUGEE CAMPS, MILE LONG LINES at border crossings...

JOHN MCWETHY (O.S.)

UN officials say they have never seen anything like it. In just the last 24 hours, more than a quarter of a million people have fled Rwanda and its terror.

FOOTAGE of AID WORKERS, passing out JUGS and BLANKETS...

FOOTAGE of THOUSANDS OF FLIES. SWARMING HUNDREDS OF SLAUGHTERED BODIES strewn across desolate Rwandan dirt roads.

Slowly PULL BACK...

Strangely, the sound of BUZZING flies BUILDS AND BUILDS AND BUILDS until we realize we're:

INT. ROOM, PUBLIC CLINIC - DOWNTOWN KAMPALA -- DAY(1994)

Full-blown AIDS PATIENTS lie THREE TO A BED. Too weak to shoo away the swarming FLIES laying eggs in their open SORES.

HALL

SHOUTING. Several NURSES help a MAN calm his deranged WIFE suffering from the psychological effects of AIDS.

WAITING ROOM

PAN around a ROOMFUL OF AIDS PATIENTS teetering on the edge.

- 1.)A WOMAN covers a nasty shingles attack on her face.
- 2.)A BOY, swollen belly, wrenching cough, battles PCP.
- 3.)A GIRL, chalk white EYES, suffers the effects of anemia.
- 4.)A MAN hold his own head. Cryptococcus Meningitis has rendered his neck too weak for the job...

Eventually we come to Esther. Emaciated. Face sunken in. Sitting beside her is Kabiite. Older now. A teen, but blind in one eye. AIDS has stunted her growth.

FRIENDLY VOICE (O.S.)

Esther..

Esther looks up. Standing at the door is the compassionate DOCTOR EMMANUEL OTALA. He looks around...

DOCTOR EMMANUEL

Taban?

Esther gives a slight shake of her head. Realizing, the doctor breathes a HEAVY BREATH.

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE -- MOMENTS LATER

Kabiite sits on Esther's lap. Esther looks ahead at Doctor Emmanuel who sits behind his desk looking regretful...

DOCTOR EMMANUEL

Drug resistance. The ability of HIV to mutate and reproduce itself in the presence of antiretroviral drugs. It's surprisingly common. What this means though is, the medicine you've been taking is no longer working the way it once did.

(MORE)

DOCTOR EMMANUEL (CONT'D)
**You will need to start a third line
 treatment immediately...**

A prolonged moment. Esther eyes the doctor rigidly, trying to mask years of emotions. But it's too much. They spill over. Esther WEEPS. Her TEARS are not of pain, but of a deep sadness only she knows...

The doctor removes his glasses, allows Esther time to grieve, eventually he continues...

DOCTOR EMMANUEL (CONT'D)
**Are you familiar with the Joint
 Clinical Research Centre?**
 (Esther nods, wipes her
 wet eyes)
**Right... Well the JCRC is now
 treating a large number of patients
 with a new Highly Active
 Antiretroviral Therapy. They're
 calling it, HAART.**

Esther takes a breath, collects herself.

ESTHER
HAART...

A thinking moment.

ESTHER (CONT'D)
Is it helping people?

DOCTOR EMMANUEL
**Indeed. It's returning life to the
 dead. The success rate is very
 high.**

Esther eyes the doctor, sensing more...

ESTHER
But...

A beat.

DOCTOR EMMANUEL
The cost is exorbitant, Esther...

ESTHER
What is the cost...?

DOCTOR EMMANUEL
**I would say far above your means
 but the word 'far' would be a
 grossly ill-suited term.**
 (MORE)

DOCTOR EMMANUEL (CONT'D)

It's impossible. A year's therapy can run in excess of 6,000 US dollars. Per patient. I'm sorry. I didn't want to withhold any information from you.

Esther exhales a hard deflated breath.

ESTHER

Six thousand dollars? Who has that kind of money?

All the doctor can do is shake his head to the truth...

ESTHER (CONT'D)

I don't understand. Why make drugs so expensive when they are suppose to save lives?

DOCTOR EMMANUEL

I ask myself that very same question every day. As complex as the pharmaceutical trade is, everything boils down to profit. Drug manufacturing is a very lucrative business. These companies are extremely powerful and all they care about is what's in their pockets. Reasoning from a morality stance will only cause you further disappointment...

ESTHER

What about a less expensive substitute? A generic drug...?

DOCTOR EMMANUEL

Because of patents generics do not exist. I've heard of companies running 30 year patents on drugs. And under these patents, manufacturing generic copies is prohibited...

ESTHER

So what are we supposed to do? Just die quietly...?

And as if to underscore the moment, Kabiite is suddenly gripped by a WRENCHING COUGH. Doctor Emmanuel rises, grabs a little water and brings it over to Esther...

The doctor returns to his seat, watches Esther feed Kabiite water...

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Slowly...

Kabiite does as she's told. Takes water slowly. Grimacing. It must hurt to swallow. A little water spills around her mouth. She coughs a bit more, easily choking on the little water that slides down her thrush filled throat...

A moment. Esther looks up with a new strength, a second wind.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Thank you doctor. For everything.

Esther lifts Kabiite up into her arms, rises to her feet. The doctor stands, confused.

DOCTOR EMMANUEL

Esther. Where are going...?

ESTHER

(a beat)

To find hope...

DOCTOR EMMANUEL

Hope? Esther, this hope you speak of, it doesn't exist.

(off Esther resolute look)

Where then? Where will you go?

Esther pauses.

ESTHER

I don't know. Somewhere. Clearly we cannot stay here. Hope does not live here like it once did. Now I must go find it. That's what you do, yes? When hope is out of reach, you stretch further. You search for it until you find it.

(off doctor's disagreement)

Doctor I understand your concern. But you know all I've had to do. I cannot dig another hole. More than anything I refuse to sit back and simply 'live positively'. I'm past that point. We both know there's only one option. And that is to move forward.

Esther moves toward the door. A moment. The doctor calls out:

DOCTOR EMMANUEL

Esther... wait...

Esther PAUSES, turns back. She watches as the doctor pulls open a drawer and produce a SHEET OF PAPER...

DOCTOR EMMANUEL (CONT'D)
**Every week or so these briefings
 come my way...**

The doctor walks the sheet over to Esther...

DOCTOR EMMANUEL (CONT'D)
**Updates on what's happening around
 the world regarding this disease.
 Sometimes, if I'm lucky, these
 briefing can be the occasional
 faint ray of hope...**

The doctor sighs. Hands the sheet to Esther, seemingly torn.

ESTHER
**I urge you not to misinterpret my
 passing this along to you as
 anything more than what it is. This
 is uncharted territory. But with
 that said, the British National
 Health Service is offering free
 therapy to all those who qualify.
 Naturally you and Kabiite would
 qualify. But let us be pragmatic
 here. England is a long ways away.
 More of a dream than an achievable
 reality...**

FADE TO:

INT. SMALL ROOM, SOMEWHERE IN UGANDA -- NIGHT

A small BRAZIER casts soft light onto walls draped with OLD NEWSPAPERS.

WIDEN to see Kabiite, one eye shut, sitting Indian style, silently eating BOILED LENTILS out of a small metal bowl... She looks up at Esther, sitting in the corner, WRITING A LETTER.

Kabiite holds out her bowl, silently offers Esther some food. Esther smiles, softly shakes her head...

ESTHER
 No thank you.

A moment. Kabiite continues eating. Esther continues writing.

CUT TO:

THE SCREEN OF A HIGHER END DIGITAL TELEVISION SET

GRUESOME FOOTAGE of AFRICAN REFUGEES, floating dead in the Mediterranean Sea.

NEW FOOTAGE shows GUNNED DOWN BODIES of those trying to climb up over walls erected in European refugee reception areas.

The sound of a DOOR OPENING and CLOSING.

An old man's FAINT VOICE calls out:

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Cheryl...?

CHERYL (O.S.)
In here.

WIDEN to see we're:

INT. STUDY, BRITISH HOME - ENGLAND -- DAY

Cheryl's timeworn eyes are glued to the muted television.

"TWO MONTHS LATER"
(caption)

Life has brought age upon Cheryl slow and gentle... Henry enters slow and falteringly. He wears a tweed cap, a light jacket and holds a BUSHEL OF MAIL in his hand...

HENRY
There was about a weeks worth of mail in the bin. Mostly rubbish with your name on it...

CHERYL
(saddened)
Have you see this? They're fishing bodies out of the Mediterranean...

HENRY
(shakes head at TV)
A tragedy. The greatest hour of need and the world is failing Africa.
(hands mail to Cheryl)
Here. I'm going to go lie down for a spell...
(as he walks off)
Don't watch too much of that...

Henry hobbles off...

FOOTAGE of the refugee situation plays across the screen... Saddened by it all, Cheryl remotely turns off the TV, starts sorting through the mail. She discards the junk, sets aside what appears to be real...

AND THEN WE SEE IT... The backside of an INTERNATIONAL ENVELOPE, riddled with custom stamps. Cheryl flips over the envelope and is gripped by SHOCK... Wide eyed, she covers her mouth at sight of Esther's name written on front...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HALLS, NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICES, UK - DAY -- WEEKS LATER

A WALL-TO-WALL build up of shrivelled Multi-National Africans. Covered up, coughing, sneezing, wasting away...

British NURSES and DOCTORS split through the horde with latex gloves on their hands and MASKS over their faces...

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE, NHS -- CONTINUOUS

CLOSE ON TWO SETS OF WEARY EYES...

PULL BACK to see Esther and Kabiite. Sitting numbly in a clean, sterile room, at the NHS, in England.

They are staring ahead at WILLIAM GRAHAM(45). A compassionate British doctor well versed in the AIDS virus...

Dr. Graham gets up, moves from behind his desk and pulls a chair before Esther and Kabiite. He takes their hands, looks them in the eyes and says:

DOCTOR GRAHAM

Welcome. You made it. You are here.
An arduous journey comes to an end.
Now it's time to become well again.

Esther manages a half-smile. Kabiite shows no emotion.

DOCTOR GRAHAM (CONT'D)

We will begin treatment immediately. But before we do, there is some important information that I must go over with you. I want you to understand, HAART is in no way a cure for HIV...

DOCTOR GRAHAM (PRE-LAP) (CONT'D)
... But instead a strong and long-
lasting therapy to ensure that the
immune system stays strong enough
to fight off any opportunistic
infections...

FADE TO:

INT. STUDY, CHERYL'S BRITISH HOME -- LATER DAY

Cheryl sits in her wing chair, adrift, eyes of a castaway...

DOCTOR GRAHAM (V.O.)
... In order for this therapy to be
effective, it is important, and I
stress the word important, that you
take every dose of medication,
every day...

Henry comes into view in the bg, stands in the doorway.

HENRY
Their car just pulled up...

Cheryl takes a deep breath...

INT. VESTIBULE, HOME -- MOMENTS LATER

The FRONT DOOR OPENS. Daylight pours. Henry is already down
by the HACKNEY CARRIAGE idling curbside...

EXT. HOME -- CONTINUOUS

Cheryl steps outside, limps a bit, starts on the longest walk
of her life toward the taxi...

The carriage DRIVER steps out, pulls on the rear door handle.
Cheryl stands a few feet away now... And as the door opens,
what emerges draws the life right out of Cheryl...

INT. GUEST ROOMS -- MINUTES LATER

Henry carries bags, shows Esther and Kabiite to their room...

INT. MASTER BEDROOM -- SAME

Cheryl lies in bed, crying. It's all just too much for her...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HALL -- HOURS LATER

Cheryl steps out of her bedroom in better shape than when she entered. The home is still. Quiet. She passes Henry in the hall carrying FOLDED TOWELS...

CHERYL
Where are they?

HENRY
Kabiite is resting in her room...

CHERYL
And Esther?

Henry tilts his head toward...

HENRY
The study.

INT. STUDY -- MOMENTS LATER

TIGHT on an old framed photo of Michael, standing with some old man, his father perhaps... Esther holds the photo in her thin hand. She's looking at it, but not really seeing anything. Cheryl walks up in the bg. Stands in the doorway.

CHERYL
That's the only picture I have of him.

A moment...

ESTHER
Is he still living?

CHERYL
No... He passed some time ago.

And it's as if knowing Michael passed brings Esther closure... She sets the photo down, turns. She's like a literal walking corpse. Cheryl observes the ruins of AIDS, the wasting and thieving of life. But what she notices more than anything is that, any vestiges of the little girl from the letters is long gone...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A PARK, SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND -- LATER DAY

A scenic fall. The colorful CROWNS OF TREES. The sundry of LEAVES lightly falling down onto the park...

A flock of GEESE float across a blue lake. A golden sun sparkles on it's surface. It's a beautiful day as Britons give use to a winding footpath not far from where...

Esther and Cheryl sit together on a bench. They're looking out on the lake. Cheryl's a mess. Esther seemingly at peace.

CHERYL

Esther, where do I begin...?

ESTHER

To begin is to say we never started. We are continuing.

Cheryl sighs deep regret...

CHERYL

I'm so sorry, Esther. Please forgive me.

ESTHER

Aunt Cheryl, you've done nothing wrong.

CHERYL

But I have. I've never seen you before. Not face to face. All I know is the little girl you once were. And now we're meeting like this. For the first time under these God awful circumstances...

Cheryl starts to weep. Wipes her eyes with a handkerchief.

CHERYL (CONT'D)

I'm sorry for the way he treated you. He didn't have to leave you and your mother behind like animals. He abandoned you. For no reason. I hated him for that. I never found it in my heart to forgive him. I can't understand why he did what he did...

Cheryl weeps more. Esther looks ahead, reminisces.

MICHAEL'S VOICE (V.O.)

And what are you?

YOUNG ESTHER'S VOICE (V.O.)

A human being...

MICHAEL'S VOICE (V.O.)
*And no matter what, don't you ever
forget...*

A moment. Esther breathes...

ESTHER
There's a lot to life that's not
meant to be understood.

Cheryl lightly shaking her head, not understanding...

CHERYL
Of all the ways you could feel, how
do you choose not to be upset...?

ESTHER
I was upset. But realized how much
energy I was using.
(looks at Cheryl)
I was trying to live. I couldn't
afford to be upset...

A beat. Cheryl fixes her teary eyes on Esther...

CHERYL
Do you not wonder why he left?

Esther thinks on her aunts' million dollar question... She
breathes in the clean air. Glimpses the birds in the sky, the
trees and the many beautiful leaves scattered on the ground..

And then Esther simply shakes her head...

ESTHER
No.

FADE TO BLACK.

ERICK (V.O.)
Hi. I'm here to drop off a
prescription.

FADE IN:

"4 MONTHS LATER"
(caption)

INT. PRESCRIPTION DROP-OFF WINDOW, CVS - "PRESENT" -- MORNING
Erick slides a PRESCRIPTION over to the PHARMACIST.

PHARMACIST

Has Ms. Brown ever filled here
before?

ERICK

Yes. I believe she has.

PHARMACIST

Great. Just a moment...

(typing)

Okay. We will have this filled for
you in about an hour.

ERICK

Thank you.

Erick turns, sees Lisa walking alongside Sheldon who's
pushing a shopping cart full of BEACH STUFF up the aisle.

LISA

What did they say?

ERICK

Gotta wait about an hour.

LISA

You didn't have to do that.

Erick smiles, looks into the shopping cart.

ERICK

Jesus... Think we got enough stuff?
Who's gonna carry all this?

Erick glimpses Lisa and Sheldon. They both shrug as we...

FADE TO:

THE AIRY SOUND OF BREAKING WAVES AND CAWING SEAGULLS.

EXT. OCEAN -- DAY

Sail boats look like white knives slicing across the horizon
line of the Atlantic Ocean... It is this large body of water
that separates the "Old World from the New."

WIDEN to see we're at:

EXT. BEACH, SOMEWHERE ON THE NEW YORK COAST - SAME

Sheldon rides on Erick's shoulders. The two happily play
where the surf breaks upon the shore...

And as the tide naturally ebbs and flows, we move up the beach. All the way up where the sand is dry and where Lisa turns the final page on Erick's DRAFT MANUSCRIPT. Written on this last page is a SHORT EPILOGUE. As Lisa begins to read we hear it read aloud by Erick.

ERICK (V.O.)

It was the miracle treatment. Many said it raised the dead like Jesus did Lazarus. But while miracles last forever, the treatment was short lived... A story beholden to the age old adage, anything that can go wrong, will go wrong, culminated with news of HAART being readily available to Ugandans in their home country. What bureaucracies failed to realize was, with the exception of a slim minority, the price tag put the treatment beyond the reach of almost all Ugandans. Within weeks of the announcement, the powers that be sent Kabiite back to Uganda. Esther refused to leave Kabiite's side. Cheryl and Henry did all they could to no avail. Not much long after, Henry passed. His health was failing. Cheryl was somewhat prepared. But in the end, it was all just, too much. And so Cheryl left England and her past behind...

Lisa looks out at Erick and Sheldon slowly making their way up the beach. She flips the manuscript right-side over. We glimpse the title, "Letters".

SUDDENLY SHELDON CRASHES INTO LISA...

LISA

Ah...! Sheldon!

Sheldon laughs. He's soaking wet. Erick lingers up the beach smiling...

LISA (CONT'D)

Look what you did! I'm all wet now...

ERICK

I'm no genius, but I do believe you'll dry...

Lisa evil eyes Erick as he sits down on the dry sand beside her. Erick smiles, cues Sheldon to look at Lisa's face... Sheldon looks and Lisa plays along, further twisting and contorting her facial expression. Sheldon giggles, plays with his toys...

Lisa looks over at Erick. He sit with his arms around his knees, staring out at the rolling waves, thinking God knows what. Lisa telegraphs a look of love that ends with a SWEET KISS... They smile at each other. Erick's eyes cling to Lisa as she reaches for the manuscript...

LISA
I finished it.

ERICK
Yeah?
(Lisa nods)
What do you think?

LISA
I don't know what to think...

ERICK
What do you mean?

Lisa casually flips through a few pages...

LISA
I mean it's an awful lot to swallow. An amazing story, though... Sad. Truthfully Erick, I don't know if the world's ready for something like this...

Erick sighs, stares out at the sea again..

LISA (CONT'D)
Any idea what happened to them after they left...? I'm assuming...

A moment.

ERICK
I don't know. That was it for the letters.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE DISTANT HUM OF TRAFFIC AND SCATTERED VOICES...

FADE IN:

EXT. LONDON -- DAY

A beautifully BUSY STREET in downtown Oxford.

"LONDON - ONE YEAR LATER"
(caption)

INT. BOOK SHOP -- DAY

A tall MAN(40's) walks up and down aisles, searching for someone. To no avail, he flags down a SALES CLERK.

MAN

Excuse me.

SALES CLERK

Yes, how can I help you?

MAN

I can't seem to locate my mother.
She's an older woman, brunette
hair. Have you seen her?

SALES CLERK

Think I have actually. This way.

ALCOVED AREA -- CONTINUOUS

The Sales clerk leads the Man to a quiet reading section. He points to an OLD WOMAN sitting by a large window.

SALES CLERK

Would that be her over there?

The man recognizes the woman, sighs relief.

MAN

Yes. That's her. Cheers.

SALES CLERK

Of course.

The sales clerk walks off and the man walks over to his mother. As he draws near we begin to recognize who she is...

MAN

Mum. You had me seriously
concerned. I looked all over for
you.

The woman is looking down into a BOOK. A TEAR falls onto the page. Concerned, the man squats down before his mother.

MAN (CONT'D)
Mum what is it? What's wrong?

She looks up. It's KATHERINE. An old, wrinkled woman with tears in her eyes.

MAN (CONT'D)
What is it?

Katherine closes the book, passes it to her son, MICHAEL. He flips the book around and glimpses the title, 'Letters'.

MICHAEL
What is this?

KATHERINE
It's her story, Michael.

MICHAEL
Who's story?

KATHERINE
Esther.

-THE END-