

CLOUDS OF SORROW

John Royan

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.

EXT. SAVANNA - DAY

The vehicle approaches a cluster of brown, cone-shaped huts sprouting from a field of lion-colored grass.

Nearer the huts they pass a tall Sudanese man on crutches missing a leg, tending his goats. The man stares at the occupants of the vehicle as they drive by.

Tahir looks after him as they pass.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

The Land Cruiser pulls up beside one of a dozen village huts, humble round abodes with mud walls and grass thatch roofs.

Benni and Marie step from the vehicle. Tahir remains in the back seat, peering out the window. Taking a keen interest in the familiar surroundings. This isn't home, but it's the closest he's come to it in a long time.

A young woman under the eaves of a hut turns inquisitively towards the visitors, her shadowy dark face in contrast with her brightly colored robe.

Two old Sudanese men wearing white jalabiyas approach the vehicle.

Benni and Marie greet the elders.

Tahir watching the encounter from the security of the car.

The friendly greetings, smiles and handshakes. Benni is speaking, motioning toward the vehicle. One of the elders nods knowingly and points to the far side of the village.

Suddenly a half-dozen boys and girls appear at the other window, eyeing Tahir with unabashed curiosity.

Tahir looks eye-to-eye with a teenage boy in a red shirt. There are familiar quotation-shaped scars on his temples. Tahir checks the other children. Several of the older boys marked in the same way.

Tahir observes them in perfect stillness.

MARIE (O.S.)

Tahir.

He turns to Marie at his window.

MARIE (CONT'D)

C'mon, it's okay. We're among friends.

INT. HUT - DAY

Close on a high angled ceiling of musty grass thatch.

And Tahir gazing upward and around, surveying the dim cornerless hut. Marie at his side.

MARIE

What's wrong? Don't you like it?

Tahir notes the central post supporting the ceiling, the reed mats and low wooden table at this feet.

TAHIR

It is very nice. Like my home.

MARIE

Good. I need you do me a favor.
Okay? Will you wait for me here?
There are some people who need my
help.

Tahir nods.

MARIE (CONT'D)

I'll try not to be too long.

Marie leaves. Stooping through the entryway onto a sandy,
sun-dappled lane.

Tahir watches her go, the soft angles of his boyish frame in
silhouette against the bright doorway.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Marie walks between the huts in search of Benni.

A woman threshing millet with a stick watches her pass.

Up ahead Benni turns onto the lane carrying a rusty five
gallon tank of gasoline.

BENNI

Marie, we're in luck. Look what I
found! I got it off an abandoned
A.U. jeep. It's practically full.

Benni points between the huts at a old jeep with its hood up
in a field of grass.

BENNI (CONT'D)

And there may be some gas left in
the tank. I'll need a siphon.
Where's Tahir?

MARIE

The elders gave us a hut. He's waiting
there.

Marie stares at Benni, unsettled by something.

BENNI

(off Marie's look)
What? What's wrong?

MARIE
(troubled)
Nothing.

INT. ZAGHAWAN HUT - CLINIC - DAY

A portable table topped with bandages, medicines and hypodermics - a micro-clinic set up by Marie and Benni inside a hut.

Marie listens with a stethoscope to the lungs of a little girl. Her anxious mother waiting nearby with Benni.

Marie sets down the scope and looks with mock seriousness at the girl, at her shiny brown face streaked with tears. Marie pokes her belly button and the little girl laughs.

She hands her to her mother and takes a container of pills from her khaki pocket.

MARIE
Here...

Marie gives them to the mother then turns to Benni.

MARIE (CONT'D)
Tell her to give her daughter one of
these every day until they're gone.
(smiles at the woman)
She'll be all right.

Marie turns and looks at a queue of ailing Zaghawans lined up outside the hut.

EXT. VISITOR'S HUT - DAY

Tahir sits in the doorway waiting for Marie.

Across the way, beside a hut, a wisp of a girl Tahir's age refills the water cups for pigeons inside a coop. She takes one of the birds and launches it skyward.

Tahir follows the bird's flight with a meaningful gaze, reflecting on something - perhaps the freedom of the bird, or the last peaceful moments with his father. Who can say?

He spots Marie approaching along the dirt tract that runs through the center of the village.

She stops before him, streams of perspiration parting the dust on her cheeks.

Marie is spent, as much from the heat as from a hard day's work. She smiles warmly at Tahir.

And he beams. It's a dose of medicine for Marie. She puts out her hand. A ZAGHAWAN SONG begins, linking the scene to

EXT. MASIK - NIGHT

A Zaghawa woman singing joyfully with her hands extended in a gesture of welcome. One of a dozen women standing before a bonfire performing a ceremonial greeting for their guests.

Tahir, Marie and Benni sit to the right of SHEIK JAMAR, the elders on his left, a horseshoe of villagers completing a circle around the masik, a central shaded area of the village.

Tahir leans against Marie, his eyes focused on the fire, on the glowing embers lifted by a breeze into the night, fluttering away like golden butterflies.

INT. SHEIK'S HUT - NIGHT

Torches hung on posts throw grotesque shadows against the sides of the hut.

Sheik Jamar sits at the head of a long wooden table with his guests and a half-dozen other villagers, the remnants of a meal before them. Ageless, baronial, a great shepherd to his people with deep furrows in his face and snow white hair.

He speaks in Arabic to Benni.

While he does Tahir looks down at a mosquito on his arm. Covers it with a wood cup then slowly slides the vessel across his arm squashing the insect, smearing a splotch of blood on his skin.

Marie notices, not sure what to make of it.

BENNI

(to Marie)

I told him this is your last visit,
that you were on your way home, and
he said this makes him very sad.

The sheik acknowledges this with a gentle smile.

BENNI (CONT'D)

He says, "Though you may go home you
will be here always, in our hearts."

Marie smiles graciously.

MARIE

(to Benni)

Thank him for me and ask him if he
can do us a great service.

The sheik is attentive, alert to the change in Marie's tone.

MARIE (CONT'D)

(to the sheik)

This little boy has no home.

She glances at Tahir, who looks back with innocent
expectation.

MARIE (CONT'D)

He is orphaned and I wish it that
you keep him here and look after
him.

The sheik turns to Benni, anxious to learn what's been said.

Benni translates and while he does, Marie, pleased with
herself, turns to Tahir and is taken aback by what she sees.

Tahir looks stunned, betrayed, as if he can hardly believe
what Marie just said. Hot tears well up in his eyes then
the emotional dam bursts and he bolts out of the hut.

MARIE (CONT'D)

Tahir!

Marie looks to Benni and the sheik, every eye in the room
upon her. She stands.

MARIE (CONT'D)

Excuse me.

She goes after Tahir.

EXT. MASIK - DAY

Tahir runs away from the hut. Comes to a halt, as if
realizing he has nowhere to go. Marie comes up behind him.

MARIE

Tahir.

He turns.

MARIE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I should have spoke with
you first.

TAHIR
(wiping his tears)
I am not angry at you, Ma-rie.

MARIE
No? Maybe you should be, it wasn't
very thoughtful of me.

TAHIR
I know you must go. And I must stay.
But this makes me very sad.
(looks around)
This place, is not my place. These
people, not my people.

MARIE
(kneels down)
I know, Tahir, believe me I know.

Marie gives him a hug. Pulls back, holding his thin
shoulders, looking into his sincere brown eyes shining in
the moonlight.

MARIE (CONT'D)
I'll tell you what. We won't decide
this tonight. We can talk about it
tomorrow. Is that better?

Tahir's face brightens. And Marie gently wipes off his tears.

MARIE (CONT'D)
Tonight you can stay with me.

She grips his shoulders, affectionately. It is a gesture
reminiscent of his mother and the similarity strikes Tahir.

He smiles at Marie, then suddenly hugs her. This touches
Marie, but there's a danger - she's moving in deeper.

She pulls away.

MARIE (CONT'D)
Come on, it's time for bed. Little
boys need their sleep.

Marie stands and leads Tahir away.

EXT. VISITOR'S HUT - DAY

Sunrise.

Tahir sits outside the hut watching the sun come up, a villager passing by leading his donkeys to pasture.

INT. VISITOR'S HUT - DAY

Marie awakes. Tahir's empty sleeping bag beside her. Benni asleep under a blanket across the hut.

EXT. VISITOR'S HUT - DAY

Marie emerges from the hut to find Tahir watching the sunrise. She sits with him, shares a moment of peaceful repose.

MARIE

This is my favorite time of day.

TAHIR

Why is it so?

MARIE

Well, I suppose it's because everything seems so new again, and beautiful. Even here... Especially here.

(turns to Tahir)

And the day is full of the promise of what's to come.

TAHIR

But what comes can be very bad.

MARIE

That's true. But I always have hope... Tahir, what happened to your family, your mother and father?

Tahir shuffles his feet and picks up a stone. Drops it back down again and again as he speaks.

TAHIR

Gone. Mama, Papa, all gone. These bad men, they come. I saw it with my eyes.

MARIE

I'm so sorry.

(MORE)

MARIE (CONT'D)

Do you have anyone else? A brother
or sister? Other relatives?

TAHIR

No, only me.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

A pack of children race across a field of grass after little
boy running with a bone - playing a game of anshel.

Tahir leans on a low rail fence bordering the village
compound, watching them play.

Coming up from behind are Benni and Marie walking along the
path between the huts.

MARIE

You told them about Colonel Akande.

BENNI

I did.

MARIE

What did they say?

BENNI

The sheik says he knows the danger
they're in, but he's more concerned
about us. He doesn't think we should
leave.

MARIE

Is he right?

BENNI

What is that Irish saying of yours?
McDonald's Law?

MARIE

Murphy's - Anything that can go wrong,
will go wrong.

BENNI

Yes, that's it, the story of my life.

MARIE

Not everything's gone wrong, Benni.

(MORE)

MARIE (CONT'D)
(off Benni's look)
If it hadn't been for Tahir we'd
have been caught in the ambush.

Benni thinks on it, knows it's true.

An outburst of laughter from the children distracts them.
They turn to the game, to Tahir watching it, the odd boy out.

MARIE (CONT'D)
(approaching)
Tahir, why don't you join them? It
looks like fun.

Tahir turns and looks at Marie. Shakes his head "no".

BENNI
(to Tahir)
When I was a boy we played something
like it in my village in Kenya. I
used to be quite good at it.

Tahir listens politely then turns back to the game. Benni
looks at him with concern. At Marie with an idea.

BENNI (CONT'D)
Maybe I'll give it a try. See if
these old bones can still hold up.

He walks onto the playing field.

A girl races by carrying the bone. The other children follow
in a group, engulfing Benni like a wave around a stone. He
takes off after them.

Tahir follows the action with his eyes.

Benni runs to and fro, lost, unable to catch any of the
children. Finally, the bone lands at his feet. He picks it
up and runs.

Shortening his strides to allow the children to overtake
him, pile onto him and drag him to the dirt.

He throws the bone away and the group of children scramble
after it.

Benni sits up and wipes dirt off his pants. Smiles at Marie
and Tahir.

Marie laughs. Looks over at Tahir.

He stares out at the game with his head resting on his arms propped up on the fence. His large brown eyes following the action without a hint of joy on his face.

The bone is thrown by a child and it lands a few feet in front of Tahir.

He looks down at it and remembers...

EXT. DESERT - DAY

The sun-bleached bones of a skeleton protrude from the sand on a parched desert plain.

Tahir and Oda walk by. Both extremely tired, worn down by the trek.

Tahir stops and hands the water pouch to Oda.

She inverts it and puts the last few drops on her baby's lips. The child is listless, fading. She tosses the empty pouch aside. Tahir retrieves it.

TAHIR

No. We will need it.

Oda answers with a blank stare.

TAHIR (CONT'D)

The border is close. I am sure it is so. There we get water and food. Help for your baby, and for you.

Oda turns to go. Tahir reaches out for her arm.

TAHIR (CONT'D)

You are hurt. Let me carry him.

She pulls away.

ODA

No. Leave me be.

Oda walks away. Tahir follows.

EXT. ESCARPMENT - DAY

The harsh desert sun bakes the landscape.

Tahir and Oda stagger along through the heat.

Arriving before a low rocky escarpment.

They climb up to the protective eave of an outcrop of stone and take shelter from the sun.

An exhausted Oda lies back against the rock and closes her eyes, resting. After a moment, she unfolds the cloth that covers her baby.

The child is slipping away, now too weak to cry.

Tahir looks from the child to Oda.

She stares off into space, broken, as if she's lost the will to fight.

Tahir scans the desert around them, spots something in the distance.

TAHIR
Oda, look! Over there.
(points)
Those are date trees.

Oda doesn't appear to hear him, sitting still as a statue with a faraway look in her eyes.

TAHIR (CONT'D)
I will go. I will get dates for
your baby. They will make him strong.

Tahir, losing her, close to panic.

TAHIR (CONT'D)
You wait. I will come quick. Just
wait!

Tahir stands and hurries off.

Sliding down the escarpment onto the sun-washed plain.

Running swiftly across it.

Oda watches him go.

A hazy, dark figure fading to insignificance against the limitless terrain.

She looks down at her infant son and after a long, still moment starts to sing a low, melodious tune - a lullaby for her baby.

TAHIR

Sprints across the hard cracked earth.

Runs out of breath.

Slows to a walk. Drawing closer to the cluster of trees ahead of him.

ODA

Sings. Slower now. One word at a time. Then she stops and lays her head back against the stones.

TAHIR

Reaches the cluster of trees.

Locates the date trees and looks up at the branches.

Only the stalks of the dates remain.

He searches the ground, which is covered with the withered, fallen dates.

Selects a few fit to eat.

ESCARPMENT

Oda lies against the rock, her head slightly to the left.

Out in front of her, heat waves blur the horizon where a shadowy form appears in the waves, a small black phantom approaching from across the plain.

Coming closer and clearer, it is Tahir who staggers up to the escarpment.

Climbs to within a few feet of Oda and halts, the dates clutched in his hands.

He catches his breath and looks down at her.

Oda is slumped to one side with her baby in the sling across her chest. The wrap around her body is stained black with blood that has seeped onto the ground beside her. She is dead.

Tahir stands over her, perfectly still.

Close on his face, his eyes... and TRANSITION TO

INT. HUT - ZAGHAWA VILLAGE - DAY

Tahir, his brown eyes filled with innocence, sitting crossed-legged on a mat listening intently to Marie.

MARIE

It's a hard thing for me too. But you will be all right.

TAHIR

What does this mean - all right?

Marie can't answer. She glances across the hut at

Two women tending to other children. One with an infant at her breast, the other with a five-year-old boy seated beside her. The five-year-old watching Tahir and Marie.

MARIE

These people... they have other children here like you, little boys and girls all alone in the world. They will look after you.

TAHIR

You are going far away?

MARIE

Yes, very far.

TAHIR

And I cannot come?

Marie tears up, frozen before a cliff of commitment, powerless to leap.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Benni places a five gallon tank of gas into the back of the Land Cruiser next to the camouflaged net.

He leaves the liftgate open and turns to go when sees Marie approaching

MARIE
(holding back tears)
Let's get out of here.
(as she passes Benni)
I don't ever want to have to do
something like that again.

She opens the car door, stops and sobs.

Benni comes and puts an arm around her.

BENNI
(gently)
Hey now, c'mon, go easy on yourself.
You've done a lot for that boy. It's
sad, I know, but he's going to be
okay. These are good people here.

MARIE
(pulling it together)
Oh, shit, Benni. He's not the first
orphan I've seen. Why am I so upset?

BENNI
It happens.

MARIE
Has it happened to you?

BENNI
Sure... more than once.

MARIE
I don't want to foget him.

BENNI
Don't worry, you won't.

Marie nods and wipes a tear.

BENNI (CONT'D)
Hang on, I just have to grab the
water.

Benni turns and goes into a hut and Marie enters the vehicle.

ACROSS THE WAY

Tahir steps into frame eyeing Benni entering the hut and the
Land Cruiser sitting there with an open liftgate.

ON MARIE

Alone with her thoughts. She checks the side mirror.

Spots Benni approaching with two containers of water.

He puts them in the back. Sets the gas tank upright and shuts the liftgate. Locks the spare tire rack in place.

EXT. MASIK - ZAGHAWAN VILLAGE - DAY

Sheik Jamar stands posted before his hut like a pillar of dignity, a few village elders by his side.

The Land Cruiser cruises by on its way out of the village. Marie waving goodbye from her open window.

A score of children swarm after the vehicle from all sides. Chasing it down, laughing and shouting.

Marie turns and looks back.

One by one the children peel away leaving only the teenage boy in a red shirt in dogged pursuit.

He falls behind then comes to a stop and stares breathlessly after the SUV.

Marie looks in the side mirror and the boy behind them.

His receding image getting smaller and smaller until it's finally lost in a trailing cloud of dust.

EXT. BASIN - DAY - TRAVELING

The Land Cruiser crosses a dry wind-swept basin rimmed by low-lying hills.

Passes a family of refugees walking along the side of the trail. A man leading a camel stacked with the family belongings ahead of his wife and two children.

FARTHER ON

The sun nears its zenith.

The Land Cruiser appears closer to the hills, conveying distance traveled and a passage of time.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Marie gazes out her window, ruminating. Comes out with it.

MARIE

Should we try the radio? Maybe there's an A.U. convoy nearby.

BENNI

Maybe. And maybe there's a Janjaweed warrior listening in. Don't forget they have our vehicles.

(lightly)

So noooo... radio. We're just going to slip out of Darfur, as quiet as a pair of mice.

Marie offers no argument, knows Benni is right.

They drive in silence for a time when a THUD! comes from the back of the vehicle.

Marie turns in her seat and Benni glances back then turns to Marie. What could it be?

EXT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

The Land Cruiser grinds to a stop.

Benni and Marie step out and go to the back of the vehicle.

They move the spare tire aside and open the liftgate.

The fuel tank has fallen over again.

Benni puts it upright and spots a small dusty foot that withdraws quickly under the camouflaged net.

Benni looks at Marie then removes the net and reveals Tahir tucked into a ball against the seat.

EXT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

The Land Cruiser whips a U-turn.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Marie looks over her seat at a Tahir sitting with his head down.

MARIE

Tahir, we're not angry with you.

Benni shoots her a look that says otherwise.

MARIE (CONT'D)

Don't think that. Okay? But you can't come with us. We have to take you back. You'll be much better off here among your own people.

Tahir looks up and Marie regrets the words as soon as she's said them. Tries again.

MARIE (CONT'D)

Where we're going there are only refugee camps. And trust me, there no place for a little boy. Do you understand?

TAHIR

Yes, Ma-rie, I understand. It was wrong to do this. I am sorry, but I did not want to stay.

Tahir is contrite and it makes it that much harder on Marie. She sinks into her seat, emotionally deflated, weighed down by the whole affair.

LATER

Tahir looks out at an endless run of brown trackless land. Benni driving with one hand on the wheel, Marie beside him with her head back...

Her lovely mahogany eyes dulled by the bleak, monochrome view around her. Suddenly, she sits up and stares.

Ahead of them, beyond a small hill, a spiral of black smoke rises into the sky.

Benni looks at it with alarm then turns to Marie.

MARIE

Jesus, no.

EXT. HILL - DAY

The Land Cruiser approaches a small hill.

Climbs a gentle dirt slope.

Reaches the crest and comes to a halt.

Marie and Benni step out of the Land Cruiser. Tahir watching through an open window.

Benni moves in a crouch toward the edge of the hill. Lays flat and motions for Marie to join him.

Marie stoops down and comes and lays by his side.

ON THE PLAIN BELOW

The Zaghawan village burns, no sign of the Janjaweed or Sudanese Army anywhere in sight.

EXT. ZAGHAWAN VILLAGE - DAY

A burning hut. The meager belongings of a poor family strewn over the ground - clothing, baskets, shattered clay pots and the scattered remnants of food stores.

All about are huts in similar condition, some burning, some not, but all ransacked.

The teenage boy in the red shirt lies face down in the dirt, a pool of blood around his head.

All around him are dead men and women; one man with a machete still in his hand.

The Land Cruiser enters frame and stops. A wispy cloud of dust rising around the wheel.

Benni and Marie step out.

MARIE
(to Tahir)
Stay in the car.

Tahir looks out the window at the destroyed village.

Marie takes the lead, walking between the huts.

BENNI
Marie.

She stops and turns.

BENNI (CONT'D)
We should go. There's nothing we can do.

MARIE

(her voice trembling)

There could be survivors, some
wounded.

Benni just stands and stares, a silent indictment of Marie's optimism. Marie continues on.

And Benni follows, kicking an empty bottle containing traces of gasoline out of his way. Such bottles scattered all around the burnt huts.

Back in the vehicle Tahir watches them walk among the huts.

Marie's eyes rake the scene, stunned by what she sees:

The corpses of men and women.

Burnt huts.

Dead animals and shattered nuns.

All the huts have clothing, clay pots and other belongings strewn about.

In the masik, the center of the village, they come upon the bodies of Sheik Jamar and a few village elders, their white jalabiyas stained with blood.

They walked around them to the far side of the shade tree and come upon a scene that stops Marie in her tracks.

She stands there perfectly still, her eyes glued to something so horrific a swift spasm of pain contorts her face. She turns away in revolt, falls to her knees and vomits.

Benni comes to her side. Helps her to her feet.

Suddenly Tahir is there. He walks up to Benni and Marie. Stops and stares.

Before him lie some twenty to thirty children, a few infants, all linked together by a rope on the foot. They are dead, burnt to a crisp. A few have spears stuck through them.

Tahir looks down at two of the dead children holding hands, one comforting the other at the moment of death.

EXT. PLAINS - DAY

The Land Cruiser speeds across the open plain.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Everyone sits in silence, lost in their own thoughts. After a time Marie grabs the CB mic. Benni grabs her wrist.

BENNI
What are you doing?

MARIE
We have to report this.

Benni locks eyes on Marie and she understands.

He releases her arm and she sets the mic back in place. Marie breathes and looks off into space.

MARIE (CONT'D)
My God, those poor people.
(crushed by the thought)
And to think we left him there.

She sobs.

Benni reaches over and pats her shoulder. There is a long silence. Then...

MARIE (CONT'D)
This will never stop. Will it?

BENNI
Not until the last African Sudanese
is cleared from this land. The
Janjaweed have the government on
their side and if you are not Arab
Sudanese, then you will not be
Sudanese at all.

Marie ponders the thought. Turns and looks back at Tahir.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - DAY

The vehicle powers up a gentle rise in the land.

Climbs a the hill overlooking the valley below.

Winds along a trail among heavy brush and trees.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Marie takes a drink from her canteen. Offers Benni who turns it down with a nod.

Marie turns to Tahir and is jolted forward as Benni slams on the brakes and whips the vehicle off the trail behind some trees.

Marie looks out through the windshield.

Ahead of them, down on the valley floor, two Janjaweed horsemen ride.

BENNI
Marie, the field glasses.

Marie rummages around at her feet, comes up with the glasses and passes them to Benni.

He steps out of the vehicle.

Hides behind a tree and spies on the horsemen.

THROUGH FIELD GLASSES

Benni follows the horsemen as they ride up to a Janjaweed encampment at the base of the hill.

Tents, goats, horses, a camel or two and about twenty to thirty men armed with rifles, RPGs and machetes.

A trio of men sift through a pile of belongings, loot from the villages they've burned.

Near them are a group of animals tethered together, livestock taken from villages - more goats, donkeys, another camel.

BENNI

Lowers the field glasses. Gets back in the car.

BENNI (CONT'D)
Janjaweed. A whole encampment at the base of this ridge.

MARIE
Are they the ones that attacked the village?

BENNI
It looks like it.

Benni turns and looks at the trail behind them.

MARIE
Should we go back?

BENNI
We only have so much gas. And if we
end up on foot we're as good as dead.

MARIE
Can you go around them.

BENNI
Maybe. But it's a good bet that
they've posted a lookout on this ridge.
It might run straight into him.

Benni looks out at the trail that winds through the brush
ahead of them.

Marie flashes a worried look at Tahir.

MARIE
Maybe they won't bother us. It's a
U.N. car.

BENNI
Time was they wouldn't, but you saw
what they did to Akande. That U.N.
badge might as well be a bullseye.
They'll kill me and the boy and then
take turns with you. Is that bother
enough?

MARIE
You don't need to frighten him.

Benni checks Tahir - a picture of calm. He looks flatly at
Marie.

MARIE (CONT'D)
Well? What then?

BENNI
For now, we sit.

He pulls a pistol from under his seat. Opens the glove box
and takes out a flashlight and a magazine. He tests the
flashlight and changes the magazine in the gun as he speaks.

BENNI (CONT'D)

Once it's dark, I'll scout ahead and lay out a route past them. Deal with the lookout if I find one. Then at first light we'll make a run for it.

MARIE

Couldn't we slip past them in the dark? I mean, after deal you with the lookout, if there is one.

BENNI

No. They'd see the lights for sure and peppered us with bullets. And without lights I'd probably crash on this ridge or drive too slow to outrun their horses. Our best chance will be to make run for it tomorrow morning - that's *if* I can take care of any lookouts.

Benni snaps the fresh magazine into the gun and exchanges looks with Marie.

Tahir observes this then turns and looks out his window at the setting sun.

EXT. SANDY PLAIN - DAY - FLASHBACK

To another sun, this one blazing hot and high in the sky.

Tahir looks up at it and squints. Wraps the cloth around the infant he carries and walks on.

Viewed from on high, Tahir's tiny dark figure crosses a dry sandy plain.

LATER

Tahir is exhausted. He shifts the child from one arm to another. Checks the infant's condition.

It's eyes are open, still alive.

Tahir moves on with heavy steps.

Ahead of him heat waves make it appear as if there is a tantalizing body of water within reach, but Tahir is not moved, he knows it's a mirage.

So he walks... and walks.

EXT. CLIFF - DAY

He comes to the edge of a narrow wadi that cuts through the plain like a trench before a SHARP RISE in the land.

He moves downs into the wadi carrying the child.

Climbs up the far side.

He slips and falls, careful to take the fall on his back, sheltering the infant in his arms.

He lays there in a cloud of dust. After a moment, he sits up and checks on the child.

The baby's breathing is weak. His lips are parched.

Tahir musters all the spittle he can and puts it onto his fingers and into the babe's mouth.

TAHIR

Soon, I will find us water. Do not
give up, little one.

Tahir looks around the barren landscape. Up the face of the small cliff behind him.

TAHIR (CONT'D)

When we reach Chad, I will tell them
you are my little brother. That
your name is Ismael. Do you like
it? Ismael.

He looks intently at the baby boy, fearful. He wipes dust off the infant's face then stands and starts up the cliff.

He climbs near the top, to a particularly steep portion of the cliff. Too steep.

Tahir stops and glances down the cliffside, contemplating a retreat. He looks around for a way forward.

Over to his right there is a crack in the rocky cliff face.

He switches the child to his left arm, holds him tight against his chest. Plants his foot and reaches for the crack.

He gets hold of it, drags himself up. Slips! Catches himself, but the empty water pouch slides off his arm and falls to the base of the cliff into a tree.

Tahir looks after it. Let's it go. And pulls himself up. Reaching a less steep portion of the climb.

He continues on. Reaches the top.

Where he sits down and catches his breath.

He looks out over the featureless plain. Checks Ismael.

Then turns around and gets a good look at what's on top of the cliff.

A dense thicket of thorn bushes, nearly impenetrable.

Tahir looks left and right for a way around them. Not a chance, the thorns grow right up against the edge of the cliff which is even steeper on both sides of him.

He looks down the cliff at the daunting prospect of climbing back down. He considers his options then looks again at the thicket.

To his left there is a small crease in the thorns, an opening of sorts.

He wraps the cloth tight about Ismael. Holds him close in the center of his chest and enters the thorn bushes.

He moves slowly through them. Shouldering his way along, carefully moving aside branches covered with inch-long thorns.

Thorns grab at his clothes. Cut his legs, back and arms.

Deep into the thicket Tahir comes upon a veritable wall of thorns. He looks around for a way forward.

There is none.

Tahir's breathing becomes rapid and a look of panic comes to his face.

He finds a narrow passage to his right. Moves deeper into the thorns. Only to be blocked in again.

Searching for a way out, Tahir winds through the thicket, turning this way and that, but only succeeds in placing himself in ever narrower passageways.

He tries to go back, but he's entered a maze and the way back becomes confused and each turn only serves to take him

deeper into the maze, into passageways that get tighter and tighter until the wall of thorns have closed in around him.

Tahir stops and catches his breath. Checks Ismael, asleep.

He looks around at the thorns, at the hopelessness of the situation, and then squats to the ground and just sits in the sandy soil with the child on his lap.

He looks up.

Beyond the branches overhead is a small patch of blue sky.

Tahir stares at it, like a prisoner at a cell window gazing at a piece of the outside world, and freedom.

Trapped, alone with an infant and dying of thirst, Tahir puts his head down.

TAHIR (CONT'D)

(whimpers)

Mama.

After a long still moment Tahir lifts his head and his expression has changed. He no longer appears frightened, instead he wears the blank, resigned expression of a doomed individual who has accepted his fate.

He lies down cradling the child and waits to die.

LATER

The shadows have changed, they're longer, the sun no longer directly overhead.

Tahir shuffles his feet. Does it a second time, then looks down at ants crawling over his legs. He wipes them off and notices something beyond his feet.

A small portal at the base of a bush.

He moves toward it, gets a better look.

It's a small opening perhaps a foot and a half across. An old tunnel formed by the passage of small animals.

Tahir peers into it. Thinks, then turns over onto his back, and with the child on his chest, protected by his arms, shimmies his way through the opening.

He moves along, inches at a time.

Craning his head every few feet to see his way forward.

The thorns cut his arms and legs. Scratch his cheek.

Catch on the cloth covering the baby.

Tahir carefully turns them away.

He moves on, stopping now and then to catch his breath.

He comes to a spot where the thorns are just inches from his face with no room for Ismael.

He turns onto his shoulder and moves in a side-stroke with the infant against his chest. Tahir's arms absorb deep scratches but shield Ismael from the needle-like thorns.

He continues like this for a few meters until the tunnel widens then flips over onto his back again.

He rests for a moment. Keeps going.

Pushing himself along with his feet. Until finally he comes to the end of the tunnel.

Tahir crawls out and stands.

The thicket is less dense here, breathable, with plenty of space between each bush. He weaves his way through them until he comes to another dry plain beyond the thorns.

Tahir stops and looks back, relieved to be free.

He looks at his arms and legs covered with small cuts and scratches.

Checks Ismael, still asleep, not a mark on him.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

A small cloud of dust floats into the air. Beneath it...

Tahir, with his calves flat to the ground, digging around a shrub with his bare hands.

Dust kicks up into his eyes. He wipes them clean. Looks over at Ismael an arm's length away, making sure he's out of the path of the dust.

He digs some more. Pulls the plant out of the dirt and checks the bulb - a dry, shriveled mass free of any water.

He tosses it aside.

Looks over at Ismael with a defeated look on his face - "now what?"

DEEP IN THE DESERT

Tahir walks beneath a blistering hot sun, totally exhausted.

He stops and checks Ismael. Musters up all the spittle he can and puts it on his finger. Puts it to the baby's mouth.

TAHIR

Open. Open, Ismael.

He gently opens Ismael's mouth.

The child's tongue is dry, his lips chapped. Tahir puts the spittle onto his tongue.

There is no response. Ismael is dead.

Tahir stares at him, numb, seemingly without emotion about the passing of the child.

He sets him down. Looks off across the arid plain.

A dust devil whirls in the distance.

Tahir walks around scanning the ground.

Finds a stone with a pointed edge.

Moments later, he scrapes away at the hard desert earth, Ismael's body lying beside him.

The ground is unyielding, like scratching at concrete, and it's all he can do to remove a thin layer of dirt.

Tahir digs harder, jabbing at the crusty soil over and over again, wearing himself out, barely chipping inches of the rock-hard dirt.

Then the rock point breaks.

And like the shattered stone this thirsty, frustrated, exhausted little boy finally breaks down and cries. He cries for his lost mother and father, his destroyed village and its people, for his hopeless situation and for little Ismael, he cries for all of it.

LATER

The swaddling cloth, a thin layer of dirt and a few stones cover Ismael's body.

Emotionally drained, his dusty face streaked with tears, Tahir sits beside the grave observing a serene African sunset.

CUT TO:

Thick night. The Land Cruiser among the tress on the RIDGE.

INT. LAND CRUISER - SAME

Tahir stares out the window at his own ghostly reflection in the glass. Turns to a rending sound.

Up front, Benni tears an orange shirt into strips.

BENNI

While I'm gone keep quiet, and no lights. If you have to relieve yourself do so close to the car. But be careful with the doors, leave them ajar. Sounds carry very far out here.

He looks at Marie and Tahir, their faces little more than shadows in the faint moonlight that enters the car.

He puts the pistol in his belt.

Opens the door and steps out.

BENNI (CONT'D)

I could be a while. If you hear horses, if anyone comes near, get out and hide in the brush.

Marie nods.

MARIE

Bonne chance.

Benni easing the door back into place without closing it.

Tahir's eyes follow Benni who disappears into the darkness out in front of the car.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - NIGHT

A three-quarter moon set among the stars.

INT. LAND CRUISER - NIGHT

Tahir and Marie wait.

Marie stares out the windshield. Checks the trees on each side of the car. Turns to Tahir.

MARIE
Are you hungry?

TAHIR
Yes.

Marie takes two protein bars in shiny blue wrappers from a bag at her feet. She and Tahir eat them in silence.

MARIE
Do you like it?

Tahir holds up the colorful wrapper.

TAHIR
I like this.

Marie smiles. They sit for a moment in the quiet.

TAHIR (CONT'D)
Ma-rie.
(she turns)
You are African?

MARIE
Not entirely.
(off Tahir's puzzlement)
My mother was from Chad. My father's
French.

TAHIR
Now you go home, to Chad?

MARIE
No, Paris. France.

TAHIR
What for did you come here, to Darfur?

Marie rolls the question over in her mind.

MARIE

It's a long story.

TAHIR

I like the long story.

MARIE

Yes, me too... My father was a physician, a doctor, who came to Chad while in the army. There he met my mother and brought her home with him to France. Not long after I was born she died.

TAHIR

How?

MARIE

A sickness in her chest. As I grew up I became very attached to my father. I wanted to be just like him. So I studied very hard and got good marks. I think it was the happiest day of my life when I was accepted to medical school, to be a doctor.

TAHIR

Like your father?

MARIE

No, not like my father.

Tahir appears confused.

MARIE (CONT'D)

I found out my father was not an honest man. He was caught bilking, stealing, from the government insurance.

TAHIR

That is very sad, to have such a father.

MARIE

Yes, it is.

Suddenly, RUSTLING in the brush outside the car. Marie and Tahir turn, fearful.

The shadowy figure of Benni come out of the brush.

Marie and Tahir are relieved.

Benni slips into the vehicle and eases the door in place and checks his watch.

BENNI

All right, I think I get us out of here.
(re: the canteen)
Let me have that.

Marie hands him the canteen and Benni takes a drink.

BENNI (CONT'D)

In an hour it will be light enough to drive. The trail passes right above their camp, so it's going to be dicey. I marked some of the turns so I can drive fast.

MARIE

Were there any lookouts?

BENNI

Yeah. Just one.

Benni looks bothered - this is not a man accustomed to murder.

It sinks in with Marie. After a moment...

MARIE

Won't they miss him?

BENNI

Yeah, but my guess is he had an overnight watch. Hopefully, we'll be on our way before his relief shows up.

MARIE

Can we outrun them?

BENNI

Their horses - yes. Their rifles and RPGs....

Benni looks from Marie to Tahir and back.

BENNI (CONT'D)

Did you get any sleep?

MARIE

No, we were too scared.

BENNI

You were scared. I got lost.

Benni grins and takes another drink from the canteen.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - DAY

Sunrise.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Tahir sleeps. Benni at the wheel watches the sunrise through the liftgate window. Marie dozing beside him.

Tahir comes awake. Benni and he stare at each other for a moment - Tahir is calm, Benni resolute.

Benni gently nudges Marie who opens her eyes.

He passes her the canteen and she and Tahir take a drink.

BENNI

Put your belts on. We may be in for a rough ride.

Marie reaches over and helps Tahir with his belt.

BENNI (CONT'D)

If we're spotted I want the two of you to duck down.

(to Tahir)

Do you understand? You must open the belt and get down on the floor and stay there.

TAHIR

Yes, Benni, I understand.

It's the first time Tahir has called him by name and Benni notices, seems to like it.

BENNI

(to Marie)

Ready?

Marie nods. Benni starts the car. Drives.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - DAY

The Land Cruiser crosses the hill.

Maneuvers through the brush.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Tahir peeks out the window...

At an orange cloth tied to a bush, Benni's marker.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - DAY

The Land Cruiser travels in and out of a dip on the ridge.

Passes another marker and comes to a halt.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Benni jams the vehicle in park. Points to a boulder off to their right at the edge the ridge.

MARIE

What's wrong? Why'd you stop?

BENNI

Their camp is just down there below that rock. I need to take a look it in the light.

Benni steps out and passes in front of the vehicle over to the edge of the ridge.

Tahir slides over to the other window and watches

BENNI

now down on all fours. Crawling up to the side of the boulder.

Spying on the camp with the field glasses.

FIELD GLASSES - POV

Of the Janjaweed camp down on the plain a hundred yards away.

EXT. JANJAWEED CAMP - DAY

The camp occupants go about their morning activities.

A group of men seated in a circle eat a breakfast of dried meat and tea.

A JANJAWEEED COMMANDER washes his hands in a pan of water.

He looks up and notices a flash of light atop the hill overlooking the camp.

EXT. HILLTOP - HIGHLANDS - DAY

Benni scans the camp with the field glasses. The slight movement of the lens catches the sunlight and emits a bright reflection.

LAND CRUISER

Marie watches Benni through the windshield.

BENNI

flat to the ground still spying on the Janjaweed.

A JANJAWEEED WARRIOR

Brings his commander a cup of tea. The commander doesn't take, but just keeps his eyes level and speaks to the man.

JANJAWEEED COMMANDER

Aatini bunduqiyati.

The man looks to a sniper rifle leans against a tent post.

HILLTOP

Benni scans the camp then shifts to the escarpment on the side of the ridge. Scans ahead of them.

POV - FIELD GLASSES

as they follow a dirt trail that leads down to the plain out beyond the camp - a course for the Land Cruiser to take.

BENNI

views the camp again then slides back, rising into a crouch, approaches Marie...

BENNI

(softly)

There's a way down--

PHHFFFTT-THUUP! Suddenly a bullet slams into Benni and a mist of blood explodes out of his chest.

CUT IN BENNI - BEING SHOT

viewed through the scope of the sniper's rifle.

He spins around and drops to the ground.

MARIE

screams! As the report of the rifle reaches them, echoing around the hillside.

MARIE

No!

She bolts from the car and goes to Benni. Kneels down and lift's up his head.

Benni's eyes looking blankly at the sky.

MARIE (CONT'D)

Oh, God! Benni!

Marie lays his head gently on the ground. Runs back to the vehicle.

As bullets whiz past her head. Followed by the reports that resound through the hills.

Marie takes the wheel. Jams the car in gear.

Tahir at his window looking out at Benni.

At the pool of blood around his chest.

EXT. HILLTOP - HIGHLANDS - DAY

The Land Cruiser flies along the hilltop.

Plowing through brush that lashes its sides.

INT. LAND CRUISER - DAY

Marie steers wildly.

Avoids a tree.

Driving along the rim of the hill. Looking out her window for a safe way down.

She picks a spot.

Turns the vehicle and heads down the slope.

MARIE
Tahir, get down!

Tahir ducks behind her seat. Grabs the door handle and holds on for dear life.

As Marie drives like madwoman, flushed with adrenaline.

She weaves around a boulder and slides across the slope.

Avoids a tree and plows the front bumper into the ground, ejecting a huge cloud of dust.

The four-wheel-drive powering the vehicle down the slope through a brush-covered landscape that blocks Marie's view.

She whips the wheel back and forth.

Steers around shrubs. Bowls over others.

Suddenly, the ground gives way before her and the Land Cruiser sails over a ten-foot drop above a small plateau.

It crashes onto its side.

Rolls all the ground then comes to a battered halt in a huge cloud of dust.

Marie emerges from driver's door as if exiting a submarine. She reaches in and helps Tahir out the open back door window.

Tahir's left arm is cut, bleeding.

She helps him off the Land Cruiser, lowering him by his good arm onto the ground.

Climbs down after him and checks Tahir's arm.

A deep cut in his bicep.

She tears off his sleeve and ties it around the wound.

Thinks what to do. Her eye's raking the area for any sign of the Janjaweed.

Off in the distance...

Janjaweed horsemen ride up the slope from the plain, heading for the small plateau.

Marie grabs Tahir and heads for the brush.

TAHIR

No, the water!

Tahir breaks away from Marie and goes back for the water.

Reaches in through the shattered tailgate window and grabs a canteen that catches on a toggle that lowers the seat.

The Janjaweed horsemen gallop up the slope.

As Marie comes and grabs Tahir.

MARIE

Come on, leave it!

Tahir unhooks the canteen and Marie pulls him away.

They escape into the brush as the Janjaweed riders reach the plateau and head straight for the vehicle.

EXT. BRUSH - PLATEAU - DAY

Marie and Tahir tear through the brush.

Stop to breathe. Marie's eyes flicking left and right, looking for a place to hide.

She pulls Tahir toward the densest part of the brush, but the boy trips and falls.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

To Tahir lying flat on the ground. Completely exhausted and dying of thirst.

He stays on the ground weighing whether to continue the fight.

He pulls himself to his feet and walks on. A tiny figure crossing the bleakest part of the desert.

Tahir stops and looks up at the sun - an open furnace at the top of the sky.

He touches his split, chapped lips. Moves on.

EXT. OASIS - DAY

Tahir walks across a scorched plain. Blistered, cut and exhausted, so parched that it hurts to breathe.

He looks ahead of him to the west...

At a range of low-lying hills impossibly far off.

A bird sails over his head.

He shields his eyes from the sun and follows its flight.

The bird soars off to his left then descends sharply below a sand berm.

Tahir stares in that direction.

Another bird comes in from different direction and it too descends below the berm.

Tahir heads toward the berm.

Reaches the steep slope of sand and climbs up its base, feet sinking in the deep sand.

Halfway up the berm he drops to his hands and knees, keeps crawling until he reaches the top.

Tahir stares at the view of the other side. Stone-still.

WHAT TAHIR SEES

An oasis of brown water encircled by date trees.

TAHIR

Can't believe his eyes. He smiles wearily, rises to his feet and runs down the berm.

He stumbles, falls and rolls through the sand toward the base of the depression.

As he rolls his arm slaps the sand and his mother's bracelet comes off his wrist, unnoticed by Tahir.

He rolls to a stop a few feet from the oasis. Tahir looks up at the brown water just a few meters away. In this heat as welcomed a sight as the freshest stream in the world.

He lies there a moment gazing at it. At a large bird dipping its beak at the edge of the pool.

Suddenly the sound of automobile engines rolls in from beyond the far side of the berm.

Tahir just lays there and watches as...

A Sudanese Army jeep and two trucks drive up to the oasis and come to a halt just in front from Tahir.

A massive SUDANESE MAJOR gets out of the jeep and approaches Tahir. Looms over him, blocking out the sun.

Tahir looks up.

CUT TO:

EXT. BRUSH - DAY

A Janjaweed soldier searching the brush. Passing an arm's length away from Marie and Tahir hiding under a bush.

The man passes by.

Marie and Tahir crawl as quiet as ghost into the thicket.

Janjaweed horsemen passing by all around them, talking, searching. The horses's hooves kicking up clouds of dust.

MARIE

(in Tahir's ear)

Come, this way.

Marie crawls toward a tree with a thick bush around its base. Makes a hole for Tahir and he crawls inside.

Marie follows him in and together they tucked up into a ball next to the trunk of the tree. Pretty well hidden by the leaves of the bush.

Several Janjaweed riders approach their hiding place.

Thudding hoofs. The snorts of horses and the shouts of men.

The Janjaweed commander passes by in front of them.

Wheels his horse. Scans the area. Then rides on. The other riders galloping after him.

Eddying dust fills the air and drifts onto Marie and Tahir's face. They wipe it from their eyes. Sit in silence. Listening and hoping that the Janjaweed have passed them by.

Seconds pass, like an eternity.

Marie looks at Tahir and smiles as if the danger has passed.

Tahir uncaps the canteen and drinks. Hands it to Marie.

She raises it to her lips when all of a sudden a hand reaches in from behind the tree and grabs Marie by the hair.

She screams! And is dragged from the bush.

Tahir pushes his way out of the bush. Turns and sees...

A Janjaweed rider dragging Marie by her hair toward his horse.

Marie screaming. Grabbing at the man's hand. Thrashing her legs as she tries to break free.

The Janjaweed warrior kicks her in the back and Marie doubles up in pain.

MARIE (CONT'D)

OHHH!

Marie is dragged to the horse.

And Tahir picks up a stone and throws it at the man.

Missing the warrior, but hitting his horse...

Which bolts away.

The man let's go of Marie and runs after his horse.

Tahir rushes up to Marie and helps her to her feet. And together they run off into the brush.

The Janjaweed warrior catches his horse. Mounts up and comes after them.

MARIE AND TAHIR

run for their lives.

They enter a clearing.

Of to their left, are the commander and more Janjaweed. They spot them. Gallop toward them.

And Marie and Tahir run to the edge of the plateau and down toward the plain.

Moving sideways down the gravelly slope.

Sliding onto their thighs and coming back to their feet with dust mushrooming behind them.

The Janjaweed horsemen appear on the plateau above them.

A pair of riders come down the slope after them... but then they suddenly stop and turn back and rejoin the others.

Marie and Tahir stagger onto the plain and look back at the Janjaweed, puzzled why they don't pursue.

Tahir turns and looks out across the plain.

There, a convoy of six African Union (A.U.) vehicles pass by a couple hundred yards away. He grabs Marie and she turns.

MARIE (CONT'D)

Over here! Over here! Help us!

Marie waves her arms.

The convoy drives past oblivious to her calls.

MARIE (CONT'D)

Over here, pleaseee!

TAHIR

(shouts)

Come! Help!

The convoy moves on, missing them.

Marie stops waving and watches them drive off in disbelief.

Then, the last vehicle in the convoy suddenly turns and heads straight toward them.

And one by one the other vehicles turn and do the same.

Marie stares at them, beyond relieved. She turns to Tahir who smiles broadly, amazed that they're being saved.

They both look up at the Janjaweed.

THE COMMANDER

now the only rider left on the plateau, looks down at them and smirks.

Wheels his horse around and gallops away, vanishing beyond the crest of the plateau.

MARIE AND TAHIR

look an unholy mess. Bruised. Bleeding. Covered with dust. They wait for the A.U. vehicles to arrive.

INT. AFRICAN UNION TRUCK - LATER

Marie and Tahir ride in the back seat of a vehicle. An A.U. captain turns around in his seat.

A.U. CAPTAIN

You are one very lucky lady. Do you know that. Yes, very lucky that we happened by. Water?

He offers them two bottled waters.

Marie takes one and hands the other to Tahir. Opens hers and drinks.

Tahir takes a moment to to examine his bottle, staring thoughtfully at the crystal clear water within.

CUT TO:

THE CARAMEL-COLORED WATER OF THE OASIS

And the Arab Sudanese major standing over Tahir. Looking down him with eyes filled with hate.

Tahir tries to stand and the Sudanese Major puts his foot on Tahir's shoulder and pins him hard to the ground.

He turns to his men.

SUDANESE MAJOR

Go on, hurry up! Fill up the tanks.

His men jump down from the trucks and fill tin and plastic containers with water from the oasis.

The towering major kneels beside Tahir.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
What are you doing all the way out
here, my black little friend?

Tahir tries to speak, but his mouth is too dry.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
You are thirsty, yes? Me too.

He turns to one of his men.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
Water!

A nearby soldier hustles over with a canteen.

Tahir looks up hopefully.

The Sudanese Major uncaps the canteen and takes a long drink in front of Tahir. The water flows down his chin and to the parched earth in front of Tahir.

Tahir looks at the major and holds up his hand in desperation. So dry he can't even speak to ask for water.

The Sudanese Major savors tormenting Tahir. He smacks his lips and sighs.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
Good. So cool. Just the thing for
a dry throat.

He offers the canteen to Tahir.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
What? You want water? Of course. You
must be very hot with that black
head of yours and this sun.

He looks up at the sun.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
Here, let me cool you off.

He pours water over Tahir's head. And Tahir licks the water that runs down his face.

The Sudanese Major laughs. Stands.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)

(to his men)

Come on, hurry up. Finish it. I want to get out of here.

Soldiers load the last water containers onto the trucks.

Others grab burlap sacks and come back to the pool of water.

Using tin cups, they scoop a yellow powder out from the bags and toss it into the water, poisoning the oasis.

Tahir watches this in disbelief.

He panics and scrambles to the water to get a drink, but the Sudanese Major throws him back onto the ground.

Tahir lies there and whimpers, totally broken.

The Sudanese Major stands over Tahir.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)

Where are you from? How did you get out here? Nevermind. Only a very strong boy could have made it this far, from anywhere. That is the problem with you zurga, you are descended from slaves, so you are used to hard work. That is why it is so hard to get rid of you. But soon there won't be one tribesmen left in Sudan. And it will be only for the people. For the people only!

He kicks Tahir who doubles up in pain.

The Sudanese commander looks down at Tahir in disgust. Suddenly smiles.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)

Hey, zurga boy. Look!

He reaches down and takes hold of Tahir's arm and yanks him to his knees.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)

Look at that, over there.

He turns Tahir's head with his hand and points.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
You see that, that line of hills.

Tahir looks at the distant hills between the berms.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
Just beyond them is the border with Chad. About fifty, maybe sixty kilometers away. Not too far, considering how far you've come already. There you will be welcomed by the Chadians, your black-skinned brothers. If you can make it.

He kneels down beside Tahir again, speaks confidentially into his ear.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
What? You don't think you can make it, do you? Frankly, neither do I. Not without water, no, that would be very difficult. But here...

He takes a Sudanese five pound note from his pocket and folds it up into a square. Stuffs it in Tahir's shirt pocket.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
For you. If you get there. You can have a cold beer on me. You can toast the new Sudan. One without you!

He laughs in an exaggerated derisive cackle.

Stands and kicks Tahir who rolls over onto his side.

A soldier steps up with his rifle and aims it at Tahir's head, ready to shoot when the Sudanese Major puts out his hand.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
No, no need for that. Why make it easy on him? Before the day is out he'll try the pond. He won't be able to help himself.

(to Tahir)

Will you? You will drink it up and it will be like a thousand little knives inside of you, ripping you apart.

He laughs again, then waves at his men.

SUDANESE MAJOR (CONT'D)
Come on, back in the trucks. Let's go!

The men climb into the trucks.

One of the last ones in sits at the end of the bench at the rear of the truck bed. He notices something.

A spot of blue half-buried in the sand.

He jumps out of the vehicle and runs over to it.

Picks up the bracelet Tahir made for his mother.

The truck pulls away and the soldier runs after it.

His comrades laughing as he chases the truck.

Catches up with them and gets pull into the truck bed. In the process one of the soldiers steps back and knocks a small plastic container of water over the side.

It falls to the ground unnoticed by the soldiers who are laughing and retaking their seats.

The trucks move out, one by one, heading east, small towers of swirling dust left in their wake.

TAHIR

lies in the sand, finished.

After a moment he rolls over and watches the trucks drive off through the beige cloud of dust.

Tahir stares after them, then notices the small plastic container lying in the sand a short distance away.

Waves of emotions wash over Tahir's face: amazement, joy, profound relief, for at last his God has reached down with a tender hand and helped him.

EXT. INFIRMARY - CHAD REFUGEE CAMP - DAY

Tahir is in bed, his arm bandaged.

Marie comes in. She looks well, fresh and none the worst for wear from their ordeal.

She sits beside Tahir and takes his hand.

MARIE

How are you? Your doctor says that your arm is healing fine.

TAHIR

How long do I stay here?

MARIE

Not too long. What's wrong? Don't you like it?

TAHIR

It is a good place. Where do you stay?

Marie looks dearly at Tahir. Torn by his obvious attachment to her.

MARIE

I have some things for you.

She reaches into her pocket and takes out a couple of protein bars with shiny blue wrappers.

Tahir takes them and smiles.

TAHIR

These I like very much. Thank you. I will eat them later.

MARIE

And this.

Marie takes two photos from her shirt pocket and hands one to him. Tahir looks at it and smiles.

It's a photo of he and Marie under the baobab tree.

MARIE (CONT'D)

I made a copy for me.

Marie looks down at the photo, seeking the right words, mustering the courage to tell him something.

TAHIR

Soon you will leave Africa?

MARIE

Yes, very soon. I'm going home.

Tahir looks her in the eye with an acceptance and understanding beyond his years.

TAHIR
Then I will miss you.

Marie tears up.

TAHIR (CONT'D)
Do not cry, Ma-rie.

She wipes her tears and forces a smile.

TAHIR (CONT'D)
I promise, I will write to you a letter. But I will need first a pencil and paper.

MARIE
I'll leave some for you... and stamped envelopes. You'll need those too.

TAHIR
Yes... Goodbye, Ma-rie.

Marie cannot utter the words. She kisses Tahir on the forehead. Stands and leaves.

INT. MARIE'S TENT - CHAD REFUGEE CAMP - NIGHT

In the pale yellow light of a kerosene lamp Marie sits on a cot beside a small nightstand with a stack of papers on it.

She stares at the papers. Picks them up...

A Chadian adoption form for orphaned Sudanese children.

She sets down the form. Lies down and stares at the ceiling.

MORNING

Marie packs her bag.

The adoption forms still on the table - not filled out.

Marie picks up her bag and leaves.

INT. CAMP HOSPITAL - DAY

Tahir, with his arm in a sling, sits on a wooden crate outside a hospital tent watching the aid trucks, camp workers and refugees passing by.

He takes out the photo of himself with Marie. Looks at it fondly then places it back in his shirt.

He hops down off the crate and turns to go back inside. Behind him a white U.N. truck pulls up and stops.

Marie steps out of the truck, walks up to Tahir and smiles.

TAHIR
You have not left?

MARIE
No.

TAHIR
Then you will stay?

MARIE
No. No, it's much too hot for me here. I have to go home to France, which can be a very cold place.

Tahir looks at Marie with all innocence.

MARIE (CONT'D)
Do you have anything warm to wear?

Tahir considers the question, unsure of its meaning. And then it hits him and he smiles. Overcome with emotion, Tahir trembles and great big tears run down his cheeks.

TAHIR
No, Ma-rie. I have nothing at all.

Marie takes him in a motherly embrace as her tears flow.

MARIE
No, that isn't true. You have me.

EXT. HILLS - DAY

A sweeping view of brown foothills.

Viewed from on high, a small dark spec reaches the crest of one of the barren hills.

ON TAHIR

Atop a hill. Looking into the distance where a long dirt road cuts through the maple-colored plain below.

EXT. BORDER - DAY

Framed by a large piece of wood, Tahir walks along a dusty road carrying his plastic container of water.

Comes to a stop and stares at the wood:

A sign with faded white paint that reads: "REPUBLIC DU TCHAD" and the same in Arabic script.

A truck blows past him kicking up a cloud of dust that lays another layer of dirt on Tahir's face.

He wipes his eyes. Walks over into Chad.

To a small shack manned by two Chadian soldiers. There is a small queue outside the shack, two or three other refugees ahead of him. Tahir waits his turn.

INT. AIRLINER - DAY

Tahir, looking clean and sharp in a plain white shirt and black slacks, sits in a window seat. Marie sits beside him reading a magazine. Tahir watches her, and after a moment she turns to him and smiles.

Tahir looks out the window.

Below, the brown sweep of the central African plains, distant rolling hills, and the stark white tents of a refugee camp.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - CHAD - DAY

A group of refugee children play a game of anshel in a patch of dirt among the tents.

Sitting outside one of the tents is the little girl who was friends with Tahir. She watches the game. Looks into the sky and sees the airliner leaving a contrail in the sky.

She look back at the game, at a group orphans playing.

FADE OUT.

THE END