

IN THE BLACK: A CHILD'S LAUGHTER

FADE IN:

On a television screen...

A BLOND 10 YEAR OLD GIRL with a pony tail sings and dances in a field. It's a sunny day. Tall trees and lustrous flowers surround her. The child rolls on the grass, the bouncing camera follows...

DARREN (V.O.)  
Some places, we find hard to  
leave...we get comfortable...

The girl waves at the camera - her laughter's infectious. She gets up and runs. The camera rocks up and down chasing her. She waves again, racing toward a forested area.

DARREN (V.O.)  
...In other places, no matter how  
much we look, answers don't live...

She spreads her arms out like an angel - flying free. She enters the forest, still seen...

DARREN (V.O.)  
...Leave it at that. Move on.

FADE OUT

EXT. MANHATTAN BRIDGE, NEW YORK - DAY

Sunny day. Traffic moves steadily, exiting the bridge.

INT. DARREN YATES' CAR

DARREN YATES, late 40's - solid build, graying hair, distinguished - follows traffic signs heading into Queens.

Sitting beside him is KIM YATES, mid 40's, dark stylish hair - a natural beauty.

In the back seat of their Dodge Sedan, several packed boxes.

The weather man on the radio chatters about the warm spring day and unusually high temperatures nearing 80 degrees.

SIRENS make their presence felt.

Darren glances at the rear-view mirror. Cars peel off the road; he follows suit. Kim looks over to Darren. An ambulance and fire truck fast approach.

EXT. ROADWAY

The two vehicles accelerate with their SCREAMING SIRENS.

INT. DARREN'S CAR

Darren watches the ambulance and fire truck. His hands rest on the steering wheel, his eyes drift...

CUT TO:

INT. JEFFERY YATES' CAR - NIGHT

JEFFERY YATES, 40, has his hands on the steering wheel and drives. He smiles, glancing over to his son.

10 year old Darren wears a New York Ranger jersey and holds their banner on his lap.

Hanging from the rear view mirror is a cross.

JEFFERY

See what a little prayer can do?

Darren nods, clutching his banner...then loses his smile.

JEFFERY

Darren?

Darren points - up ahead on the horizon, flames and rising smoke. Jeffery drives until a blockade of fire trucks and police cars stop him.

A house is in flames.

JEFFERY

(exiting car)

Don't move.

Darren is captivated by the flames and CRACKLING FIRE. His dad weaves his way through the gathering crowd.

Fire fighters are frantic to contain the flames - the house is crumbling.

Darren drops the Ranger banner, resting his hands on the dashboard.

An animated Jeffery argues with police officers and fire fighters; his voice intensifies.

Darren notices the cross dangling. His hands quiver, eyes now widen - face freezes.

Jeffery SCREAMS and punches his way through a barricade of officers. It takes three of them to bring him down.

Darren looks down at his shaking hands.

KIM (V.O.)

Darren...

INT. DARREN'S CAR - DAY

Darren's hands tremble, grasping the steering wheel. He stares ahead, unblinking at the passing fire truck. The SIRENS wane.

KIM

Darren.

Other drivers continue on their way.

He wakes up, turns to Kim.

KIM

Honey, let's move.

EXT. FOREST PARK, QUEENS - DAY

A TEENAGE GIRL wearing sweat pants and a tank top runs along a pathway. The sun beats down.

She jogs out into an open field to a large body of deep blue water. Another jogger stands as still as a statue by the water's edge.

BRAD HAMILTON, 30, 6'2', good looking, lean build wears a bandanna, fashionable sunglasses, a sleeveless top and nike shorts. He takes his water bottle, pouring a bit on the crown of his head.

The teenager slows down, nearing Brad, as she pulls out her bottled water.

Brad runs his hand along the top of his head. He stops and rubs a spot on the back of his neck before noticing the girl.

His cell RINGS; he answers it.

BRAD

Hey Gwen.

GWEN (O.S.)

They passed you up for the commercial, hon.

He's distracted by the teenage girl.

BRAD

Great.

GWEN (O.S.)

You got a call back for the movie.

BRAD

Really?

He keeps his eye on the teen as she jogs passed him, smiling sweetly. Brad pivots his body in her direction.

GWEN (O.S.)

It's Tuesday at one.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

ESTHER MONROE, 40, short hair, business suit, paces on the porch of a house. A "*For Sale*" sign is posted on the front lawn bearing her name.

Esther's on her cell, taking a drag of a cigarette while in mid conversation...

A SCHOOL BELL RINGS.

TOM (O.S.)

Don't be pissed...

ESTHER

We had a deal Tom.

TOM (O.S.)

It was conditional.

ESTHER

Based on the inspection. My guy's on his way.

TOM (O.S.)

Mine isn't. He changed his mind.

Parallel to the house is an elementary school. Within seconds, a swarm of BOYS & GIRLS exit the front doors.

Esther peers out at children running into parents' open arms. One SAD GIRL, wearing second hand clothes, walks alone.

EXT. CROSS WALK

A CROSSING GUARD stands in the middle of the street stopping traffic as children shuffle along.

INT. DARREN'S CAR

At the front of the vehicle line is Darren.

Kim has her eye on one child, dirty blond. Her mother holds the girl's hand. The child looks in Kim's direction mouthing the words "hi". Kim responds with a half wave, meek smile.

The crossing guard lowers her sign, returns to the side of the road. Darren drives on. Kim loses sight of the child.

EXT. HOUSE

Darren's car passes the "For Sale" house where Esther paces and argues on the front porch...

ESTHER  
(on cell)  
Tom -

TOM (O.S.)  
- Look, it's no secret Esther. You've moved from home to home with no sales for months....People start talking.

Esther flicks the cigarette on the ground, crushing it. Her eyes follow the sad girl crossing the street.

ESTHER  
People are talkin' outta their holes.  
It's gossip.

TOM (O.S.)  
You're bad luck.

ESTHER  
Right, right. Cut the crap. I'm ready to play.

TOM (O.S.)  
Find yourself a new sport.

ESTHER  
Go to hell.

She hangs up, entering the house.

INT. HOUSE

The house is virtually empty except for a table set up in the kitchen, an odd chair. A decades old paint job colors the walls, peeling wallpaper from the 70's decorates the cozy kitchen.

Esther approaches the table picking up a folder. She turns to leave - then GASPS.

JACK  
Hello Esther.

JACK MONROE is a walrus of a man: early 50's, heavy set, wears an outdated suit, average looks and hairline receding.

ESTHER  
What the hell're ya doin' here?

JACK  
You promised to help me.

ESTHER

Look Jack, I have no time for this.  
My mother is -

Jack pushes her back, slamming Esther against a window and cracking the glass.

JACK

Your mother?  
(laughing)  
You mean Aunt Jemima?

Esther's arm is bleeding, blood seeping through Jack's tightly gripped fist.

JACK

You don't have no mama Esther. Ya  
never did.

ESTHER

Shut up.

He squeezes, she winces.

JACK

No one wanted you - 'cept me.

Esther knees Jack in the groin. He grabs her hair, she screams. She swings her hand across Jack's face, cutting his cheek with her ring.

Jack's bent over, blood drips from his gash like water from a leaky faucet.

ESTHER

You come around again, I'll get a  
restraining order. Run along now.

Esther fishes out a cigarette, lights it and takes a much-needed drag.

Jack stands straight pulling out a handkerchief and applying it to his cheek.

JACK

Those'll kill ya.

Esther goes digging into her purse. This time she pulls out her wallet, leafing through cash.

Jack snakes his way toward her. Esther keeps her stand as their eyes connect like magnets.

He lunges at her lips. She resists, pulling away, but then just as curtly attacks him.

They kiss, devouring each other. Esther runs her hands through his hair ripping it out by its roots. Jack rubs his hands around her neck, digging his nails into her flesh.

Esther's face becomes partly smeared in blood from Jack's cut. She shoves the money into his hands as they pull apart.

Esther, cool as ice with cigarette in hand, takes a drag. Jack rubs the blood off her cheek with the handkerchief.

JACK

Say hi to mama.

Jack lets out a greasy smile, grunts contently as he turns and departs.

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, CLASSROOM - DAY

A hand holding a chalk brush wipes over the following words on a blackboard: family, father, mother, brother, sister.

The hand belongs to NOLAN RADFORD. He is in his late 30's, medium build, positive countenance, quick and efficient. Nolan wears a short sleeve black shirt with a striking red tie.

In his other hand, he holds a cell, listening...

WENDY (O.S.)

...I'd like to go see her tonight if that's okay...

Nolan stares at another set of words on the blackboard: light, night, fight.

WENDY (O.S.)

(trying not to cry)

...I know it's not my turn...but...  
...I...I...booked a flight...I...uh...  
gotta pack tomorrow...

Nolan stops and listens...

WENDY (O.S.)

Nolan...I...I can't be here right now. My mom moved to Florida....

Wendy hangs up in mid sentence. Nolan wipes over the words light and night.

INT. NOLAN'S HOUSE, BEDROOM - NIGHT

Nolan leans over in bed, turning off a lamp - darkness. Laying with her back to Nolan is WENDY - shoulder length dark hair, late 30's.

Nolan slides his hands along Wendy's upper back.

WENDY  
 (firmly)  
 Good night Nolan.

She moves further away from him. Nolan leans his head back into his pillow.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NOLAN'S BEDROOM - LATER ON

Nolan and Wendy are fast asleep...stillness, then a faint noise.

Wendy awakens. She listens, then taps Nolan.

WENDY  
 I heard something.

NOLAN  
 (rubbing eyes, yawning)  
 Go back to sleep..

WENDY  
 (sitting up)  
 Nolan...

NOLAN  
 Alright. Alright.....Wait here.

INT. HALLWAY

Nolan pokes his head out of the bedroom. He flips on a hall light and finds VANESSA, 10 years old, dark, long tangled hair laying on her stomach, asleep. She wears a red dress with tiny rhinestones.

NOLAN  
 Oh sport...

Nolan shuffles over to her.

NOLAN  
 We're gonna chain you to that bed.

WENDY (O.S.)  
 Nolan?

NOLAN  
 (kneeling down)  
 It's just our sleepwalking princess.

Wendy comes out of the bedroom, yawning at the doorway.

Nolan places his hand on the back of her head - it's wet.

Wendy sees blood on his hand and SHRIEKS. She bolts to him.

Nolan turns Vanessa over. Blood is splashed across her face; her upper forehead has a bullet hole.

NOLAN

NO!

WENDY

VANESSA!

All of a sudden, a gloved hand wraps itself around Wendy's mouth, muffling her scream. A second hand holds a gun.

Nolan looks up when someone else grabs him from behind. He half turns and sees a MASKED FIGURE.

The intruder raises a knife swiftly and comes down...

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Emergency ward. CHAOS. Gurneys race along the corridors. BABIES CRYING. Patients impatiently waiting. Nurses taking names. Doctors being PAGED.

Nolan lays on a gurney, his face bloodied, bandages across his naked chest.

Beside him, Wendy is more conscious, less hurt.

Nolan's vision is blurred. ECHOING VOICES pierce in and out of his semiconscious state.

SQUEALING WHEELS. Nolan lifts his head - a nurse pushes a cart toward him.

A doctor gently rests Nolan's head back down. They wipe the blood from his face.

Nolan glances over to Wendy beside him - she cries, but he can barely hear her. A nurse inserts a needle into Wendy's arm.

Everything slows down....sounds muffled.

The nurse applies a needle to Nolan - his eyes squeeze shut.

INT. NOLAN'S HOUSE, LIVING ROOM - EARLY EVENING

Nolan's eyes pop open, shaken awake. His black, short sleeve shirt is drenched with sweat; he loosens his red tie.

Nolan sits up in a haze. Children's papers lay scattered on the coffee table along with a half eaten dinner.

The living room is painted in a golden hue decorated with modern furniture, fancy drapes cover the front bay window.

Nolan hurries over to the window, peeking through the drapery - the setting sun strikes his eyes. He's jittery, taking off his red tie.

Everything is still. He sees the kitchen, dining room, then strides to the carpeted staircase. He looks up - unsettled.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Nolan stands in the hallway glancing down on the carpet where Vanessa's slain body once lay.

He turns to a portrait of him, Wendy and Vanessa which hangs on the wall, happier times. Nolan's drawn to the portrait and decides to take it down.

He proceeds to a closed bedroom door on which he rests his hand, sliding it down the dark wood.

EXT. HAMILTON'S HOUSE - EARLY EVENING

Brad breathes heavily, dressed in his jogging gear, he stands at the front door of a house. He drinks his bottled bottle, rubs the back of his neck before entering the house.

BRAD

Hello?

CHERYL (O.S.)

Who's there?

BRAD

(dropping smile)

It's me mom.

INT. HAMILTON HOUSE

The house is dark, blinds pulled. Brad sees newspapers piled high in the living room and plastic covering on the couch.

CHERYL HAMILTON dashes passed Brad to the front door. In her 60's, she has graying hair and wears a frumpy dress and plaid apron.

CHERYL

(closing door)

You'll let in a draft.

Brad wipes sweat from his brow.

Cheryl bee-lines back to the kitchen. Brad follows unwillingly. He stops to admire a photo hanging in the hallway.

A young Brad with a crew-cut stands beside a teenage girl; both are wearing winter attire with skates hanging from their shoulders.

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