

CLOUDS OF SORROW

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FADE IN:

EXT. DIRT FIELD - DAY

A dry white bone lies in the dirt. TAHIR DINAR, a sturdy ten-year-old African boy, slides into view and picks it up.

Sprints away. Other children chasing him, laughing, engaged in a game of anshel, an African version of rugby.

Tahir races across the field beaming with the joy of sport.

He darts between two boys, breaks into the open, in sight of the goal, which is just a line in the dirt, when from out of nowhere a tall teenage girl runs him down.

Holds him until the others catch up and tackle him in a pile.

Tahir laughs. Clings to the bone. Tosses it away. The pack of children race after it and Tahir rolls over onto his back, breathless.

IN THE SKY

A speck of an airliner leaves a contrail in the stratosphere.

TAHIR

Shields his eyes from the sun. Watches the plane for a moment then hops up and rejoins the game.

LATER

The game ends. The children disperse from the playing field.

A group of boys pass the skeleton of a dead donkey. One of them throws the bone back where it came from.

EXT. GRASS FIELD - DAY

Tahir walks across the camel-colored grasslands of West Sudan toward a cluster of huts on an open plain. A beautiful tableau of a boy walking beneath an acacia tree silhouetted against a setting crimson sun.

EXT. ACACIA TREE - DAY

Tahir lifts a stone at the base of the tree and takes out a colorful bracelet wrapped in a cloth. Pulls a tiny blue stone from his pocket and attaches it to the bracelet.

EXT. HUT - NIGHT

A goat roasts over an open fire.

Tahir's MOTHER, an attractive woman in her late twenties, cooks the evening meal.

Tahir walks up and drops a load of firewood beside the flames. Squats down next to his mother and adds a branch to the fire.

Mother stands and arches her stiff back.

MOTHER

Tahir, watch this for Mama. Don't let it burn.

She gives him an affectionate squeeze on the shoulder and turns to leave.

A mangy, three-legged dog approaches the fire in a crouch.

Tahir's mother picks up a stone and throws it at the dog, running him off.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Go on, get away. Go!

Tahir watches the pathetic dog hobble off into the darkness.

INT. HUT - NIGHT

Tahir eats dinner with his mother and FATHER - a tall, raw-boned man of thirty. They sit on reed mats before a low, flat table with a half dozen bowls of food before them: goat, mashed fava beans, millet porridge, salad and hot sauce.

Mother picks up a jebona, a Fur coffee pot, and fills tiny cups for her husband and herself. Tahir's bracelet of multicolored stones on her wrist.

She puts it on display for Tahir. Subtly flaunts it and smiles at her son, pleased with his gift.

She leaves the table and Tahir takes the opportunity to slip a piece of goat into his pants pocket.

His father notices.

Tahir concentrates on his dinner, his father's eyes upon him. After a moment he glances up at his father who gives him a reproachful look.

EXT. HUT - NIGHT

Tahir slips out the entrance of his home. Walks around to the back of the hut, to a grass field draped in darkness where he whistles softly.

Moments later the three-legged dog comes out of the dark wagging his tail.

Tahir removes the piece of meat from his pocket.

TAHIR
(feeds the dog)
Here, Amirock, your favorite, goat.
I saved it just for you.

Tahir sits down beside the dog and gazes up an orchard of stars, listening to the music of the CRICKETS.

His father appears from around the side of the hut.

FATHER
Wasting goat on that dog again?

Tahir turns, caught.

His father smiles.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Better not let Mother find out or
she'll give you nothing but millet
for a month.

He sits down beside his son.

FATHER (CONT'D)
What do you see in this ugly dog?

TAHIR
He is my friend.

FATHER
You have lots of friends.

TAHIR
Yes, but he doesn't.

The comment strikes a chord with his father and he takes a long look at Tahir, assessing him.

FATHER

You have a good heart, Tahir, very big, with much room in it, and I want you to keep it so. But you have a good head too, and you must learn to use it. Do not be too kind, for this is not a kind world, and it can be very hard on people like you.

TAHIR

Yes, Papa, but Amirock was hungry and he especially likes goat.

FATHER

Does he now.

He rubs his son's head affectionately. Pulls him a little closer and they sit quietly like this staring out at a sliver of moon on the horizon and the distant dark peaks of the Jebel Marra Mountains.

On one of the mountains, the red glow of a large fire, like a beacon in the night.

TAHIR

That fire must be very big.

Tahir's father stares at it, his face strained and worried.

TAHIR (CONT'D)

What for could they need such a big fire, Papa?

His father smiles, masks his concern.

FATHER

Perhaps theirs is a big family and they have much food to cook.

TAHIR

No family is so big.

Father looks again at the distant fire.

FATHER

There is great trouble in Sudan, son, great trouble.

TAHIR

This trouble, it is far away?

His father doesn't answer, lost in a burgeoning fear. He breaks free of it, turns to his son.

FATHER

Better say "good night" to your friend. It's time you went to sleep. I'll need your help tomorrow after school and a tired boy cannot learn and carry millet.

TAHIR

I will fight with you, Papa. I am not afraid.

They stand. His father puts his arm around Tahir and guides him back inside.

FATHER

No? That is good. Now I feel much safer. I'll have you at my side - the boy who runs from bats.

TAHIR

I don't run from bats.

FATHER

Ah, but I do. Look! There's one.

Tahir jumps back. His father runs past him.

FATHER (CONT'D)

He's going to get you!

Tahir chases his father, laughing. Amirock watches them go.

INT. SCHOOL ROOM - DAY

Tahir and a dozen other students sit on a large mat spread beneath an open-air structure with a thatched roof and thin tree trunk rails in place of walls.

A young Fur woman, their teacher, goes over a lesson on a chalkboard, English and Fur sentences side by side.

STUDENTS

The big, white cloud is high. The small, red bird is sleeping. The angry, old lion is...

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Tahir, walking ahead of other students, comes home from school carrying his slate.

He passes a group of women at the village well. Hauling up water. Carrying it away in pots placed on their heads.

He reaches his home and enters.

INT. HUT - DAY

His mother kneels at the table stitching a torn jalabiya. She greets him with a smile, keeps a governing eye on him while he puts away his things from school.

Tahir takes chalk from his pocket and carefully lays it and the slate beside his sleeping mat. Glances furtively at his mother then takes out a beetle and puts it in a cup beside his mat with other beetles.

MOTHER

Another cousin?

Tahir looks up guiltily and holds back a smile. His mother grins and waves him on his way - it is a joke between them.

She resumes her mending and Tahir hurries out.

Once gone, his mother looks after him, following him with her eyes as he runs off through the village. It's in her eyes: he is the light of her life.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Tahir's father works the fields, cutting millet with a sickle. In the distance comes Tahir hustling down a dirt path.

He joins his father and moves seamlessly to work beside him.

Gathering millet. Tying it into bunches.

LATER

They work beneath a blazing hot sun. Tahir stops and rests. Looks around at the blue cloud-swept sky.

His father walks by drenched with sweat.

Tahir watches him pass, thoughtfully, then resumes his work.

LATER STILL

Father and son rest in the shade of a tree, sharing a jug of water and a melon. Tahir is up to his cheeks in a piece. He tosses aside the peel, wipes his face and looks out across the golden field.

In the distance other families labor in the sun.

TAHIR

Will I always work our field?

FATHER

You are how old now, ten, and already you tire of it?

TAHIR

No, I'm not tired. But what for do I go to school if all my life I am to grow millet.

FATHER

Maybe you don't grow millet. Maybe God sends a drought and all the millet dries up. Then what?

Tahir ponders the thought.

TAHIR

Someday I would like to see a city. I think that would be something to see.

His father turns to comment but pauses, his thoughts interrupted. He looks around, listening.

All's quiet and terribly still. So still not even a blade of grass bends in the wind.

Suddenly Tahir's father springs to his feet, wary of some unseen menace.

FATHER

Come, Tahir. Come, we must go!

TAHIR

No more work today, Papa?

Father pulls Tahir to his feet and rushes away.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Tahir runs with his father along the dirt path between the fields doing all he can to keep up.

He trips and falls and calls to his father.

TAHIR

Papa!

His father turns back, gets him to his feet, then freezes and looks behind them.

A flock of birds burst from the millet field and take flight.

Tahir turns and looks.

EXT. REGISTRATION TENT - REFUGEE CAMP - DAY - CLOSE ON

Tahir's face - dusty, eyes glazed, exhausted.

A crowd of refugees queue up before a table set in front of a large canvas tent where NGO (non-governmental organization) officials process newly arrived refugees.

Tahir stands among towering Sudanese men and women with an empty plastic container in his hand. Several of the women carry infants. An old man in front of him clutches a suitcase.

Tahir looks to be in very rough shape - his clothes are in tatters, small cuts and scratches cover his arms and legs, his face is bruised and he's coated with dust, like he just came through a long haul through the desert on foot which, we will later learn, he has.

He gets to the table, to a CHADIAN MAN seated beside a white NGO OFFICIAL, presumably a European aid worker.

CHADIAN MAN

Tatakallam al-arabiya?

(subtitle: Do you
speak Arabic?)

Do you speak English?

Tahir nods "yes"?

CHADIAN MAN (CONT'D)

Name?

Tahir stares at the white man.

CHADIAN MAN (CONT'D)

What is your name, boy?

TAHIR

Tahir. Tahir Dinar.

CHADIAN MAN

Where are your parents?

Words form on Tahir's lips, but die there. He looks at the man unable to answer.

The Chadian man and the NGO official exchange knowing glances as if they've seen this before.

NGO OFFICIAL

We'll put your name on this list.
That way if anyone is looking for
you, they can find you. What region
are you from?

Tahir gets a questioning look.

CHADIAN MAN

Are you Massalit?

TAHIR

No, I am Fur.

The Chadian man writes this down.

NGO OFFICIAL

Are you hungry?
(doesn't wait for an
answer)
You can get some food at the CARE
kitchen, it's the next tent over.
They serve meals twice a day, just
after sunrise and before sunset.

The NGO official looks him over.

The many cuts and scratches on Tahir's arms and legs.

NGO OFFICIAL (CONT'D)

You can get treatment for those cuts
at the Red Cross clinic. It's across
the way, over there.
(he points)
Just beyond that tent.

Tahir looks in the direction of the clinic, back at the man.

TAHIR

Thank you.

He turns to go.

CHADIAN MAN

Boy!

Tahir stops and turns around.

CHADIAN MAN (CONT'D)

You are in Chad now as our guest.
Make no trouble and don't steal
anything or we'll send you right
back to Sudan. Understand?

Tahir nods.

CHADIAN MAN (CONT'D)

And no work. The people of Chad are
poor themselves, any jobs here are
for Chad citizens only. If we catch
you working, back you go.

Tahir's eyes go to the European, his look giving voice to
the inconsistency of the remark. He turns and walks away.

INT. RED CROSS CLINIC - DAY

Tahir sits on a chair. An ICRC African nurse applies
antibiotic ointment to one of the cuts on his arm.

She lifts his shirt.

Tahir's back is covered with cuts and scratches.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - DAY - FOLLOWING

Tahir walks through the twists and turns of the refugee camp
carrying his plastic container, a waif among the multitudes.

He passes...

Naked toddlers.

Emaciated men, women and children.

The maimed, wounded and dying.

He comes to a long line before an NGO supply truck, where people crowd together at the truck bed, reaching up desperately for Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs) dispensed from atop the tailgate of the truck.

Tahir stops and observes the melee, assessing his chances of getting anything among that throng. He moves on.

EXT. CLINIC - REFUGEE CAMP - DAY

He passes a make-shift clinic where a dozen or so teenage girls lie on stretchers and thin mats.

Nurses tend to them, many of the girls with bandages around their loins, a tell-tale sign of a victim of gang rape.

Tahir glances down at a girl no older than himself who lies there staring blankly into space.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - DAY

Tahir waits on a long line of refugees carrying assorted empty containers for water.

He gets his turn. Hands his plastic container to a man who fills it with water from a pump.

LATER

Tahir waits on another long line for a meal.

Reaching the front, he is handed a bowl of rice.

He finds a place to sit away from the crowd and digs in with his fingers.

A gang of boys approach. They stop and surround him.

The GANG LEADER, a tall wild-eyed boy of fifteen with small ceremonial scars on his temples stands over Tahir.

GANG LEADER

Hey, boy! What you think you're doing? This our place. Who said you can sit here?

Tahir looks around at the tough little faces filled with hate, each with small quotation-shaped scars on their temples, marking them as male members of the Zaghawa tribe. Tahir tries to stand. The gang leader pushes him back down.

GANG LEADER (CONT'D)
Hey, you don't listen. This our
place. Who said you can go?

TAHIR
Leave me alone.

GANG LEADER
Leave you alone?

He knocks the bowl of rice from his hand.

GANG LEADER (CONT'D)
How's that? Now you have no food.
So you are all alone.

He lets out an exaggerated laugh. As if on cue the other
boys join in, laughing at Tahir.

Tahir looks up with a challenging glare in his eye.

GANG LEADER (CONT'D)
What? You going do something?

He kicks Tahir in the ribs.

GANG LEADER (CONT'D)
What you going do?

He kicks him again, viciously in succession.

GANG LEADER (CONT'D)
Huh! Huh!

Tahir grabs his plastic container and tries to run. The
other boys push him to the ground, join in with Gang Leader
kicking him. Tahir clammers away on all fours. Gang Leader
coming after him.

GANG LEADER (CONT'D)
Go on, little dog, run. Run!

He kicks Tahir's backside. Tahir falls face first into the
dirt. Scrambles forward onto his feet and runs away.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - NIGHT

Tahir wanders the camp, bruised and walking with a limp.

A piece of blue tarp blows past him like a tumbleweed. He
picks it up. Tucks it under his arm.

Turns down an ALLEY between two NGO tents.

Beds down for the night behind a stack of rusty fifty-five gallon drums, covering himself with the tarp, keeping his plastic container of water safely within his arms.

EXT. ALLEY - REFUGEE CAMP - DAY

Morning. Tahir stirs and stares for a moment at a hazy red sun over the horizon.

He folds up his tarp and hides it and his container of water behind one of the drums. Leaves his resting place.

EXT. NGO KITCHEN - DAY

He waits on the food line again.

An African NGO worker ladles a green puddle of food into a bowl and hands it to Tahir.

Tahir stares at the unappetizing meal.

He steps out of line and spots the gang of boys harassing another orphan and turns quickly in the opposite direction.

Ducks into an alley among the tents and frightens birds that peck at bits of cornmeal on the ground.

The birds take to the air.

Tahir watches them rise, their wings fluttering.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Tahir and his father in the earlier scene, on the path when the birds take flight.

Tahir turns and looks...

As first a great black shadow and then a huge, white Antonov Mi 24 helicopter sweeps overhead and makes straight for his village.

INT. HELICOPTER - SAME

A machine gunner fires a .50 caliber from an open doorway, chewing up everything in sight...

Huts. Animals. Fleeing villagers.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Janjaweed horsemen pour into the village from all sides, weaving between the huts, armed with guns, machetes and torches.

Two trucks loaded with Sudanese soldiers arrive with them. The soldiers hop out of the truck beds, AK-47s and rocket propelled grenade launchers (RPGs) in hand.

They open fire.

Mowing down villagers.

Blasting huts.

Spraying the livestock with gunfire.

A Janjaweed marauder pours a bottle of gasoline onto a hut. Another hits it with a torch and it bursts into flames.

A village man charges them with a sickle.

A government soldier guns him down.

Nearby, a woman scoops up her child and races from a hut. A Janjaweed warrior shoves her to the ground, drags her back inside by her hair. Two comrades follow him in, past the wailing child lying in the dirt.

EXT. FIELDS - SAME

Tahir races through the millet fields with his father.

Runs across the dirt where the kids play anshel into the

VILLAGE

Where his father darts into the family hut. Emerging with a rifle, an old carbine.

He loads the weapon, focused, making certain each cartridge enters the magazine.

Other armed village men arrive and gather around him. One carries a rifle, another a handgun, all the rest machetes, spears or clubs.

They mount a defense, firing at the helicopter, rushing headlong at Sudanese and Janjaweed soldiers who sweep through the village in a coordinated attack.

Tahir shadows his father in a crouch.

Pancakes himself to the ground as an RPG round explodes a few yards away.

He looks up and through the dust his father is there shouting at him. Tahir can't hear a thing.

Suddenly he's on his feet, dragged by his father behind a nunu, a large clay pot used to store millet.

FATHER
Run, Tahir! Run!

Tahir's father points toward brush beyond the huts.

Tahir is too stunned to move.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Go! I must find Mama.

TAHIR
(tearful)
No, Papa!

He grips Tahir's shoulders.

FATHER
No, Tahir, listen to me. Run! Hide in the brush. I will find you. But I must get mama.

Father points to a line of brush fifty yards away.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Hurry!

Tahir runs off, making for the safety of the brush.

With his son heading for safety, Tahir's father takes on the attackers. He guns down a soldier and runs off into the heart of the village, firing as he goes.

Tahir approaches the brush when an RPG explodes near him. He falls to the ground. Rises and turns, sees...

A group of soldiers armed with Kalashnikovs spitting lead.

A woman holding an infant runs with two children. All four of them mercilessly cut down by the men.

Tahir turns from the horror and runs into the...

BRUSH

just ahead of another explosion from an RPG.

Tahir runs for his life through the bushes and trees.

Scrambles up a SMALL HILL where he stops and looks back, completely out of breath.

WHAT TAHIR SEES -

His father at one end of the village firing up at the helicopter, the bodies of village men, women and children lying around him.

The helicopter banks.

Turns toward his father and fires a rocket.

In the next moment a huge blast erupts right where Tahir's father stands. When the smoke clears there is nothing there but a bloody stump of a leg left in a sandal.

Go to Tahir's reaction, to his eyes and TRANSITION to

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - DAY

Tahir staring at his reflection in a pool of water.

He is back in the refugee camp, outside a tent before a tin wash tub filled with black water with a layer of dirt floating on its surface. He washes himself, leaves.

EXT. FOOD DISTRIBUTION AREA - DAY

An African aid worker shuts the tailgate of a white World Food Programme truck and the vehicle drives away.

In its wake, workers dump lentils from burlap sacks onto a large tarp spread out on the ground.

More than a hundred refugees line up for the food.

Far back in line, Tahir waits his turn, pestered by flies, baked by a relentless sun.

LATER

Tahir is just three people from the tarp when the last handful of lentils is given out. Without a word the refugees all turn away and disperse through the camp.

Tahir lingers for a moment, then he too turns away.

EXT. TENT CITY - DAY

Tahir passes through a sea of small tents and lean-tos made from plastic tarps, corrugated tin, cloth, old clothes and blankets - anything you can think of to construct a shelter.

He wanders along a snaking, red dirt path among the tents and comes to an open area that serves as a marketplace.

EXT. CAMP TRADING CENTER - DAY

He enters the camp trading center, a chaotic gathering of customers and camp merchants selling their wares from small stalls, tables or tarps laid out on the ground.

Tahir stops and stares at...

People buying hot food, handing over coins, taking with them plates of goat, cabbage or yams.

He thinks for a moment, then reaches into his shirt pocket and takes out a folded piece of paper. Opens it - a Sudanese five pound note.

He gets in line for food. And while he waits he regards with interest the different vendors.

Some have elaborate stalls with tables, pits for cooking, coolers, or rusty kettles of boiling meat, while others just have a mat set on the ground with a few items out for sale.

There's a potato and onion vendor.

A man selling matches.

A woman with fried locusts on a stick. She collects a coin from a customer.

Tahir stands there thinking, then pockets the five pound note and steps out of line.

He walks away and not ten feet from the stalls comes upon a young mother and her two children: an infant on her lap

covered with flies and a boy by her side in the dirt with a distended belly like a ripe, brown melon and limbs thin as twigs. The woman appears delirious, too weak to move.

Tahir looks from her to the vendors and people eating hot food, linking the two.

Turns and walks away.

FARTHER ALONG

Once more among the tents, a camp security vehicle rushes past him blowing its horn.

Tahir steps out of the way. His eyes meeting those of a gendarme armed with a rifle, a member of the Detachement Integre de Securite, the DIS, the organization responsible for camp security.

EXT. PERIMETER - REFUGEE CAMP - DAY

Tahir walks outside a large fenced-off area where NGO transport trucks are parked. Along the fence he finds a discarded tea pot.

He examines it. Takes it with him.

EXT. CAMP DUMP - DAY

A dog sniffs along the perimeter of a large dump.

Tahir approaches. Stops and stares at the people, mostly women and children, sifting through the dump for whatever they can use.

He steps into the massive garbage pile. Looks for something.

Deep within the dump he comes upon a small wooden crate.

He takes it then continues searching, combing the trash for some unknown purpose.

He gathers pieces of wood, small branches, any paper.

Finds a piece of wire and puts it in the crate.

EXT. CAMP TRADING CENTER - DAY

Tahir stands in line again before a make-shift shop thrown together with plastic tarps, branches and tin.

Once inside he gathers some goods - a box of matches, a sack of tea and two tin cups.

Pays the vendor and leaves.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - TAHIR'S STAND - DAY

Tahir lights a fire made from sticks and crumpled paper.

Suspends his tea kettle above it with pieces of wood made into the shape of a doorway arch and the wire.

He writes the word "Tea" in the dirt with small white stones. Sits behind his sign and waits.

LATER

Two European aid workers stop and buy a cup. Tahir looks at the money in his palm.

Another buyer, an African aid worker, drinks a cup. Pays Tahir. He adds the coin to his take - a half dozen Chadian francs and Sudanese piasters.

More customers. More change.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - FOOD STAND - DAY

Tahir buys a bowl of roasted goat and fava beans.

Sits in the dirt off by himself and eats. A small girl, perhaps six or seven, watches him from a few meters away.

Tahir eats with one eye on his food and the other on the girl. He scoops up a last handful of food and stuffs it in his mouth.

Takes the bowl, with about half the food left, and hands it to the girl.

She smiles at him, then attacks the food as only a starving person can.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - NIGHT

Tahir carries his box of supplies down a lane between the tents. The little girl follows him at a safe distance.

Tahir feels her presence. Stops and turns around.

The girl stops too, unsure if he'll shoo her away.

Tahir merely looks at her, his face set and passive, then he turns around and continues on his way.

The little girl trails after him.

EXT. ALLEY - REFUGEE CAMP - NIGHT

Tahir turns down the alley between the tents where he beds down. Takes up his usually place behind the rusty drums.

He lays down, shifts to get comfortable, his gaze falling on the little girl who stands a short way off.

Tahir stares at her for a moment and then opens the piece of plastic tarp he uses as a blanket.

The little girl comes and lays beside him. She smiles at him. Tahir frowns and turns over putting his back to her.

The little girl lays there a moment staring at the back of his head. After a moment she puts her hand gently against him and goes to sleep.

EXT. TEA STAND - MORNING - SERIES OF SHOTS

Tahir sets up his tea stand.

Builds a fire.

The little girl comes up and hands him a branch.

He sells his first cup.

A second. And another.

Coins pile up in a small cardboard box.

LATER

The gang of boys turn onto the alley where Tahir sells tea.

Tahir makes tea for a woman. Collects a coin with one eye on the woman and the other on Gang Leader who approaches carrying a switch.

The woman leaves. Gang Leader stops and points the switch at Tahir.

GANG LEADER

What for you think you're doing?

Tahir ignores him, puts his coins in his pocket. Turns his back on Gang Leader and makes more tea.

Gang Leader lashes Tahir with the switch.

GANG LEADER (CONT'D)
Hey boy, you no listen!

Tahir whips around, flush with anger.

GANG LEADER (CONT'D)
You like for me to beat you? Huh, boy?

Tahir glares at him.

The little girl, standing off to the side, takes a step back, frightened by the scene.

TAHIR
You get away from me. Go away!
Bother someone else.

For a moment Gang Leader is taken aback by Tahir's defiance. He checks his gang, refuels his confidence.

GANG LEADER
First you pay the tax. You from Darfur.
This is Chad. You pay the tax.

Tahir scans the group of boys. He is hopelessly outnumbered.

TAHIR
No.

Gang Leader locks eyes with Tahir, his gaze steady and devoid of any expression. He holds still for a moment, then with sudden violence knocks over the tea kettle and grabs Tahir's little crate and throws it aside.

The gang of boys stomp on it and break it to pieces. Tahir rushes up to stop them. Gets shoved roughly to the ground.

He tries to rise but the gang of boys surround him and kick him viciously.

Up and down the alley of stalls, adults stop and watch, but no one intervenes. One old man scurries away.

The little girl cries and one of the boys shoves her aside.

The act infuriates Tahir. He scrambles away on all fours, takes hold of a piece of shattered crate, comes to his feet, and strikes the boy hard across the face.

He turns on the other boys and uses the wood like a club.

The gang scatters. And Tahir zeros in on Gang Leader.

Striking him repeatedly with the piece of wood. Knocking him to the ground. Bloodying his face.

Suddenly a gendarme is on the scene, a member of DIS.

He grabs hold of Tahir. Restrains him.

Another gendarme arrives and together they drag Tahir away.

The little girl watches him go, tears streaming down her cheeks.

INT. JAIL CELL - DAY

A cockroach crawls across a dirt floor and over a man's foot.

The man is asleep in a jail cell. A half dozen prisoners around him. Among them is Tahir, sitting off in a corner with his arms around his knees.

The cell is a shack with walls made of wooden boards and sheets of rusty corrugated tin. A row of planks spaced a few inches apart serve as the ceiling.

Across the cell a tall emaciated man with crusty eyes stares at Tahir.

Tahir turns away. Looks up at a strip of blue sky between the boards.

TRANSITION TO A NIGHT SKY

And back down to Tahir, now asleep.

A guard enters the cell.

Kicks Tahir awake and pulls him out by the arm.

EXT. CAMP JAIL - NIGHT

The guard takes Tahir to another shack that serves as the

JAIL OFFICE

Where a large GENDARME CAPTAIN sits behind a table with paperwork and files in front of him. Next to the files are Tahir's coins and the piece of crate he used as a club.

The captain fills out a report while Tahir waits. Finished, he sets his pen aside, leans back and looks at Tahir.

GENDARME CAPTAIN

What is your name, boy?

TAHIR

Tahir Dinar.

GENDARME CAPTAIN

How old are you?

TAHIR

Ten.

The captain looks hard at Tahir, his dark eyes measuring him with contempt.

GENDARME CAPTAIN

You were told not to work while in Chad. Isn't that so?

Tahir nods.

GENDARME CAPTAIN (CONT'D)

Answer me.

TAHIR

(lowering his head)

Yes, sayyid.

GENDARME CAPTAIN

Still, you disobeyed. You decided to take advantage of your host, of our hospitality, to make your own business, a tea stand, with no permit, and no regard for the citizens of Chad who have the right to sell the tea in this camp.

Tahir lifts his head and looks the man in the eye.

GENDARME CAPTAIN (CONT'D)

And then you beat another boy with a club, injuring him.

He stands and leans over the table.

GENDARME CAPTAIN (CONT'D)
You are a criminal! One of the swarm
of Sudanese locusts that have infested
my country and are stripping it bare.
I want you out! Go back where you
came from. Go back and stay there!

He looks to the guard who grabs Tahir roughly by the arm and drags him out.

EXT. CAMP JAIL - NIGHT

The guard comes out of the jail leading Tahir by the arm. Hands him over to two other guards who usher Tahir roughly into the back of an enclosed truck with a group of Sudanese men, other deportees.

They slam the door shut and bolt it.

FOLLOWING THE TRUCK - SERIES OF SHOTS

Weaving through the camp.

Out to an open plain under a pale yellow moon.

EXT. BORDER - NIGHT

The truck crosses the border into Sudan. The only indication is a small sign by the side of the road that reads: "Republic of Chad", "Republique du Tchad" and the same in Arabic script.

INT. TRUCK - NIGHT

Tahir sits among a dozen men crammed into the back of the truck. Most are asleep, but a large man across from him is awake. He stares at Tahir, like a carnivore.

Tahir looks the other way.

EXT. DARFUR COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

The truck speeds over open countryside at sunrise.

Passes a village in the distance, a collection of mud brick huts with thatched roofs.

FARTHER ON

The vehicle dips into a wadi, a dried up river bed.

Travels down it.

INT. TRUCK CAB - DAY

The driver looks out through a windshield covered with dust and dead insects.

He checks the fuel gage.

It reads half-full.

He nudges one of two sleeping guards next to him and points at the gage. The guard reads it. Wakes the other guard.

SECOND GUARD

Stop the truck. Over there.

He points to the side of the wadi near an area of dense brush.

EXT. WADI - DAY

The truck comes to a teetering stop.

The driver and both guards step out of the cab. The guards carry rifles, the driver a cardboard box filled with RTEs and small, plastic pouches of water.

They come around to the back of the truck. The guards step away from the doors and raise their rifles.

The driver unbolts the doors and swings them open.

The deportees come out, moving stiffly, shielding their eyes from the glare of the sun.

Once out, the driver hands them each a pouch of water and an MRE food packet.

Tahir takes his, not at all sure about the MRE.

SECOND GUARD

You are home.

He waves an arm.

SECOND GUARD (CONT'D)

All this is yours.

He laughs. Then with an abrupt change in tone...

SECOND GUARD (CONT'D)
Do not come back to Chad. You are
not wanted there. If you do, you
will be beaten and thrown in jail.
Understand?

He scans the dejected faces of the men. Looks at Tahir.

SECOND GUARD (CONT'D)
And if I see you again, I will pluck
out your eyes and feed them to the
birds.

He fires his weapon into the air above their heads and laughs.

The deportees cringe.

Second Guard nods to the driver who slams shut the rear doors.

The Chadians get in and drive away in a cloud of dust.

The deportees watch them go, then one by one they turn away
and walk off down the wadi.

Tahir lingers, as do Large Man and another slender deportee.

Large Man reaches over and yanks the slender man's MRE and
water pouch out of his hand.

The slender man tries to get them back, but Large Man strikes
him with his fist and shoves him hard to the ground.

Tahir's eyes meet those of Large Man - he's next.

Tahir backs up. Then darts to his left. Into the...

BRUSH

A maze of small trees and shrubs.

Large Man gives chase. Closing in, only steps behind Tahir.

Tahir cuts sharply to his left and Large Man stumbles and
falls, reaching for Tahir, taking a brief hold of his ankle.

Tahir falls, drops the MRE and slaps the ground with the
pouch of water in his hand. The pouch bursts and the water
spills out.

Large Man clambers after him. Tahir hops to his feet and
runs away, zigzagging as he goes.

Large Man picks up the MRE, looks after Tahir for a moment, then turns around and heads back to the wadi.

Tahir keeps running until he comes to an opening where a dry gully cuts through the brush.

He pauses to think. Then runs down into it and up the far side, slipping in the dirt. Climbing on his hands and knees to reach the crest.

Once on top he stops and looks back, out of breath.

Large Man does not pursue.

Tahir scans the area.

Beyond the brush Large Man walks down the road toward the other deportees who are now a couple hundred meters up the wadi. The slender man between them, hustling away from Large Man toward the relative safety of the group.

Tahir squats down and watches them go.

EXT. WADI - DAY - LATER

Tahir's head pokes out from the brush at the edge of the wadi. He looks in the direction the other deportees went.

The way is clear.

Tahir steps out of the brush and looks both ways along the wadi, into Sudan and back the way he came, to Chad.

He studies his options. Turns toward Chad.

EXT. WADI - DAY

Tahir walks and walks.

A tiny dark figure moving across the rust-colored track cut into the land.

A tired Tahir stops and looks up at the sun. Shields his eyes and views something out on the horizon.

Coming closer and closer until it reaches him and soars overhead - a huge, white Antonov helicopter.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. BRUSH - NEAR TAHIR'S VILLAGE - DAY

Another white helicopter passing directly overhead, banking, revealing a soldier manning a machine gun in an open doorway.

PICK UP TAHIR

Running through the brush, the smoke from his burning village roiling into the sky behind him.

He enters a THICKET densely packed with brush, his arms and legs lashed by the branches.

He slows to a trot, winded by his flight.

Finally stops and drops to one knee, exhausted.

The shadow of the helicopter passes over him.

He turns and searches the sky.

The helicopter is no longer in sight. But he can hear the staccato bark of the machine gun and moments later the distant boom of a rocket explosion.

Tahir sits in the dirt keeping an eye on the sky. His breathing levels off. After a moment he lies down and curls up into a ball under a bush.

Staring blankly into space, overcome with shock and grief.

LATER

The shadows in the thicket deepen.

NIGHT falls.

Tahir lies there awake, the rhythmic trilling of the crickets lulls him to sleep.

EXT. THICKET - DAY

Tahir awakes. Walks out of the brush into a

CLEARING

In the distance, across a grass plain, black funnels of smoke reach into the sky.

Tahir heads toward them.

EXT. VILLAGE - PERIMETER - DAY

He reaches the outskirts of his village.

Hunches low to the ground behind the trunk of a tree and scans the area.

The village appears deserted, not a soldier or Janjaweed warrior in sight.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Tahir walks among the burnt huts. The bodies of slain villagers all around him.

Amirock, the three-legged dog, lies dead on the path running between the huts.

Tahir passes him, glancing at the dog's blood-soaked chest.

He arrives at his family hut and stops. It's been torched. Black smoke still rising from the burnt ruins of his home.

He scans the charred wreckage, no bodies in sight.

He moves on, walking among the torched huts and the dead, many of the bodies burnt beyond all recognition.

Tahir passes the burnt body of a woman, stops and looks back.

On the woman's wrist, a colorful bracelet half-covered with soot.

Tahir kneels beside the twisted black form and stares at what's left of his mother. For the moment there are no tears only a look of profound shock and dismay.

Tahir's lips move slightly, as if he has some last words of love for his Mama. But no sound comes out. He drops his head to the ground and weeps.

VIEWED FROM ON HIGH

This little ten-year-old boy, so tiny from this height, mourns his mother among the ruins of his village.

The vantage point brings into view over a hundred dead bodies scattered throughout the scorched village.

EXT. VILLAGE WELL - DAY

Tahir approaches the well, walking past twisted burnt bodies sprawled obscenely on the ground.

There are traces of a yellow powder in the dirt and around the rim of the well. Tahir looks at it, suspicious.

He lowers the bucket. Hauls it up.

The water is stained yellow, poisoned. Tahir lets go the bucket. Turns around and scans the village.

A small animal-skin pouch lies near a burnt hut.

He goes to it.

Finds it half-filled with water and takes a drink.

Tahir sits in the dirt. Takes his mother's bracelet from his shirt pocket and cleans it with water.

EXT. GRASS PLAIN - DAY

Elephant grass, low and dry. From over a small rise in the land Tahir appears walking toward a weak westering sun.

The water pouch hung over his shoulder and his mother's bracelet on his wrist, bright and colorful again.

Tahir stops and gazes across a vast open plain.

EXT. GRASS PLAIN - NIGHT

Tahir sleeps in the grass. It rains. Thunder and lightening.

EXT. GRASS PLAIN - DAY

Sunshine. Tahir wrings out his wet shirt. Puts it back on.

Walks across the blonde grass plain.

An African wild dog watching him pass.

On a small rise in the land, Tahir stops and looks around, deciding which way to go.

Ahead of him, to the northwest, there is a group of green, low-rising hills.

Tahir heads toward them.

EXT. JUJUBE TREES - DAY

At the base of a small hill Tahir enters a grove of jujube trees. A short way in, he hears a woman's scream and the indistinct shouting of a man ahead of him.

He comes to a standstill.

Proceeds cautiously through the trees. Moving aside branches, releasing them slowly back into place.

After a few steps he comes to a halt and peers through the leaves of a tree.

A few meters away a Sudanese soldier is atop an attractive young woman on the ground with her robes up, raping her. We will come to know her as ODA.

Oda moans in pain, tries to pull away. The man hits her in the face.

Tahir is enraged, and with no thought for his own safety, he flies out of the brush, sweeps up the soldier's rifle leaning against a tree and wields it like a club. He cracks the soldier in the head and knocks him cold.

He goes to the woman's aid. Her nose is broken, bleeding.

Tahir tears off a piece of his shirt and puts it to Oda's nose. Stemming the flow of blood.

She pushes him aside and staggers off into the brush.

Tahir follows her.

A short distance away Oda stops and drops to her knees and carefully sifts through a mound of broken branches and leaves, uncovering an infant boy wrapped in a cloth.

She pulls the baby out, holds him tight against her chest and then attempts to run from Tahir. He stops her.

TAHIR

No, wait! I won't hurt you.

She looks at him, puts her finger to her lips to convey "be silent" and points to a break in the trees.

There, across a field, is a jeep with two soldiers in it. A third soldier walks toward it with his back to them.

Tahir pulls her out of sight, thinks, then moves into action.

He rips a branch off a tree, sweeps away their tracks and backs up with Oda into the trees.

Turns and runs. Pushing through branches that recoil with a whoosh! The SOUND MIXING with the rush of a convoy of...

EXT. WADI - DAY

Four African Union (A.U.) vehicles zooming past Tahir asleep at the edge of the wadi. Three A.U. trucks and a white Land Cruiser with a "UNHCR" (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) decal on the door, all racing towards Chad.

INT. LAND CRUISER - CONTINUOUS

DOCTOR MARIE TREICHEL whips around in her seat and looks back at Tahir.

Marie is slender, half-French, half-Chadian, on the plus side of forty - no apparent make-up, baggy khaki clothes, cropped black hair - none of which succeeds in understating her beauty.

She turns quickly to her driver.

MARIE

Stop the car!

BENEDICT "BENNI" WETENDE (55), an imposing East African with fierce, dark eyes and the chiseled features of an African king, throws her a look.

BENNI

What for?

MARIE

Stop the car. There's a boy back there.

Benni checks the rearview mirror.

IN THE MIRROR

Tahir, faintly visible through a cloud of dust.

BENNI

Takes a moment then pulls the Land Cruiser to the side of the wadi and stops.

The last truck in the convoy flies by. An A.U. soldier at a window rubbernecks as they pass.

Marie grabs the door handle. Benni detains her.

BENNI

Hold on.

Benni picks up a CB.

BENNI (CONT'D)

Colonel Akande. Colonel.

COLONEL AKANDE (V.O.)

(on the C.B.)

What now? I thought I told you to stay off the radio.

BENNI

We've pulled over. Doctor Treichel wants to help a boy.

The convoy in the road ahead moves out of sight.

INT. A.U. TRUCK - SAME

COLONEL AKANDE, a great bull of a man in his 40s, speaks into the CB mic from the passenger seat. He turns and looks back.

The dust cloud kicked up by the convoy obscures his view.

COLONEL AKANDE

No, Benni, not here. This brush is much too dangerous. Get going again.

INT. LAND CRUISER

Marie listens to the Colonel, glances at Benni, then bolts out the door.

BENNI

(into the CB)

Colonel, she's already gone. Can you pull over?

COLONEL AKANDE (V.O.)

(on the CB)

Like hell!

(MORE)

COLONEL AKANDE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 (silence, gathering
 himself)
 ... We'll wait for you at the end of
 the wadi. We'll refuel there. But
 be quick about it. And get that
 damn woman under control.

Benni looks behind the vehicle at Marie jogging toward Tahir.
 Throws his arm over the seat and reverses the vehicle.

EXT. WADI - DAY

Tahir, stirred from sleep, sits perfectly still in the shade
 of a tree watching Marie approach.

She jogs up, slows to a walk then stops and kneels down,
 wary of frightening the Tahir.

MARIE
 Etes-vous blesse?
 (subtitle: Are you
 hurt?)
 Parlez-vous le francais?

Tahir looks past her at the Land Cruiser backing up. And
 Benni hustling out of the vehicle.

BENNI
 Marie, what on earth are you doing?
 Colonel Akande will have our heads
 for this.

MARIE
 Oh, let him. I'm tired of taking
 orders from that man.
 (re. Tahir)
 What language do you think he speaks?

BENNI
 Who knows? He's not Zaghawan - no
 ceremonial scars on his temples;
 could be Massalit.
 (to Tahir)
 Tatakallam al-arabiya?
 (subtitle: Do you
 speak Arabic?)

Tahir stares at Benni without answering.

BENNI (CONT'D)

I don't know. But what difference does it make? Come on, Marie, let's go. The Colonel refused to wait, he said it was much too dangerous around here and he's right.

MARIE

We can't just leave him.

BENNI

And we can't take him either.

MARIE

Why not? We can drop him at the last village. Sheik Jamar has an orphanage.

BENNI

For Zaghawans.

(confidentially)

Look, between here and there we'll come across another twenty people who'll need our help. Most in worse shape than him. Do you suggest we take them all?

Marie listens to Benni at the edge of her attention, her eyes locked on Tahir who stares at a canteen on her belt.

MARIE

Would you like some water?

She offers the canteen. Tahir takes it and drinks.

BENNI

Marie, give him some food and water, but leave him here. He could have family nearby and we can't just make off with him and take him halfway across the desert.

MARIE

(stands)

But what if he's orphaned? Look at him. He could die out here.

Tahir hands back the canteen.

TAHIR

Thank you.

MARIE
(stunned)
You speak English?

Tahir looks at Benni, his dark eyes assessing him, measuring him for potential danger. He addresses Marie.

TAHIR
A little.

MARIE
Where is your family?

Tahir looks at Marie as if she struck him, silent and still. He holds back tears and shakes his head side to side.

A gratified Marie turns to Benni.

EXT. PLAIN - DAY

The Land Cruiser flies down the wadi.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Tahir slides his hand across the car seat, marveling at the leather, glass and metal of the SUV.

Marie, now in back beside him, studies him with a smile.

MARIE
Do you like the car?

TAHIR
Yes.
(glances out the window)
So fast.

MARIE
Benni always drives fast.
(to Benni)
Too fast.

BENNI
Just trying to keep ahead of the
local wildlife.

MARIE
(to Tahir)
Where did you learn to speak English?

TAHIR

In my school we learn the English.

BENNI

My guess is he's Fur. English is the second official language of Sudan behind Arabic, but it's not taught around here. Tribal schools in the south will teach it rather than Arabic. Their way of thumbing their nose at their Arabic overlords. But if he's Fur, he's a long way from home.

Tahir doesn't appear to understand Benni's comment.

TAHIR

I cannot speak the English good.

MARIE

You speak it fine. What's your name?

TAHIR

Tahir. Tahir Dinar.

MARIE

I'm Marie. This is Benni.

Tahir looks at Benni, back at Marie.

TAHIR

Ma-rie.

He smiles, likes the sound of it.

EXT. OPEN PLAIN - DAY

The Land Cruiser bursts from the tree-lined wadi onto an open plain.

Speeds past a rotted corpse in the grass, a grotesque pile of brown bones with fragments of leathery skin clinging to them, flapping in the wind.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Benni drives with both hands on the wheel.

The speedometer steady at fifty.

He glances back at Marie, seated with Tahir resting against her, asleep.

MARIE

He knocked off a few minutes ago.
(looks down at Tahir)
He's very sweet, isn't he?

Benni picks up the CB mic.

BENNI

Colonel.

Benni waits for a response. Hears static.

BENNI (CONT'D)

Colonel, do you read me? Over.

Nothing. Benni glances at Marie in the mirror.

MARIE

What do you think it is?

BENNI

(steady)

It's nothing, probably just refueling.

But his face tells another story. He eases off the gas pedal.

The speedometer needle falls below forty.

EXT. PLAIN - DAY

The Land Cruiser travels across a grass landscape dotted with acacia trees.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Benni peers through the dirty windshield.

Following brown vehicle tracks cut through the grass like a railroad line.

His eyes raking the horizon, searching for any sign of the A.U. trucks.

Suddenly he pulls sharply left toward a cluster of trees.

MARIE

Benni! What are you doing? You'll
wake him.

Benni brakes. Halts the vehicle behind the trees. Turns and points into the distance.

BENNI

Look!

Marie turns and looks.

In the distance a dozen horsemen cross the plain.

BENNI (CONT'D)

(eyeing the riders)

Janjaweed, the devil on horseback.

Tahir awakes. Looks at Marie and Benni, their eyes locked on the horsemen.

BENNI (CONT'D)

(perfectly calm)

Marie, reach under the seat in front of you and hand me the field glasses.

C'mon, hurry.

Tahir observes a shaken Marie who fumbles for the field glasses and hands them to Benni.

Benni takes a look, adjusting the focus.

THROUGH FIELD GLASSES

The Janjaweed riders come to a small dip in the land where some descend while others remain on top greeting Janjaweed warriors on foot coming out of the depression.

Suddenly the field glasses shift to a rider cresting the depression, dragging a half-naked A.U. soldier behind his horse.

Trailing him are two armed warriors pushing captured A.U. soldiers before them, Colonel Akande among them.

CUT TO:

COLONEL AKANDE

bathed in sweat, a dip cut on his brow.

He and a half-dozen A.U. soldiers are prodded at gunpoint out of the depression and through the knee-high grass.

Below them, at the base of the depression, Akande's crashed A.U. truck on its side, its tires blown out.

The two other A.U. vehicles parked askew behind it. Windshields shattered with bullet-holes. A dead driver or two more evidence of the ambush.

RESUME TAHIR AND MARIE

Staring into the distance, trying to make out the hazy group of figures across the plain. And Benni scanning with the field glasses.

THROUGH FIELD GLASSES

Colonel Akande's men are forced to their knees. Akande refuses to kneel, turns defiantly on his captors.

A Janjaweed warrior strikes him down with a rifle butt. Shoots the Colonel.

Another Janjaweed walks down the line and executes the A.U. soldiers with a pistol, shooting them in the back of the head. Their bodies falling out of sight into the grass.

INT. LAND CRUISER - SAME

The gunshots reverberate across the plain. Marie gasps.

MARIE

Oh, my god.

Benni lowers the field glasses. Turns to Marie and Tahir. A glance at the little boy, who looks at him with more curiosity than fear.

MARIE (CONT'D)

(eyeing the Janjaweed)

Benni, get us out of here.

Benni starts the vehicle, jams it gear.

Tahir looks out the window. Marie puts an arm around him.

MARIE (CONT'D)

No. Don't look.

BENNI

Get down.

Marie ducks down in the seat with Tahir.

Benni eases the SUV out of the trees, heading right, proceeding forward in a wide arc around the Janjaweed.

EXT. PLAIN - DAY - SHOTS OF

The Land Cruiser crossing the endless plain.

Putting more distance between them and the scene of the crime.

Heading toward a sun a few inches above the horizon.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Tahir stares out his window at the sunset.

Turns to Benni, focused intently on the trail, the back of his neck glistening with sweat. And Marie sitting in silence under a mantle of fear.

Marie catches him watching and he turns away. Marie studies him for a moment, curious.

MARIE

Tahir.

(he turns)

How did you end up in the wadi?
Where were you going?

TAHIR

No place.

He turns away.

Marie catches Benni looking meaningfully at her in the mirror.

EXT. PLAINS - DAY

A roan antelope grazes in a field of golden grass. The sound of a automobile engine startles it and the animal bounds away, just ahead of the Land Cruiser coming over a small rise in the land.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

They ride along in silence, jostled by the uneven ground.

Benni looks at the fuel gage.

Pegged at less than a quarter tank.

BENNI

How much farther to the village?

Marie scans their surroundings, looks back the way they came.

MARIE
I'm not sure, but I think it's there,
(pointing forward)
... beyond those hills.

Through the windshield a group of low brown hills barely visible in the fading light.

BENNI
We're losing the light.

Benni weighs a decision. Decides. Steps on the brake and stops the car.

BENNI (CONT'D)
We'll have to camp here.

MARIE
Is it safe?

BENNI
Safer than wandering around in the
dark low on gas.

Benni scans the area.

Nearby, a giant Baobab tree rises from the plain, a majestic, lonely sentinel keeping watch over the land.

Benni cranks the wheel and heads towards it.

EXT. BAOBAB TREE - TWILIGHT

The Land Cruiser is parked beside the mature baobab in the shade of the multiple layers of umbrella-shaped branches.

Benni unloads supplies from the back. Hands Tahir a sleeping bag. He carries it to where other supplies have been set on the ground. Passing Marie on her way to the vehicle.

BENNI
(to Marie)
No fire tonight. And don't use your
flashlight. Here, help me with this.

Benni hands her one end of a camouflaged net. He closes the liftgate and puts the spare tire rack back in place. Drapes the net over the Land Cruiser with Marie's help and secures it to the bumper.

BENNI (CONT'D)

The Janjaweed don't travel much at night.

(off Marie's expression)

We should be fine.

Marie, not entirely convinced, scans the beautiful landscape for danger, the golden grass shimmering in the twilight.

EXT. BAOBAB TREE - NIGHT

A brilliant fortune cookie moon hangs in the sky, framed in the drooping branches of the Baobab.

Benni sits beneath the tree on one of two beach chairs, sipping cold coffee from a cup.

Behind the camouflaged Land Cruiser two triangle-tents face one another. Tahir sits in one gazing at the night sky. Marie beside him, talking in hushed tones.

MARIE

In French we call them "etoiles"

(points to a star)

I think that bright one is a planet, probably Jupiter.

TAHIR

My Mama told me it is a hole in the sky that lets in light from heaven.

Marie gazes wistfully at the star.

MARIE

Yes, perhaps it is...

(there is a moment, then)

Tahir, where is she, your mother?

The boy points to the stars.

TAHIR

There, behind the stars.

Marie ponders a response, at a loss for words. She turns down the sleeping bag.

MARIE

Here, in you go. Get some sleep, we have another long ride tomorrow.

Tahir slips into the sleeping bag. Marie tucks him in and he looks up at her with his big brown eyes. She smiles and slides her hand affectionately across his brow.

MARIE (CONT'D)

Sleep well.

She comes and sits with Benni.

BENNI

That's a mistake.

MARIE

What is?

Benni looks toward Tahir.

BENNI

Getting close to him.

MARIE

C'mon Benni, he's just a little boy.

BENNI

Exactly, a little boy who won't understand when the nice doctor from France goes home in a week.

MARIE

So what would you have me do? Give him a cold shoulder?

BENNI

Just keep it in mind that he's alone and scared, and children who've been through what he has are in an emotional state where they will cling to anyone who is kind to them. They don't know any better.

On Marie, turning to Tahir, Benni's warning sinking in.

EXT. BAOBAB TREE - DAY

Dawn.

Tahir wakes up next to Marie asleep under a blanket. He leaves the tent.

Comes to Benni sitting in a chair eating peaches from a can.

Benni's eyes meet Tahir's. After a long still moment, he pulls a peach out of the can on a fork and offers Tahir.

LATER

Marie loads the tent and sleeping bags into the vehicle. Benni rolls up the camouflage net and puts it away.

MARIE

What do we do about Colonel Akande?

BENNI

What can we do? We'll report it when we get back.

Benni turns away, Marie detains him. Suddenly she tears up and looks very afraid, as if all the fear and uncertainty of what's been going on has just rushed to the surface.

MARIE

Benni, we will get back, won't we?

BENNI

If I have anything to say about it.

(puts a finger under
her chin)

C'mon, chin up. Where's my Albert Schweitzer, hmm; my intrepid crusader?

MARIE

She's not so intrepid--

She chokes up, holds back tears.

MARIE (CONT'D)

God, if anything happens to that boy.

There is a moment. Benni waits and Marie pulls it together.

BENNI

You know it was only a matter time.

MARIE

(wipes a tear)

For what?

BENNI

For Africa to get to you, the way it gets to every European who comes here...

(MORE)

BENNI (CONT'D)
(adds cynically)
those with a heart.

MARIE
I don't know. There's just something
about him. It's as if he's brought
this whole...
(searches for the word)
holocaust down to one person.

Benni listens. Understands.

BENNI
We take it in steps. Okay? First
we get to the village.

Marie nods, reassured.

Tahir stands nearby watching the sunrise.

Marie steps toward him then stops and watches him mutely for
a moment, this little orphaned boy gazing dreamily at the
promise of a coming day.

Struck by the scene she takes a camera from her pocket and
photographs Tahir.

TAHIR
(turning to her)
What for do you do this?

MARIE
Here, take a look.

She shows him the image in the digital camera.

TAHIR
You can make one of this - you and me?

MARIE
Sure. Benni.

Benni closes the Land Cruiser liftgate, swings the spare
tire rack in place.

MARIE (CONT'D)
Get one with us together.

She hands Benni the camera. He takes it with a disapproving
glare. Marie ignores him. Poses with Tahir.

BENNI
 (mirthlessly)
 Smile.

Marie smiles. Tahir stares, then blinks from the flash.
 Benni hands Marie the camera and she shows Tahir.

MARIE
 I don't know when I'll have a chance,
 but soon as I can I'll print this
 and find a way to send it to you.

Tahir doesn't quite get it.

BENNI
 (disapproving)
 C'mon, let's go.

He gets behind the wheel.

Tahir climbs in back, turns to Marie who shuts the door and
 opens a front door for herself. By Tahir's expression he
 takes her moving up front as a form of rejection.

Before entering Marie pauses to take a drink from her canteen.
 Some of the water spills onto the ground.

Tahir looks at it.

At a stain in the dirt blossoming at her feet.

EXT. DRY PLAIN - DAY

Another water stain in the dirt.

Oda pours water from the animal skin pouch into her baby's
 mouth, a little spills onto the ground.

She hands Tahir the pouch. Cradles the infant in her arms.
 The child cries and Oda rocks him.

TAHIR
 Why does he cry?

ODA
 He is hungry. He wants my milk,
 but I have none to give.

They sit in silence for a moment, the hot desert wind ruffling
 their clothes. Tahir turns to Oda.

TAHIR
What is your name?

ODA
Oda.

TAHIR
And your baby, what do you call him?

ODA
He is too young. I have not given
him a name, not yet.

TAHIR
But how will God know him if he has
no name?

ODA
He was God's child before he was
mine. God will know him, with or
without a name.

EXT. DRY PLAIN - DAY

Focusing on Tahir's and Oda's feet as they walk - their sandals worn thin, their skin bleeding in spots and covered with dust.

A wider view reveals Tahir and Oda traveling across an unbounded expanse of dry rust-colored plain.

The overhead sun pounds them mercilessly.

Oda appears faint. She stops.

ODA
Here, hold him. Let me tie this.

Tahir takes the infant.

Oda turns her back to Tahir and unties a wrap from around her waist, revealing a black bullet hole in her side caked with blood. She binds the wrap tightly around the wound.

Takes her baby from Tahir and walks on.

LATER

The sun sits low in the sky.

Tahir stops and wipes his brow. Stares at the setting sun as if the first stage of a battle has been won.

Oda comes up behind him, sweating freely. She stumbles on a stone and falls to one knee.

Tahir turns and hurries to her aid. She brushes his hand aside. Stands and walks past him.

EXT. NIM TREE - TWILIGHT

Tahir and Oda approach a nim tree and take shelter beside the trunk.

Tahir hands Oda the water pouch. She gives her baby a drink and hands it back.

TAHIR
You must drink.

Oda regards Tahir steadily without expression.

TAHIR (CONT'D)
You need it, to give strength to
carry your baby.

He offers the pouch again. She turns away, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Tahir watches her, uncertain what to do.

TAHIR (CONT'D)
Do not worry, Oda, we will find a
safe place for your baby. Somewhere,
that way...
(he points)
where the sun goes, is Chad. There
we will be safe.

ODA
No, it is not so. Chad is not our
country, and a camp is not a village.

Tahir scans Oda with concern. He seeks the right words. Falls short.

TAHIR
Where is your home?

ODA
Far away, beyond the great wadi.

TAHIR

And you cannot go back?

Oda's eyes turn lazily toward Tahir. Lingered on him for a moment, unfocused. She turns and look off into space with a faraway gaze.

ODA

Two days ago the Janjaweed and the government troops, they come, kill everyone - my husband, my two little ones... I escaped with my baby. I just walked. Walked and walked until those men found me.

TAHIR

It was good you hide your baby. You are a good mother.

Oda wipes a tear and looks at Tahir, unconvinced.

She lays down and curls up into a ball with her baby tucked within her arms, shielding him from the cold.

Tahir studies Oda with a gaze then turns and looks out at the deepening purple of the sunset.

He lies down beside Oda, and like the little girl in the camp, gently puts his hand against her back.

EXT. DRY PLAIN - DAY

Dawn.

Tahir collects dew off a plant with a leaf.

He takes it to Oda.

She pours the droplets into her baby's mouth.

LATER

Under a scorching hot sun Tahir walks among shrubs, looking at each one with a discerning eye.

He spots what he's looking for. Scurries up to a plant and digs out the dirt from around its base.

He takes hold of the root. Pulls it out of the ground.

Carries it over to a stone and scrapes it against the rock.

MINUTES LATER

Tahir gathers the plant shavings and twists them in his hands, wringing out water one drop at a time. Oda collects it into the water pouch.

EXT. HILL - DRY PLAIN - DAY

Tahir and Oda climb a small hill covered with stones.

Oda slips. Tahir puts his arm around her to help her up. She stiffens, grimacing in pain.

Tahir looks at her waist.

Her wrap soaked through with blood.

TAHIR

You are hurt.

ODA

It's nothing. Let me be.

Tahir gives her a look, he knows better.

ODA (CONT'D)

Just help me to the top.

She gives him her hand and Tahir helps her up the hill.

Once at the top Oda drops to the ground and rests.

She unfolds the cloth around her baby and checks on him. She takes the infant's hand and he responds, grasping her thumb.

Tahir watches Oda. She is tender with the child, putting his little arm in place, wrapping him up again.

Oda looks into the distance.

There, a single white cloud crosses the sky.

Oda stares at it and Tahir notices.

ODA (CONT'D)

When I was a little girl, sometimes my father would leave us to visit his uncle, a sheik in a village many days away.

(MORE)

ODA (CONT'D)

This always made me cry. To make me stop crying my father would tell me to watch the sky. That he would send me a pretty white cloud with all his love in it. He told me to keep careful watch, and to believe, and it would always come.

She looks round the barren landscape. Her eyes meet Tahir's.

ODA (CONT'D)

I think now there are no clouds of love left in the skies of Darfur, only clouds of sorrow.

She turns away and lies down.

Tahir sits there thinking, his gaze focused on the great expanse of desert before them.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Tahir gazing out the Land Cruiser at a golden savanna.

He looks over at Marie and Benni. Stares at them each in turn as if to reassure himself that he is here with them and not back in the desert with Oda and her baby.

HERE ENDS MY WEBSITE EXCERPT OF CLOUDS OF SORROW. IF YOU'D LIKE TO READ THE SCRIPT IN ITS ENTIRETY REACH OUT TO ME AT johnkroyan@gmail.com. THANKS FOR CHECKING OUT MY WORK. I HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT.

John Royan