

# NANNY

Written by

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"For the mouths of her children quickly forgot the taste of her nipples, and years ago they had begun to look past her face into the nearest stretch of sky." --**Toni Morrison, Sula**

1 INT. UPPER EAST SIDE APARTMENT - DAY

1

THE SOUND OF WATER RUNNING, unfettered, unencumbered--perhaps overflowing...

We creep through a longish hallway littered with doorways and framed pictures. In these pictures are various poses of a PERFECT UPPER EAST SIDE FAMILY comprised of a WHITE COUPLE [30's] and their angelic BABY BOY [4].

At the foot of one doorway, shards of light refract like luminescent knives off a pool of blood. We float past...

A faintly discernible larger than life arachnid shadow ambles along hallway walls.

Whispers. Barely discernible--then louder emanate from--

An AFRO-DOMINICAN WOMAN [45], at the end of the hallway. Her back is to us. She's frantic. Desperate.

She presses a phone to her ear--in her other hand: a top of the line, bloody, French *Laguiole* steak knife.

She stumbles through tears.

AFRO DOMINICAN WOMAN  
(spanish)  
*I...don't know. I don't know what  
happened. I was tired. Confused. It  
wasn't the boy. It was something  
else--*

An INHUMAN GROAN echoes just behind her. She freezes, turning slowly and we see her face for the first time: palpable fear.

Defense scratches etch her face.

A SMALL SPIDER emerges from her ear, making its way across her cheek.

She drops the bloody phone as she faces an ANIMALISTIC WAIL.

She raises the knife to her own neck...

2 INT. CATERING HALL - DAY

2

A KNIFE HACKS into a MEWLING GOAT'S neck. Blood erupts from a carotid artery forming crimson pools on concrete.

Steaming slabs of roasted meat pass between hands, piled in chafing dishes.

We follow AISHA [26], eyeing the nape of her neck as she saunters into the bustle. She's dressed in *traditional African wear*. Her profile grants us a look at a jarringly pretty dark skinned woman with the eyes of a griot in a youthful face.

An AFRICAN WOMAN carrying a brimming pan of food darts past as Aisha surveys the space.

A sign strung on a wall reads: "HAPPY 6th BIRTHDAY ROMANO". Ribbons and balloons hang haphazardly. West African music blares from speakers.

Aisha places a carefully wrapped box in a pile of gifts--each distinct wrapping paper an ode from its gift giver.

WOMAN  
AISHA!

SALLAY [30], bright eyed with a permanently mischievous grin bee-lines towards Aisha. Her bright red blush matches her crimson lipstick.

AISHA  
As late as I am they're still  
setting up?

SALLAY  
You know how things go. Time is the  
white man's invention.

Sallay envelopes Aisha in a warm hug.

SALLAY (CONT'D)  
Sierra Leoneans know how to party.  
Guess who's coming? Idris Elba!  
He's my friend's cousin.

Sallay whisks Aisha away, enveloping her in infectious energy.

3 INT. CATERING HALL - CAKE CUTTING ROOM - DAY 3

ROMANO [6 today], an effusive child sits at the helm of a table flanked by COUSINS and FRIENDS. Children wear various superhero party masks, stark American contrasts colliding with continental flair.

A multi-tiered cake is placed before Romano aglow with six candles.

Taking in the scene from her perch, Aisha smiles to herself observing the boy's contagious joy. Fire dances in his eyes.

Revelry plays in slow motion as the crowd rises in a *Happy Birthday song*. Some sing the African version.

## CROWD

*Appy birthday to you! Appy birthday  
to you! Everybody like you!  
Everybody like you!*

Romano leans in to blow out his candles.

Aisha closes her eyes and inhales, making a silent wish alongside the boy.

She opens her eyes.

In Romano's place sits another child--the one we will come to know as KOFI [6], Aisha's son.

Kofi grants Aisha a dazzling smile before blowing out candles with all his might.

Back to reality, Aisha watches Romano bounce in his chair.

4 INT. CATERING HALL - DANCEFLOOR - EVENING

4

THE IDRIS ELBA enters the party as AUNTIES REGALE him with money--pressing it to his face and upper body, scooping up bills as they hit the floor, only to begin the cycle again.

He revels in the attention as women crowd around him in celebration. A throng of PARTYGOERS fill the dance floor.

Sallay and Aisha dance the night away, testing their maturing knees as they literally hit the floor.

Prince Nico Mbarga's, "Sweet Mother" blasts from speakers:

## SONG

*Sweet mother I no go forget you for  
de suffer weh you suffer for me,  
yea...*

5 INT. MOVING TRAIN - NIGHT

5

Still draped in her traditional African wear, Aisha stares ahead. Her body sways with the train's movement.

The black canvas of the subway window behind her seems to pulsate as the train speeds ahead.

A WOMAN'S STERN VOICE slices through silence:

CARIBBEAN WOMAN (VO)

They seem nice enough. Grandmother was caring for the child, had to go leave NY. Your immigration status don't matter. You will be their first Nanny.

AISHA (VO)

Do they know?

CARIBBEAN WOMAN(VO)

No. Don't tell them. They need to feel you are only focused on *their child*--that nothing will distract you. Chloe is the most important thing. You hear?

AISHA(VO)

Yes.

CARIBBEAN WOMAN (VO)

They prefer someone young, so that works in your favor. And you speak French fluently? Another plus. You've been in America how long?

AISHA (VO)

Almost one year.

WOMAN (VO)

You're too smart to braid hair all day. The money is better here. They have no experience so it's a fresh start for you and them. No family is perfect. Be nice. Do your job. You will be fine...

We push in on Aisha, like a painting--perfectly composed in the melody of the darkness enveloping her.

RISING BEEP BEEP BEEP of a phone alarm echoes.

Aisha, buried in a twin sized bed pressed against a wall, opens her eyes and darts out of bed.

We scan her room: quaint as to be expected, but not without brush strokes of style. Shards of African fabric peek from nooks. A small pile of books nestle in a corner of the room.

Pictures encased in baroque frames intimate a life before this.

In one photo Aisha grins happily with a boy in her arms. Her mini me: KOFI.

We see a collection of knick knacks. Toys. Trinkets. Boy's Clothes. Pictures. Images of Kofi smiling, dancing, playing...A shrine dedicated to his impending arrival in America.

Tangible reminders of why she's here.

7 INT. APARTMENT - BATHROOM - DAY

7

Aisha puts on makeup as an attempted *WhatsApp* video call rings endlessly--just as she's about to give up an image flashes on the screen:

A WOMAN: blurry but decipherable. Her name, we will learn, is MARIATOU. She's approximately Aisha's age.

They alternate between their *tribal language* and English.

MARIATOU  
Hello, Hello, Aisha--

Aisha holds the phone up.

AISHA  
Yes! Mariatou? Hello?

Jumbled conversation of people in distant lands struggling to communicate, words tumbling on top of each other, delayed seconds of understanding--

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Can you hear me?

MARIATOU  
Loud and clear!

AISHA  
Is Kofi near you?

MARIATOU  
You know your son is slippery. Hold on...

Aisha waits for what feels like an eternity. She watches as Mariatou scurries off screen, then

KOFI. In digital flesh. Aisha visibly softens at the sight and sound of him.

KOFI  
Hi mamma!

AISHA  
Kofi, my baby. Are you being a good boy? Aunty Mariatou tells me you're not listening.

KOFI  
She's lying.

AISHA  
Ah Ah! You call your aunty a liar?

Kofi shakes his head no.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
I heard you went to Musa's birthday party. Was it fun?

KOFI  
They had so much food. I ate too much.

AISHA  
Is there anything you want to tell me?

Kofi pretends not to hear his mother.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Hello. Kofi, did you bite Musa?

KOFI  
He took my toy!

AISHA  
I don't want to hear about anymore trouble. When you come we will have so many toys you won't want anymore.

KOFI  
Ok...will it be cold?

AISHA  
Very cold. There will be snow on the ground. Remember the pictures I sent you.

KOFI  
White cotton candy.

Aisha laughs.

AISHA  
White cotton candy. I will have a  
very warm coat waiting for you.  
When you come to New York we'll go  
to *Ray's Pizza*. Kofi it's the best  
pizza you will ever have...

KOFI  
When will we go to the beach?

AISHA  
When it's hot. The water is not as  
clear...

Kofi is distracted. He talks to someone off screen.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Kofi, I'm talking to you. We don't  
have much time.

Kofi's voice dissipates into a crackling sound. His image  
freezes on screen.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Kofi? Hello? Kofi...

Aisha stares at Kofi's frozen image.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
I don't know if you hear me but  
I'll see you soon, my love.

The apartment is unveiled in all it's tiny glory. A living room seamlessly tumbles into a kitchen, which bumps into a bathroom. Indistinct boundaries of cramped spaces.

Dressed and ready to go, Aisha tucks food in a backpack.

She pauses at a slightly ajar door.

AISHA  
I'm leaving now.  
(Beat)  
Aunty, are you here?

Silence. She's not. Aisha darts out of the apartment.

9 INT. SERIES OF TRAIN STATIONS - MORNING

9

--A train arrives. Aisha gets on, sandwiched between a sea of bodies. Music emanating from her headphones insulates her from the raging city around her.

--Aisha climbs up a flight of steps, weaving in and out of bodies in an attempt to hustle to the next train.

--AN OLDER BLACK WOMAN standing at a platform across from Aisha is barely discernible behind the barreling train that, rather than stopping, flies through the station.

Her stare fixates on Aisha. Aisha notices her briefly.

The woman is gone when the train passes

--Aisha walks alongside a train as it arrives, angling for a good seat.

10 EXT. 19 STORY DOORMAN BUILDING - UPPER EAST SIDE - DAY 10

Aisha enters, peeling away from the crowd of commuters.

11 INT. 19 STORY DOORMAN BUILDING - LOBBY - DAY 11

Her gaze lands on a DOOR MAN [31] behind the desk. He double takes, standing up instinctively, allowing her to take all of him in--muscly, lithe, formidable.

This man, cognizant of his beauty, is MALIK: fully aware of his effect on Women...and men. He flashes a pearly smile meant solely for Aisha.

She pulls out her passport before he can ask for I.D. He studies it.

MALIK

I-SHA. New Nanny for the HAVS  
right? You know where you goin'?

AISHA

Yes. Thank you.

Aisha tucks away her passport, makes her way to the elevators...

POV OF SECURITY MONITORS. Aisha's pixelated black and white image enter the elevator.

12 INT. 19 STORY DOORMAN BUILDING - ELEVATOR 12

Aisha stares at her reflection in the mirrored elevator doors as she ascends. She glides chapstick over her lips.

13 INT./EXT. HAV CONDO - DAY 13

AMY [36], opens the door. An ageless beauty belying a tightly wound undercurrent of nerves.

AMY  
Aisha! Welcome.

14 INT. HAV CONDO - VARIOUS ROOMS - DAY 14

Amy studies Aisha as she takes off her shoes and unloads her bag.

We see the condo in all its glory: sterile, modern, spacious. Lower upper class by New York standards, relative wealth by national standards. A pristine box encased in floor to ceiling windows.

Aisha knowingly makes her way to the...

KITCHEN SINK

She washes her hands meticulously. The women grant each other tight, but warm smiles.

AMY  
How was the commute?

AISHA  
Not too bad.

AMY  
Great! These are for you.

Amy presses condo keys into Aisha's palm. Aisha closes her hand around them.

AMY (CONT'D)  
Now that it's official let me give  
you the full tour...

Aisha trails Amy--her eyes swimming with curiosity as she takes in the impressive space more closely this time.

Contemporary Art riddles walls traveling up sky high ceilings. Various exotic house plants sprinkle the clinical space with life.

*A Bird of Paradise* plant sprawls upwards, branches reaching out for dear life among *schefflera amate* and *monstera* plants.

The inhabitants of this space are collectors of resplendent, peculiar things.

INT. GUEST BATHROOM

Amy flicks on a light.

AMY (CONT'D)  
All yours. Nothing fancy.

Aisha peeks in. Quite fancy, actually.

Amy points at a door.

AMY (CONT'D)  
Chloe's room. Little diva should be up soon.

GUEST BEDROOM

From inside the room, we watch the door float open. Though sparse, it's spacious.

AMY (CONT'D)  
For overnights. Please, please make this space yours. Bring whatever you need to feel at home: pictures, books, your favorite pillow. Just one small request: no candles or incense. Chloe's hyper sensitive to certain smells.

A tight smile from Amy. Aisha returns it.

AISHA  
(searching)  
So many windows.  
(Beat)  
Please remind me of the overnight rate.

AMY  
Right. Yes. Chloe sleeps like a log once she has her bath so we'll start with a flat rate: 150?

AISHA  
(unsure, no blueprint)  
Sure. That's fine.

AMY  
Awesome.

They pass a slightly ajar door...

Aisha furtively peeks through the sliver of access. A 30x45 FRAMED PHOTOGRAPH of a WAILING AFRICAN WOMAN slumped on her knees SCREAMS back at Aisha. The image is mesmerizing-- whoever exists behind the lens is clearly skilled.

Amy closes the door abruptly.

AMY (CONT'D)  
Adam's office. We civilians aren't allowed.

They return to the...

15 INT. CONDO LIVING ROOM - DAY 15

AMY  
Chloe hasn't stopped talking about you. She's already obsessed.

AISHA  
She's a sweet girl.

Amy slides a binder towards Aisha.

AMY  
Don't feel overwhelmed. Think of this as a loose guide: basic schedule, emergency contacts, a list of where things are...

Aisha peruses the meticulous multi tabbed planner.

AMY (CONT'D)  
All phone numbers you'll ever need. Even her therapist...some blank pages for you to fill in and make it yours...

Aisha lingers on a tentative schedule with end times "TBD".

AISHA  
Thank you.

Amy gathers her belongings, willing herself to leave.

AMY  
Ok...

She lingers a beat too long.

AMY (CONT'D)  
Is this weird? It's kinda weird. Is  
that ok to say out loud?

AISHA  
Everything will be fine.

Amy approaches Aisha.

AMY  
Can I?

Amy dives in for the embrace anyway, wrapping herself around  
Aisha. Aisha hugs her back.

16 INT. CHLOE'S ROOM - DAY

16

CHLOE [5], a blonde haired blue eyed cherubic bundle of  
cheeks. Dead asleep to the world. Aisha watches her for some  
time. Stiff. Arms folded like a little corpse.

Aisha checks the girl's breath, her finger hovering just  
below Chloe's nose, feeling her exhalations.

Chloe's long lashes flutter open.

CHLOE  
Aisha, you're back!

She springs into her outstretched arms, burrowing into Aisha.

AISHA  
*Salut petit amour.*

17 INT. CONDO - KITCHEN - DAY

17

A FRIDGE OPENS meticulously organized with labels, color  
coded stickies--

"gluten free",

"fermented kimchee - do not touch",

"help yourself"....etc.

Aisha scans the fridge landing on a pre-packaged meal labeled  
"CHLOE".

CUT TO:

Settled in a kiddie chair with personalized plastic utensils, Chloe turns her face defiantly away from an approaching spoon of organic, gluten free slop.

CHLOE  
No.

AISHA  
Your mommy made this just for you.  
Don't you want to eat the healthy  
food Mommy made?

CHLOE  
I don't want it.

AISHA  
*Encore en français.* Again in  
french. Je ne-

CHLOE  
Je ne...

AISHA  
Veux.

CHLOE  
Voo.

AISHA  
Pas.

CHLOE  
PAH!

CHLOE (CONT'D)  
What does that mean?

AISHA  
I don't want.

CHLOE  
Je ne veux pas!

Aisha holds her hand out for a high five. Chloe leaps up eagerly, slapping Aisha's hand.

AISHA  
Good girl! Ok...

Aisha looks at the slop, braces herself, and shoves a spoonful into her mouth.

Fighting her gag reflex, she forces a pained smile as she swallows.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Mmm. Yum.

Chloe giggles at Aisha's pathetic performance. Shakes her head no. She watches Aisha unpack her own carefully packaged lunch: rice, stew, plantains. Chloe sniffs the air dramatically. She squinches her nose, curious.

The two are in a stare off. Aisha finally relents.

She scoops a tiny morsel of jollof rice onto a spoon and hovers it before Chloe who snaps it up like a baby alligator.

Chloe's eyes light up.

CUT TO:

Chloe dances happily. She scoops a large spoonful of rice off Aisha's plate into her mouth.

Aisha does the same.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Happy now? C'est délicieux?

Chloe nods.

CHLOE  
Say deli-see-you.

AISHA  
(tribal language)  
*Crazy child eating all this pepper.*

As though in defiance, Chloe grabs another mouthful off Aisha's plate.

18

EXT. UNION SQUARE - FARMER'S MARKET - DAY

18

A sea of bodies flow through the open market. Aisha fights upstream. Chloe is hoisted on her hip, arm wrapped around Aisha's neck, as Aisha pushes the stroller.

Aisha lingers at a seafood stall. She points at a fat branzino fish.

AISHA  
The receipt please. Yes. Thank you.

Another stall. Aisha receives a loaf of bread, adds it to her brimming stroller. She holds Chloe with her other arm.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Receipt. Yes. Thanks.

A bouquet of roses floats from a seller's hand to Aisha's.

She adds them to the stroller.

The seller gives her a receipt without her asking.

Her arms are brimming now. She places Chloe down and crosses off a final item on a handwritten list.

SHRILL RING of a phone.

19 INT. CONDO - DAY

19

Aisha rummages for her cell.

She sees a face-time call from 'AMY' on the screen, deflating a bit as she accepts the call. Chloe, glued to her ipad, is lost in her own world.

AMY  
Hi Girls! What are you two up to?

AISHA  
We're in the middle of French lessons.

AMY  
Did Chloe finish her food?

AISHA  
Every last drop.

Off the cell phone screen Aisha extends her pinkie to Chloe who hooks her pinkie finger in Aisha's, promising to keep their culinary adventure a secret.

AMY  
Thank god. Picky doesn't even begin to describe that child's eating habits. Adam gets here sooner than expected so I'll need your help getting everything together tomorrow. Can't wait for him to meet you!

AISHA  
Looking forward.

AMY  
Give me kiss,Chloe!

Aisha holds the phone up for Amy to see her daughter pantomime a kiss. Chloe's gaze is still transfixed on her ipad.

CHLOE  
Aw wava (*au revoir*), Mommy.

AMY  
See you soon girlies.

AISHA  
See you.

Aisha cups her chin, momentarily lost elsewhere. Chloe mirrors her body language. Aisha forces a smile, putting a thread of Chloe's hair behind her ear.

20 INT. CONDO - GUEST BATHROOM - DAY

20

Aisha stands over Chloe as she washes her hands.

CHLOE  
My booty burns.

AISHA  
No more African food for you.

CHLOE  
But I like it!

Chloe sleepily rubs her eyes.

AISHA  
Wash your hands properly.

Aisha is momentarily distracted by a flickering sconce.

A droplet of water falls on her face. She looks up to see...

A SMALL WATER STAIN in the ceiling of the immaculate bathroom.

She fixates on the stain until--

CHLOE  
What's wrong?

Aisha looks at Chloe, then back at the water stain.

AISHA  
*Rien. Nothing, mon amour.*

21 INT. CONDO - EVENING

21

Aisha wipes off kitchen counters. She glances at a clock. The minute hand ticks. 7pm. Her phone is painfully silent.

She flips through her work binder to a blank page, scribbling the date and her hours 8am-7pm.

The sound of KEYS JANGLING grants a reprieve. Amy barrels into the apartment.

AMY

Sorry I'm late! Things got crazy.

As bubbly as Aisha can muster--

AISHA

It's ok. Chloe is in bed.

AMY

Everything was smooth. No tantrums?

AISHA

None at all.

AMY

You kept all the receipts?

Aisha flips to a nook in the binder with carefully paper-clipped receipts.

AMY (CONT'D)

You are amazing.

Reciprocal smiles. Aisha gathers her belongings.

AMY (CONT'D)

One more thing. Sorry for the last minute request but can you do an overnight tomorrow? Things will probably go late. We agreed on 100 for overnights right?

Aisha hesitates.

AISHA

150.

AMY

Yes. 150.

22 INT. 19 STORY DOORMAN BUILDING - ELEVATOR - EVENING 22

Aisha stares at her reflection in the mirrored elevator doors as she descends. She wipes sleep from her eyes.

23 INT. 19 STORY DOORMAN BUILDING - LOBBY - EVENING 23

POV SECURITY MONITORS: Aisha's pixelated black and white image exits the elevator.

CUT TO:

Her eyes search for Malik, but all she sees is an empty chair at the doorman's post--swiveling slowly as though moved by some phantom body.

She explodes into the bustling city air, exhaling for what feels like the first time all day.

KOFI (O.S.)  
Mamma is in the computer.

24 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - AISHA'S ROOM - NIGHT 24

*Laughter emanates from a phone--*

MARIATOU (O.S.)  
Noooo Kofi!

KOFI (O.S.)  
She in America. Hi Mommy! Sing AYO  
NENE.

Aisha, sprawled on her bed stares at a pre-recorded video of her son. She loops it back. We see phone imagery--faces that accompany the voices.

Kofi's bright face dances on the phone screen.

KOFI (CONT'D)  
Mamma is in the computer.

MARIATOU  
Nooo Kofi!

KOFI  
She in America. Hi Mommy! Sing AYO  
NENE.

As though responding to Kofi in the flesh, Aisha sleepily sings a lullaby, AYO NENE--rocking herself to sleep.

AISHA  
 (tribal language)  
*Oh my baby, my little baby, who can  
 calm you down? Oh my baby, my  
 little baby who can calm you down  
 and bring you to Saloum--*

Just outside her door, Aisha hears movement. She pops her head out.

25 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS 25

AUNTY SARAH [55], dressed in nurse scrubs, wearily shuffles out of the apartment. A ragged breath escapes her as though steeling herself for the long shift ahead.

AISHA  
 Do you need anything, Aunty?

AUNTY SARAH  
 Toilet tissue. We're almost out.  
 (remembering)  
 How was it?

AISHA  
 They seem nice.

AUNTY SARAH  
 Work hard to keep it. Jobs like  
 that aren't falling from the sky.

AISHA  
 Good night...

But she's already out the door.

26 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - AISHA'S ROOM - NIGHT 26

Aisha's heavy lids finally close. Phone in hand. We zoom into the looping recorded imagery of Kofi until the individual pixels hold the screen hostage.

27 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - BATHROOM - DAY 27

Wet feet step out of the shower.

A hand wipes steam off of a mirror.

Aisha stares at her reflection, a towel wrapped around her damp body.

Invasive whispers of a woman calling her name forces her to turn towards the bathroom door, away from the mirror.

AISHA

Aunty?

Her reflection in the mirror--its back still to us--stands eerily still in spite of Aisha turning to face herself. Her eyes widen...a twinge of dread plucking at her belly. Her reflection lingers backwards, beads of water forming on its moist shoulders.

Aisha retreats as the mirror figure slowly turns to face her, its nebulous features coming into view.

Aisha readies a scream...

28 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - AISHA'S ROOM - DAY 28

...that never comes. She breathlessly darts awake. Panting. Remembering the nightmare.

29 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - BATHROOM - DAY 29

Aisha wipes the fogged mirror. She studies her reflection. Turns away and back, as though trying to catch her image in rebellion.

She laughs at herself. *It was just a nightmare after all.*

30 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - AISHA'S ROOM - DAY 30

ANGLE ON a duffel bag: A pair of clothes. Panties. Shoes wrapped in an old grocery bag.

Aisha eyes her favorite pillow. Brings it with her.

She grabs a framed image of Kofi, sliding the photo from glass and tucking it into her bag before leaving.

31 INT. 19 STORY DOORMAN BUILDING - LOBBY - DAY 31

Aisha passes Malik, offering him a good morning wave as he signs in a VISITOR.

MALIK

No one told me we were having a sleepover!

Aisha, eyes twinkling in response, slips through elevator doors just before they close.

AMY (VO)  
Caterers will be there around 5...

32 INT. CONDO - VARIOUS ROOMS - EARLY EVENING

32

--Aisha opens the door for CATERERS.

--Aisha helps lay out platters of food. She glances at her phone.

AMY (V.O.)  
...Make sure Chloe is dressed. She knows what she wants to wear...I just want everything as close to perfect as possible for him.

--Chloe twirls in front of a mirror in a sparkly tutu and pink cowboy boots.

--Aisha guides a PREGNANT LATINA CLEANER to the bathroom.

--Aisha runs through the house with Chloe on her back. Chloe laughs, clinging to Aisha for dear life.

33 INT. CONDO - CHLOE'S ROOM - EVENING

33

Aisha playfully dumps Chloe in her bed and the two sprawl on their backs alongside each other, gleefully exhausted.

A KNOCK.

Aisha props herself up as Amy enters. Amy's steely expression expands into a warm smile too quickly.

AMY  
You two are having fun.

Aisha squeezes Chloe's arm, whispers in her ear.

AISHA  
Go to Mommy.

A twitch in Amy's saccharine smile as Chloe flops back on the bed passive aggressively.

CHLOE  
I'm tired.

Aisha stands, making room for Amy to sit beside her daughter. As Amy swaps with Aisha she gently squeezes Aisha's hand.

AMY  
Don't go far.

Aisha leaves the two, catching a fleeting moment of Amy clinically smelling strands of Chloe's hair...

CUT TO:

The Pregnant Latina, dangerously pregnant to be engaging in physical labor, vacuums an opulent rug.

Our gaze lingers on her a beat too long. She looks up, locking eyes with Aisha.

Aisha smiles. Looks away. Shame blooms under her skin--caught in the act of pity, or projection...

34 INT. CONDO - MASTER BEDROOM - EVENING

34

Aisha, settled in a loveseat, tries not to look directly at Amy's half naked reflection in a mirror.

Her eyes flick across the room, resting on various curated portraits of the *All American Family*: Amy, Adam and Chloe--poised like artfully designed photos you'd see in a TIME magazine spread...

AMY  
...it's my fault. I should have told you. There's always so much going on at work now. My brain is in a million different places...

Amy balances a glass of red wine in one hand as she slides her naked body into a dress in a

WALK IN CLOSET OFFSHOOT.

Amy is like a moth. Frantic. Evanescence. Perpetually in multiple places at once.

AMY (CONT'D)  
No worries. I have the perfect dress.

Amy explodes from her closet. Poised. Manicured.

She presses a dress against Aisha's frame.

AMY (CONT'D)  
I swear red was made for your skin.  
Mahogany red, Imperial red, Wine  
red, the whole family. Speaking of  
wine--

Amy knocks back what's left in her glass.

35 INT. CONDO - GUEST BATHROOM - NIGHT

35

Washcloth drenched in running water.

Aisha hits her hot spots with the damp washcloth, giving  
herself a *whore's bath*: armpits, neck, between her legs.

Aisha turns to face the blood red dress hanging on the  
bathroom door, its extravagance beckoning Aisha.

She slides into it.

In spite of her ambivalence, Aisha can't deny she looks  
stunning. She eyes her form in the mirror, snapping a selfie  
to capture the moment.

Something moves in her periphery. She looks up. The water  
stain is more formidable now: expanded into a weblike  
fissure.

36 INT. CONDO - MASTER BEDROOM

36

Amy zips Aisha into the dress with finality. It clings to her  
every curve for dear life--a complimentary second skin.

Amy places her hands on Aisha's hips to turn her around.

AMY  
I could never...

AISHA  
A little tight.

AMY  
Isn't that the point?

Amy kisses Aisha on both cheeks and grants her a wink as she  
floats by.

The RISING MURMUR of a dinner party well underway SWELLS TO A  
CRESCENDO.

37

INT. CONDO - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

37

Shrouded in the shadows, lingering in the space where the living room meets the hallway, Aisha takes in the gathering.

FOUR HANDSOME COUPLES in their late 30's, early 40's.

Aisha hones in on the sole *Black* body in the white space: a pretty CARAMEL SKINNED AMERICAN WOMAN framed by a nest of natural hair.

The Woman's ease and grace is palpable. She throws her head back in laughter.

Then Amy, a little too drunk a little too soon. Aisha catches slivers of their conversation.

AMY

...When are we getting another book out of you?!

BLACK WOMAN

Oh honey, stay tuned. The apocalypse is not exactly a salve for my writer's block...

Aisha studies the carefree Black woman who catches her staring and grants her a genuine smile. Aisha smiles back.

Chloe emerges from the shadows. She wraps her arms around Aisha's legs, stubbornly fighting sleep.

Aisha scoops Chloe up. Chloe presses her head against Aisha's warm chest, inhaling her scent.

38

INT. CONDO - KITCHEN - NIGHT

38

Aisha watches Chloe sneakily drink a cup of juice bigger than her head as the gathering buzzes around her.

AMY

Lights off!

Chloe perks up, searching for Aisha in the revelry.

CHLOE

Daddy's here!

The gathering collapses in a hush. Lights expire descending everyone into darkness.

A sliver of light cuts into the room as Amy slides out.

MUFFLED VOICES behind the door. A sharp conversation discernible in pieces.

Aisha hears her own breath.

MAN  
...No. Don't...

AMY  
Seriously?

MAN  
Are you drunk?

AMY  
Drunk is relative...

MAN  
Give me a sec...  
(beat)  
Can I at least wash my fucking  
hands first? Go inside  
please...Stop.

The door OPENS and SLAMS.

A festoon of light. Everyone instinctively yells-

EVERYONE  
SURPRISE!

But it's just Amy. Alone.

She strolls to a nearby table and refills her empty wine glass. Moments behind her...

ADAM [37]. Rugged. Weary. A bundle of repressed emotion comforted by a mask of logic.

Genuine surprise drains his face as he drops his bags, taking in the small crowd.

AMY  
Surprise.

CHLOE  
Daddy!

Chloe leaps from Aisha's arms, sprinting to her father. The room buzzes with renewed vigor. He immediately wears a mask of civility belying an impatience reserved for Amy.

Adam embraces familiar faces, making the rounds. He was missed.

Adam hoists Chloe in his arms, whispering in her ear. Chloe giggles as he places her down. He reveals a thin hardcover book brought back from his travels--hands it to Chloe. She clutches it tightly.

Adam notices Aisha just before a CHUBBY GUY tackles him in a bear hug. Amy looks on with a scowl as Adam effortlessly charms the room.

39 INT. CONDO - CHLOE'S ROOM - NIGHT

39

Chloe is fast asleep, clinging to Aisha like a koala. Aisha sits on the edge of her bed, painstakingly peeling the girl off her body without waking her.

She still clutches the book Adam gave her: Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti by Gerald McDermott.

Aisha plucks the book from Chloe's hand. She studies it, flipping through its pages.

A CORNER OF CHLOE'S ROOM...

A SHELF OF TEEMING WITH CHILDREN'S BOOKS FROM AROUND THE WORLD. Aisha's fingers scan the books. She wedges Chloe's new book in between books.

Nearby her eye catches an ever so slight movement. Something mechanical hiding between stuffed animals.

She walks closer to see a NANNY CAM.

The head swivels as she moves, tracking her. Aisha bristles at the discovery.

40 INT. CONDO - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

40

Adam balances Amy on his lap. She's DRUNK drunk and he's jet-lagged but catching his second wind.

The star couple regales a CIRCLE OF FRIENDS, all engaged in rapt attention as they dance through the quagmire of various levels of intoxication.

CHUBBY GUY

How long are we graced with your presence this time?

ADAM

A while.

FRIEND 1  
So your wife can finally give mine  
back.

AMY  
She likes me better.

FRIEND 1  
Sold to the highest bidder!

Laughter. Knowing glances. Friend 1's wife is the Black American woman Aisha admired before...

BLACK WOMAN  
Money can't buy love, darling. If  
it did I'd still be on the shelf.

Amy leans into Adam. Wet lips graze his ear.

AMY  
Did it buy yours yet?

Adam dodges Amy's wine kiss, granting her a paternal peck on the forehead.

CHUBBY GUY  
How you feeling about this trip?

ADAM  
What's stunning is that worldwide people are protesting the same things. The goal is to bring the brutality of those people's experiences back in a way that even the most hardened people can--

CHUBBY GUY  
Ok save the PC bullshit. How does burning shit down and looting stores help their cause? This is not a rhetorical question.

A nudge from the Chubby Guy's wife abbreviates his commentary.

AMY  
Can we focus on the peaceful protestors though, like what they're fighting for? They are people who matter, not theoretical talking points.

BLACK WOMAN

Peaceful protest or not. If  
property damage dilutes the message  
then you didn't want to hear the  
message in the first place--

As the group erupts into a heated debate, Adam's gaze lands on Aisha--still salient in spite of her outfit change. She watches HOUSEKEEPERS pack up leftover food escaping the condo, returning to their lives.

Adam nudges Amy who looks over at Aisha. The two engage in a tension laced conversation. Pregnant looks in Aisha's direction. The more lucid of the two: Adam finally stands decisively.

Aisha watches as he approaches.

ADAM

Whatever she said about me is a  
lie. Rude of her not to formally  
introduce us but she's been gushing  
about you. Adam.

AISHA

Nice to finally meet you.

ADAM

Loud in here. Do you mind? Amy  
wanted me to talk to you about  
something.

Aisha glances at Amy, drowning in a drunken diatribe--her friends her rapt audience. Aisha allows Adam's hand to linger on her shoulder, ever so delicately, as he guides her to...

41

INT. ADAM'S OFFICE - NIGHT

41

Aisha enters reverently, eager to see this space.

Walls are littered with award winning photojournalistic imagery...MAIMED children...PIERCING eyes...MEN darting away from fire...GIRLS covered in burkas, their backs cagily turned to the camera.

Aisha revisits the PHOTOGRAPH of the WAILING AFRICAN WOMAN slumped on her knees, allows her curious gaze to finally return to Adam.

As Adam rifles through his wallet, Aisha watches the bills flit between his fingers. She silently counts with him.

Satisfied, he hands her the small stack of cash, along with a metro card.

ADAM

Tonight's pay in advance. Amy should be keeping track.

AISHA

Thank you.

ADAM

Je parle français aussi.

Aisha suppresses a giggle. Adam's pronunciation is ugly. He smiles, able to poke fun at himself.

ADAM (CONT'D)

Go ahead, laugh. I'm well aware I suck--was just in Lille, France documenting anti racist protests.

Aisha's attention drifts as a photo beckons to Aisha, pulling her by some invisible thread...FLAMES dance behind a BLACK TEENAGER.

ADAM (CONT'D)

We have George Floyd, they have Adama Traoré. Malian-French man. 24 years old...

A building on fire casts an ominous glow on the Black teen's face. His arms are outstretched, God like. He's elevated on a structure--half his face shrouded in a surgical mask. Protestors gaze up at him.

Adam shares Aisha's fixation.

ADAM (CONT'D)

No pun intended but that kid had a rare fire in him. Malcolm X-like. Protestors hung on his every word.  
(beat)  
He's dead now.

Unnerved by his matter of factness.

AISHA

What happened?

Adam shakes his head. The weight of seeing too much heavy on his shoulders.

ADAM

They said it was gang related...

Aisha returns to the image. Struck by its poignancy. Struck that the boy's extinguished life is now immortalized by the confines of the photograph.

ADAM (CONT'D)

(laughing)

What kind of person does this for a living, right--freeze frames despair.

They lock eyes long enough for Aisha to turn away. A momentary barely detectable break in the air.

AISHA

Is it ok if I--

ADAM

Oh yeah. Please feel free to go to bed. Wish I could. That's really what we wanted to tell you...Sleep tight.

AISHA

Thank you.

Aisha, well versed in granting smiles that never quite reach her eyes, slides past Adam...

42

INT. CONDO - GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

42

THREE MISSED CALLS. Aisha's finger flicks through her phone's call history:

MARIATOU.

MARIATOU.

MARIATOU.

Aisha listens to a voicemail from Kofi.

KOFI (O.S.)

I just called to say goodnight mama. Love you.

It's late in New York but even later in Senegal. Aisha takes a chance, pressing the ringing phone to her ear, silently wishing for contact.

The phone rings, endlessly. Aisha gives up.

She unpacks her overnight bag, sliding Kofi's photograph into the groove of a dresser mirror.

CUT TO:

Light sleep finally takes its rightful place. Aisha's chest rises and falls in the darkness--a momentary respite.

An other worldly GUTTURAL GROAN resonates, growing louder...

Aisha opens her eyes. She darts up.

PITTER PATTER--the scurrying of feet echo just outside her door.

AISHA  
(whispering)  
Chloe?

Clammy silence.

She pulls her covers to her chest, creating a thin wall. Heart rate rising. She stares at the door, honing in on the knob...

Scrambling for her cell phone, Aisha activates the flashlight, pointing it at the door.

Just as she's about to turn the flashlight off, the knob turns--ever so slowly.

Aisha sinks into her bed throwing her covers over her head.

She pants for some time under the sheets, struggling to make sense of what she's seeing and hearing.

FEET PAD deeper into the room, settling just inches from her.

Steeling herself, she wrenches the sheets off her head--

WATER CASCADES into her room as an INHUMAN MOAN rises to a piercing crescendo.

Aisha darts out of bed, remembering...She takes inventory of her room.

Water PLOPS on the smooth wood of the bare dresser. Three more droplets fall in quick succession.

Kofi's photograph is surprisingly unfazed as water drips around it. Aisha looks up.

The water stain from the Guest Bathroom infiltrates the guest room, yawning outwards into an intricate wet web.

She places a nearby towel under the sporadic drip and places Kofi's picture in her bag, out of harm's way.

Glancing at her phone, Aisha hustles to get herself together.

44 INT. CHLOE'S ROOM - MORNING

44

Adult fingers button a toddler's shirt. Chloe hums quietly as Aisha dresses her. Aisha recognizes the tune of the familiar native lullaby emanating from Chloe.

Puerile humming stops abruptly. Chloe studies Aisha's doleful, distant eyes. She presses her small hand against Aisha's cheek, letting it linger.

Aisha pauses, studying Chloe.

AISHA

How do you know that song?

CHLOE

What song?

Aisha shakes it off. Continuing to dress Chloe.

CHLOE (CONT'D)

Are you going to leave me?

AISHA

No. *Mon amour.*

Chloe hugs her suddenly, desperately, toddler arms wrapped tightly around Aisha's neck. Holding onto her for dear life.

45 EXT. CONDO ELEVATOR - DAY

45

Eyeing the numbers as they descend, Aisha musters everything in her body to stay awake.

46 INT. 19 STORY DOORMAN BUILDING - LOBBY - DAY

46

As Aisha steps off the elevator she catches the reflection of a BLACK BOY darting past in her periphery.

Eerie echoes of his giggles bounce of corridor walls. She follows the sound...

As she rounds a corner she sees the boy standing eerily still at the end of a long hallway. He stares right at her.

The boy looks faintly like Kofi.

She walks towards him, puzzled but mesmerized...

Malik appears from no where, breaking her trance. He scoops the rambunctious boy in his arms--his son--BISHOP [6].

Unwitting to Aisha, the boy's SHADOW slinks away on all fours, its movements unnatural, spider-like...

MALIK

What I tell you about running around, knucklehead? We almost out. I need you to sit still so I'm not unemployed like you.

Malik studies Aisha.

MALIK (CONT'D)

You ok? Look like you saw a ghost.

Aisha laughs it off.

AISHA

How old are you, handsome?

The boy looks at Aisha annoyed.

MALIK

Bishop is 6 going on 25.

AISHA

They let you bring him?

MALIK

(laughing)

Let me? Shit happens. I brought him.

Bishop wriggles aggressively out of Malik's slippery grasp.

BISHOP

My daddy has a crush on you!

Malik laughs awkwardly.

MALIK

This guy...

Aisha searches Malik's face for confirmation.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
I mean. He ain't lying.

Aisha sees her uber in her periphery.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
You think I could...see you  
outside of here.

Aisha studies Malik's hands noting the absence of a ring.

AISHA  
I think you could.

Malik's phone is out and ready to go. Aisha punches her number into his phone. Waves as she darts off.

MALIK  
Get some sleep, beautiful--for the  
both of us.

Malik watches Aisha until his son play punches him in the stomach. He crumples to the ground dramatically, pretending to collapse in pain as Bishop giggles over him.

47 EXT. MOVING CAR - DAY

47

Aisha stares out at the passing city from the back seat. New York: perpetually teeming with life. Passing bodies dance on the car's windows.

She closes her eyes.

48 INT. AISHA'S ROOM - DAY

48

Kofi's corner. Aisha takes visual inventory of artifacts: photos, toys, books, etc. Something catches her eye--

ANOTHER FRAMED PHOTO OF KOFI. Aisha studies it. A small water stain lingers near his head, it's circumference threatening to distort his face.

She instinctively looks up, searching for the water stain's source, but finds none...

49 INT. WESTERN UNION - DAY

49

LONG intricately designed NAILS click clack with every bill flitting through deft fingers.'NIKKI, THE TELLER'[30's] counts out two hundred dollars in twenties.

Aisha watches her behind murky glass, counting silently with her.

NIKKI  
Dakar, Senegal.

AISHA  
Yes. When will they get it?

NIKKI  
Two business days. Cool?

AISHA  
Yes. Thanks Nikki.

NIKKI  
How's your little chocolate drop?

AISHA  
He's coming to America, finally! I want him to celebrate his birthday with me.

NIKKI  
Oh shit?! You got his ticket and everything?!

AISHA  
Not yet. I almost have enough.

NIKKI  
He comin to live or just visit?

AISHA  
To live, thank God.

NIKKI  
Word. African boy comin' to the big apple! He gonna fit right in.

AISHA  
How's Nigel?

NIKKI  
A raggedy mess. I told him if I gotta come up to that school one more time those teachers gonna have to start a gofundme for his casket.

The women laugh warmly, temporarily in the presence of one another--peripheral mothers forever in the background of privileged mother's highlight reels.

SOMEONE IN LINE coughs loudly.

NIKKI (CONT'D)  
 AIGHT YALL AINT GOT NO JOB TO GO  
 TO! RELAX! You all set Aisha. Kiss  
 those cheeks for me.

50 EXT. GRAND CENTRAL PARK -DAY 50

The United Nations of Nanny-dom overtake the park as BROWN AND BLACK CAREGIVERS tend to white and racially ambiguous CHILDREN of varying ages.

LATINA NANNIES populate one corner of the park speaking Spanish.

WEST INDIAN WOMEN chattering in English on park benches keep their charges in their eye-lines.

FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICAN and HAITIAN WOMEN stick together bonded by their French tinged english.

Aisha, phone pressed to her ear, watches Chloe bossily guide a new friend up a ladder.

MARIATOU (O.S.)  
 Hi, how are you?

AISHA  
 Mari, how are you--

MARIATOU (O.S.)  
 Ha just kidding! You've reached  
 Mariatou. Leave a message after the-

BEEEEEEEEEPP.

AISHA  
 What kind of voicemail message is  
 that, Mari? Tell Kofi I called.

CYNTHIA and FLORENCE [50's], JAMAICAN NANNIES, one heavyset, one thin, both soul deep weary and wise, settle beside Aisha with their CHARGES.

They nod warmly at Aisha, scrutinizing her intensely but innocently as older Caribbean women are wont to do.

CYNTHIA  
 Hello.

FLORENCE

Hello.

AISHA  
 Hi.

CYNTHIA

Cynthia.

FLORENCE

Florence. And you are?

AISHA

Aisha.

Cynthia furiously wipes snot from the nose of an OVERWEIGHT RED HEADED BOY [5] shoveling a cinnabun into his mouth.

He stares at Aisha with an unnerving focus as Cynthia jerks his head back and forth.

RED HEADED BOY

Shit, Cynthia!

Florence gasps.

CYNTHIA

You watch your mouth, David!

She pushes him towards the park, smacking his behind.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

Go on and play now! You can use the exercise.

(to Florence)

No manners. Parents too busy letting him eat junk. I try to cook real food but everything too spicy. Curry too spicy. Salt too spicy. Air too spicy...

FLORENCE

Why you let that boy call you by your first name?!

Cynthia shakes her head, defeated.

FLORENCE (CONT'D)

Well, my baby Elizabeth: she know better.

CYNTHIA

She not gonna know a thing once she keel over dead!

ELIZABETH [6], a half korean/half white cherub carefully scoops dirt in an unseasonably thin t-shirt.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

You better put a real coat on dear Lizzie. Police will lock you up quick fast if you make them people children sick. You know them quick to say "abuse..."

Florence drops to a whisper.

FLORENCE

Too soon, Cynthia. Remember that Dominican nanny, Arlenis.

Cynthia's eyes go big. She shakes her head, clucking in dismay.

CYNTHIA

(to Aisha)

You heard about Arlenis?

Aisha shakes her head no.

FLORENCE

Had a breakdown. Her employers fired everybody else: cleaners, night nanny, kept her but worked her to the bone and wouldn't pay what they owed...then her daughter got ill back home.

CYNTHIA

(tapping her temple)

Arlenis was sick. The kind you can't see...

Cynthia and Florence's voices fade into an inaudible babble as Aisha's gaze locks on something in the distance.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

...slit her employers' child throat from ear to ear...

Aisha stands--propelled towards some unseen object. Aisha approaches slowly. gingerly. Her eyes glossy with dead focus.

We finally see what captivates her...A BOY singing a familiar tune: his back to us.

BOY

*Oh my baby, my little baby, who can calm you down? Oh my baby, my little baby who can calm you down and bring you to Saloum...*

Aisha approaches the child.

Inching closer.

She crouches behind the boy.

He turns to her slowly.

*Is it Kofi?*

She reaches out for the boy.

AISHA  
Kofi?

A WOMAN'S SCREAM penetrates the air. Car's SCREECH.

WOMAN (O.S.)  
OH MY GOD!

Horns BLARE DEAFENINGLY LOUD.

Aisha darts up.

Her eyes search for the source of the chaos, landing on...

...A NANNY cradling Chloe, consoling her. Chloe's beet red face is contorted in a wail of despair.

Aisha turns back to the boy.

He's gone.

Lucid, she takes in the DISAPPROVING GLARES OF NANNIES throughout the park enveloping her like an inescapable wall.

The FILIPINA NANNY holding Chloe stomps up to Aisha, handing the red faced child to her.

FILLIPINA NANNY  
You better pay attention. Someone  
will report you. How could you let  
her get out of the park?!

Aisha grips Chloe's hand, maybe too tightly, as the little girl wipes fresh tears from her eyes.

AISHA  
Thank you.

Aisha scoops Chloe in her arms, making her way out of the park, escorted by the heavy weight of judgement.

51 INT. ICE CREAM SHOP - DAY

51

Chloe, tears dried, watches intently as a massive scoop of strawberry ice-cream is scooped onto a cone. Aisha stops the PIMPLE FACED TEEN behind the counter.

AISHA  
Is that gluten free?

The teen points to a huge sign that reads:

ALL OUR FLAVORS ARE GLUTEN FREE AND DAIRY FREE SO YOU CAN BE!

52 EXT. ICE CREAM SHOP - DAY

52

Aisha keeps Chloe close, watching her happily lick ice cream. She's a giddy ball of energy, the innocence of puerile amnesia seems to wash away the previous incident...

AISHA  
Chloe, why did you leave the park?

Chloe extends the ice cream to Aisha. Aisha shakes her head no.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Chloe...

A shadow suddenly falls over Chloe. She throws her ice-cream on the ground shrieking at the top of her lungs.

CHLOE  
I wanna go home! I wanna go home!  
Take me home!

53 INT. CHLOE'S ROOM - EVENING

53

Chloe's book shelf. Chloe's small finger scans the books, finally landing on a selection. She pulls the book from the shelf.

CUT TO:

A fabric fort illuminated by a flashlight. Two figures inside: Aisha and Chloe. The silhouette of Aisha's hand, formed into a makeshift shadow spider, dances on the tent walls, growing ominously.

Chloe fights sleep--hanging on Aisha's every word as she reads from Chloe's selected book: Anansi The Spider by Gerald McDermott.

AISHA

"Hold on son, for if you fall Death is going to get you," Anansi the spider said to his child. However, the boy could not hold on any longer. Therefore, he fell."

Chloe gasps. Aisha's makeshift spider hand climbs up Chloe's arm. Chloe bristles.

CHLOE

Anansi's son died?!

AISHA

Death caught the boy and opened the burlap bag. "It is your father I want... not you." Then he placed the child into the burlap bag. Another of Anansi's daughters cried out to her father. "Puppa, please...my hands are tired. I am going to fall..."

CHLOE

Is Anansi bad, Aisha?

Aisha thinks, flipping through the pages.

AISHA

Do you know the word *filou*?

CHLOE

Fee. Loo.

AISHA

Trickster.

CHLOE

Trickster.

Making a small circle with her thumb and pointer finger.

AISHA

Anansi is this big.

Chloe mimics Aisha with her small fingers.

AISHA (CONT'D)

And most of the people who bother Anansi are as big as me, so he uses his intelligence, sometimes good sometimes bad, to survive. He is a survivor. *Survivant*

CHLOE  
SYUR. VEE. VANT. Survivor.

AISHA  
Are you ready to tell me why you  
left the park, Chloe?

Chloe's lids are heavy. She rubs her eyes.

CHLOE  
Anansi told me to.

At this, Chloe unceremoniously curls into a ball, falling asleep in the warm fort. Aisha watches her chest rise and fall.

54 INT. CONDO - GUEST ROOM - EVENING

54

ANGLE ON THE WORK BINDER; Aisha jots down her hours for the day.

She sits cross legged at the foot of the guest room bed.

A NOLLYWOOD FILM blares in the background.

ON SCREEN: a man painted in white howls over the deceased body of a loved one. He wails maniacally--overacting as a cheaply costumed witch creeps up behind him.

Aisha glances at her phone: 9:30PM, then up at the water stain from the guest bathroom infiltrating the guest room.

KEYS JANGLE in the distance. Aisha darts up, methodically gathering her belongings.

She snakes through the darkness towards the  
MAIN ENTRANCE.

Stands still as she watches Amy's dark figure stumble into the condo.

Something CLANGS loudly hitting the floor.

AMY  
Fuck.

AISHA  
Amy.

AMY

Homygawd! Aisha?! You scared the shit out of me. How long have you been standing there?

AISHA

Not long.

AMY

Why are you still here? I told Adam to let you leave. Where is he?

At this, Aisha flicks the lights on, cocooning the Women in brightness.

AISHA

I don't know where he is? I haven't seen him today.

Amy is visibly drunk. She grants Aisha a lipstick smeared smile as she fumbles with her purse. She pulls out a wad of cash, gripping it tightly.

AMY

It's so hard when you're the Woman overseeing everything: expected to get drinks with the guys every Friday to prove I'm one of them but...we'll never be one of them. It's a boy's club. A serious fucking boy's club--And when you're a Mom on top of that...

Amy creeps closer to Aisha. Aisha smells wine on her breath...

AMY (CONT'D)

Guess who got a promotion?!

Amy jumps up and down, giddy. She dances around Aisha to music only she can hear, intertwining her fingers in Aisha's as she forces her to sway with her in celebration.

Aisha let's her use her body as a prop until she doesn't, gently pulling away. Amy won't let her go, embracing Aisha tightly. Aisha's hands hang limply at her sides.

The hug lingers, uncomfortably long. Aisha rips away.

AISHA

Enough!

AMY  
(whispering)  
Aren't you happy for me?

AISHA  
I need a set schedule. I need you  
to stick to the times you tell me.

Amy's face contorts. Her lip quivers. Weaponized tears stream down her face.

AMY  
I'm sorry. I...I mean this with all  
my heart: you're like family to us  
now, Aisha. Chloe loves you so  
much...we'll work out a clear  
schedule. Promise.

AISHA  
Ok...

Amy follows Aisha as she makes her way to the door. She presses the balled up bills in Aisha's hand.

AMY  
Do me a favor...Watch Adam for me.

AISHA  
(stern)  
Goodnight, Amy.

55 INT. MOVING ELEVATOR - NIGHT

55

Aisha presses out the crumpled bills, sixty dollars. She scoffs, shaking her head at the gall of this woman.

Aisha studies her fractured reflection in the descending elevator.

56 EXT. NYC TRAIN STATION - NIGHT

56

As Aisha makes her way into the train station, she recognizes Malik a few steps ahead. She watches him as she joins the herd of people descending into the train station.

57 INT. TRAIN PLATFORM - CONTINUOUS

57

She swipes her card, just behind Malik. They're going in the same direction. Taking the same train. The kind of NYC coincidence that makes perfect sense.

Tired commuters fill up sparse platform seats. Most are forced to stand.

Aisha watches Malik, debating. He nods to the music in his headphones. She decides against breaking her voyeuristic perch, staring ahead...

Then, a touch on her shoulder. She turns to see Malik--that Colgate smile.

MALIK

Aisha. You following me?

AISHA

You wish.

MALIK

Naw you gotta take a number. I got too many stalkers.

Aisha smiles in spite of her exhaustion.

AISHA

Where do you get off?

MALIK

That depends on where you get off...Sorry. Lemme not be a creep. 116th. You?

AISHA

Same.

Malik holds his hand up for a fist bump. Aisha grants him one. As if on cue, a train flies towards the platform. Onlookers brace themselves to secure a seat.

58

INT. MOVING TRAIN - NIGHT

58

Aisha trails Malik as he darts towards an open seat in the bustle. He uses his body to create a barrier that allows her to slide into the empty seat. She looks up at him. He stands over her, protective.

AISHA

There's space.

MALIK

Naw you got it.

His body sways as the train pulls off.

MALIK (CONT'D)

You gonna tell me where you're from  
or you think I'm a dumb American  
who thinks Africa is one big ass  
country?

AISHA

It starts with an S.

MALIK

(singing *Frank Ocean song*)  
Blood diamonds. Sieeerrrraaaa  
Leoooone.

Aisha shakes her head no.

MALIK (CONT'D)

South Africa?

Wrong again.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Senegal!

Aisha's face lights up. She grants Malik an affirmative smile.

AISHA

Have you been to Africa?

MALIK

Does Harlem count?

Aisha laughs.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Trying to make my way over there.  
Got a couple of homies dipping to  
Ghana as soon as the world opens up  
again.

A space opens up next to Aisha. Malik immediately settles beside her--their legs pressed together on the cramped train.

MALIK (CONT'D)

So lemme ask you this but you gotta  
tell the truth: who has the best  
jollof rice, cuz let Nigerians tell  
it...

AISHA

Let Nigerians tell it, they have  
the best of everything. What do you  
know about jollof rice?!

MALIK  
(licking his lips)  
What don't I know about jollof  
rice, baby?!

59 EXT. 116TH TRAIN STATION - HARLEM - NIGHT

59

TIRED PASSENGERS file into the night air. Malik strolls alongside Aisha.

Aisha stops him.

AISHA  
You don't have to.

MALIK  
You sure? It's late.

AISHA  
I come home late all the time.

MALIK  
Copy that.

Malik lingers behind her.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
Don't be dreaming about me!

Aisha laughs to herself as she drifts towards home.

60 INT./EXT. AFRICAN HAIR BRAIDING SALON - DAY

60

Aisha peers through the glass of the salon, phone pressed to her ear.

MARIATOU (O.S.)  
Hi, how are you?

AISHA  
Mari--

MARIATOU (O.S.)  
Ha just kidding! You've reached  
Mariatou. Leave a message after the-

BEEEEEEEEEPP.

AISHA  
Mari, please change this voicemail.  
I beg you.

Sally unlocks the door, greeting Aisha warmly with a kiss on the cheek. In spite of her tired, sunken eyes, she ekes out joy in the presence of her friend.

She wears a t-shirt tucked into a *lappa*. As Aisha follows her into the shop we see a SLEEPING BABY tied to Sallay's back, anchored tightly by another *lappa*.

CUT TO:

OVERMODULATED SOUND of a Nollywood movie drones in the background. Exaggerated Nigerian dialects ebb and flow.

Sallay returns to her customer, an ANNOYED AMERICAN GIRL getting individual braids.

Aisha settles into a salon chair.

The American girl scrolls through her phone. She has a small tuft of hair left to be braided, which she touches hopefully.

Every time we think the tuft is finally too small to part, Sallay parts another smaller tuft to braid.

*Sallay and Aisha speak in their native language, sprinkled with English.*

SALLAY

*I was like, this girl forgot about me. No call, no text, no visit...*

AISHA

*They own me, Sallay. I have no life.*

SALLAY

*I just did an overnight. This is my only customer today then I'm going to sleep! Work until you die. The American dream, right?*

AISHA

*Speaking of American dream, I'm so close to being able to buy Kofi and Mari's tickets.*

SALLAY

*I wish I could just give it to you, Aisha.*

The girl looks up from her phone.

ANNOYED AMERICAN GIRL

Sallay, I told you about pulling on  
my edges. How many you got left?!

SALLAY

Three more. Almost done. Your man  
is gonna ask you to marry him when  
he sees you.

ANNOYED AMERICAN GIRL

I don't have a man. I have a girl.

SALLAY

Oh...

Sallay gives Aisha a "good for her?!" look. Aisha laughs.

SALLAY (CONT'D)

If only being attracted to men was  
a choice. I would choose anything  
else.

ANNOYED AMERICAN GIRL

(smirk)

It can be a choice you know.

Sallay nudges her playfully.

SALLAY

In your dreams girl.

ANNOYED AMERICAN GIRL

No cis hets allowed in these  
dreams.

SALLAY

(back to Aisha)

*These Americans and their words.  
Have you ever thought about going  
back...to live?*

AISHA

*To live where? With what job?*

SALLAY

*Maybe if you apologize to the  
family they can help you.*

AISHA

*Apologize for what?! He knew he was  
married when he started paying my  
school fees, when he gave me money  
for food, clothes, for my sick  
mother, when he slept with me.*

(MORE)

**AISHA (CONT'D)**  
*Shouldn't he apologize for getting  
teen girls pregnant?*

**SALLAY**  
*Calm down. You think I don't know  
how it is? Big men play with little  
girls and it's always the girls who  
are punished. I don't know why  
their wives brag about their  
husbands like we can't all date  
them too.*

**AISHA**  
*He doesn't care whether his own son  
lives or dies--cut me off when I  
got pregnant.*  
(beat)  
*I remember walking to the beach.  
The moon was so big. The water was  
cold at my feet...*

Aisha shakes off the memory.

**AISHA (CONT'D)**  
*I'm glad I didn't do it. This one I  
would keep. Kofi is the best thing  
that happened to me, Sallay. He is  
my greatest work.*

**SALLAY**  
*Kofi is a beautiful boy. Let them  
be corrupt and rich in their own  
country. I would rather be a slave  
in America than a slave in Africa.  
At least here when you work you see  
the money.*

**AISHA**  
*Do we?*

That mischievous smile creeps over Sallay's face.

**SALLAY**  
*You heard about your friend  
Mariatou?*

**AISHA**  
*Heard what?*

Aisha instinctively looks at her silent phone.

SALLAY

She better hurry up and come.  
People have been seeing her  
man...around, but you know leaving  
a man who cheats is like leaving a  
country because it rains.

Sallay's deft fingers reach the end of the American girl's last braid.

SALLAY (CONT'D)  
Finished sexy lady!

CUT TO:

The American girl's head is tilted back. Eyes closed. Steam rises around her as Sallay dips the ends of her long braids in scalding hot water. Each plait painstakingly immersed in wetness like a braided baptism.

61 EXT. AFRICAN HAIR BRAIDING SALON - DAY

61

SALLAY'S BABY, a gurgling bundle of fat. Aisha bounces her on her hip, cooing to her as Sallay pulls down a metal gate, closing up shop with the strength of five men.

They pass the baby between hands and hug tightly, swaying back and forth.

SALLAY

I just want you to be happy Aisha.

AISHA

I will be soon. Be safe.

The women part ways.

62 EXT. NYC - DAY

62

A series of restaurant storefronts. Aisha, in an existential daze. Chloe, salivating as they pass each one.

Chloe spots an Ethiopian restaurant, tugging Aisha in that direction.

CHLOE

It's your food! I want some.

Aisha humors Chloe, allowing her to drag her toward a menu plastered to the window.

Aisha digs a tangerine from her bag and hands it to Chloe. She shakes her head "No".

AISHA  
There's food at home.

CHLOE  
I don't want that food. I want your food.

Aisha pulls Chloe away from the window.

63 INT. CONDO - VARIOUS ROOMS - DAY

63

Aisha removes her shoes. Chloe squirms as Aisha takes her shoes off.

Aisha helps Chloe wash her hands, sudsing Chloe's small hands in hers as they sing.

AISHA <i>Tops and bottoms. Tops and bottoms. In between. In between. Scrub them all together. Scrub them all together. Now we're clean. Squeaky clean.</i>	CHLOE <i>...and bottoms. In between. In between. Scrub them all together. Scrub them all together. Now we're clean. Kweeny clean.</i>
---	--

CUT TO:

Aisha opens and peers into a sparse fridge. Sighs.

Eye's ablaze, Chloe sees something behind Aisha.

CHLOE (CONT'D)  
Daddy!

Aisha turns to see Adam smiling at them.

ADAM  
Hey piglet. You two hungry?

CHLOE  
Yes!

ADAM  
Aisha, what time are you off today?

She glances at her phone never quite knowing when she's free to leave.

AISHA  
I was going to ask...

ADAM

Let's grab a quick bite.

CHLOE

Yay!

Aisha barely has time to protest as Chloe leaps in her father's arms.

64

INT. ETHIOPIAN RESTAURANT - DAY

64

The trio sits outside of the restaurant Aisha and Chloe previously passed. A half eaten plate of *doro wat* among other Ethiopian dishes in various states of having been eaten.

Chloe claps her hands--giddy.

ADAM

I don't know what hex you put on this kid. She's the pickiest eater in the world and now she wants to Anthony Bourdain her way through Africa.

Adam and Aisha watch Chloe as she eats a spoonful of *the dense stew*.

AISHA

Bon Goût?

Chloe nods exuberantly.

ADAM

What did you do...before you came here?

AISHA

I was in school...studied English and French.

ADAM

English. You want to be a writer?

Aisha's face warms with shame.

AISHA

It was self indulgent, but I plan to go back to school here. America doesn't acknowledge African degrees. It's like I have nothing.

ADAM

You definitely have something.  
You're smart, Aisha.

He covers Chloe's ears.

ADAM (CONT'D)

I can tell you won't be with us  
long. Much as I'd love to keep you.

Letting Chloe's ears breathe, Adam offers a genuine smile. Aisha glances at the precocious girl, lost in her ipad. Her gaze returns to Adam.

He mouths to THE WAITER. "The Bill". The waiter nods, scurrying away.

AISHA

Can I ask you a question...

ADAM

Shoot.

AISHA

The hours aren't clear. Maybe Amy  
forgets, being a working mother,  
but I've started keeping track of  
overtime...

ADAM

Want me to have a talk with her? I  
won't say you brought it up.

AISHA

Sure. That would be great--

WOMAN'S VOICE

Adam is that you?!

A MODELESQUE ASIAN AMERICAN WOMAN in form fitting yoga gear approaches.

ADAM

Christie?!

Aisha looks on as Adam stands to embrace the woman, CHRISTIE [mid 30's]. Aisha notes the woman's effervescent laugh, the glide of Adam's hand intimately pressed to the woman's lower back, the kisses on both cheeks that linger dangerously close to the lips...

They talk closely, in whispers. Eyes locked on one another.

Aisha looks away, embarrassed, for what she's not sure.

Christie squeals at the sight of Chloe.

She kneels beside the table to speak to her, close enough for Aisha to smell her perfume.

CHRISTIE

Remember me, Chloe?! Oh my god, look at how big you are now. I saw you when you were just a teeny tiny thing.

CHLOE

Bonjour.

CHRISTIE

Ohmygawdsocute! Look at those lashes.

The Woman unceremoniously turns to Aisha.

CHRISTIE (CONT'D)

You are very pretty.

More a declarative statement than a compliment. Before Aisha can respond, the Woman returns to Adam. Adam glances at Aisha self consciously.

The waiter places the bill on the table. Adam blindly tosses a credit card down.

ADAM

You two go ahead. Aisha, don't worry about it. I'll talk to Amy...

Aisha straps Chloe into her stroller, distracted by Adam's hand sliding down the small of Christie's back.

65

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE - DAY

65

Rows of children's puffer coats hang like phantom toddlers. Aisha studies a series of coats before settling on one with sufficient thickness and warmth. She looks at the price tag. Bites her lip.

66

AT THE REGISTER

66

Aisha pays in cash. She parts with each bill reluctantly. Her fingers run along the coat's stitching as reassurance.

67 EXT. WEST HARLEM PIERS PARK - DAY

67

Aisha, settled on a bench, listens intently--the familiar ring of an unanswered call--Her ear buds pressed in her ears.

REVELERS flit past, an endless sea of strangers moving in and out of sight before the shoreline.

MARIATOU'S VOICE (O.S.)  
 ...Ha just kidding! You've reached  
 Mariatou. Leave a message after the-

Aisha ends the call. She eyes Kofi's new coat, propped beside her on the empty bench.

She removes her headphones and gazes out at the expanse of water. Barely blinking, Aisha appears to be mesmerized by a nebulous force pulling her attention to the dark murky water.

A PIERCING RING fills her ears along with the sound of WOMEN WAILING--visceral cries of suffering.

CLOSE ON dark waves crashing into one another.

As she peers into the water, she sees a WOMAN...The Woman's head rises just above the water surrounded by a halo of thick, black hair. The Woman's sclera, the whites of her eyes, are as black as her pupils, peering through Aisha with an unnerving gaze.

SOUND FILTERS AWAY as Aisha locks eyes with the creature...

SUDDENLY A CHILD'S CRY jolts Aisha back to.

A PASSERBY'S VOICE filters into auditory perception:

PASSERBY  
 ...need help?...come down...not  
 worth it, Miss...

Aisha snaps to--mid climb, perched on the railing that separates pedestrians from water. Unsure of how much time passed, she jumps down, disoriented.

She exhales, unwittingly holding her breath.

Her phone buzzes alive.

A text: 'Come grab dinner with ya boy. My treat.'

She gazes at the body of water. Shaken.

68 INT. AISHA'S ROOM - DAY

68

Kneeling at the foot of her bed, head bowed, eyes closed, a whisper of a prayer only she knows slips from Aisha's lips.

DING.

A text message.

Aisha glances at her phone.

69 EXT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - EVENING

69

Lips. Aisha's. Glossed to perfection.

Her face is reflected in a compact mirror. Aisha eyes herself, then puts the mirror away.

She's casually dolled up as she lingers at the top of the Brownstone steps. As she waits she takes in the menagerie of plants in the Brownstone yard: an urban garden.

A CURTAIN PEELS BACK to reveal sage eyes of a BLACK WOMAN peering at Aisha through glass.

The door opens unveiling KATHLEEN [65], well preserved, dressed from head to toe in white with a steely expression accented by motherly warmth.

ELDERLY BLACK WOMAN

Hi Aisha. I'm Kathleen Karter. Come on in. He'll be down in a second.

70 INT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - PARLOR - EVENING

70

Aisha takes in the welcoming space as she nestles into a couch. The brownstone is a relic, a menagerie of African artifacts and plants.

These are the types of preserved, protected Brownstones a transplant could never discover; kept in the family. Passed down.

She notes framed photographs: progressions of Malik burgeoning from child to man. His son Bishop...

In Malik's childhood pictures he's flanked by a SMILING WOMAN with empty eyes.

The woman is absent as Malik transitions from teen to Man.

Suddenly, Malik is alone in his portraits. His smile no longer meeting his eyes.

KATHLEEN (O.S.)  
Tea? I have hibiscus, ginger turmeric, Lipton...

Kathleen emerges with a platter of tea anyway. She places it gingerly before Aisha. Aisha takes the offering, plucking a choice from the array.

She can't shake the feeling...

AISHA  
I feel like I've met you before.

KATHLEEN  
It's very possible.

They study each other, two formerly acquainted spirits reunited in this liminal space called *life--the present*.

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)  
I learned about heart-ache in Dakar. Lived all over West Africa for 10 years. Fell in love with the continent. Unrivaled style and a certain--a certain pulsating vibrance I wish I could bottle and sell over here. A dash of Nigerian bravado with a sprinkle of Ghanaian pride and a heaping serving of Sierra Leonean humility...

AISHA  
I miss my country. Every day. The good parts.

KATHLEEN  
Do tell about the bad parts?

Aisha fiddles. Glances down at her tea. Unnerved by her compulsive desire to tell unfettered truth in the presence of this woman.

AISHA  
We are supposed to make babies to settle--even for men who don't want us, but some of us would rather make ourselves.

Kathleen takes Aisha in with an agreeable "hmm".

Aisha's curiosity moves to a *collage painting on vinyl*. She approaches the piece--losing herself in the image of a grotesque but beautiful half woman half fish underwater creature with bared teeth sharp as nails.

The Mer-woman's claws sink into the head of a limp human figure succumbing to the creature's power...

Kathleen's voice cuts through like a salve.

KATHLEEN

One of my favorites. It's called "Killing you softly" by Kenyan Arist: Wangechi Mutu. It's an interpretation of *Mami Wata, La Siréne, Yemayá, River Mamma*...whatever name a culture chooses, they are genderless ancient water gods. Some believe the mermaid lures with sexuality, money and promises of fertility, but they can also be dangerous, unpredictable and impermanent. Enslaved West Africans brought tales of *Mami Wata* with them. They're as unpredictable as the water that swallowed too many of us whole--or rather, liberated us...

Aisha faces Kathleen, worry etched in her face.

AISHA

I think I saw her...them.

KATHLEEN

*Mami Wata?*

Aisha nods, tears welling in her eyes.

AISHA

Am I sick? The kind you can't see.  
Am I losing my mind?

Kathleen presses her hand to Aisha's cheek as though transferring strength into her body.

KATHLEEN

Oh no no no dear don't cry. You're perfectly fine. *Mami Wata* feeds on whatever you give--whether it's fear or rage or vengeance. The spirits are calling you, trying to communicate something.

AISHA

But, why me?

Kathleen tilts her head, raises her shoulders - her eyes searching Aisha's with sympathy and a deep resignation.

KATHLEEN

Ancestors remind women like us how to survive. It's up to us to answer the call.

An omniscient glimmer in Kathleen's eyes. Kathleen backs away. Relaxes. Sips her tea.

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)

On to happier things. What's your boy's name?

AISHA

How do you...

KATHLEEN

Aisha, mothers know other mothers. Children are like ghosts, clinging to your body even when they're not physically present.

MALIK (O.S.)

You two done with the intro course to African gods?

Malik approaches the Women. All smiles. Oozing charisma.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Gram always asks too many questions.

AISHA

She asks them of all the Women who pass through?

A nervous laugh from Malik.

KATHLEEN

Only the one's with a story that piques my interest. There haven't been many...

AISHA

That pique your interest or--

MALIK

Time to go.

Malik kisses Kathleen on the forehead, whisking Aisha away as he hooks his arm in hers.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
Love you Gram, stay outta trouble!

Aisha turns back to Kathleen briefly.

AISHA  
Kofi.

Kathleen closes the door behind them. She sighs a sigh bone marrow deep, staring at the space Aisha inhabited. Her mind's fingers touch the intangible...The presence of life... The coming of violence...

KATHLEEN  
Kofi.

Kathleen grabs the tea tray and leaves, passing the haunting Mami Wata painting, but we don't pass with her.

We linger on the Mer-woman, pushing closer to her...

71 EXT. HARLEM - EVENING

71

Close on Aisha shaking her head disapprovingly.

AISHA  
No.

We pull back to reveal Malik sitting on a motorcycle, extending an extra helmet to Aisha.

MALIK  
Come on.

Malik dismounts, approaches Aisha.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
Stop being a scaredy cat. We not  
even goin far.  
(Beat.)  
I'll go extra slow.

Aisha holds up her pinky finger. Malik hooks his pinky in hers.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
Trust me.

Aisha sighs, takes the helmet. *Good thing she wore jeans.* Malik helps her. He clicks the strap of the helmet closed.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
You still fine. Even though your  
big ass head can't fit in that  
helmet.

Aisha hits him playfully. Malik revs the engine as she mounts behind him, visibly nervous.

AISHA  
Slow. Ok?

MALIK  
All you gotta do is hold on to me.  
I got you.

Aisha nods. She adjusts her snug helmet then grips Malik for dear life as they take off.

CUT TO:

Aisha, hands wrapped around Malik's waist.

Malik, looks back silently checking on her.

A slow motion symphony of movement as they snake their way through Harlem streets.

72 EXT. SYLVIA'S RESTAURANT - EVENING

72

So tightly pressed against one another they seem to be one body with four legs, Malik alights in front of the Soul Food Restaurant.

73 INT. SYLVIA'S RESTAURANT - EVENING

73

Various warm shouts, nods, hand claps from WAITSTAFF as Malik strolls into the restaurant--this convivial show in spite of GENTRIFIED CLIENTELE.

COOK  
My boy!

MALIK  
E, Whaddup!

COOK  
Shit, can't complain. Tryin to get  
like you.

MALIK

Man I'm trying to get like you.  
Heard you bought another  
Brownstone?!

COOK

How else we gonna keep what little  
we got?

MALIK

Respect.

HOSTESS

Hey, handsome! Seat in the back?

MALIK

You know me.

Aisha basks in the rapid fire exchanges between Malik and people who clearly adore him. He extends his hand behind him, reaching for her. She eyes his outstretched hand, placing her hand in his as he guides her to the back of the restaurant.

Malik chooses a private nook. He pulls out Aisha's chair for her. She settles in.

CUT TO:

We follow a waitress carrying a menagerie of cheesecake making her way to Aisha and Malik. Malik grants the waitress a silent thank you as she refills Aisha's wine glass.

AISHA

Oh no. I can't eat anymore.

MALIK

Just one bite. Best cheesecake on  
the East Coast.

Malik helps himself. Aisha sips wine from a straw.

AISHA

Malik.

MALIK

What's up?

AISHA

How did she know? How did your  
grandmother know?

MALIK

Know what?

AISHA

I didn't tell you I have a son.

MALIK

I mean everybody, all of us, were born with the ability to see. Most folks start to close those eyes to survive adulthood.

AISHA

She's....a witch.

Malik almost chokes on his cheesecake.

MALIK

A witch?! Naw. She's clairvoyant. A Priestess.

AISHA

Psychic?

MALIK

Yeah but Gram prefers "Intuitive Consultant" I'm not gonna lie, gives me the heeby jeebies sometimes. Had to let her know I don't wanna know. Let me live it as it comes.

A synaptic breach in Aisha's belief system, crumbling before our eyes, in real time.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Can I see little man?

Aisha pulls out her phone, scrolling. She unveils a digital image of Kofi smiling at the person behind the camera.

MALIK (CONT'D)

That's a lady killer right there-- or...whoever he wants to kill.

Aisha laughs.

AISHA

He's coming soon. For his birthday. I haven't seen him in almost a year.

MALIK

That's like forever for a kid.

AISHA

I know...

The weight of time lost hangs in the air. Aisha inhales the rest of her wine.

AISHA (CONT'D)

And you?

MALIK

And me.

AISHA

You have how many kids?

MALIK

Five.

AISHA

Really? Four plus Bishop?!

Malik nods, pushing a morsel of cheesecake in his mouth.

AISHA (CONT'D)

How many mothers?

MALIK

Five. I don't like to double dip.

A mischievous smile creeps over Malik's face. Aisha punches him in the shoulder.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Ow. Damn!

AISHA

I knew you were lying.

MALIK

Just my knucklehead Bishop. You really thought I was a procreatin' ass nigga out here with mad kids huh? Ain't no Future here. Call me Present.

(off Aisha's oblivious look)

You know...the rapper...Future.

Aisha just stares at Malik. He shakes his head in mock disappointment.

AISHA

I try not to judge. Don't want people judging me.

Aisha and Malik lock eyes. Unspoken secrets lurk just behind their gazes.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Is the woman in the pictures your  
mother?

Malik clears his throat. His veneer of charisma falters for the first time. He picks at his cheesecake.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Sorry.

That impenetrable grin again.

MALIK  
What you sorry for?

Aisha notes Malik's hand on the table. Places hers on his. He pulls it away casually placing it on the back of his neck.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
My mom been talking to herself,  
laughing at the jokes in her head  
since I could remember. Used to  
hate when she came to pick me up  
from school.

He's struck by the memory. Hell is a place of remembering.

MALIK (CONT'D)  
Kids used to see her before I did.  
Pacing back and forth in the lobby  
in front of everybody. I dressed  
fly--started pumping weights so no  
one could say shit to my face about  
my schizophrenic Mamma.

AISHA  
Is she--

MALIK  
Dead. Killed herself when I was 8.  
Pops been around as much as he  
could, still is, but Grams raised  
me.

At this Malik looks Aisha straight in her eyes, devoid of his cape of humor--naked without his shield of comedy.

Aisha moves food around her plate.

AISHA  
I was 12 when my mother died.

MALIK  
What happened?

## AISHA

She kept her sickness from us for as long as she could. She got thinner and thinner, stopped eating. Then one day she couldn't walk. Cancer...

Aisha trails off. This time Malik holds her hand. She takes a good look at this man--his wet, rueful eyes...the sharp edge of desire cuts through her like a knife.

Strangers inexorably linked by loss.

74 EXT. HARLEM STREETS - NIGHT

74

Aisha grips Malik tightly as his Motorcycle rips through the darkness.

He pushes faster this time. Aisha lets him.

75 INT. REGGAE CLUB - BROOKLYN - NIGHT

75

Bodies writhe under flashing colored lights as sumptuous Reggae/Afrofusion music fills the air. Something like Koffee's TOAST pulsates.

Aisha and Malik press themselves against each other as they move to the music, intoxicated by lust and libation.

76 EXT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - NIGHT

76

Giggles in the darkness as they enter the Brownstone. Malik shushes her with the gravity of the left-in-charge eldest child trying hard not to laugh.

They stumble and fumble like teenagers.

77 INT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - MALIK'S ROOM - NIGHT

77

Aisha and Malik, both naked, face each other as they lie in bed...His eyes closed...Aisha's open. She watches him for some time before pressing her lips to his.

He opens his eyes. Looks at her.

She kisses him again.

Harder.

Pushes him onto his back as she straddles him.

He stops her, breathing hard. She grips him harder with her thighs.

MALIK  
You sure?

She takes his hand, guiding it under her top to the skin of her breasts.

He squeezes.

She moans.

He moves his hands down her stomach, tugging at her *waist beads*, threatening to rip them off.

This time she stops him.

He fingers the beads curiously then flips Aisha on her back, taking control, climbing in between her legs, inside of her, her mouth contorting in gasps of muted pleasure...

She holds onto him moaning a prayer to ecstasy.

78

FAMILY CENTER WAITING AREA - MANHATTAN - DAY

78

Aisha. Anxious. She clutches a folder with paperwork. One of many BLACK AND BROWN WOMEN lingering in the waiting area-- some try to quiet their restless children, some await their fate lost in far away thoughts...

A COUNSELOR peeks her head out of an office.

COUNSELOR  
Aisha Bâ! Aisha--

Aisha scrambles, grabbing her belongings.

79

INT. FAMILY CENTER OFFICE - MANHATTAN - DAY

79

Aisha watches the Counselor rifle through her paperwork, pulling various documents from a folder. The Counselor's eyes dart between a computer screen and documents.

COUNSELOR  
So last time I think I said you  
don't need a green card or a Social  
Security number to register Kofi.

AISHA  
I was so happy to hear that.

COUNSELOR

You brought proof of address but  
your child must live in the city  
before you can register. Is he a  
resident yet?

AISHA

Not yet, but he'll be here very  
soon.

COUNSELOR

Come back once he gets here. For  
now, I'll bump you up the waitlist.

The counselor slides Aisha's folder of paperwork back across  
the table.

AISHA

Thank you.

KOFI (PRELAP)

Hi Mummy. Don't worry. I'm fine. I  
will see you soon!

80

INT. CONDO - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

80

Aisha removes her shoes, pressing her phone to her ear. She  
plays the voicemail from Kofi again.

KOFI (O.S.)

Hi Mummy. Don't worry. I'm fine. I  
will see you soon!

As soon as she takes Chloe's shoes off, the girl slips  
through her fingers, darting into the condo.

CHLOE

Dad? Daddy are you here?!

AISHA

Chloe!

Aisha runs after Chloe but loses her as she disappears into a  
nearby room.

81

INT/EXT. CONDO - ADAM'S OFFICE - EVENING

81

Aisha pauses at the door's threshold. Light cascades from the  
room and the sound of ADAM'S VOICE intimates a very important  
phone call.

Aisha knocks.

ADAM  
Come in.

Aisha steps in to see Chloe bouncing on her father's lap.

AISHA  
(re: Chloe)  
She's tired.

ADAM  
Wanna nap, piglet

Chloe shakes her head no but her weary eyes betray her.

Adam hands Chloe to Aisha's outstretched arms.

ADAM (CONT'D)  
Before I forget...

Adam rifles through paperwork. Finds it. Hands a white envelope to Aisha.

ADAM (CONT'D)  
Amy's working late but I know today  
is supposed to be payday?

AISHA  
Yes. Thank you.

She balances Chloe in one hand and the envelope in the other.

82 INT. CONDO - CHLOE'S ROOM - LATER

82

Chloe fights sleep. She reaches for Aisha, wrapping her arms around her neck. Aisha hugs back but Chloe won't let her go.

CHLOE  
No. Lie down with me!

AISHA  
Chloe I can't. It's not my nap  
time. C'est ton temps de sieste

Her face turning beet red, Chloe starts to cry. Aisha relents, curling up beside her. Chloe clings to Aisha, nestling into her as though trying to climb into her skin.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Chloe...

The child ignores her, pulling at Aisha, fingers ripping at skin.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
 Ow. Stop that!

She peels Chloe off her.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
 What is the matter with you?

Chloe rolls on her side. Defiant, but sleepy.

CHLOE  
 Je ne veux you to leave me for him.

AISHA  
 For who? I'm here now.

Desperate for Chloe to sleep, Aisha whisper sings the familiar *native lullaby* to Chloe, stroking the girl's cheek.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
 (Wolof)  
*Oh my baby, my little baby, who can calm you down? Oh my baby, my little baby who can calm you down and bring you to Saloum...*

Chloe finally drifts to sleep. Aisha takes the moment to herself to rifle through the envelope. She shakes her head in disbelief.

Her pay is short.

83 INT. CONDO - HALLWAY

83

Aisha and Adam collide in the dark hallway. He catches her. Their proximity tense.

AISHA	ADAM
Sorry...	I was just about to come get you. Hungry?

84 INT. CONDO - KITCHEN - NIGHT

84

A feast. Thai food beckons from the counter. Aisha's stomach growls.

ADAM  
 Can't finish this all myself.

AISHA  
 Are you sure?

ADAM  
Eat. Please.

They stand-eat, neither getting too comfortable.

ADAM (CONT'D)  
Got it extra spicy. Amy swears  
spicy food is bad. "Dulls the  
tastebuds."

AISHA  
Adam...

Adam stops mid chew to look at Aisha.

ADAM  
Uh oh. Why does it sound like I'm  
in trouble?

AISHA  
Were you able to talk to Amy? She's  
hard to get a hold of.

ADAM  
What is it?

Aisha moves food around the plate--her appetite waning. She  
reveals her *work binder*. Flips to her meticulous note taking:  
hours of overtime unaccounted for.

AISHA  
The thing is...I need the rest of  
the money to bring my son here.

Adam stops eating mid chew.

ADAM  
Your son?

AISHA  
His name is Kofi.

ADAM  
Holy shit. What else don't we know  
about you?

AISHA  
He will be 7 in a few days.

Aisha studies Adam. Defiant. Fearless.

Adam rubs his jaw. Thinks.

ADAM

Tell you what, I'll advance you some of the money until we figure this out. Things have been a little tight...for everyone.

Aisha beams as Adam momentarily disappears. She catches her reflection in a nearby mirror. Studies herself.

Adam returns with cash.

ADAM (CONT'D)

I could go to the ATM but this is a start...

Aisha hesitates, takes the cash. Without thinking she hugs Adam. He hugs her back.

AISHA

Thank you. Thank you. You have no idea...

They part too slowly. Adam seizes the opportunity, leans in for a long desired kiss, pressing his lips to Aisha's.

Stunned, Aisha lets him for a few seconds, but something overtakes her--

Adam pulls away sharply, touching his lip. She bit him. Hard.

ADAM

Shit. I guess I deserved that, huh?  
(beat)

You can't tell Amy about this...the money. She's a little too by the book sometimes. Might complicate things for you.

A PHONE RINGS. Aisha instinctively checks hers but it's Adam's. He presses the phone to his ear, seamlessly falling into work mode, unfazed. He sucks the soreness of his bottom lip.

ADAM (CONT'D)

Hey Scott. Yeah. The exhibit would be a huge step...

Searching for Nanny Cams, Aisha steals the opportunity to leave.

85 INT. CONDO - MOVING ELEVATOR - CONTINUOUS 85

Hands count money. Aisha mouths the amount as she flips through the bills.

She smiles to herself, closer to her goal.

Aisha stares at her reflection. Her face fractured by the elevator mirrors. She wipes the residue of guilt off her mouth.

86 INT. YMCA POOL - DAY 86

Swimming lessons for BABIES.

Aisha participates hands on. She trails through the water, behind Chloe's SWIMMING TEACHER, snaking their way among OTHER SWIMMERS.

Chloe's small legs kick in and out of the water.

Momentarily distracted, Aisha drifts away. Compelled to be underwater, she sinks lower in the pool until her eyes are all we see above water.

Looking out at the disjointed world: fractured by a slice of water, Aisha submerges herself fully-- pushing herself to the bottom of the pool.

8...7...6...5...4...

She holds her breath for as long as she can, then thrusts herself up--EXPLODING OUT OF WATER. As she sucks in air.

She Turns 360 degrees, realizing she's suddenly alone in the blue water of the pool.

A MURKY FIGURE appears behind her. Aisha turns to face it. Finally recognizing *her* in all her glory:

*MAMI WATA.*

Close now.

The Mer-Woman's amphibious EYES kick back light, like a coyote caught in headlights.

Aisha closes her eyes, wills herself to control her breathing.

She opens them again, startled to see a monstrous but eerily beautiful mirror reflection of herself peering back at her with those telltale, wet alien eyes.

She tries to keep one eye on the Mer-Woman's dark, iridescent tail snaking beneath the water.

The mermaid woman leans in closer to Aisha, as though she's about to kiss her.

Unable to move, Aisha looks in horror at the nictitating membrane that flicks across the creature's eye as it blinks.

The Mer-woman wraps her tale around Aisha's legs, SUDDENLY RIPPING HER BENEATH THE WATER'S SURFACE.

Two bodies. Intertwined. Jolted underwater. Descending to the bottom of a depthless sea, the creature's tail envelopes Aisha, like an anaconda squeezing life from her body.

Bubbles rise to the surface as Aisha screams, being dragged deeper and deeper and deeper...

QUICK POP:

Aisha curled in fetal position in a clawfoot tub.

QUICK POP:

A full brown stomach marked with the a black line from navel to vagina--the pregnant belly of a woman half immersed in water.

QUICK POP:

A PLUMP BROWN BABY, fat wrists and ankles adorned with gold bracelets that ring out with every jerk of her new movements.

The baby yawns and stretches with life.

CUT TO:

Aisha jolts up from the clammy cement of the poolside, desperately coughing up water. A LIFEGUARD leans away from her. His work done. He breathes a sigh of relief.

Disoriented, catching her breath, unsure of how much time passed, her searching eyes find Chloe, shivering under a strangers towel.

Chloe mouths to Aisha, "I won't tell." She holds up her wet pinky finger.

Gloved fingers delicately wrap plant bulbs with chicken wire.

Kathleen, though strong, exerts some effort to stand. She appraises her work of keeping squirrels from destroying her plants. An old lady in her personal urban jungle.

Sensing something, Kathleen turns to find Aisha lingering at her Brownstone gate.

88 INT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - LIVING ROOM - DAY 88

Aisha raises a glass of ice cold water to her lips. She drinks for some time surprised at the magnitude of her own thirst.

KATHLEEN

Anansi, Mami Wata--They are figures of survival and resistance for oppressed people. They challenge the dominant order, subverting it through chaos, anarchy...creative energy. They refuse to be ruled by the human or the divine and operate on the boundaries between two worlds, refusing to submit to the laws of either...

AISHA

I just...wish I knew what they wanted from me.

KATHLEEN

That, my dear, I can't tell you.  
(beat)  
I had to learn the hard way.

Aisha glances at a photograph of MALIK'S MOTHER/KATHLEEN'S DAUGHTER. Kathleen follows Aisha's gaze.

AISHA

She was beautiful.

KATHLEEN

Losing her almost broke me, but I had to forgive myself. I didn't fail her. The system did. She wasn't meant to be held down here. She was meant to fly...

Kathleen knows Aisha wants more, needs to hear more...

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)

She started threatening to hurt others, herself. A manic episode like I'd never seen.

(MORE)

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)

I wasn't so much scared for myself.  
I was scared for Malik. He was just  
a small boy then.

Kathleen swallows.

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)

So, I called the police...

Aisha's presence no longer registering, Kathleen's mind slips into the cave mouths of memory.

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)

Cops didn't ask questions, didn't care. Stormed in with their preconceived notions ready to rage. Slammed Gloria down like a rabid animal, exposed her body. Handcuffed her. Started to tase her so I threw myself between them. Tried to use my body as a shield.

(beat)

As they drove off in that car, in her eyes I saw something had shifted that was never coming back.

Tears in Aisha's eyes, little fragments of diamond.

AISHA

I'm sorry Kathleen. I am so sorry.

KATHLEEN

The spirits can equip us with resilience...escape...

89

EXT. MANHATTAN - DAY

89

Perched on a park bench, Aisha stares straight as Chloe rides a scooter back and forth--in and out of Aisha's field of vision.

Chloe's mouth opens but sound doesn't emanate.

KATHERINE (V.O.)

...but the spirits' tools aren't always kind.

Everything moves in slow motion, Aisha's gaze fixed across the street as she studies...

EXT. ITALIAN WINE BAR - DAY

MANICURED, PALE HANDS raise glasses.

CLINK.

CLINK.

CLINK.

Rosé swishes.

KATHERINE (V.O.)  
Sometimes they want blood...

Ceramic filled molars gleam in the sun as red glossed lips part, revealing full teeth. We peer into the open mouths of a table of LAUGHING UPPER CLASS WOMEN.

Sunglass covered eyes twinkle, reveling in privilege.

90 EXT. MANHATTAN - DAY

90

CLOSE ON AISHA.

KATHLEEN (V.O.)  
One can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good. You never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put it to. My question for you, Aisha:  
*How do you use your rage?*

We dance on Aisha's empty eyes. Fermented scorn turning to wine.

91 INT. CONDO - KITCHEN - DAY

91

Aisha peers into a sparse fridge. Chloe by her side.

AISHA  
Que Voulez-vous manger? Tell me what you want to eat?

CHLOE  
*Chebu jën!*

Aisha shakes her head, closing the fridge.

CUT TO:

Aisha pulls her African food out of the oven. Chloe can't contain her excitement as she bangs her fork on the counter.

CHLOE (CONT'D)  
*Manger! Manger!*

Aisha blows on a steaming spoonful of rice before hovering it before Chloe's mouth. Chloe opens wide, happily cleaning the spoon.

Drained of color, Chloe stops chewing. She stares at something, someone behind Aisha.

Aisha turns behind her to see what Chloe sees...

AMY.

Puffy, bloodshot eyes. Amy's made up face can't hide the fact that she's been crying.

AMY  
What are you feeding her?

Aisha, unable to hide her surprise, is momentarily frozen.

AISHA  
I didn't know you were here.

AMY  
That's not what I asked you, Aisha.

CHLOE  
I like it, Mommy.

Chloe innocently holds up a heaping spoonful of rice. Amy snatches the spoon from Chloe's hand, sending rice flying everywhere.

AMY  
One of the few times I'm home sick and I find you feeding my daughter food that is one: way too spicy for her tummy and two: blowing germs on her food? What is in this? What if she's allergic? How long has this been going on? When you have your own kids you can feed them whatever you want!

Aisha stares at Amy.

AMY (CONT'D)  
Say something!

Instead of saying anything Aisha wrenches open the empty fridge and yanks out molded blueberries, wilted kale, a bottle of Gluten Free Kids Multivitamins...

AISHA

Should I feed her this, or this, or this...?

Amy opens her mouth to speak but stops. Aisha rifles through her purse and pulls out a small stack of receipts paper clipped together.

AISHA (CONT'D)

Since I started I've been buying her food or giving her some of my own. Didn't you ever wonder how your child was eating or you were too busy to care?

Amy crouches down to Chloe's eye level.

AMY

Go pick a book for Mommy to read to you. Any country you want.

Chloe looks at Aisha for reassurance. The sting of this is not lost on Amy.

AISHA

*Va dans ta chambre.* Let Mommy and I talk.

Chloe nods, scooping up her ipad. The women wait for Chloe to disappear.

AMY

Look, sorry if I offended you but the implication that I'm not a good mother is too much--

AISHA

I didn't say that.

Amy hurls Aisha's food into a nearby trash can.

AMY

No more of this shit in my house--

As Amy turns to unleash on Aisha, Aisha slaps her. The sting echoes. Amy gasps, holding her cheek.

She transitions from shock, to humor--giggling then outright laughing in Aisha's face.

Unhinged.

Aisha watches her, on guard as Amy plops down on a nearby couch. She stares into space, still laughing, tears stinging her cheeks.

AMY (CONT'D)  
That was brave of you.

Aisha pulls out her work binder.

AISHA  
Since I have your attention, I've documented all my overtime hours--

AMY  
Did you subtract the hours you spent having lunch and dinner with my husband?

Aisha closes the binder, instinctively searching for cameras...

AISHA  
My time is not free, you know.

AMY  
We'll work something out--

AISHA  
You keep saying that. I have a child too. A son. Kofi.

Amy really looks at Aisha. Lucid. Truly sees her.

AMY  
I knew you did, from the moment I met you.  
(beat)  
This is my third miscarriage in two years.

Amy smiles broadly. Hopeful.

AMY (CONT'D)  
Maybe it's a sign, telling me to get out while I can.

AISHA  
I don't know what you want me to say.

AMY  
Say you'll do an overnight for me tomorrow. I need to get away.  
(MORE)

AMY (CONT'D)  
Can't think clearly in this fucking  
overpriced shoebox.

Aisha shakes her head no, at the end of her rope...

AISHA  
I can't.

AMY  
Tomorrow night. Seven to seven. Two  
hundred flat rate is very  
reasonable.

AISHA  
Three hundred. Plus the overtime.

Amy stares off into space.

AMY  
You drive a hard bargain my lady.

AISHA  
(emboldened)  
In advance.

Amy scoffs.

AMY  
You think we just have cash laying  
around. I'll withdraw money for  
Adam to pay you in the morning. It  
all comes from me, anyway. Pinky  
swear.

Amy holds up her little finger. Aisha, impassive, but she  
obliges, hooking her finger in Amy's.

Aisha slides into her shoes, unceremoniously. Amy stares  
ahead vacantly.

Chloe explodes from nowhere, as if she was lurking in the  
shadows. She clings to Aisha's leg. Holding on for dear life.

AMY (CONT'D)  
That's enough, Clo. Come here to  
Mommy.

CHLOE  
NO!

Aisha nudges Chloe towards her mother.

AISHA  
I'll be back Chloe. *Écoute ta mère*

AMY

Come to Mommy please! Don't you  
want me to take you to the  
dollhouse?

CHLOE

NO! Aisha Don't leave! Don't leave  
me! He can't have you!

Chloe clings to Aisha defiantly. Aisha tries to pry the child off but she won't let go. Amy finally wrenches Chloe off Aisha as the child kicks and punches her mother. She's throwing a full blown tantrum unlike any we've seen before. Tears stream down her red face.

CHLOE (CONT'D)

I don't want you! I want Aisha! I  
want grandmaaaa...

Aisha cringes, sliding into the...

92 EXT. CONDO - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

92

Closing the door behind her.

She lingers, shutting her eyes--inhales and exhales sharply as she listens to Chloe's cries echoing. Aisha speed walks towards the elevators.

93 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - AISHA'S ROOM - EVENING

93

Aisha packs an overnight bag. She stops, frozen in her tracks by Kofi's framed photo resting among his gifts--his face mysteriously water stained beyond recognition.

94 INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

94

Aisha, earphones in her ear. The call rings endlessly...

MARI (O.S.)

Aisha how are you?

AISHA

*Wow, Mari! I didn't think you'd  
pick up. I've been trying to call  
you.*

MARI (O.S.)

*You have? I ran out of credits.*

AISHA

*Where is Kofi?*

Silence.

AISHA (CONT'D)

*Hello?*

MARI (O.S.)

*I'm here. You never ask about me, you know that. Never. Anyway, he's with Musa. He wanted to spend the night.*

AISHA

*Sorry...Are you ok?*

MARI (O.S.)

*I'm fine.*

AISHA

*I don't really like him sleeping out--*

MARI (O.S.)

*...he said...call you...*

Static overtakes the call.

AISHA

*Hello...Mari...*

95

EXT. BROWNSTONE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

95

Outside of the illuminated Brownstone, peer through a window to see Kathleen leading Aisha, Malik and Bishop through an intricate dance routine mirrored on a large screen video game console.

Malik gyrates his hips hitting every beat as the foursome basks in momentary joy, playing in their peaceful familial microcosm.

96

INT. BROWNSTONE - MALIK'S ROOM - NIGHT

96

Malik. Deep in sleep. Aisha wide awake. Restless.

She stares at the back of Malik's head, then at his still chest, searching for indicators of life. She hovers her hand in front of his mouth as he exhales, feeling his breath on her hand.

She turns away from him draped in the relentlessness of insomnia.

She closes her eyes, willing sleep.

CUT TO:

The CREAK of a door. Aisha's eyes dart open, unsure of how long she slept.

Aisha stares at Malik's bedroom entrance, fixating on the door...it doesn't move.

Aisha's petrified gaze follows the direction of a sick CRUNCHING SOUND. She glides sheets off her body.

She makes to scream but can't muster a sound as a SNAKE COILS AROUND HER THIGH, CURLING BETWEEN HER LEGS as it SHEDS its SKIN.

An aborted gasp dissipates as tears stream down her face.

She turns to Malik--reaching. A silent plea for help, but stops short...

In lieu of Malik's body is a writhing mass of hair-like tendrils: brimming, throbbing. The mass gives way to unveil *daddy long leg spiders*, running over one another--toppling onto the bed, climbing over Aisha's skin...

Aisha kicks at the spiders, fighting air as she falls backwards off the bed.

MALIK (O.S.)  
Hey! Hey!

Malik leans over the edge of his bed looking down at Aisha on the floor still scrambling backwards, shoving invisible spiders off her.

He grips her wrists, fists still balled.

Aisha comes to, breathless. Tears stream down her face.

Malik stands her upright, hugging her tightly.

MALIK  
Shh. It's ok. You're good. Your feet are on the ground...ten toes on the floor. Say it.

AISHA  
(sucking air)  
Ten...toes...on the floor.

MALIK  
Not gonna lie. You got me pretty  
good, Ali.

Malik notes bruises on Aisha's inner thighs--visible in the sunlight streaming into his room.

98 INT. MALIK'S BATHROOM - DAY

98

Aisha's fingers hover over Malik's cosmetics: shaving cream, pomade, brushes, coconut oil.

A KNOCK at the door.

Malik hands Aisha a towel.

AISHA  
Thank you.

MALIK  
Let me know if you need anything  
else.

99 INT. MALIK'S BATHROOM - SHOWER - DAY

99

Aisha revels in the hot water cascading against her skin. She exhales, taking her time in the shower for once.

100 INT/EXT. CONDO - DAY

100

From inside the condo, the JANGLE of KEYS resonates--condo entrance being unlocked. Aisha pushes the door open, surveying the eerily quiet space.

Shoes robotically peel off feet. Aisha braces herself for the night ahead.

101 INT. CONDO - GUEST ROOM - DAY

101

Light flickers on. Greeted by the sparse room, showing no history of her inhabitance, Aisha drops her overnight bag and flops down on the immaculately made bed.

She eyes the ceiling. Black specks of mold now surround the web-like water stain like encroaching ants.

102 INT. CONDO - VARIOUS ROOMS - DAY

102

The work binder flips open. Aisha scrolls through pages, finally landing on one demarcated by Amy. Aisha scans the *evening to-do list*.

CUT TO:

Aisha washes a small pile of dishes, mindlessly humming to herself.

She scrubs marble countertops meticulously.

Aisha loads laundry into a drier. She lingers before the machine, staring at her reflection in the spinning abyss of strangers' clothes.

103 INT. CONDO GUEST ROOM - DAY

103

Aisha falls back on the bed, closing her eyes momentarily-- her body salient against white sheets.

The ceiling water stain actively snakes its way along the plaster, sprawling outwards like a web. Black mold throbs as a lone spider crawls from the mass, ambling its way down the wall towards Aisha's sleeping body.

The spider creeps over Aisha's face, crawling into Aisha's open mouth.

Aisha darts awake choking as small arms wrap around Aisha's neck too tightly. Chloe clings to her, seemingly leaping from nowhere.

CHLOE

Aisha!

Aisha pries Chloe off her. Instantly looking to the ceiling.

ADAM (O.S.)

That's enough Clo! Let Aisha  
breathe for a sec.

Chloe releases her grasp, plopping down beside Aisha. Adam lingers in the doorway of the guest room.

ADAM (CONT'D)

Yeah. That's getting pretty bad.

AISHA

You see it right?

ADAM

The mold. Yeah. Sorry about that.  
 Didn't realize it had gotten that  
 bad. It comes and goes. Totally get  
 if you want to sleep on the couch  
 tonight? Gonna have someone look at  
 it tomorrow.

AISHA

I might do that.

ADAM

I'll lay out some sheets for you.  
 Gonna run some errands.

Adam makes to leave, but backtracks.

ADAM (CONT'D)

By any chance, did Amy mention  
 where she was going?

AISHA

She didn't tell me.

A perfunctory smile from Adam. He leaves without speaking,  
 moving in the liquid way that is his custom.

CHLOE

*J'ai faim*, Aisha!

Aisha, exhausted, faces the small child beside her.

CHLOE (PRELAP) (CONT'D)

LA LA LA LA! LAAAAAAA....

104

INT. CONDO - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

104

Socked feet slide back and forth on bamboo hardwood floors.  
 Chloe SCREAMS at the top of her lungs--her shrill yells  
 battling with COMMERCIALS BLARING on TV as she sprints.

105

INT. CONDO - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

105

Freshly boiled red lentil pasta trickles into a kiddie bowl.

CHLOE

LAAAAA LAAAAA LAAAAAA!

Aisha pours homemade tomato sauce on top of the slimy  
 fusilli. She rubs her temple, eyeing Chloe sliding back and  
 forth...

Aisha turns her attention to a detailed note clipped to the fridge. She grabs a box of nutritional yeast and sprinkles it on top of the concoction.

Steam rises from the slop.

Chloe turns the volume up even higher.

CUT TO:

106 AISHA GRIPS THE TV REMOTE, HER STERN GAZE TRAINED ON CHLOE

Chloe hovers a spoon of pasta to her face. She sniffs it, pursing her lips in disdain.

CHLOE

*Je ne veux--*

AISHA

This is what your Mommy wants you to eat tonight. This is what you're eating. *Pas de dispute.*

CHLOE

(whiny)

But I want your food!

AISHA

Please.

CHLOE

No!

AISHA

Chloe you have to--

Chloe shoves the bowl of food, sending it crashing to the floor, sending morsels of red slop splattering on Aisha's face like viscous blood.

Aisha gasps. Chloe just stares at her.

AISHA (CONT'D)

Pick it up!

Chloe folds her arms, defiant.

AISHA (CONT'D)

Pick it up now! I am not your maid.

Aisha extends a rag. Chloe turns her back to Aisha. Rage simmering to the surface, Aisha reaches out to grab Chloe but stops herself--hands hovering in a liminal space of indecision.

Aisha scans the space for visible Nanny cams.

Weary, impatient, Aisha takes Chloe's hand, forcing her to grasp the rag. She controls Chloe like a puppeteer, using her limbs to manually clean the mess...

SOUND OF RUNNING WATER.

107 INT. CONDO - GUEST BATHROOM - EVENING 107

Chloe, wrapped in her kiddie bathrobe, quietly sulks as she watches Aisha run her bath.

BENEATH THE WATER'S SURFACE: Aisha's hand submerges. Her fingers graze the bottom of the tub, testing the temperature.

AISHA  
Ok, Chloe time for...

Aisha turns to find Chloe gone.

Behind Aisha, an oversized arthropod leg curls from the tub, gripping ceramic...

108 INT. CONDO VARIOUS ROOMS - CONTINUOUS 108

Aisha searches for Chloe, progressively getting more frantic.

AISHA  
Chloe!

She rifles through Chloe's room, tossing stuffed animals aside. Aisha peeks into various rooms. She rips open cabinets.

109 EXT. CONDO - NIGHT 109

Rising panic, Aisha stares into empty hallways.

A CHILD'S MEWLING CRY stops Aisha in her tracks. Sends her hurtling back into...

110 INT. CONDO - VARIOUS - NIGHT 110

Aisha grabs a knife, terror riding her face.

She creeps towards the child's cry emanating from--  
ADAM'S OFFICE.

CHILD  
Help...me. Help me! Helllp...I  
can't breathe...can't...

It sounds like Chloe's voice, at first...

111 INT. CONDO - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

111

Chest heaving, knife outstretched, Aisha walks in the direction of the child's pleas.

AISHA  
Chloe?

The pleas rise to a deafening crescendo, morphing into a sickening symphony of sound.

An INHUMAN VOICE ECHOES, singing THE FAMILIAR AFRICAN LULLABY...like a vintage record player.

VOICE  
*Oh my baby-baby, my little baaaaby-baby, who can calm you dowwwwn-down down? Oh my baby, my little baaaaaaaby who can calm you down and bring you back hooooooome...*

The timbre of the voice gets deeper, melting into a haunting baritone...

VOICE (CONT'D)  
*Oh my baby-baby, my little baby-baby, who can calm you down-down down...*

Aisha forces herself to breathe as she creeps closer to the door.

112 INT./EXT. ADAM'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

112

Steeling herself Aisha touches the knob...turning it ever so slightly. Knife still clenched in her other hand.

The door creaks open as she slides into the room.

AISHA  
(a whisper)  
Chloe?

Aisha's gaze hones in on the ominous photo of the BLACK TEEN PROTESTOR surrounding by a halo of fire--his arms outstretched as though nailed to an invisible cross.

An intangible thread pulls her closer to the image.

The TEEN is drenched in sweat and moon, unwavering, ascendant, all movement and muscle--fearless.

His mouth is contorted in a soundless battle cry.

A NETWORK OF OTHERWORLDLY BLOOD CURDLING SCREAMS DEAFEN AISHA  
...

Hypnotized, Aisha stares at the still image, her face contorted in torment.

We hold on the eerie image. Fire dances in Aisha's eyes--reflected back at her. Flames leap from the still image breaking the fourth wall.

Blood drips at Aisha's feet, snapping her out of this waking nightmare.

She looks down to see her hand wrapped around the blade of the knife, the softness of her palm sliced by sharpness.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
No...no...no...

Aisha runs out of Adam's office, slipping on overflowing water trickling out of the...

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

FALLING HARD against the wet tile floor.

CUT TO:

Surroundings gradually fade into focus. Aisha props herself up--remembering. Water overflows onto the bathroom floor, pooling around her feet.

Aisha approaches the brimming tub. Turns off the water.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
What...do you want? WHAT DO YOU  
WANT FROM ME?!

A crimson viscus of blood at the bottom of the tub catches Aisha's eye.

An UNSEEN FORCE sucks her into water's surface, thrusting Aisha' head beneath the water. She screams underwater, sending bubbles rising in a suffocating frenzy.

The force yanks her head up, allowing her to suck in oxygen.

She spots the bloody knife on the floor. Grabs it, before being plunged underneath again.

Aisha flails, raising the knife.

Her CELL PHONE RINGS SHRILLY from another room, snapping her to. The INCESSANT RING TONE grants a gift of lucidity.

Teeth chattering, body shivering, Aisha holds the knife mid air. A drop of water pools at the blade's sharp tip hovering just above...

CHLOE.

Whimpering. In a corner of the tub. Directly in the knife's path.

Aisha drops the knife, scooping Chloe out of the tub.

**She turns off the tub.**

She studies Chloe desperately. Chloe peers back at her, surprisingly fearless. Aisha spins her around, touches her face. She's unharmed.

CHLOE

I'm ok.

Aisha chokes back tears, cocooning Chloe in a warm towel. She hugs the small child.

AISHA

I'm sorry Chloe. I don't know what happened...

Aisha holds Chloe, rocking back and forth, unsure if she's consoling the child or herself.

113 INT. CHLOE'S ROOM - NIGHT

113

Sleep chasing her, Chloe's small chest rises and falls. Aisha watches her intently.

CHLOE

It's not your fault. He's just jealous.

AISHA  
Who is jealous?

CHLOE  
Kofi.

Chloe's eyes become tiny slits. She's falling asleep.

AISHA  
Who told you about Kofi? Did Daddy  
tell you about him?

Chloe shakes her head, No.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Who told you, Chloe?

CHLOE  
I'm sleepy, Aisha.

Aisha let's Chloe sleep--allows her to shut her eyes, leaving Aisha alone with a myriad swirling questions.

114 INT. CONDO - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

114

Her cell phone the sole source of light, Aisha stares up at the condo ceiling, sleeplessness tormenting her. Her bandaged hand hangs off the couch.

AISHA (V.O.)  
Oh my baby-baby, my little baaaaby-baby, Aja, who can calm you downwwwn-down down? Oh my baby, my little baaaaaaaby Ajaaaa who can calm you down and bring you back hooooooome...

Aisha's eyelids gradually draw closed.

115 INT. CONDO - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

115

Aggressive sunlight pervades the curtain-less, window ensconced room. Aisha sits up. Stretches and yawns. Lingers on the edge of the couch for some time, remembering...

A long EERIE SILENCE broken by the buzz of an incoming text message. Aisha reads it.

ADAM: "Took piglet to breakfast. Didn't want to wake you."

116 INT. CONDO - KITCHEN - MORNING

116

A white envelope and a letter linger on the kitchen counter.

ON CASH as Aisha rifles through the envelope. She counts out money. Beams in triumph.

Overnight bag in hand, Aisha wrangles the condo keys out of her pocket, placing them on the counter decisively.

Her eyes search the room, landing on a Nanny cam. She stares directly into it. We see her pixelated image from the camera's POV.

She leaves the frame.

117 INT. WESTERN UNION

117

Long acrylic nails click clack against one another as they count out hundred dollar bills.

Nikki the Teller smiles at Aisha through the glass.

NIKKI  
You good, girl!

Giddy, Aisha skips out of the Western Union.

118 EXT. HARLEM STREETS - DAY

118

On Malik's bike, Aisha grips him tightly as they ride in slow motion.

*We hear the following conversation in Voice Over.*

AISHA  
Is there anything else you need.

MARI  
No. Tickets are booked...Kofi wanted to speak to you but he's napping now.

AISHA  
Don't wake him. Call before you take off.

MARIATOU  
I will try.

AISHA  
See you soon.

MARIATOU

Aisha...

MARIATOU (CONT'D)

Yes?

MARIATOU (CONT'D)

See you soon.

119 INT. JFK AIRPORT - EVENING

119

Malik flanks Aisha.

She clutches Kofi's thick bubble coat, lingering at the gate where Kofi and Mariatou are expected to arrive.

She looks on as families greet loved ones with perishable gifts and nostalgic embraces.

She waits.

And waits.

Malik paces, helping her search for Mariatou and Kofi in the crowd.

Finally her gaze lands on a child in the crowd who resembles Kofi.

As she darts through a mass of people dread washes over her as she realizes it's not him.

She looks on as the boy is scooped away by his mother.

Evening turns to night. Aisha listens to her call ring endlessly--

MARIATOU (O.S.)

Hi, how are you...

AISHA

Mari--

MARIATOU (O.S.)

Ha just kidding! You've reached  
Mariatou. Leave a message after the-

120 INT. JFK AIRPORT - VARIOUS - DAY

120

Aisha approaches a series of AIRPORT WORKERS. She shows them pictures of Kofi on her phone. They all grant her various renditions of unknowing.

121 INT. JFK AIRPORT - CUSTOMS - DAY

121

Aisha paces as an AIRLINE REPRESENTATIVE types information into a computer.

AIRLINE REPRESENTATIVE

The flight arrived on time. Some of the luggage was delayed so there might be some stragglers but everyone was cleared. No one was detained.

AISHA

But my son and my cousin were on the flight...

AIRLINE REPRESENTATIVE

Miss, there's not much else I can do. Is there any other family--

Aisha grabs her bag and storms out of the office. Malik runs behind her, quietly thanking the representative.

122 EXT. JFK AIRPORT - AIRTRAIN - NIGHT

122

Aisha stares into space. Malik beside her, unsure of what to say or do. A quiet urge overcomes her.

She tries Mariatou again, pressing the phone to her ear. Listening.

The sound of a phone ringing nearby arrests her attention.

Instinctively Aisha stands up, floating towards the ring. Eyes searching. The distinct ring stops suddenly. just as Mari's familiar voicemail sings out--

MARIATOU (V.O.)

Hi, how are you...Ha just kidding!  
You've reached Mariatou. Leave a message...

But Aisha has already dropped the phone away from her ear. Eyes widening in disbelief--impossibility roaring through her mind.

Her gaze lands on MARIATOU. In the flesh. Rueful but real. The woman we've come to recognize in Aisha's phone, a chimera materialized--the very personification of Aisha's past colliding with her present.

Mariatou is too busy struggling with her oversized suitcase to notice Aisha breathlessly approaching her. She locks eyes with Aisha just as an Airtrain approaches, thrumming closer.

Palpable fear etched in Mariatou's face as she stands to face Aisha, close enough to touch her...

AISHA  
Where is he?

Mariatou tries to back away, her gargantuan suitcase impeding her path.

MARIATOU  
Aisha...I...

Desperation plucks at both women.

AISHA  
Mari, where is he? Where is Kofi?

Tears stream down Mariatou's face. Aisha lost in a colorless rage grabs Mariatou by the collar of her flimsy jacket.

MARIATOU  
Please!...Aisha...wanted to tell  
you...

AISHA  
WHERE IS HE?

Mariatou drops to her knees before Aisha. Begging for forgiveness.

MARIATOU  
We looked away only for a little  
time...

QUICK POP:

Soundlessness.

Aisha, pressing BABY KOFI's head against her chest, sunlight drenching them in a veil of protection. Baby Kofi coos in response to his mother's loving touch.

QUICK POP:

Aisha's hands loosening their grasp on Mariatou. Looking up. The canopy of sky above them staggering.

Mariatou. Breathless. Wet with tears, sputtering words...

MARIATOU (CONT'D)

...when we went to the  
Beach...waves were too  
strong...didn't know how to tell  
you...He drowned...We looked for  
him...

QUICK POP:

Soundlessness.

Bath water trickles from Aisha's fingertips onto Baby Kofi's glowing face. He gifts his mother the most loving of smiles. She kisses his escarpment of cheeks, like plots of land.

QUICK POP:

Life teeming around her dissipates to noiselessness--Mariatou seemingly in a faraway place still pleads as Aisha floats away.

A synaptic breach of the soul.

Aisha collapses on the Airtrain platform.

CUT TO BLACK.

123 INT. MALIK'S ROOM - DAY

123

Aisha groggily opens her eyes, remembering. She hears a soft susurrus of whispers. Real or imagined, she's not sure. She drifts back to sleep, clutching Kofi's winter coat against her chest.

AISHA (PRELAP)  
I just need some air.

124 INT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - PARLOR - DAY

124

Aisha drinks tea. Puffy, mournful eyes betray her attempt at a consoling smile. Kathleen studies her before sharing a concerned look with Malik.

KATHLEEN  
What you need is rest.

AISHA  
After this walk. I promise.

Aisha places the tea down. Malik and Kathleen on her heels as she makes her way to the door.

Malik makes to go with her, but Aisha firmly presses her hand to his chest.

AISHA (CONT'D)  
Please.

Malik concedes, lingering on brownstone steps. Aisha turns back to grant an affirming smile.

Kathleen watches her through glass.

125 EXT. HARLEM STREETS - DAY

125

Aisha takes in the air. Stares up at burnt orange and red NYC leaves ushering in winter.

126 INT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

126

Aisha opens her eyes. A HERD OF COMMUTERS trample towards her. Some make contact, shoulder bumping her. Unforgiving of her stasis.

CUT TO:

Barreling through a tunnel, wheels spinning, a train flies into the station whooshing inches from--

Aisha--as she stares into space. Her feet linger at the edge of the train platform.

The train slows to a stop. She steps on board.

127 EXT. WEST HARLEM PIERS PARK - DAY

127

Bucolic, expansive water. Lenticular clouds roll through a blue sky.

Aisha: eyes closed, a backpack strapped to her back, steps off a ledge. Her body collides with water, fracturing its surface.

A WOMAN SCREAMS.

Sunlight refracts off bubbles forming just above the water's surface as Aisha sinks...

128 INT. UNDERWATER - DAY

128

Aisha descends, her hair dancing weightlessly around her. Whispers rise to a crescendo as she looks down into endless blackness.

Something grazes her face. She looks up. Kofi gazes back at her hovering above her but beneath the water like an aqua angel.

He extends a small hand. She reaches for his hand, gripping it with every fiber of her being. She wriggles her body out of the heavy backpack sending it falling to the water's depths...

Aisha EXPLODES FROM THE WATER'S SURFACE, gripping a hand that belongs to KATHLEEN: teeth gritted, gripping Aisha by the skin of her clothes. Kathleen struggles with Aisha's weight. Malik helps guide her drenched body onto land as MEDICS surround Aisha...

KATHLEEN  
She's pregnant, please be  
careful...

Aisha sobs into Kathleen's chest, gasping for air, as animal cries erupt from her soul.

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)  
Shhhh...Forgive Yourself. Forgive  
yourself...They wanted vengeance,  
but they also wanted to tell you he  
was gone...

FADE TO WHITE.

129 INT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - DAY

129

LAUGHTER emanates as we snake through the Brownstone, past balloons, streamers...landing on an INTIMATE CROWD of FRIENDS AND FAMILY, including Kathleen, Malik, Sallay.

They surround Aisha as she rips open *baby shower* gifts. She looks to be in her third trimester.

Sallay claps giddily on the sidelines as Aisha holds up a gift.

SALLAY  
That's me!

AISHA  
Thank you Sallay.

Feeling a bit dizzy, Aisha excuses herself from the celebration, reassuring Malik as she makes her way...

130 EXT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - DAY 130

...outside, settling at the bottom of her Brownstone steps.

Aisha exhales deeply, holding her belly. A CAR DOOR SLAM, draws her attention as she studies an INTERRACIAL WHITE/ASIAN COUPLE [30's] moving into the Brownstone next door.

Her gaze lands on a THIN BLACK WOMAN [mid 20's] trailing behind them. A pale, biracial child [3] is draped over her shoulder, his arms wrapped tightly around her neck.

The woman locks eyes with Aisha. Aisha waves warmly in return as the woman slows to a stop before her.

Aisha notes a BLACK BOY walking just inches behind the woman.

Aisha extends her hand. The woman shakes it.

AISHA

Aisha.

THIN BLACK WOMAN

Yasmine.

AISHA

How old is he?

Yasmine eyes the sleeping toddler. His pale lids fluttering with dreams.

YASMINE

Timothy is three now.

AISHA

No, your son?

Yasmine furrows her brow, confused. The black boy smiles at Aisha.

YASMINE

How do you know? He's in Haiti.

Stanley is 8 today.

AISHA

Happy birthday to Stanley. If you ever need anything, Yasmine, Feel free to ring our bell. I'm here.

Timothy's mother calls out for Yasmine. Yasmine grants Aisha a warm but befuddled smile as she re-joins the family.

Stanley trails behind Yasmine and Timothy directly in a passing car's path, dissipating into a puddle as the car passes.

Aisha takes a deep breath, cradling her stomach as she alights the brownstone steps. A diaphanous affirmation lurks behind her gaze.

THE END