

ALI

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. MIAMI STREET - MOVEMENT - NIGHT (1964)

in the dark. Coming toward us. Up and down in sync to an INSTRUMENTAL LEAD-IN from somewhere. A slip of light. A glimpse of somebody in shadow under a sweatshirt hood, staring at us, in and out of the dark as...

INT. THE STAGE, HAMPTON HOUSE CLUB - EMPTY FRAME - NIGHT

A man walks into the shot, grabs a microphone, slips out of his jacket and looks at us. He wants to tell us something. He's in a lavender light. This is SAM COOKE. What he calls out...a throaty mixture of gospel, soul and sex...is "Let me hear it!" And WOMEN SHRIEK. He says, "Yeah!" They answer, shrieking, "Oh, yeah!"...

EXT. MIAMI STREET - HOODED MAN'S FACE - NIGHT

up and down, running along a dark road in the dead of night, passing vacant lots with debris amid trees and faded buildings. He is CASSIUS CLAY. He runs in construction boots. His eyes stare from under the hood. He passes the husk of an abandoned car, a pastel storefront. We're in Overtown, Miami's inner-city black neighborhood.

INT. THE STAGE, HAMPTON HOUSE CLUB (MIAMI) - SAM COOKE

shouts, "Don't fight it! We gonna feel it!" The women in the audience answer: "Gotta feel it!"

EXT. MIAMI STREET - CASSIUS - NIGHT

now runs diagonally across NW 7th INTERCUT with Cooke shouting, "Yeah!"

EXT. MACARTHUR CAUSEWAY - CASSIUS - NIGHT

SAM COOKE'S AUDIENCE (O.S.)

Oh, yeah!

Cassius runs toward us. Off to the side in the black-mirrored water of Biscayne Bay, leaden clouds in a black sky. And now Sam Cooke SINGS "...because you make me wanna mooove...!" and breaks into the first verse of "Feel It." But we see Cassius' eyes are FOCUSED, CONCENTRATED, ELSEWHERE. To where is this man running? Why is his expression so distant? A WHITE LIGHT suddenly hits him from behind. He looks over at...

WIDE FROM THE FRONT: CASSIUS + A METRO-DADE POLICE CAR

that's slowed, clocking the suspicious, running black man. The driver starts to pull over, to hassle Cassius. Then, the cop riding shotgun gets a radio call. He taps the driver's shoulder. They take off, the driver laughing. Cassius looks after the white cops. He is neither relieved nor angry. He's dismissive. And, instead, he sees something else...

INT. A BOARD ROOM - GORDON DAVIDSON - DAY

and six other patrician, white business-people of Louisville in their green baize and wood-paneled Luxo boardroom. They speak soundlessly and patronizingly to Cassius Clay, Sr., seated at the foot of the table. It relates to the stack of contracts in front of him. He is in a suit and tie, his hair and moustache are dapper. His tie's a little loud. He has his hands folded deferentially in front of him.

LSG BOARD MEMBER

(reading)

"...the successor trustee shall be fully authorized to pay or disperse such sums from the income or principal as may be required."

(beat)

Do you understand so far, Mr. Clay?

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.

Uh, yes, I do.

We get the impression that, if he doesn't understand what he's being told, he's faking it. He is conforming, delivering socially mandated deference...

FRONTAL: CASSIUS, SR.

and BEYOND HIM, seated against the wall, is Cassius, Jr. in sport jacket and tie. Right now he looks to his left and to the right, and only then do we notice the entire wall he's against is covered with pictures of thoroughbreds and studs this Louisville Sponsoring Group owns as well. He is one among their sporting possessions. He doesn't like it. He looks at the back of his father listening.

LSG BOARD MEMBER

Are you sure, sir?

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.

Yeah. I follow you.

LSG BOARD MEMBER
 Okay. 'Cause I'd be happy to
 explain any of these terms.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
 No, thank you.

LSG BOARD MEMBER
 Thank you, sir.

EXT. MACARTHUR CAUSEWAY - CLOSER: CASSIUS' EYES - NIGHT

back here, now, crossing through black night and over black
 water of the MacArthur Causeway. We start to HEAR pop pop
 pop pop pop pop POP over Sam Cooke's music, and Sam Cooke's
 image SUPERIMPOSES as he segues from "Feelin'" to "Bring It
 On Home." And the pop pop pop pop pop carries us into...

INT. THE FIFTH STREET GYM, (MIAMI) - SPEED BAG - DAWN

Cassius' fists fly in a reeling motion, hitting the speed
 bag. But it's his eyes that arrest us...focused, concentrated.

OVER CASSIUS' SHOULDER: BROWN SPEED BAG

is a blur. And it SLOWS and becomes a brown boxing glove
 driving in a SLOWED straight line right at us like a piston.
 OVER the glove, pushing the fist at us is SONNY LISTON. The
 brown glove hits...

INT. RING - A BOXER (N.D. BOXER)

in a linear left jab. These punches are watched by Cassius'
 eyes in the Fifth Street Gym...studiously studying Liston's
 feet...straight-line movement...the jab, linear and straight
 at us. But it SLAMS into the Boxer, not Cassius. Down he
 goes. He's out. The referee pulls out his mouthpiece.
 It's a bloody mess. Teeth have been knocked out with it, so
 devastating is Sonny Liston... A distant crowd ROARS.

INT. RING - CASSIUS - NIGHT

VERY CLOSE, climbs into the crush with other contenders.
 Victorious, Liston, being escorted out, passes very close to
 him on purpose to say...

SONNY LISTON
 (whispers; low)
 Gonna fuck you up. Gonna beat you
 like I's your daddy...

To Cassius, boxing is dangerous athletics, but Liston's
 malevolence is straight from the street.

INT. FIFTH STREET GYM - CASSIUS' EYES

SEE...

INT. CHURCH - THE BACK OF HIS FATHER'S HEAD

working. He's painting a mural. It's the face of WHITE JESUS with blue eyes and blonde hair. CASSIUS, SR.'S EYES painting... EYES OF 12-YEAR-OLD CASSIUS, JR. watching white Jesus go up on the Negro Baptist Church in Louisville become...

INT. FIFTH STREET GYM - CASSIUS' EYES

watching now...

INT. A CITY BUS - WATCHING - DAY

the back of his own head moving through a tunnel of white faces, holding his mother's hand, passing the balloon faces of nice white passengers, teenagers in athletic sweaters going to high school, some children, all seated. MOVING through to the rear of the bus where, standing, are black women, heavysset with heavy legs, and middle-aged black men with large, rough hands, crowded on their way to the day's labor or domestic jobs in the back of the bus.

12-YEAR-OLD CASSIUS LOOKS

at a newspaper being refolded by one man in front of his face...

CASSIUS' POV: LOUISVILLE COURIER: EMMETT TILL

Published nationwide, it shows his gouged-out eye, the barbed wire noose around his neck, the mutilation to his face because at 14 years old he winked at a white girl in Alabama.

CASSIUS, JR.

is frozen by the image. It will haunt him for most of his life. The man holding the paper sees the boy's fear and pushes the paper out at him as a rough joke. Cassius reacts. Then, the man rises and offers his seat to Odessa. Then someone shouts...

ANGELO DUNDEE

TIME!

INT. FIFTH STREET GYM - CASSIUS

PAST him a short man in a white shirt, ANGELO DUNDEE, has entered with a folded newspaper under his arm.

And Cassius -- elsewhere -- SLAMS the speed bag with a right hook, and the bag becomes...

INT. THE MASJID AL ANSAR-MOSQUE - CASSIUS - DAY (MIAMI)

in black glasses, leaning against a wall.

MALCOLM X (O.S.)

...and those of you who think you came here to hear us tell you, like these Negro leaders do, that times will get better and we shall overcome someday, I tell you: you came to the wrong place.

MALCOLM X is at the podium. Ceiling fans. We could be in Tripoli.

MALCOLM X (CONT'D)

'Cause your times will never get better until yo make them better. And any of you who think you came here to hear us tell you to turn the other cheek to the brutality of the white man and the established system of injustice in this country, to beg for your place at their lunch counter, I say again! You came to the wrong place.

And Cassius is there in a black shirt, standing in the back. Malcolm X sees him, nods...the casualness attests their familiarity is close and extensive...

MALCOLM X (CONT'D)

(beat)

'Cause we don't teach you to turn the other cheek. We don't teach you to turn the other cheek in the South. We don't teach you to turn the other cheek in the North. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches you, instead, to obey the law. To carry yourselves in a respectable way. And a proud Afro-American way. But at the same time...we teach you...that anyone who puts his hand on you? Do your BEST...to see he doesn't PUT HIS HAND on any...body...else...AGAIN.

INT. FIFTH STREET GYM - LUMINOUS HOOP - MORNING

Whopwhopwhopwhopwhop...as first rays of golden light illuminate the jump rope spinning effortlessly over his head in a blur. Dust dances in light through the two dirty windows with boxing gloves and "Fifth Street Gym" painted on them. It's that time of day Jack Johnson called the "fighter's hour," "...between the night and the light..." ...whopwhopwhopwhopwhop... And Angelo Dundee puts on a pot of coffee. He washes his hands in a dirty sink, thoroughly drying them. Alert and clean, he's old school. He goes back to the edge of the ring, reading his newspaper. Now, crossing past the white windows is DREW "BUNDINI" BROWN. He takes an orange out of his pocket, sitting on a bench, silently peels it... As Cassius "walks" the rope, jumping up and back.

ANGELO DUNDEE

(approving; past newspaper)

Yeah. Like that, Daddy. Don't jump in one place. Bad for the heart. That's the most important thing.

(without looking)

TIME!

Cassius drops the rope where he stands, and walks off as Sam Cooke...

INT. THE HAMPTON HOUSE CLUB - SAM COOKE

segues into "Bring It On Home" and women in the front row reach out for him. The heat between Cooke and them is palpable. The first row is going crazy as...

INT. FIFTH STREET GYM - CASSIUS

sits into our frame, glistening with sweat, directed through tortuous calisthenics by the hands of Luis Sarria.

ANGELO DUNDEE

TIME!!!

INT. HAMPTON HOUSE CLUB - HIGH + WIDE FRONTAL: SAM COOKE'S

sweating. The place is rocking as...

INT. THE RING, FIFTH STREET GYM - CASSIUS' EYES - DAY

alive, sparring. But Cassius never throws a punch... He jerks back, sliding away, an inch away from being hit. He circles in a movement that seems off-balance and then becomes fluid and changes rate, faking out where you think he'll be. His sparring partner throws a jab that misses and

follows with a hook. Cassius slips it by an inch. Entering the gym, now, is gregarious DR. FERDIE PACHECO with a young, afro'd HOWARD BINGHAM, who starts photographing while LUIS SARRIA looks at us. None of the gathered crowd, the greatest "corner" in boxing, breaks his concentration. He's in his zone. We're in the ring. Cassius, trance-like, hands down, circles and slips in no predictable way as...

INT. A LIMOUSINE - NOW CASSIUS IS - DAY

zenned out in SLO-MO on the way somewhere in a suit and tie. People on the Miami streets drift by. The slow-moving limo floats on its soft suspension through the pastel heat of Miami. While Sam Cooke...

INT. HAMPTON HOUSE CLUB - SAM COOKE

drives to the big climax of "Bring It On Home To Me...!" counter to the limo's EXTREME CALM as Sam Cooke's medley ends and...

INT. A HALLWAY, THE MIAMI CONVENTION CENTER - CASSIUS - DAY

in a terry-cloth robe, walks faster and faster as Dundee and Bundini, Bingham and his cameras, Pacheco and RUDY race to keep up. And as Cassius slams through a door into a large room...

INT. THE WEIGH-IN ROOM, MIAMI CONVENTION CENTER - CASSIUS - DAY

EXPLODES:

CASSIUS/BUNDINI

(shout)

Float like a butterfly! Sting like a bee! Rumble, young man, rumble. Aaaaaaargh!

CASSIUS

Sonny Liston: you ain't no champ!
You a chump!

(beat)

You want to lose your money, bet on Sonny. He know I'm great. He will go in eight!

500 press, promoters and boxing people turn and stare!

CASSIUS (CONT'D)

What you lookin' at, you ugly bear?!

LISTON a tree trunk in boxing shorts, can't wait to pull apart this kid.

CASSIUS (CONT'D)
C'mon, bum. I whup you right here!

Cassius pushes past people and leaps at Sonny! He wants to rumble right now. Bundini, Rudy, Dundee, Liston's handlers struggle to keep them apart, wrestle Cassius onto the scale.

A MAN
(reading)
...210... Cassius Clay weighs 210
pounds.

CASSIUS
(changes down)
You sure you got that right...?

The man nods. Cassius gets off, is pulled aside. And Liston gets on: unremitting stare of death at Cassius...

THE MAN
218. Sonny Liston...the heavyweight
champion of the world weighs 218
pounds...

BUNDINI
Pounds of what?!

And Cassius goes off again...

CASSIUS
Pounds of ugly! He so ugly, sweat
run backwards off his forehead to
get away from his face! C'mon,
bear! I turn you into a rug!!
Rumble right now, man!

He's restrained by Angelo and Bundini.

SONNY LISTON
(low)
Keep talkin', punk-ass faggot!
I'll fuck you up like I's your daddy...

Handlers break it up and hustle Liston out of there.

CASSIUS
You whup me, I'll crawl out of the
ring on my knees and catch the next
jet plane out of the country.

JIMMY CANNON
(older reporter)
That a promise?

Laughter.

CASSIUS
 (to Jimmy Cannon)
 ...you be the first eatin' his words!

A Doctor claps a cuff around Cassius' arm, taking blood pressure.

THE DOCTOR
 (alarmed, to Pacheco)
 210 over 110?! I can't let him in
 the ring in this condition!

REPORTERS
 (shout)
 Liston says he'll talk with his
 fists. "Lip from Louisville."
 (laughter)
 ...odds 7:1 against you. Big bet's
 whether he'll knock you out in the
 first round or third round or kill
 you altogether. You scared of him?

CASSIUS
 I'm scared of no man. I give Sonny
 Liston talking lessons, boxing
 lessons and falling down lessons.

CANNON/OTHERS
 Yeah, sure. Are you a Black Muslim?
 Pat Putnam in the Miami Herald said...

CASSIUS
 "Black Muslim"'s a press word...

Dundee's defensive, fast...

ANGELO DUNDEE
 Man's religion's his own business.
 What kinda question's that?

REPORTERS/HOWARD COSELL
 Does he hate white people? Malcolm
 X was in town. Then he left. Was
 that so he wouldn't embarrass you?
 Liston cannot stand you...

ANGELO DUNDEE
 (sees)
 Howard!

HOWARD COSELL

...cannot stand you, Cassius. He
really wants to kill you...

HOWARD COSELL is balding, tall, forties, lugging a tape recorder.

CASSIUS

Howard Cosell, you are an instigator!
(Cosell smiles)
How you get that way? When I'm
done with Liston, I'm comin' for you!

Dundee uses that to end the conference before it strays into "Black Muslim" territory. Meanwhile on the way out...

DOCTOR

(to Pacheco)

It doesn't come down, I cancel this
fight. You call me in an hour with
his blood pressure.

EXT./INT. MIAMI RENTAL HOUSE - DR. PACHECO - DAY

past guards, Bundini, press, starts to enter. Inside, Clay's on the sofa, in his underwear, watching "The Man With the X-Ray Eyes," who has the power to imbue and control from beams emitted from his eyes. Dundee and Bingham hang out.

Cassius' mind is elsewhere. His eyes float to the corner of the doorway before we see Pacheco, even though from the outside, has started to enter...

EXT. CASSIUS' RENTAL HOUSE, BACKYARD - CORNER OF HOUSE - DAY
(MIAMI)

Nothing. Cassius is asleep in a lounge chair...incongruously a TV is run from the house by an extension cord. Cassius wakes. His eyes say, "Who are you?"

BUNDINI

(entering)

I'm called Bundini, rhymes with
Houdini. He was a Jew, too...some
other people call me Fastblack...or
Daddy Mac...

Drew "Bundini" Brown, early forties, holds a hat in his hand, his eyes always seem to be glistening, ready to rage, laugh or cry, tentatively approaches. Cassius' flat eyes return to the television.

BUNDINI (CONT'D)
 (motions at lounge
 chair)

Shorty sent me to Sugar Ray
 Robinson. I gave my power to Sugar
 Ray for seven years, gave him my
 voodoo, my magic. Now Shorty sent
 me to you.

CASSIUS
 Who Shorty?

BUNDINI
 I call him Shorty 'cause he like
 'em circumcised. Original people.
 Like Moses. And I was a babe in a
 basket, too. I was born on a
 doorstep with a note 'cross my
 chest that read, "Do the best you
 can for him, world." I had to suck
 the first nipple come along. I
 didn't run away from home...I been
 runnin' to home.

Cassius should kick him out, but Bundini's got his foot in
 the door of Cassius' attention.

BUNDINI (CONT'D)
 (beat, and his raison d'être)
 Now, I gotta ask you. You fixin'
 them fights? Else no way you could
 tell great Archie Moore what round
 you droppin' him in...all of them
 predictions you make, comin' true.
 Never heard of nobody predictin'
 the round like you. You either a
 phony or Shorty's in your corner.
 Tell me the truth, young man...

Cassius, stretched out, mumbles without looking at him...

CASSIUS
 ...I study every fight. 'Til I got
 a plan. Wear him down two through
 four. Drop him in the fifth round.
 So the p'diction ain't a p'diction.
 It's a plan. And 'cause of all the
 poppin' off I do, I know I gotta
 win! That's the truth. And why
 I'm tellin' you?

BUNDINI

'Cause I'm gonna be your Inspiration.
Your motivator. In your corner.
Can I be in your corner, young man?

CASSIUS

(thinks, then)
Yeah...

BUNDINI

(inexplicably moved,
covers)
Ain't spent much time in Miami.
Where the water?

Cassius has drifted off, back to watching TV. What he sees as his eyes close is:

INT. MIAMI RENTAL HOUSE - PACHECO

The blur of Pacheco taking his blood pressure. Now Cassius looks and his shaman, Bundini, enters.

PACHECO

120 over 80?
(re: his blood
pressure)
You should be asleep...

The weigh-in episode was an act. We take a different measure of this man. Pacheco sits next to Cassius and eats some of his potato chips.

INT. MIAMI CONVENTION CENTER, A DRESSING ROOM - HANDS - EARLY EVENING

being wrapped. Cassius' shirt is off, sitting on a bench in the dressing room...the ritualistic tradition, having his hands taped. Dundee expertly does it. In the background, Bundini, Pacheco, Bingham, Rudy and Two Men in dark suits, someone from Liston's camp, and a State Boxing Inspector watch. Then, the door opens for Malcolm X, in a dark suit, thin tie. Cassius lights up. Dundee is done. The Boxing Inspector signs the tape. Then, Dundee puts on gloves and laces them while...

CASSIUS

When you get back?

MALCOLM X

Just now. I'm front row, seat 7.

RUDY

I'm gonna find Mom and Dad.

CASSIUS

You could have stayed. Nobody
gotta hide when they with me.

MALCOLM X

Nothing wrong with being cool, my
brother. You been working toward
this moment for four years.

ANGELO DUNDEE

(while tying)
He's right.

Dundee turns away to tear two strips of tape while Cassius and Malcolm face into a corner. Sarria throws a towel over Cassius' shoulders. Arms bent, head down, a true believer, he silently stands in prayer, bowing to the east with Malcolm. During this, Dundee starts collecting his cut gear on table.

MALCOLM X

It's a crusade in modern times.
And television is beaming if off
Telstar to the whole world. So
Allah has brought this about for a
reason...

(time to leave)
Salaam alaikum, my brother...

And as he goes, leaving us, not Cassius, incomplete, Cassius returns to Dundee, who ties gloves and puts tape over the knot. The Inspector signs that, too.

INT. A CORRIDOR, CASSIUS - NIGHT

A door slams open. Cassius comes along the hallway, his entourage surrounding him. Three large middle-aged white officials accompany him, too. His face is set in stone. White towels are draped over his head onto his shoulders. Bundini chirps in his ear. Dundee, like a plumber, carrying the tools of his trade...a bucket, his swabs and Vaseline. And they seem distant to Cassius. They reach the end of the corridor, and against the wall stand three or four older bad cigar guys. A curtain...the sounds from the arena drift into the hallway. Cassius is on his toes now, dancing, dancing. And as if being drawn by a force we can't see, he just goes...his entourage, as if holding on, carried along by him...

INT. THE MIAMI CONVENTION CENTER - NIGHT

He comes into the hall...there are shouts, some scattered applause, some booing, growing; and the sound moves through the arena...the sounds of expectations, ridicule, potential

violence. But past the faces and the press, what's arrested Cassius' attention and makes him oblivious in his solitude to all else is the bright 20-by-20-foot place he wants to be most in all the world: the ring.

INT. THE RING - CASSIUS - NIGHT

is struck by the brilliance. Illuminated, ready to go... dancing...warming up. Counter to an expectation of anxiety, Cassius can't wait to get this on. Other sounds happen...irrelevant to him...and now the distant sound of Liston coming into the ring...his bulked-up presence, the roar he inspires, somewhere over there. And all of a sudden, Cassius turns to face the angry man who wishes him death. Cassius rocks left and right, like a tough kid on a corner ready to rumble. The hysteria act is gone; so is the boasting. Instead, there is only Cassius' stare. The effect is enigmatic: what is going on here? A Referee, like a distant bird, says something we don't hear...

In the corner, his feet float, waiting. There's the BELL for ROUND ONE.

INT. RING - ROUND ONE - WIDE

It starts.

LISTON

right away throws a left that misses and attacks Cassius, throwing seven more that Cassius with extreme, awkward caution evades.

He is fearful of the monster whose punches he has yet to feel. Nevertheless, he does his job: measure Liston's range and speed. Then, a body shot catches him above the heart. Cassius feels the real power of Liston. It could stop your heart's beating. He survives. Then...

CASSIUS

throws his long left jab. It keeps Liston at a set distance. He has Liston's range, now, and he dances away from Liston's charges. Then, halfway through the round, Cassius' eyes have hunted out an opportunity, and he throws his first combination with a few hard shots that, to Liston's surprise, rock Liston's head back. And, then, Cassius easily evades...

LISTON'S

furious big misses to the left and right.

CASSIUS

keeps tagging Liston with his long left. And, now, infuriates Liston even more by merely walking away from Liston's big misses, provoking even wilder and more inaccurate Liston assaults. (We're aware that any Liston shot could knock out Cassius if it connected.) Then Cassius soaks up a couple of body shots, most flicks his jab, slides, dances, clinches, circles away...UNTIL...

AT THE END OF THE ROUND

Cassius launches a second combination, slams a couple of big lefts Liston's way that rock his head back two times. Liston's so furious, he flips, charging Cassius, who hits and ducks at the same time. The BELL RINGS THREE TIMES before they stop.

CLAY'S CORNER - CASSIUS

breathes hard. Dundee works. Cassius says something we can't hear.

CASSIUS

He was supposed to kill me. Well,
I'm still alive.

Angelo is talking to Clay a mile a minute, while Clay MUGS an open mouth...to the press, ridiculing their accusation he was all talk. It's clear he controlled Round One to everyone's surprise.

THE BELL. INT. RING, ROUND TWO - CASSIUS + LISTON

We see press with typewriters, ribbon, microphones, note pads; massive TV cameras hang on platforms over two of the corners. It's a desultory, lower-key version of Round One. And...

BIRD'S NEST TV CAMERA + MEDIA

Coverage segues to Liston, who throws and misses a few lefts. Cassius tags him with a few rights.

THE BELL. CASSIUS

literally ambles into the corner.

SONNY'S CORNER: HIS TWO TRAINERS

Liston's getting a lot of strident advice. THE BELL.

INT. RING, ROUND THREE

LISTON'S LEFT

comes in like a freight train. Cassius merely leans away to avoid Liston, circles and now snaps off a flurry and OPENS A CUT UNDER SONNY'S LEFT EYE. Then, he splits out of there.

ANNOUNCER

(at ringside, on radio)

He's opened a cut on Liston.

Liston's never been cut!

And Cassius, seizing opportunity, hits Liston with more combinations. If Cassius won Round One, probably but not certainly won Round Two, he now demonstrates he OWNS Round Three. It's a symphony of classical Cassius Clay footwork, flicked jabs that confuse, and, then, hard-hitting combinations that rock the presumably immovable Liston. No one told Sonny that Cassius could hit. And, at 210 pounds, he hits HARD. Liston, angered, panicked, knows he's losing and goes after Cassius and misses wildly as the BELL ends Round Three...

INT. CLAY'S CORNER - CLAY

stands a moment before he sits.

EXTREMELY CLOSE: CASSIUS CLAY

breathing heavily, ignoring the stool and Dundee and Bundini, looks around. THIS IS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 22, TO BE CASSIUS CLAY, TO BE ON TOP OF YOUR GAME AND TO BE ABOUT TO OWN THE WORLD. He looks over the crowd. Only then, turns and sits...

CASSIUS

(to Dundee)

He's nothin' to me...

The genius of Cassius...

CASSIUS (CONT'D)

And he knows it...

INT. LISTON'S CORNER - CORNERMAN

slips a vial of some medicant from his pocket and rubs it into Liston's shoulder.

INT. RING - ROUND FOUR

The BELL RINGS. Clay peppers Liston with jabs. Liston pokes his left at Cassius, trying to reach him. They feint,

circle. Liston gets his left into Cassius' face. It's more a poke than a shot.

CLOSE: CASSIUS

blinks back something...we're not sure what. It seems to go away. Then it's back. The fight continues...

WIDER: CASSIUS

dominating. They clinch. They break. This time Cassius violently blinks his eyes! Something's wrong!

CASSIUS
...my eyes!

A knife-like pain. He can't see. He's getting beaten up. He's in trouble. The BELL.

INT. RING, CASSIUS' CORNER - CASSIUS

sits.

CASSIUS
(shouting)
My eyes! I can't see...somethin'
in my eyes!

Dundee feverishly washes water to get the irritant out of Cassius' eyes.

INT. ARENA

A buzzer sounds, warning the bell's coming for Round Five. Now Cassius stands, saying...

CASSIUS
(his gloves)
Cut 'em off! Cut 'em! I'm blind.

The BELL. Dundee's still in the ring.

ANGELO DUNDEE
No. You quit, it's over! Get out there. Be a yardstick. This is the big one, daddy. Get out there and run!

He literally pushes Cassius into the ring.

INT. RING - ROUND FIVE - LISTON

rushes Clay. He knows this is his chance. Cassius tries to tie Liston up by holding onto the back of his neck, but

Liston pounds left and right hooks. If anybody wondered if Clay could take punishment, this answers that. WHAM-WHAM-WHAM-WHAM-WHAM...five huge hooks.

Liston is desperate to end it while Cassius is in trouble. Haymaker after haymaker; some connect, others are blocked but knock Clay sideways. Clay, still blind, keeps backing and dancing.

CLOSER: CASSIUS' EYES

With a minute left, now, he sees better. Liston throws him into a corner, still trying to put him away. But, he can't, and Liston's energy seems to deflate once he knows that. The BELL.

INT. RING, CASSIUS' CORNER - CASSIUS'

eyes are clear. In 60 seconds he recovers his energy. He's ready. BELL.

INT. RING - ROUND SIX - CASSIUS

can't wait to get out. He shuffles. He circles. He fires combinations. In the early rounds, provoked by Cassius, Liston's anger caused him to abandon his fight plan. Now, having been proven futile, Liston's confidence is gone. He's left with nothing. Psychologically and athletically, Liston is defeated. The BELL. Liston's eyes contemplate the inevitable: face nine more rounds of this.

INT. RING, CASSIUS' CORNER - BETWEEN ROUNDS - AS CASSIUS

waits for the seventh-round bell.

HOWARD COSELL
 (doing color radio
 commentary with Les
 Kelter's blow-by-blow)
 ...Clay, a round ago, looked like
 he'd about had it, but in round six...

Then Cassius, knowing before anybody else, suddenly rises as if on wings. Both arms are in the air...followed by a roar from the crowd...

HOWARD COSELL (CONT'D)
 (realizing, screaming)
 Sonny Liston is not coming out!
 Wait a minute! Wait a minute!
 Sonny Liston is not coming out!

And we can see Liston still sitting on his stool in his corner, spitting out his mouthpiece.

HOWARD COSELL (CONT'D)
 The winner...and the new heavyweight
 champion of the world is Cassius Clay!

Cassius jumps onto the ropes in the corner, rails the crowd:

CASSIUS
 I upset the world! I am the
 greatest! I am the greatest!

All hell breaks loose...

CASSIUS (CONT'D)
 (to press)
 Eat your words! Eat your words!

Howard Cosell, the first to climb into the ring, is on him...

HOWARD COSELL
 What made him so easy for you?

CASSIUS
 I told you. Didn't I tell you?

Bundini gives him a comb. Cassius combing his hair.

HOWARD COSELL
 Was there any single point you knew
 you had him?

And he sees Malcolm leaving his seat...they look at each
 other. Malcolm's huge smile.

CASSIUS
 I had him in the first round.
 'Cause I'm the greatest!
 (and seeing at ringside,
 calling him up)
 Sam... Hey, Sam! Let him up.

And Sam Cooke climbs into the ring.

CASSIUS (CONT'D)
 I am the greatest! And he the
 greatest rock 'n' roll singer. Sam
 Cooke! I want everybody to bear
 witness.
 (they embrace)
 I shook up the world! Don't have a
 mark on me! I was burning. I was
 blind. I'm the prettiest thing
 that ever lived. I shook up the
 world! I shook up the world!

As Sam Cooke embraces Cassius...

INT. ELIJAH MUHAMMAD'S HOUSE, LIVING ROOM - WIDE - NIGHT

A small older man with fine features, ELIJAH MUHAMMAD, THE MESSENGER, sits on plastic-covered furniture in his expensive living room. With him is an expressionless man who, literally, never smiles, in a tailored dark suit. He's JOSEPH 13X. As Elijah Muhammad, the head of the Nation of Islam, contemplates Cassius' victory -- like everyone else in America, he's surprised.

INT. THE MIAMI BEACH CONVENTION CENTER - PAY PHONE - NIGHT

GORDON DAVIDSON is from the Louisville Sponsoring Group, standing in the chaos with another partner and Odessa and Cassius, Sr....

GORDON DAVIDSON

...I don't care what should have been ordered! We need a victory party right now.

(pause)

I got national press, the family, the champ, all kinds of folks...

(beat)

250 to 300. Yes.

INT. THE SIR JOHN NIGHTCLUB - SAM COOKE - NIGHT

singing "Feel It." It's packed with elated people. Outside, celebrations spill out onto the streets...cars honking...

EXT./INT. HAMPTON HOUSE VILLAS - CLOSE ON COOKE AS HE CROSSES - NIGHT

through the club, with lots of partygoers, picks up Chesterfields from the cigarette girl and goes out by pool, around which we see women at tables in cocktail dresses and good-looking men. Most of the rooms' doors are wide open, couples drinking, celebrating...radios playing out into the Floridian night.

INT. THE BALLROOM, THE RONEY PLAZA HOTEL - GORDON DAVIDSON - NIGHT

and others of the Louisville Sponsoring Group in a crowd of predominantly white people, drinking free drinks at the hastily arranged victory party, wait. Sportswriters...Jimmy Cannon, Red Smith. Cassius, Sr. is there. They all wait. No sign of Cassius. "Where's your boy?" A young New York Times sportswriter, ROBERT LIPSYTE, is there as well. He looks like he doesn't belong...his clothes are only perfunctorily conventional, and he's a generation younger.

INT. HAMPTON HOUSE HOTEL ROOM - SAM COOKE - NIGHT

enters and closes the door and greets Malcolm X, in a white shirt, no tie, and Cassius, eating ice cream in a pool of light from the TV. Malcolm's wife, Betty Shabazz, comes out of the kitchenette. A little girl runs from the bathroom back to Cassius. The girl plops into his lap with much familiarity, so we understand Cassius is family and has been for a while. He's not at the Fontainebleau or the Roney Plaza. It says Cassius' sense of himself is more about what's next than what he did tonight.

GIRL

Why's he so scared?

MALCOLM X

Man, look at that guy run!

Cassius feeds the girl some ice cream.

CASSIUS

The Mummy! "I can't get away from the mummy!" Yeah, but that mummy too slow to catch anybody.

SAM COOKE

Hey! The mummy always gets his man...

CASSIUS

No, he don't!
(to kid)
Now, don't believe that stuff on television...

Laughter from the outside. Cassius looks. He's not drawn to all the partying. Malcolm takes a picture with his Contax. Through the door enters Jim Brown. Jim embraces Malcolm and Betty, Sam Cooke, and congratulates the new champ and helps himself to food.

INT. THE HAMPTON HOUSE HOTEL ROOM, 1964 - NIGHT, LATER

The room's near dark. Soft sounds from outside. A laugh. A snatch of music. Malcolm's children are asleep on a cot. And we see Cassius has fallen asleep on the sofa. A bedsheet is over him. Malcolm and Betty, sitting at the table in the kitchenette, quietly talking...an intimate laugh...partners. And as Cassius, the new heavyweight champion of the world, spends the first night of his reign asleep at "home" with this family...

EXT. 125TH STREET + 7TH AVENUE - CASSIUS, MALCOLM + A CRUSH OF PEOPLE (NEW YORK, 1964) - DAY

Suddenly we're in Harlem. The streets are jammed. Making them crazy, causing a riot, coming down the sidewalk, looking like a rock-and-roll star in a black leather jacket, is CASSIUS CLAY and in an overcoat and hat, MALCOLM X. They OWN this day on 125th Street.

EXT. MICHAUX BOOK SHOP - PEOPLE - DAY

engulf them. People are their army. The sea of people press close to their heroes...reaching out to touch the champ, share a joke, laugh. A girl runs up to hug Cassius and runs off. We catch a glimpse on the periphery of Joseph 13X. Seven or eight reporters, black and white, and still photographers and Bingham, half with Cassius, half photographer in privileged position.

A REPORTER

The people look to you. Do you plan on being a people's champ, like Joe Louis?

CASSIUS

(tentative)

Yeah. I going to be a people's champ...

(beat)

But not like Joe Louis, exactly...

A REPORTER

(starts)

Mr. Clay...?

And Cassius drops it on them...

CASSIUS

And I'm not Clay. Clay's the name of the people who owned by ancestors. I don't want to be called after that slave name no more. So I'm "X." Cassius X. And I'm a member of the Nation of Islam. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad is my spiritual guide. Malcolm X is my mentor.

This is hard news!

REPORTERS

(all at once)

You a card-carrying member? Aren't Black Muslims a hate group?

CASSIUS

(droll)

"Card-carrying"...? Don't need no "card." You got a Christian card? 750 million people believe in Islam. I'm one of them.

ANOTHER REPORTER (O.S.)

Minister Malcolm...what about the reports of a split between you and Elijah Muhammad?

JOSEPH 13X: we read his face listening to Malcolm.

MALCOLM X

This is the champ's time. And I'm here as a friend to celebrate his victory. So I got nothing you want...

CASSIUS

I'm going to be a people's champion. But I don't have to be the way you want me to be. I'm gonna be what I want. And I'm free to think any way I want...

And, as he goes on, the crowd knows neither Cassius nor Malcolm will ever turn their backs on them.

EXT. THE HOTEL THERESA - MALCOLM - NIGHT

enters into the street with his Bodyguard and looks up to a top-floor window in which he sees a light is still on at 4 a.m.

INT. THE HOTEL THERESA, CASSIUS' ROOM - CASSIUS - BEFORE DAWN

asleep with the television on. There's a knock on the door. Barely awake, he gets up to answer it. It's Malcolm. Still in his familiar hat and overcoat. He hasn't slept...

MALCOLM X

I was leaving, saw the light on...how come you're up?

CASSIUS

(mumbles, half-asleep)

...watchin' a show on termites...they knockin' down this house, here.

He goes back to lay on the bed. Malcolm looks out the window...the wet streets at night.

MALCOLM X

I been invited to speak at Ibadan University in Nigeria. C'mon with me?

CASSIUS

Six million in your house and you don't know it. Where?

MALCOLM X

Africa. You been there?

CASSIUS

Africa? No. Only Rome. Yeah, man, let's go!

MALCOLM X

Nkrumah stayed with me when he was a student in New York, so we'll stop in Ghana...

CASSIUS

When we leaving?

MALCOLM X

Next Thursday.

Malcolm's distracted. He fingers his glasses.

CASSIUS

(sees)

What is it?

MALCOLM X

You ever been so angry...have you ever been so angry that you'd explode?

CASSIUS

(after a beat)

Tore out a picture of Emmett Till when I was little. Couldn't take my eyes to it...couldn't look at it. Barb-wire around his neck to a 75-pound cotton-gin fan. Took out his eye. The cruelty to it...I couldn't look at it...couldn't throw it away.

MALCOLM X

What else?

CASSIUS

I thought, "What I do wrong to be so low that people could do that to people like me?" It made me feel ashamed. And that makes no sense. But that's what it was.

MALCOLM X

...when I heard about the four girls bombed in the 16th Street Church in Birmingham?

(beat)

The prohibitions of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad prevented me from speaking my voice in action. Because Birmingham was part of the civil rights movement, begging for a place at the white man's table... But dead children...are dead children. So the anger I felt, I had to contain. I locked that down! So tight my muscles seized. I lost control over the right side of my body. Leg didn't work...right arm didn't work. "I'm having a stroke," I thought. I had to hold it in 'cause I wanted, all I wanted was to BREAK SOMETHING! Break a part...any part of this system. Because you are so provoked as a human being. In your spirit. In your heart... At the death of children. But I COULD DO...nothing.

Cassius is quiet.

MALCOLM X (CONT'D)

(putting his glasses
back on)

Everyone knows... Now I'm advocating more direct political action involvement with the international struggle... So Elijah Muhammad has suspended me as a Minister in the Nation of Islam for 90 days.

CASSIUS

You can fix that...

MALCOLM X

I don't know. I will try when we get back. Until then I will live each day as if I am already dead.

That statement surprises Cassius, but he says nothing. Malcolm X stands by the window and watches the day begin in Harlem.

INT. ELIJAH MUHAMMAD'S HOUSE, CHICAGO, 1964 - JOSEPH 13X - DAY

approaches Cassius in a suit and tie and beckons him into a living room in which sits Elijah Muhammad on a plastic-covered white sofa. Cassius is at his most deferential, awed at being in this man's presence. Elijah's power is the inverse of his size. He's short and delicate-featured. He motions for Cassius to sit beside him. Joseph 13X sits across the room with two men.

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD

Only after long service and high merit in the spiritual and physical rebirth of Afro-American people...is one granted an original name. But you are special. A world champion. So there is a gift I wish to give you. From this day forward you will be known as Muhammad Ali...which means "one worthy of praise," and Ali means "most high."

CASSIUS

(a beat, sounding it)
Muhammad Ali.
(humble)
"Worthy of praise..." Thank you!

And he's genuinely moved. As Elijah Muhammad puts his small hands in Muhammad Ali's hands...giving him his blessings...

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD

(cautioning)
Be very careful what you say...your words reflect on the nation of Islam, now.

CASSIUS

Yes, sir.

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD

(after a beat)
Up until now, I have entrusted your spiritual development to Brother Malcolm.
(beat)
I do not feel this is a wise course anymore.

Extremely emotional about Malcolm, tears come to Elijah Muhammad's eyes. Joseph 13X observes in the background. Cassius is taken by surprise at "The Messenger"'s display...

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD (CONT'D)

Malcolm has gone off into the secular world and does not measure his words. I have decided to give you, as your guide, my very own son, Herbert Muhammad.

And he looks across the room...a roly-poly man wearing a bow tie...HERBERT MUHAMMAD. He has a habit of nervously straightening his shirt. A seemingly mild, pleasant man, he is without self-definition. Below this avuncular surface, he defines himself by quietly desiring and acquiring what is others'.

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD (CONT'D)

Herbert will supervise all of your spiritual and material needs.

CASSIUS

(not a thought)

This is a great honor, Messenger...

Elijah gives a subtle look and Herbert retreats to where he came from, sitting back on the couch by Joseph 13X...

EXT. THE CLAY HOUSE, LOUISVILLE, 1964 - EVENING

We've entered mid-scene.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.

Why you want to change?

A NEIGHBOR (V.O.)

(to Ali)

Could we get a picture with you?

(to Cassius, Sr.)

You mind, Mr. Clay?

A neighboring family coming to stand beside Ali. Cassius, Sr. steps aside.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR., a sport, a flamboyant man, is impatient. Inside, Odessa Clay and brother, Rudy, are talking.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.

What's wrong with the lawyers and managers you got?

A NEIGHBOR

One more.
(click)
Thank you.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.

Yeah, yeah...

They leave.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR. (CONT'D)

You got...I got you the best white
men I could find. Right here in
L'ville...

ALI

When the contract run out. I want
black lawyers and managers.
Chauncey Eskridge on North La Salle
Street...

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.

(angrily)
They saved you from the gangsters,
from the jackals and the hyenas of
boxing. Never cheated you.
Protected you with a trust fund...

ALI

I don't need no "protectin'" from
myself. Why I need protecting from
myself by them...?

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.

And now I got to go tell them,
"Piss off. Cassius don't want you
around no more."

ALI

I ain't one of their thoroughbreds!
Or their charity things. "Let's do
somethin' for that well-behaved
colored boy, Cassius." I ain't
well-behaved nothing! I am a man.

The light starts to go...porch lights starting to come on...

ALI (CONT'D)

And I am not Cassius. I changed my
name. I am Muhammad Ali, now.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.

You what?

ALI
That's right.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
(stunned)
What? What's wrong with...our name,
my name...? We're...we made you.
We...

ALI
No one "made me"...

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
No bow-tie-wearin', Arab-talkin'
nigger gonna change that...

ALI
(anybody's son)
I made me.
(adamant)
No one's in that ring but me!

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
You don't know who you are...

ALI
I know who I'm not...I'm not
drinkin'! Goin' back on my wife!
I am not prayin' to no blue-eyed,
blonde-haired Jesus. I ain't...

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
Paintin' blue-eyed, blonde-haired
Jesuses and signs on cars is what
put steak and vegetables in you,
clothes on you...

ODESSA CLAY
...dinner!

And we realize it has gotten too dark to see...

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
(cold)
Go ahead!

Bitter silences.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR. (CONT'D)
Go ahead.

Cassius, Sr. walks off...his back arched too straight,
trying to hold his pride together.

ODESSA CLAY

You didn't get it from me...your words, your sense of humor, what makes you angry, what makes you a fighter. You got that from your daddy...

ALI

You saying I'm just like him?

ODESSA CLAY

I'm saying, if he was your age today, he'd do the same as you. And he knows that.

And Odessa goes back inside.

INT. MALCOLM'S HOUSE, KITCHEN (QUEENS, NEW YORK), 1964 - NIGHT

We see Malcolm at work at the kitchen table. It's cluttered and small. The telephone rings...

ONE OF HIS CHILDREN (OVER)

Daddy... For you...

Malcolm gets it.

JOSEPH 13X (V.O.)

Brother Malcolm...

MALCOLM X

What is it, Joseph?

JOSEPH 13X (V.O.)

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad has given the Muslim name, Muhammad Ali, to Cassius X. Herbert Muhammad's been placed in charge of his training, instead of you.

(and ultimately)

Muhammad Ali will not be traveling with you to Africa.

Malcolm's still. He's been co-opted.

JOSEPH 13X (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad has asked me to inform you your suspension has been extended indefinitely.

Joseph 13X hangs up. Malcolm quietly closes the door. Malcolm dials a number. No answer.

Betty has come in. They exchange a look.

BETTY SHABAZZ
 (concerned for her husband)
 Malcolm?

MALCOLM X
 (after a beat, disconsolate)
 Cassius won't be coming to
 Africa...not with me.

She puts her hand on Malcolm's shoulder.

BETTY SHABAZZ
 Go anyway. Don't put it off. It's
 not safe here.

ONE OF HIS CHILDREN (OVER)
 (calling)
 Mommy...the bath's ready...

CUT TO:

INT. GHANA AIR DC-8 COCKPIT - ALI - NIGHT

in first class on a "Ghana Airlines" flight to Africa. Close by is Herbert Muhammad. Howard Bingham and Ali's brother, Rudy, are across the aisle from him, asleep... The plane bumps in choppy air.

Muhammad, unable to sleep, a nervous flyer, gets up. He wanders up the aisle to the front of the plane. A Stewardess comes out of the cockpit. Muhammad slows, startled by the pilots. Both pilot and copilot are black.

ALI
 (joking)
 Hey, man, where they put the real
 pilot? What you doin' up here?

PILOT
 (not understanding;
 British accent)
 I am...the pilot. He's the
 copilot...
 (moves map case)
 Here, Mr. Clay, sit down...

ALI
 No, man, I meant...in L'ville, when
 I growed up, they barely let black
 folks drive buses.

Ali looks out the window...a new day dawns over the land. Then Bingham shows up over Ali's shoulder. They all pose, facing the rear of the cockpit. Then, the Pilot points to the coast below them and the sunrise...

THE PILOT

Here we are. Cote d'Ivoire...Africa.

CUT TO:

EXT. BUILDING IN CAIRO - CABLE - DAY (EGYPT)

snakes out a building. CAM FOLLOWS IT and we HEAR...

BETTY SHABAZZ (V.O.)

We should think of a name, Malcolm...

INT. CAIRO BUILDING - WIDE: HALLWAY - DAY

MARLIN THOMAS -- paunchy, grey, late 40's -- walks up the stairs carrying take-out food.

MALCOLM X (V.O.)

How about Gamilah or Khalilah?

INT. CAIRO EMPTY APARTMENT - MARLIN THOMAS - DAY

crosses to ANOTHER AMERICAN wearing headphones in the glassed-in balcony where the CABLE connects to a portable tape-recorder.

MARLIN THOMAS

(eating)

Anything?

THE MAN

...on the phone with his wife.
She's having a hard time
sleeping...baby's kicking a lot...

MARLIN THOMAS

Motor Pool, here, have a Chevy
parts catalogue...?

As the CIA monitors Malcolm X...

CUT TO:

EXT. INDEPENDENCE SQUARE, ACCRA - ALI - DAY (GHANA)

in a Mercedes convertible. It's a monumental expression of the force for the independence of black Africa. Accra is a wonder to Ali. A Third World showplace, in 1964 Ghana is alive with the optimism of emerging Africa. Infrastructure

and real estate are well-managed. Under Nkrumah, the city is in a frenzy of building public housing...

ALI

in the three-car caravan, passes the huge triumphal arch with its giant black star on the top. Thousands line the route to see the heavyweight champion and cheer him. For Ali it's another kind of parade...

ALI'S POV: GHANAISANS

They're stockbrokers and street cleaners, salesmen and secretaries, hotel managers and military officers... All is a contrast to the de facto apartheid of the middle America of Ali's experience. They all cheer his caravan as it passes.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE AMBASSADOR HOTEL, ACCRA - MERCEDES - LATE AFTERNOON
(GHANA)

arrives with Ali and entourage. It's a modern hotel. Meanwhile, a different group are about to depart in limos. One among them, a tall Man in a dashiki and sunglasses and carrying a walking stick, separates. He sees Ali. So does the woman next to him. She is the poet Maya Angelou.

MALCOLM X

(shouts)

Brother Muhammad...

Taking off his shades, we realize it's Malcolm X. He wears a goatee, now. Ali turns, sees him. Total surprise.

ALI

Hey, man!!!

They embrace. Ali greets him like the old friend he is. Maya and the Chinese diplomat wait a few steps removed.

ALI (CONT'D)

How you doin'? What's up, brother?
I knew you were here...didn't think
you were still here...

MALCOLM X

And I heard you were coming.

ALI

We just got here now...

(words rush out)

And, maaan, the brothers were flyin'
a DC 8. Flippin' switches,
navigatin', filing flight plans,
talkin' French...

And they remember how much they like each other.

ALI (CONT'D)

Where you goin'?

MALCOLM X

When...uh, Liberia. When you
fighting Liston?

ALI

November.

MALCOLM X

This is Maya Angelou and Ambassador
Huang Ha. Amando Gonzalez is from
Cuba. Taher Kaid is the Ambassador
from Algeria.

Ali waves. They keep their distance.

ALI

Man, where should I go? We're
planning on Egypt.

MALCOLM X

Algeria. See Ben Bella...

(beat)

Go to Mecca, Medina. I just came
back. Made my seven circuits
around the Kaaba, prayed at
sunrise... There were two million
people...pilgrims from all over.
Dressed all the same, high and low,
the same. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed
Muslims. Arabs.

(off Ali's look of
surprise)

Blacks. Yeah. All of them,
Muslims praying together.

INT. AMBASSADOR HOTEL ROOM - MARLIN THOMAS - DAY

who was surveilling Malcolm X in Cairo is here, too. Right
now he picks up the phone. REVEAL at the window an African
Man and another American with binoculars.

BRADLEY (V.O.)
Hello...?

MALCOLM X
It's Marlin. You'll never guess
who Malcolm ran into...

CUT TO:

INT. LEOPOLDVILLE SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - BRADLEY - DAY (CONGO)

BRADLEY
(in French; into phone)
Un moment...

BRADLEY (CONT'D)
(English translation;
into phone)
Hold on a second...

BRADLEY, an American in his late 30's, who's balding and whose mouth is too wide, sits at the teacher's desk in an empty classroom. A heavysset American and two Black African Thugs with M-1 carbines are with him.

MOBUTU'S MILITARY AIDE
(in French)
Le Ministère de Défense vous remercie.

MOBUTU'S MILITARY AIDE (CONT'D)
(English translation)
The Defense Minister thanks you.

Uniformed MOBUTU'S MILITARY AIDE smiles and warmly shakes Bradley's hand. Bradley says "he's welcome" and signals to the Heavysset American. The American leads Mobutu's Military Aide somewhere. Meanwhile...

BRADLEY
(in French)
Il n'y a pas de quoi. Cela m'a
fait grand plaisir. Faites-lui mes
compliments.

BRADLEY (CONT'D)
(English translation)
It's nothing. Give him my compliments.

INT. LEOPOLDVILLE SCHOOL CORRIDOR - MOBUTU'S MILITARY AIDE
FOLLOWS BRADLEY'S AMERICAN

to a sports court. Eight Uniformed Soldiers are with them. In the sports court, on their knees, hands bound behind them, facing away from us, are six prisoners in business clothes.

One is a woman. Guarding them are Bradley's Guards.
 Mobutu's Military Aide's soldiers take over the prisoners.
 Mobutu's Military Aide talks into a walkie-talkie. Meanwhile...

GEN. JOSEPH MOBUTU IN UNIFORM

listens to his walkie-talkie. He has distant eyes. He's heard what he needs and walks up a staircase and around a corner.

INT. LEOPOLDVILLE SCHOOL, SECOND CLASSROOM - MOBUTU

enters. He is the beneficiary of this routine military coup. Other uniformed officers at students' desks now stand and applaud. Mobutu will rename the Congo "Zaire" and we'll see him later. Meanwhile in Ghana...

INT. AMBASSADOR HOTEL ROOM - MARLIN THOMAS - DAY

MARLIN THOMAS

Malcolm bumped into Cassius Clay.
 Muhammad Ali...whatever he calls himself...

BRADLEY

I thought that was all over. Is Clay going to support Malcolm's U.N. resolution?

MARLIN THOMAS

I don't know.

BRADLEY

Find out. We'll pick up on Malcolm in Liberia ourselves.

EXT. AMBASSADOR HOTEL - ALI + MALCOLM X

MALCOLM X

Drank from the well of Zem-Zem...
 And you should visit Cairo. I have friends there in...

Meanwhile...

ALI

(his thoughts)
 ...shouldn't have quarreled with the Honorable Elijah...

The rapport between them becomes fleeting. Ali's attention drifts away. He closes down...

ALI (CONT'D)
 (to himself)
 You shouldn't have...
 (vocalized)
 ...quarreled with the honorable
 Elijah Muhammad...

MALCOLM X
 What?

ALI
 You shouldn't have quarreled with
 Elijah Muhammad.

And Ali separates. He turns away. Malcolm calls after him...

MALCOLM X
 Brother Muhammad...

Ali won't turn back from his rejection of Malcolm. He
 shakes his head "no" and walks off.

MALCOLM X (CONT'D)
 Brother Muhammad...!

INT. TIGER LOUNGE, CHICAGO - SHERI - NIGHT

sings "For Your Precious Love," and REVEAL: ALI + SONJI ROI
 dancing. We're back in Chicago. She's sexy and has a great
 smile and flashing eyes. People leave Ali alone. One Fruit
 of Islam bodyguard is nearby, semi-conspicuous. In a booth
 is Herbert with a date, another FOI guard, and a businessman.
 Sonji, who is sexually overt and fun, is laminated to Ali.
 After a few bars...

ALI
 Sonji...Sonji Roi...

SONJI
 (laughs)
 What you keep sayin' my name for?

ALI
 'Cause I love it, girl. How long
 you been workin' for Herbert?

SONJI
 'Bout a year. I sell "Muhammad
 Speaks" over the phone...

ALI
 What kind of name is that?

SONJI

My father named me after Sonja Henie.

ALI

What's your father do?

SONJI

He was shot in a poker game when I was two. He don't do nothin'. Sonja, on the other hand, was an ice skater, and my mother died when I was eleven.

ALI

So who raised you?

SONJI

Godparents, but I been on my own, doing my own thing...

ALI

Whatcha doin' tomorrow? Go ridin' with me.

SONJI

No. I gotta work, you know.

ALI

I square it with Herbert. I got a record player in my car.

SONJI

A record player? C'mon. How come it don't skip?

ALI

Got springs and stuff.

SONJI

Herbert said you met The Beatles.

ALI

Yeah. Only one of 'em's smart...the one with the glasses.

SONJI

...he's my favorite.

ALI

People all screaming and fainting. I asked him, "This the way they act when you get big?"

SONJI

What he say?

ALI

He said, "Champ. The more real you get, the more unreal it gonna get."

SONJI

Wow...

After Sheri sings the first chorus...

ALI

Let's go...

SONJI

Yeah...

ALI

(crossing out)

Where you live?

SONJI

I'm takin' you there...

Herbert looks up from his booth, starts to ask where they're going...but they're gone. He turns back to the man he's talking to...

INT. SONJI'S APARTMENT - WINDOW - NIGHT (1964)

PULL BACK from being above Chicago in the winter at night to Ali and Sonji making love where Sheri's voice sings the second verse. To Ali's reactions...

ALI

I think I gonna keep you around forever, girl.

SONJI

(laughs)

Well, I'm not too busy right now, so...I'll think on it.

ALI

Herbert said you weren't a Muslim.

SONJI

Cover my hair? No make-up? Long dresses? Honey, please.

(beat)

Were you a virgin?

ALI

Why?

SONJI

(laughs)

'Cause you so "gone" off a little good time.

ALI

I'm no virgin...but I may as well be.

(beat)

I ain't jokin'! I always know when I know. See this face? I mean, you got a pretty face for a girl's face, but you ever seen somethin' as pretty as me? Now, you about five-foot-three...that's too small. But I overlook that, too, 'cause...

SONJI

(sarcastic)

Thank you so much.

ALI

...'cause of your spirit!

SONJI

My "spirit"...?

ALI

Yeah. 'Cause you too much fun!

SONJI

You serious?

She raises his head next to hers, looks in his eyes.

ALI

But you gotta be a Muslim.

SONJI

Huh? How you do that? Step over a broom...shazaam...you a Muslim?

She laughs. He rests his head on her stomach. He likes her irreverence...

ALI

Maaan, I ain't never been with a girl like you.

SONJI

Baby, maybe you ain't ever gonna be
with any other.

They start making love again.

EXT./INT. 50TH ON THE LAKE MOTEL, COFFEE SHOP - ALI, HERBERT,
BUNDINI + BINGHAM - DAY

HERBERT

What?

ALI

That's right. I wanna marry her.

HERBERT

You can't marry that girl! She was
a date! Have some fun! She's not
your wife! You don't marry this
girl.

(puts contracts in
front of him)

Sign there. Management papers. My
father will kill me.

BUNDINI

True love!

Bundini cracks up. Ali signs without even glancing at the
documents. Bingham notices this.

BINGHAM

Watch what you signing, Ali.

HERBERT

(to Bingham; sharp)
Nothing to do with you.

BINGHAM

You talkin' to me, or someone walk
inna room, fat boy? Anything's do
to with me I think's to d-d-do with
me...I'm st-st-still a Christian.

ALI

(signs anyway)
And get me a kosher cook...lady who
cooks at Malcolm's temple. Put my
brother on the payroll. 50g a year
for drivin' and jivin'.

HERBERT

Lana Shabazz...

ALI

Yeah. How 'bout it, Howard. You be my official full-time photographer.

BINGHAM

I ain't goin' on your payroll. I like it freelance. Emphasis on "free."

As Ali signs the last of the contracts.

HERBERT

Muhammad. She's not...for you. When I met her, she was working at a cocktail lounge with a bunny tail on her backside.

BUNDINI

What were you doin' down at a cocktail lounge, Herbert? Sellin' "Muhammad Peeks"?

Ali and Bingham crack up...

HERBERT

(to Bundini)

Sober up and say something to this man, Bundini. You supposed to be his "inspiration."

BUNDINI

(looks at Ali; to Ali, serious)

I got to know about Sonji, Muhammad. She got a sister?

(as Ali laughs)

BINGHAM

You been s-s-saving it up, training, Champ. You can't unleash it on this girl all sudden. You may kill her! Maybe you should spread it around more before you tie it down.

ALI

No. Marriage is the cornerstone of Muslim life.

HERBERT

Sonji Roi is not a Muslim!

ALI

She gonna be a Muslim, now!

(flashes)

So fix it up, Herbert.

INT. FIFTH STREET GYM - ALI

past a speed bag onto Ali with Dundee + Sarria on the exercise table. They do NOT see, and we PASS them and other training boxers and MOVE IN to a portable B&W TV on top of a cabinet.

ON B&W TV: MALCOLM X + MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

exchange greetings and introductions as if in a first-time meeting, and King turns back to CAMERA.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

(mid-statement)

I fear if this bill is not passed...

(beat)

...our nation is in for a dark night of social disruption.

As an anchorman pontificates...IMAGE SUDDENLY BECOMES: FIVE DIFFERENT SURVEILLANCE ANGLES. King and Malcolm have no clue how extensive is the FBI Cointelpro surveillance and the operations mounted against them. And the image of the two of them becomes...

INT. A COFFEE SHOP (WASHINGTON, D.C.) - THEIR PICTURE - SMILEY - DAY

on the front page of the Washington Post. REVEAL Joseph 13X sitting next to JOE SMILEY in a small Washington, D.C. coffee shop.

JOSEPH 13X

Why we meeting?

JOE SMILEY

The idea was...to...make...Malcolm smaller, you know? Diminished; obscure? Not to turn him into a messiah.

(the paper)

What I got, now, is Malcolm shoulder to shoulder with Martin Luther King.

(beat)

And Malcolm running all over the world getting Ben Bella and Nasser to denounce racism in the U.S. while we're competing over there with the Soviets.

(MORE)

JOE SMILEY (CONT'D)

(droll)

Not...a resounding success. We
were better off before, with
Malcolm INSIDE the Nation.

(beat)

So... We want you...to get Elijah
Muhammad...to take Malcolm back.

Joseph 13X stares at him, slack-jawed. Incredulous. No
reaction.

JOE SMILEY (CONT'D)

That's a joke. I'm kidding! Don't
you ever smile?

Joseph 13X doesn't say anything. He does not smile.

JOE SMILEY (CONT'D)

We're on a timetable. Malcolm's
pal, Quaison from Ghana, is
introducing Malcolm's resolution to
the General Assembly in Washington.
That's in five weeks.

Joseph 13X oddly gets up, moving a stool over...

JOSEPH 13X

You got bad breath, man.

JOE SMILEY

Thyroid. I got a stab wound in
1961. They took it out. We gotta
talk about this guy, too.

Smiley indicates the picture of Ali in "Muhammad Speaks"
identifying him as a militant and a revolutionary.

JOSEPH 13X

When do I get my expenses
reimbursed...dry cleaning lots of
suits isn't free...

Off Ali's picture...it becomes...

INT. MIAMI HOTEL ROOM - ALI - NIGHT

enters, looking for Sonji. Bundini and Cassius Clay, Sr.
were laughing about something else. They got quiet.
Bundini has a large water glass in his hand; Sr., a highball
glass.

ALI
 (to Bundini)
 What you drinkin'?

BUNDINI
 What am I drinkin'? Water's what
 I'm drinkin', champ! I'm a natural
 man...

Ali goes to the bedroom door.

ALI
 What's goin' on? We're late.

He's dressed for an occasion.

SONJI (V.O.)
 I'm changing my damn clothes! You
 didn't like what I was wearin'!

As Ali re-enters the living room, there's a knock on the
 door..."Room Service..."

BUNDINI
 Come on in...!
 (sees)
 What's that?

ROOM SERVICE
 (with large glass)
 What you wanted, isn't it...a water
 glass with vodka...?

BUNDINI
 That was before...

ROOM SERVICE
 Before what?

BUNDINI
 Before you showed up...

And, now, Sonji comes out. This dress makes what she had
 been wearing look demure. Tight angora sweater and a
 miniskirt. She's Tina Turner 30 years ago.

SONJI
 I fine runnin' around in all these
 cute short things for you. I
 submissive to you. But I ain't
 gonna be submissive to the Brother
 X's and what they think. They
 askin' me questions alla time anyway.

ALI
What questions?!

SONJI (V.O.)
About you and us and I ain't tellin'
'em shit.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
(drunk)
Tell it like it is, sugar! They
took my boy's name...and what they
give him back? Bad style.

Ali takes her back into the bedroom and closes the door.

SONJI
I don't drink. I don't smoke. I
converted to Islam for you and...

INT. BEDROOM - SONJI + ALI - NIGHT

SONJI
All except the dress! I ain't
puttin' no bleached-out, double-
ugly bedsheets on this body, honey!
I'm normal!

He's furious. She smiles. He picks her up. She moans and
her tongue darts in his ear and they're on the bed making
out. And as CAMERA DRIFTS away we HEAR D.J. Daddio Daley's
"Jazz Patio"...

INT. A NEW CAR (CHICAGO) - ALI - DAY

king of the city, cruising through the pristine winter air
of Chicago...

DADDIO
(on radio)
Hey there, old, aware ones. And
you, too, my fair ones...This is
"Daddio's Jazz Patio." ON KBCA
this fine day, which is A-okay...

Segues to...Brubeck's "Time Out," cruising...

INT. THE AUDUBON BALLROOM, HARLEM - REAR OF MALCOLM'S HEAD -
DAY

center-punches the FRAME through the green-glazed terra-
cotta hallway. He and his Bodyguard (#1) come to a door.
Shedding his coat, he hesitates, and like a prizefighter
gathering himself, he goes inside.

INT. ALI'S NEW CAR - ALI - DAY

at a light, waves to a cluster of girls waiting for a bus who recognize him, go nuts...listening to Brubeck...

INT. THE AUDUBON BALLROOM - MALCOLM - DAY

walks across the stage, aware of every little sound, every motion. He makes his way to the podium...peering beyond his glasses at the gathered. Bodyguard #1 goes to the side door instead of standing next to him...and Malcolm notices that...as he...

MALCOLM X
As-Salaam Alaikum...

THE GATHERED
Wa-Alaikum-Salaam...

And two young Black men, TALMADGE HAYER and NORMAN BUTLER immediately stand up in the back, jostling each other...

A YOUNG MAN
(shouts)
What you doin' in my pockets, man?
Get your hand outta my pocket!

MALCOLM X
Hold it, hold it, brothers!
(pleading)
Let's be cool.

And the commotion in the back diverts Bodyguards #1 and #2 towards the rear, away from the stage and Malcolm, as...

THOMAS JOHNSON comes forward from a front row, his coat flapping open, revealing the 12-gauge sawed-off double-barrel shotgun coming up.

MALCOLM'S EYES

go to it. Settle on it. He new it was coming, as...

JOHNSON, an indifferent expression on his face, FIRES one barrel at...

MALCOLM

...which rips through the lectern as if paper and SLAMS a dead-center into his chest a seven-ring. 12 pellets, each the size of .32 bullet. Seven destroy Malcolm's heart. Five shred his aorta and burrow into his spine. Malcolm's hands fly back, and he topples, crashing off empty chairs onto the floor.

UPSIDEDOWN ECU: MALCOLM'S FACE + PAST

...as life exhales from his mouth and his eyes go grey, dying, indifferent to Johnson emptying a second blast into him and the meaningless indignities of Hayer and Butler firing a .45 and a 9mm Luger at him.

INT. ALI'S CAR - RADIO - DAY

Dave Brubeck, loud...

INT. THE AUDUBON BALLROOM - STAGE - DAY

Chaos. Malcolm on the floor. Betty kneels over his body, desperately trying to breathe life into it. An Asian woman, a disciple, holds up his head. Somebody shouts, "Jesus, God!" But there is no God today...

INT. ALI'S CAR - ALI - DAY

stops short at a light because a man runs across the street.

CRAZY MAN

Ambushed!

LOUD Brubeck in 5/4 time. Ali can't hear.

CRAZY MAN (CONT'D)

From the bullet holes, black eagles flew! They screaming through the streets...

Ali rolls down the window.

ALI

What?

CRAZY MAN

(dazed)

They killed Malcolm...they shot Malcolm.

"Daddio's Jazz Patio" is interrupted. Malcolm X has been killed. Ali pulls over...not really parking. The world stops. The South Side of Chicago goes still...people numb...a young Man sitting down on the curb, crying. An elegy...Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come..." plays. "I was born by a river in a little tent..." And as Ali sits in his car...he sees the face of Malcolm...the glasses...

ALI
 (his thoughts)
 You were the first...you walked me
 forward, my brother...you were the
 first...

He's overcome with a deep grief and a lack of confidence in
 the order of his world.

SAM COOKE
 (sings)
 "Been a long, long time comin', but
 a change gonna come, yes it is..."

INT. THE RING, ST. DOMINIC'S ARENA (LEWISTON, MAINE) - ALI -
 NIGHT

HOWARD COSELL
 ...the arena is surrounded by FBI,
 the stands are only half full, the
 promoter has taken out a million-
 dollar insurance policy due to
 Cassius Clay's membership in the
 militant and radical Black Muslims
 because of death threats. Oh, and
 by the way...Sonny Liston is here, too.

...sees Sonji enter in a sequined mini-dress, bouffant hair.
 She attracts attention and disapproval from Herbert. She
 sits next to Ali's parents at ringside amid the large,
 conservatively dressed Muslim contingent. He's angry at her
 presentation. She looks like a girl singer from a doo-wop
 group. He slips off his robe. Ali raises his gloves in
 Muslim prayer. Meanwhile: the BELL rings.

ALI

meets Liston, nails him with a straight right. Ali begins
 baiting him, dancing. Liston tries to cut off the ring,
 jabbing ineffectually. Ali lets Liston in, pulls back, then
 pivots on his right foot, throws a short right and RAMP INTO
 SLO-MO...to see Liston not see it coming.

The muscles of Ali's upper body contract and ripple in
 release after his short RIGHT catches Liston on the point of
 his chin. Liston drops to the canvas like a stone.

HOWARD COSELL (CONT'D)
 Liston is down! Scarcely a minute
 into the first round, I can't
 believe it!

Sonji is up. For some reason, tears of worry stream,
 absurdly, from her eyes.

The IMAGE: Ali standing over Liston, fist cocked, bellowing:

ALI
Get up, sucker! Get up and fight!
No one gonna believe this!

Liston tries to get up, rolls over. His left leg spasms.
As the ref finally pushes Ali to a neutral corner.

HOWARD COSELL
It's over; it's over!

INT. MUHAMMAD'S DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Sarria, Bundini, Pacheco as Dundee cuts the tape off
Muhammad's hands. And Sonji appears at the door...runs and
embraces Ali.

SONJI
You okay?
(he's cold)
What's wrong?

ALI
Why you done up like that?

SONJI
I'm dyin' and...'cause this is how
I dress! I dyin' for you out of
worry...

ALI
"Worry"...?

SONJI
Yeah. And all you care about is if
I look dull enough?

ALI
The world looks at me, girl! What
if I straightened my hair, live in
the white suburbs? How I am says
something!

SONJI
(quiet; tough)
Well, sorry you don't like how I am...

EXT. HOLIDAY INN, BALCONY - ALI - NIGHT

enters up the stairs. Bundini's waiting for him as are
Reporters, trying to ambush him. Lots of activity in the
motel forecourt.

ALI
 (to Bundini)
 Where's Herbert?

Bundini indicates and Ali exits into Herbert's room. Beyond is the Holiday Inn marquee: "Clay vs. Liston II." A few letters droop.

EXT. HOLIDAY INN, HERBERT'S ROOM - ALI - NIGHT

ALI
 What do I do...?

Ali, angry, stands in front of Herbert.

HERBERT
 If you want, have no contact with her for ninety days. Then you make a public statement of divorce in the mosque, and Islamic law will be satisfied.

BUNDINI
 "Satisfied?"...satisfaction is not makin' it with the woman who send you to the moon?

Cassius, Sr. bursts in. Bundini has Ali's championship belt over his shoulder.

BUNDINI (CONT'D)
 Man, I'm the only normal person left around here and I'm a black Jew who can't read and is half drunk.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
 I gotta talk to you.

Bundini and Herbert start to leave.

ALI
 Please stay, Brother Herbert.

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
 He ain't your brother! Your brother taking your wife back to Chicago. She's crying like a widow.

ALI
 I ain't dead!

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
 You might as well be. You don't remember your name or who you are.

Cassius, Sr. leaves the room.

INT. HOLIDAY INN, ALI'S MOTEL ROOM - HIGH ANGLE: ALI - NIGHT

enters. Stands at the dresser. Only his suitcase is there. She left her chartreuse blouse. He takes it and smells the scent of her cologne. He is torn with grief at the loss of her, curling into a ball on the bed, alone in the room.

INT. GREEN ROOM - ALI - DAY

getting made up by a good-looking ASIAN COSMETOLOGIST. An ASSISTANT DIRECTOR lounges against the wall with headset, reading the newspaper...

COSMETOLOGIST

You got the prettiest eyes...

ALI

Yeah?

BUNDINI

He so pretty, when you look up
"pretty" in the dictionary, he too
pretty to be there.

She laughs and whispers something in Ali's ear, holding his hand where the others can't see it and slips her phone number to him. Meanwhile...a phone rings. Bundini answers while...

A.D.

(re: newspaper,
to Ali)

...you gonna try for Germany?

ALI

Huh?

A.D.

You gonna try to get stationed in
Germany?

ALI

What you talking about?

BUNDINI

Champ. It's Eskridge...

A.D.
 (Ali didn't know)
 They changed your classification.
 (turns page)
 It's in the paper...You're 1-A.
 You're gonna get drafted into the
 Army...

ALI
 (takes phone)
 You know about this?

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE (V.O.)
 Yes. But I think the government's
 looking to negotiate a deal...

A.D.
 (hears on headset)
 Here we go...!

INT. A NEW YORK TELEVISION STUDIO, ABC - COSELL - DAY

"Wide World of Sports" is ON THE AIR. We've entered mid-broadcast.

ALI
 ...I flunk their draft board test.
 Now, without testing if I am "wiser"
 or "worser," they decide I can go
 into the Army.

HOWARD COSELL
 Cassius, it is my opinion you...

ALI
 (cuts in)
 And I'm not Cassius Clay. That's a
 slave name. I'm a free man. I'm
 Muhammad Ali.

HOWARD COSELL
 (stops, realizing)
 You know, I apologize to you. On
 the air. Your name is Muhammad Ali.
 You have the right to be called
 whatever you want.

ALI
 (stays angry)
 You make a lot of mistakes for a
 so-called educated man. You really
 go to law school?

HOWARD COSELL

Yes, Muhammad. And to think I gave up a lucrative practice for the likes of you.

ALI

I'm the best thing that ever happened to you, Howard Cosell. Without me you be a tall white man with a microphone in his mouth.

HOWARD COSELL

(fast)

And without me...you'd be a mouth.

Ali lifts Howard's toupee.

HOWARD COSELL (CONT'D)

(into camera)

We'll be right back.

Laughter.

INT. ABC TELEVISION STUDIO, BACKSTAGE - ALI + COSELL - LATER

Ali pours three spoons of sugar in his coffee.

HOWARD COSELL

(sarcastic)

Have a little coffee with your sugar...?

ALI

Keep talking. You were saying something half-smart...

HOWARD COSELL

They want to make an example out of you.

ALI

Why? I'm no Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown...

HOWARD COSELL

All they are is political. They tell people how they ought to be. But you are the HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION of the WORLD. You're important. And they don't like your militancy, your politics. So, they'll make an example out of you.

ALI

...of a good "Ne-gro," who do what he told?

HOWARD COSELL

Yes. Or, to demonstrate here is what happens to your ass if you don't...

He's screwed either way.

EXT./INT. THE UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES STATION, HOUSTON - LOBBY - CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE - DAY

waits at the curb as Ali and Herbert pull up and get out of a car...move through the crowd...reporters shouting questions at him we don't hear, go up the steps, into the lobby, joining other recruits and M.P.'s.

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

(quietly)

You do six weeks basic...you go into the Reserves...you don't go to Vietnam...you get to box...you even get to keep the money...

He gives Ali a piece of paper signed by the Justice Department, confirming the deal...

HERBERT

(lets him know)

The Messenger would not object if you joined under these terms.

ALI

I stay out of jail and I get to fight.

HERBERT

(nods)

All you have to do is accept the induction. And life goes on.

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

They call your name. You say yes.

We're not sure what Ali will do.

INT. INDUCTION CENTER, HOUSTON - ALI - DAY

lined up with the twenty-five other inductees...being addressed by an Induction Officer, Naval LT. JEROME CLARIDGE...

LT. JEROME CLARIDGE
 ...and you will take one step
 forward as your name and service
 are called, and such a step will
 constitute your induction into the
 Armed Force indicated.

Lt. Claridge begins to read the names, and services...the
 young Men dutifully stepping forward. Ali expects his name
 to be called. Instead...

LT. JEROME CLARIDGE (CONT'D)
 Cassius Marcellus Clay.

It's quiet. Dead quiet. Ali's lips move. NO sound comes
 out. We anticipate him stepping forward...he doesn't.

LT. JEROME CLARIDGE (CONT'D)
 Mr. Clay, I am required to inform
 you that refusal to accept a lawful
 induction order constitutes a
 felony under the Universal Military
 Training and Service Act, punishable
 by up to five years' imprisonment
 and a five-thousand-dollar fine.
 Do you understand?

ALI
 (nods)
 Yes.

TWO FBI AGENTS in suits have appeared.

LT. JEROME CLARIDGE
 (repeats)
 Cassius Marcellus Clay.

Ali doesn't move.

LT. JEROME CLARIDGE (CONT'D)
 (a third time)
 Cassius Marcellus Clay.

Herbert's dying. Ali "stands his ground..." and the die has
 been cast.

A MAN
 (presenting badge)
 Federal Bureau of Investigation.
 Mr. Clay, you're under arrest for
 refusing induction...

As they turn around and handcuff him.

EXT. HOLIDAY INN (HOUSTON) - ALI + ENTOURAGE - LATE AFTERNOON

approach from two vehicles. Rudy and SIX LARGE MUSLIMS escort Ali through the crowd of media trucks, reporters and conspicuous unmarked police cars and neighborhood people.

ALI

waves in Robert Lipsyte, the New York Times sportswriter in his late 20's we've seen before. He and Howard Bingham, waiting inside, know each other. They enter. The phone's already RINGING.

INT. HOLIDAY INN ROOM + BALCONY - ALI

on the phone, on a long extension, joined by Lipsyte and Howard Bingham, while Bundini keeps at bay reporters at the front door. It all feels like a rock group in town for a concert.

ALI

(listens; to cam.)

Ask Chauncey Eskridge in Chicago.
He's my lawyer. No. I'm out on
bail.

(goes onto balcony

[rear shot])

Yeah, I fight. I fight clean. I'm
an athlete. Army's there to kill,
kill, kill. My religion forbids
that. No. I never shot anything
in my life.

(turns)

Do I know where Vietnam is?

(wry; playing to
Bingham)

Yeah. It's on TV...

(beat)

In southeast Asia? It there, too?

(beat)

That's a joke, man...!

Ali hangs up. The phone rings again.

ALI (CONT'D)

(frustrated)

What do I think about who? Vietcong?

Next is something Ali has not deduced. Ali perceives it intuitively and reflexively. As with other of his decisions, once made, he doesn't hesitate to speak them. And he won't waver. He says...

ALI (CONT'D)
 Man, I ain't got no quarrel with
 them Vietcong.

It goes dead silent. Ali listens. Lipsyte is stunned.
 So's Howard.

ALI (CONT'D)
 No Vietcong ever called me nigger.

BINGHAM
 You know what you j-j-just said...?

He hangs up.

LIPSYTE
 From Europe to China...every home
 in America...the world's gonna know
 what the heavyweight champion of
 the world said about the U.S. war...

ALI
 So what?
 (beat)
 I ain't gonna be what anybody else
 want me to be. I'm not afraid to
 be what I want. And think how I want.

And that's the real Ali, right there.

INT. HOLIDAY INN, ALI'S SUITE - ALI - NIGHT

laying on the sofa. Dundee, Pacheco and Rudy have joined.
 There's the feeling the house is a bunker. Phones ring.
 Television is on. LIPSYTE, taking notes, watching Walter
 Cronkite on TV. He crosses to Ali. Dundee's on the phone.

LIPSYTE
 (reading)
 Nixon, the Republicans, Boxing
 Commission in New York, Cleveland
 and L.A.
 (a foregone conclusion)
 But you're also getting attacked as
 unpatriotic by the NAACP, Roy
 Wilkins, Jackie Robinson, the New
 York Times and Joe Louis...

The expression on Ali's face is blank, as if he's accepting
 a pounding: he knows what it is; it's not a surprise.

INT. GRANT PARK UNDERGROUND GARAGE - QUIET - NIGHT

A very low ceiling; we're in a green-lit cavern with a low ceiling. Chauncey Eskridge and Ali wait. Ali's in the backseat of a 1961 Lincoln. Two FOI guards stationed at the distant ramps allow a Black Oldsmobile to pass.

BOB ARUM

a New York lawyer and promoter arrives and climbs out of the Oldsmobile. Ali opens the door...but doesn't get out...

ALI
(to Arum)
People are following me...

BOB ARUM
I got almost nowhere I can promote
a fight for you. Plus, I think
they're going to vacate you from
the crown.

ALI
What?

BOB ARUM
Yeah. If you're convicted.

ALI
They gonna take away what no
fighter in the world can?

BOB ARUM
And New York may revoke your boxing
license.

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE
You sure you want to do all this?
(politics)
Your next three to four years are
every heavyweight's prime. And
there are few of those years...

ALI
What 'bout Terrell?

BOB ARUM
We'll know if we can fight Terrell
in Illinois this afternoon.
Terrell's running his mouth. He
said if you're called, you should
serve...

ALI
 (angrily)
 Motherfucker. He got a deferment
 for bein' too tall, or havin' flat
 feet. Why don't he serve for me?
 Tellin' me what I should do...

BOB ARUM
 (to Ali + Eskridge)
 I got to get you some fights. Fast.

Ali's quiet, not really listening anymore...

INT. ILLINOIS BOXING COMMISSION - ALI - DAY

wearing a suit and a narrow tie at a table in front of Daley
 machine apparatchiks. A bald man, angrily:

COMMISSIONER
 You understand we could take away
 your license to fight Terrell in
 Illinois?

ALI
 Yes.

COMMISSIONER
 Are you prepared to apologize?
 About your unpatriotic remarks that
 you made?

ALI
 Apologize? No.

COMMISSIONER
 You said that you were the people's
 champion.

ALI
 (angry)
 Yes, sir!

COMMISSIONER
 Do you think you're acting like the
 people's champion...?!

ALI
 Yes, sir. I am not going to
 apologize to you. This isn't a
 courtroom. And I don't have to sit
 here and answer your questions.

Ali gets up and walks out on them. Eskridge and NOI men in
 black suits follow.

INT. CHICAGO OFFICE BUILDING - ALI + ENTOURAGE - DAY

march through the lobby. Ali gives a walking interview. He's angry. He won't slow down.

ALI

I ain't draft dodgin'! I ain't goin' to Canada. I ain't burnin' my draft card. I ain't burnin' the flag. I'm stayin' right here. And you want to throw me in jail? Go ahead. I'll do my time. I been in jail four hundred years. I'll be in jail four, five more. But I ain't goin' ten thousand miles to help murder and kill poor people for you. 'Cause if I'm gonna die, I'll die now, right here, fighting you. If I wanna die. You my enemy, not Vietcong or Chinese or Japanese. You my opposer when I want freedom. You my opposer when I want justice. You my opposer when I want equality. You want me to go somewhere for you, but you won't even stand up for me in America, for my rights and beliefs, you won't even stand up for me here at home.

INT. THE HOUSTON ASTRODOME - CLOSE: TERRELL - DAY

ERNIE TERRELL is taller than Ali. The empty stadium has a scale and press at one end. Girls in cowboy hats and lone stars say we're in Texas. Ali is distracted.

ERNIE TERRELL

(getting on scale)

Tell Clay he can get on after me.

ALI

What...?

ERNIE TERRELL

Get on the scale after...

ALI

(cuts in)

What you call me...?

Terrell wrongly thinks there's psychological value in provoking Ali.

ERNIE TERRELL

Only thing I knows you as: Cassius
Clay!

ALI

(infuriated)

Announce it right here or from flat
on your back!

Ali throws a punch that doesn't land because he's separated.

ALI (CONT'D)

What's my name?!?

CLOSE ON ALI

something else in his eyes.

INT. THE HOUSTON ASTRODOME - TERRELL - NIGHT

hit FOUR TIMES by Ali: WHAM, WHAM, WHAM, WHAM! In the
glaring lights...

ALI

What's my name, motherfucker?!

And Ali flicks out punches...disorienting Terrell. The BELL.

GIRL IN BANGLED MINISKIRT STARTS 15TH ROUND

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! Ali hits him five times...Terrell ties
him up. Ali throws him off, slips two jabs and snaps his
left into Terrell's face.

ALI (CONT'D)

What's my name?

Ali, at the apex of his athletic skills, fires six- or
eight-punch combinations and then changes direction. Ali
shoots jabs and hooks going backwards; every move and set of
combinations is a dance. Ali's never been as light on his
feet, as fast, as complex as in this fight. Like any moment
of greatness, we want it to last forever... Then, Ali
throws a 17-punch combination.

ALI (CONT'D)

WHAT'S MY NAME?!

...that burns down Terrell. Terrell starts to fall. Ali
moves away. He doesn't want it to end. Sportswriters don't
like it. Half the fans don't like it. Ali defies both
their sensibilities and their politics.

TERRELL'S

face is battered. Ali SLAMS in SHOTS.

ALI (CONT'D)
 (shouted)
 My name?! WHAT'S MY NAME?!

The BELL ends the savage pounding. Ali in the middle of the ring, glorying in opposition and triumph.

INT. HOUSTON COURTROOM - ALI - DAY

with Eskridge and his other attorneys. The courtroom's packed. In the back we spot Joe Smiley, anonymous in the crowd.

ALI
 (to Judge)
 If the court would give me my sentence right now instead of waiting and stalling.

JUDGE INGRAHAM
 (obliges)
 My pleasure. The jury has found you guilty of refusing induction into the United States armed forces. I sentence you to the maximum sentence allowable...five years' imprisonment and a fine of ten thousand dollars.
 (pause)
 Fast enough? Your attorney will lodge an appeal. While you're out on bond, I order your passport surrendered. I'll not have you benefitting yourself by fighting abroad...

INT. HOUSTON COURT, FOYER - ALI - DAY

on his way out of the building. Media is held at the other end.

CLOSER - ALI

looks dazed, not sure how to act on the way out of court. Oddly, he shakes hands with each of a half a dozen white Houston Bailiffs. It's as if, benumbed by the verdict, he seeks human contact. The only contact available, ironically, is with the officers of the court that just convicted him.

EXT. 79TH STREET, CHICAGO, 1968 - ALI - DUSK

Time has passed. It's winter. Snow's on the ground. He's in a car coat and a hat with a hooded sweatshirt underneath. Street lights are on. Traffic's slight. He walks through the whiteness as new snow falls.

ECU: ALI

under the hat brim, his gaze is internal, as it was in the opening in Miami.

BURNED-OUT STOREFRONT

with icicles from Fire Dept. water. His work boots stop deep in the new falling snow...vanishing in the WHITEOUT...

INT. N.O.I. BAKERY, CHICAGO - WHITE SILK SCARF - DAY (FLASHBACK)

in Ali's hands. He leans across a white showcase of bakery goods. It's cold outside; warm inside. It smells of bread and coffee. BELINDA BOYD reacts.

ALI

Watch now...

He makes a fist, balls the scarf up, and puts it in the hollow of his fist.

ALI (CONT'D)

(offering)

Blow on it...

She blows on it. She's not quite eighteen, six feet tall; there's a supremely confident expressiveness about her. Her gestures are large. He opens his hand. The scarf is gone. She instinctively looks over at his other hand. Nothing's there. His eyes go wide in mock fright at the mysterious.

ALI (CONT'D)

This spooky! Don't get scared...

She laughs. How'd he do it? He makes a fist again, puts his thumb in the hollow. And slowly pulls the scarf out...

BELINDA

(laughs)

See, you don't need to fight no more...

He gives it to Belinda. She ties it around her neck. Ali looks at her. On a cold and dark afternoon, the windows are steamed and the bakery seems a fine refuge.

ALI
So what's fresh, girl?

BELINDA
(smiles)
Everything fresh!

ALI
(smiles)
What's the freshest of the freshest?

BELINDA
(smiles)
Doughnuts just came out...

ALI
(holds up the
doughnut)
Feed me those things, I gotta come
back as a wrassler.
(a ring announcer)
645 pounds. I'd still be
pretty...but I be fat pretty...

BELINDA
You don't remember when you met me
once before...long ago...

ALI
(joking)
I remember something... Wha's your
name?

She slaps his arm.

BELINDA
You know my name! You came to my
school, right before you win the
title. Interviewed you for the
school paper. I was eleven.

ALI
You had a long braid...

BELINDA
Yeah! You called me little Indian
girl, then.

ALI
That was you?

BELINDA
I loved you then, like all those
kids. I never stopped. I still do.

INT. NATION OF ISLAM ASSEMBLY - ALI + BELINDA - DAY (FLASHBACK)

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD'S VOICE (OVER)
(finishes)

The African-American Albert Speer-regimented seating breaks up. Ali's wearing a black suit, a white suit and white tie. As he drifts through the crowd, approaching him is Belinda in a white caftan and a white satin turban with gold earrings. It feels like they are an official couple, eugenically chosen mates.

ECU: THEIR HANDS

join.

MACRO CU: SHOULDERS

touch. She turns and leans back slightly against him... Their thighs touch.

EXT. 79TH STREET, CHICAGO - DUSK INTO NIGHT

We walk past the bakery. It's closed. Ali crosses the grey guttered street and exits into...

INT. ALI'S SINCLAIR STATION, BACK OFFICE - ALI - NIGHT

enters. CTA bus passes. Eskridge is there, waiting for him. Ali takes a coffee in a paper cup and grabs a Danish.

ALI
You see the Ellis-Quarry fight?

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE
Yes... We'll be in front of the U.S. Court of Appeals next month. We'll lose. Then we appeal to the Supreme Court.

ALI
Ellis the champ? Man. I beatin' on him since we was sixteen. They give Ellis to Joe Frazier? Frazier'll kill him. Then they out of juice. Where's the gate? So they gotta let me fight. I fight Ellis in a phone booth...middle of Times Square...you think that draw a crowd?

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

Draw a crowd or not draw a crowd, Muhammad, is NOT going to make a difference with your boxing licenses. They don't want you to fight.

(so much for speculation)
 ACLU's handling your case against the New York Boxing Commission. They discovered New York's got actual ex-murderers and ex-rapists currently licensed to fight. But revoked yours...?

ALI

Tijuana?

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

No. State Department refused permission for the one-hour visa. No fight in Tijuana. Look...

ALI

Can't fight here. Can't fight outside the country...

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

I know people in the restaurant business...want to start up a chain. Muhammad Ali's "Champ Burger"..."Muhammad Malts," "Fist Full of Fries"...all of that.

They start out towards the gas pumps.

ALI

Why I want to be in the restaurant business?!

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

'Cause you need the money.

ALI

How much all this gonna cost?

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

Too much. They do that to you, too, you know.

They seek to destroy every facet of Ali's life. Ali knows that. As they pass the pumps. Some customers recognize him.

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE (CONT'D)

Where you goin'?

ALI
 (to customers)
 Look out!

CUSTOMER
 Hey, champ!

And Ali pretends to start sparring. The working men laugh. One is brave enough to raise his hands, too. Ali smiles and trades a couple of phantom slaps. It breaks off. He made their day. He shakes each of their hands. His spirit's raised, he walks off. Chauncey watches this ritual...

INT. CHICAGO APARTMENT, ALI + BELINDA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

hands and skin and faces against white in bed. So close we are intimately inside the moment...

ALI
 Not then...

BELINDA
 First time? 1961...Sister Khalilah introduced you at assembly. You said you would be heavyweight champion of the world by the time you were twenty-one!

ALI
 I always tell the truth...

BELINDA
 I was eleven. I interviewed you for the student paper. You called me "little Indian girl," 'cause I wore my hair real long, in a braid...I told you..."Man, you scribble! You can't even write! You ought to go back to school until you do it better..."

Laughing, he starts poking her in the ribs, and she turns onto him. She's six feet tall, he's six-three. He grabs her wrist. She wrestles him down on the large bed until there's a NOISE, and Belinda separates from Ali and approaches a smaller bedroom to replace the bottle their daughter, MARYUM, threw out of her crib. As she exits, MOVE IN on the crib in streetlight and we HEAR Jimi Hendrix's bottleneck instrumental part of "All Along the Watchtower." It makes us feel the child in the crib is threatened, and that takes us INTO...

INT. COLLEGE HALL - ALI

in a black leather jacket with a white shirt and skinny tie, speaking to an audience of college students, white and black, some Asian and Latino.

JIMI HENDRIX
 (from "All Along the
 Watchtower")
 "There must be some kind of
 way outta here,
 said the joker to the thief..."

Bingham waits in the wings. Applause. Ali joins Howard and a small group watching a portable TV...

TV: "DAYS OF RAGE"

occurring on Chicago's North Clark Street. Off-screen we HEAR police sirens. On TV, Weathermen attack lines of Chicago police! The cops fall back.

JIMI HENDRIX (CONT'D)
 "There's too much confusion,
 I can't get no relief.
 Business men, they drink my wine,
 plowmen dig my earth,
 None of them along the line,
 know what any of it is worth."

INT. CHICAGO GYM - ALI - NIGHT

trains in grey sweats to Hendrix. He flashes 60 sit-ups hanging off a table. He sweats profusely. He has no trainers. Bingham holds his legs. Ali seems heavier.

The gym is grimy, filled with other boxers, a forest of heavy bags. Ali's one among other guys working out.

ALI'S FACE

grimacing through another set, trying to stay in shape, trying to retain skills going dormant.

JIMI HENDRIX
 "No reason to get excited,
 the thief, he kindly spoke.
 There are many here among us,
 who feel that life is but a joke."

Then, he's slow on the heavy bag. Sparring alone in the ring... Everyone ignores him.

INT. ALI'S GAS STATION - ALI'S TV: NEWS - DAY

REVEAL Ali + Bingham watching the 1968 Olympics. NOW, Tommy Smith and John Carlos bow their heads and raise fists in black power defiance, instead of acknowledging the national anthem.

JIMI HENDRIX

"But you and I, we've been
through that,
and this is not our fate.
So let us not talk falsely now,
the hour it's getting late..."

And the coverage cuts to George Foreman with a small American flag in his hand. Then, it flashes back to Ali in the ring with Sonny Liston at his feet. And Ali coming out of the Illinois Boxing Commission, angry. Dead Black Panthers, Fred Hampton and Matt Clark murdered by police in Chicago. And Malcolm X and Ali together. The meaning of it is clear: MUHAMMAD ALI IS THE WARRIOR SAINT IN THE REVOLT OF THE BLACK ATHLETE IN AMERICA. On Ali watching, as a phone rings...

JIMI HENDRIX (CONT'D)

"All along the watchtower,
princes kept the view,
while all the women came and went,
barefoot servants, too."

EXT. MEMPHIS MOTEL - CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE - DAY

speaks to Ali on a pay phone on ground level.

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

...struck out at the appellate
level in New Orleans. So we're
heading back to the Supreme Court...

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. ALI'S GAS STATION - ALI - DAY

ALI

Thought we already got turned down
there.

EXT. MEMPHIS MOTEL - CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

I'm petitioning on a conscientious objection basis. Religious belief. We'll petition that your sincere religious belief prohibits you from shooting people. I believe they'll hear that...

A fast car drives by, distracting Ali momentarily. Then, Ali focuses 100% on...

ALI

Where the money come from, Chauncey? Herbert tell me I'm runnin' on empty. Put aside "how do that happen"? Licenses all revoked. No passport. I can't fight here. Can't fight abroad.

(beat)

And what happen if I lose the Supreme Court?

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE

It's all over. You go to jail for five years.

There's no response from Ali. Ali hangs up, looks the other way, lost in thought.

EXT. MEMPHIS MOTEL ROOM - CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE - DAY

hangs up the phone. Looks up. Starts to dial another number. A sound CRACKS OPEN THE NIGHT...

Chauncey runs up the stairs to the second-floor balcony to join...

EXT. MEMPHIS MOTEL, BALCONY - JESSE JACKSON - DAY

cradling Martin Luther King, Jr. in his arms. People SCREAM. King involuntarily spasms. Under King, dark blood pools like crude oil. Eskridge, ANDREW YOUNG and JULIAN BOND point into the Memphis afternoon.

EXT. ALI'S APARTMENT BUILDING, ROOFTOP (CHICAGO) - CITY AT NIGHT

as if they were pointing at a burning fire, sirens, blue police flashers, an isolated gunshot. And REVEAL Ali on a rooftop, in sweatpants, sweatshirt, SHADOWBOXING while...

JIMI HENDRIX

"Outside in the cold distance,
a wild cat did growl,
two riders were approaching,
and the wind began to HOWL!"

He leaves off to look into the distance. The agility, what he was with Terrell, isn't there. He exhales in time with punches HUH, HUH, HUH...Ali's struggling to hold onto diminishing sharpness. Police lights. Looting? He contemplates the fabric of the city ripping itself apart while...

INT. JEFFREY STREET HOUSE, LIVING ROOM - FRAZIER RIPS APART ELLIS - NIGHT

on ABC. REVEAL Ali with Maryum in his arms watches the fight...an activity from which Ali, the resident genius on the planet, is excluded.

BINGHAM

Ellis doesn't belong in there.

ALI

(curt)

Man give him a shot, he took a shot.

BINGHAM

I saw Bundini in New York.

ALI

How's he?

BINGHAM

...bad shape. You better get your belt b-b-back...

Belinda brings coffee to Bingham...

BELINDA (O.S.)

She's got to be done with that bottle.

BINGHAM

You call your parents, Ali?

BELINDA

No, he didn't. I told them about the one on the way...myself.
(moves to the kitchen)

BINGHAM

You p-p-p-promised you'd call them.

ALI
 I'll call 'em, I'll call 'em...
 (re: the baby)
 May-may! It go in one end and come
 out the other.

BELINDA
 You wanna try changing her, for the
 experience?

ALI
 You so much better at it, mama.

Belinda takes Maryum. FRAZIER holds his arms up in victory,
 a formality of applause from the half-empty Garden.

ALI (CONT'D)
 (to Maryum)
 Maaan...Joe Frazier can't talk,
 can't up the gate, can't fill the
 arena. They gotta let me fight.

BELINDA
 That happen, you promise me you put
 some new people around you.

Ali crosses to kitchen phone.

ALI
 I need Angelo, Rudy, Ferdie --

BINGHAM
 Ali, she's talkin' about "Brother"
 Herbert.

Ali stops. Between him and Belinda, this is important: her
 solidarity is with her husband, not with the NOI.

BELINDA
 Where are they when we need them?
 You got Gene Kilroy droppin' off
 groceries like charity. Borrowin'
 money from my folks. So...?

As Ali contemplates what she's said, we HEAR...

HOWARD COSELL (V.O.)
 What are your feelings about up-
 and-coming Ken Norton?

INT. FRAZIER LOCKER ROOM (POST FIGHT) - COSELL + FRAZIER - NIGHT

FRAZIER
(still sweating)
Norton's big and strong, but...

Someone's talking into Howard's period headset.

HOWARD COSELL
(interrupting)
Hold on one second...we have a caller. Go ahead.

ALI (V.O.)
(into phone)
Cosell? This Muhammad Ali.

A still photo of Ali in an iris appears superimposed on monitors.

ALI (CONT'D)
Go to Georgia or Alabama or Sweden. Everybody know I'm the champ. The crown is a lie. I know it's a lie. Joe Frazier know it's a lie. It time for everybody to stop lying and tell the truth.

HOWARD COSELL
Let's tell it like it is. With your court and boxing problems, Muhammad, can you get a fight promoted?

ALI
I ain't interested in the paycheck, I'd fight Joe Frazier for free in a phone booth in Times Square, if I wasn't broke. I still will.

HOWARD COSELL
Did you say you were broke? How can you be broke?

Ali hesitates.

INT. ELIJAH MUHAMMAD'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Elijah Muhammad reacts to the interview on television. There's a formality to Elijah Muhammad, even at his kitchen table.

HOWARD COSELL

You've made more money than all previous heavyweight champions combined. What about your management? Surely they have provided for you...

ALI

I'm saying it's time for everybody to quit lying! Muhammad Ali is the champ! I have to, I'll get the fight on myself.

(beat)

And if they offer me money, I ain't gonna turn it down.

CROSSCUT: Elijah turns to an aide.

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD

Get me my son, Herbert, on the telephone!

INT. RUNDOWN CHICAGO GYM - ALI - DAY

training. There is NO entourage with him. Ali hits the heavy bag. He doubles up the left jab on the taped-together heavy bag. Sweat stains his sweats.

EXT. U.S. STEEL - ALI - DAY

runs through tall reeds in the abandoned industrial landscape, ending at the lakefront and the cold, open sky and water. He's breathing hard, struggling against time to hold onto shape and prowess. He seems vulnerable against the open sky and water.

INT. TEMPLE #2 - NIGHT

Elijah Muhammad is at the lectern ringed by Fruit of Islam Guards. HERBERT is behind him.

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD

Mr. Muhammad Ali desires to do that which the Holy Qur'an teaches him against. I am, therefore, suspending Mr. Ali from the practice of Islam. He may no longer appear in temple, pray or teach, or have any conversation with any Muslim whatsoever. Furthermore...he may no longer use the name of Muhammad Ali. Henceforward, he will revert to his old slave name, Cassius Clay.

INT. JEFFREY ST. HOUSE, KITCHEN - ALI - DAY

sits at the table. A deep vacancy is beginning to be there we've never seen before. May-may makes a mess.

BELINDA
Muhammad...?

ALI
You can't call me that no more.

BELINDA
Hell, I can't. I'm defying them by talking to you. And being with you.

MOVE CLOSER and CLOSER into Ali's eyes. He's oblivious. Belinda's pregnant again. She says something to him. Ali can't hear. She says it again, louder. Ali doesn't look at her. OVER ALI onto the Formica table with Log Cabin syrup and powdered sugar and ceramic salt and pepper shakers SEEN in his ECU, disconnected, depressed, withdrawn...

INT. FLOPHOUSE, FOYER - ALI + BINGHAM - DAY

entering, concerned and urgent...

ALI
Whyn't you call an ambulance or a doctor?

LANDLADY
(following behind)
Wouldn't let me. Said he knew you...and to call you, Mr. Ali...
He's not been out for three days...

Ali's up the stairs, down the corridor and takes the key from the lady and opens the door. It's a dump. Rotting food, something burned on the stove. On the floor, wrapped in a threadbare bedspread, half in and out of the bathroom, which is foul, is Bundini, sleeping off a drunk.

BINGHAM
Bundini!

BUNDINI
(opens his eyes; half sits)
Watchu' doin' here? Gimme that short dog!

Ali -- his concern crashes. He detests the type Bundini resembles. He throws a half-empty half-pint of Old Taylor against the wall. It splatters...

ALI
What's wrong with you, man?!

BUNDINI
Nothin' wrong with me!

Ali goes to the curtains and pulls them back. Bundini, blinded...

BUNDINI (CONT'D)
What that?!!!

BINGHAM
A mystery...d-d-d-daylight...

BUNDINI
(shielding his eyes)
Leave me alone!

ALI
I leave you alone. You called me!

BUNDINI
That were a week ago...

Ali grabs Bundini's arm and twists it and pushes his sleeve up. Bundini tries to pull his arm away. Ali is way stronger. Track marks up and down Bundini's arm. Ali slaps Bundini on the side of the head. SMACK! He slaps him again. SMACK!

ALI
What you shame yourself like this
for, maaan...?! Why you shame
yourself?!

Bundini flails back with his arms. Ali leans in and SMACKS him again.

BUNDINI
Lemme alone!
(shouts)
I'm flyin'! The Sky Chief talk
through me. I know the word!

ALI
You know "low." You so low, the
curb look like up!

BUNDINI
(demonstrates)
Yeah? The king gotta go home to
his throne! From the root to the
fruit...!

ALI

Those rhymes is old. Forget 'em.

BUNDINI

(demonstrates more)

God don't care about you! Don't care about me! In all of everything, we mean nothin'. He don't know us. We be. And that's the onliest thing he did. And that's good 'cause that's why we free. But free ain't easy. Free is real. And realness is a motherfucker...

(low; almost spooky)

It eats raw meat.

(beat)

It walk in its own shoes.

(beat)

It does not waver...

(pause)

Yeah...

There's a pause in the room. Bundini crashes. He starts crying, unabashedly...

BUNDINI (CONT'D)

I sold your belt for five hundred dollars to a barber on Lenox Avenue. That's how low I did you. I'm filled with weakness and got a crazy mind. That belt say you the Heavyweight Champion of the World. Five hundred dollars and I put it into my arm. That's what I called to tell you...

Ali leans back against the wall...the last vestige, gone.

BUNDINI (CONT'D)

...heard 'bout the Nation, all that court stuff.

ALI

(absent)

Yeah.

BUNDINI

Forgive me, Muhammad. Take me back...

ALI

No. There's no "back" to take you to...

Ali gets up -- Bundini has been taken from him, too -- and leaves.

INT. "EL" - ECU FRONTAL: ALI - NIGHT

and beyond the side of Ali's face, elevated through the slums and decrepit tenements of the south side of Chicago...the mean alleys and decaying back porches. Men gathered around 50-gallon steel drums, burning wood for warmth. Everything is corrupted or has left him.

FRONTAL: ALI

staring into nowhere.

REVERSE: PAST ALI

The city recedes. Vectors, in perspective, carry structures, buildings away. The sky is grey, going to blue. The city flees and SUDDENLY disappears as we race into the dark tunnel of subway. Ali's lost in the depths of attempting a calculation. He can't do that for which he has a genius beyond other men...

ALI

(to himself)

...you can't do what you do best in the world. And how you feed your family? From prison? Who take care of your kids? And is Allah, is God with me?

And he's been exiled from the belief system that explained the universe to him. SUDDENLY LIGHTS slash across his face in the white-tile North Avenue station. BEYOND, ghostlike working men and two heavysset women enter. Ali turns aside to prevent being recognized. It's the first time he's ever avoided the public. The train lurches forward...

OVER ALI: WHITE LIGHT

screams away from us. Red reflects off the rails past Ali's face as we descend deeper into the tunnels.

EXT. NEAR BROADCAST TRUCK - COSELL - NIGHT

steps out of the truck. There is a small crowd of people who turn as ALI pulls up in a convertible. He's solemn for a moment. Then he's out of the car...

ALI (O.S.)

A thousand dollars to the man who brings me Howard Cosell's toupee! Dead or alive!

Reveal Ali next to his car.

HOWARD COSELL

(loud)

Don't bother me. I'm a world-famous broadcaster and you're an ex-champion with diminished skills. I can't be seen you, it would be calamitous to my reputation.

EXT. NEAR BROADCAST TRUCK - ALI + COSELL - LATER

alone in the convertible parked in a distant corner of the lot.

ALI

Put me on, Howard.

HOWARD COSELL

Muhammad, I'd do anything for you. But I got bosses who only give a damn about Nielsen ratings.

ALI

I guarantee...it will be a historical and momentous night!

INT. ABC-TV STUDIO

Ali being interviewed by Howard Cosell in the "Wide World of Sports" set. We've entered mid-scene...

ALI

...what Heavyweight Champion of the World? I'm not the champ. I am retired, finished, out of the game. And I ain't gonna let myself grieve and suffer none. But I know I will not fight again...

HOWARD COSELL

I thought you were resolute in your resolve to regain your crown...

ALI

If tomorrow they say: "We want you to fight Joe Frazier. Madison Square Garden. Millions and millions of dollars. Here's your license back." I will tell them: "I am sorry, but I am done."

HOWARD COSELL

What about Frazier?

ALI

You'll have to wonder...what me and Smokin' Joe would have looked like.

HOWARD COSELL

You surprise me, Muhammad...

ALI

Howard, you losing your hearing along with your hair? Don't put questions to it!

(beat)

I am through fighting. 'Cause I got a bigger and more important match comin' up. The U.S. government. A heavier contender.

HOWARD COSELL

Do you think you're going to jail?

ALI

I don't know, but it's going to be a shocking and terrible fight. In fact, they might wish they let me stay in boxing.

HOWARD COSELL

Joe Frazier told me on this show he would knock you out.

ALI

There you go, agitatin'.

(beat)

You ask Smokin' Joe what he been smokin'?! Joe Frazier even dream he can whup me? He better wake up and apologize...

(pause)

But, if I WAS to jump in the ring with Joe, here's what you might see...

(recites)

Ali comes out to meet Frazier,
but Frazier starts to retreat;
If Frazier goes back an inch farther,
he'll wind up in a ringside seat;
Ali swings with a left, Ali swings
with a right.

Frazier keeps backin', but there's
not enough room.

It a matter of time before Ali
lowers the boom;

Now Ali lands with a right, what

(MORE)

ALI (CONT'D)
 a beautiful swing,
 But the punch lifts Frazier clean
 out of the ring.
 Frazier's still risin', but the
 referee wears a frown,
 'Cause he can't start countin' 'til
 Frazier come down.
 And Frazier's disappeared from
 view. And the crowd is getting
 frantic.
 Then our radar stations pick
 him up. He's somewhere over
 the Atlantic.
 Who would have thought when
 they came to this fight,
 That they would witness the
 launching of a black satellite?

There's laughter off-camera in the studio and a wry smile on Cosell's face.

ALI (CONT'D)
 But don't wait for they fight.
 'Cause it ain't never gonna happen.
 You only can wonder and imagine...

The phones in the master control booth and ringing off the hook...the public's reaction to Ali's Bre'r Rabbit routine. Ali used his ability to command presence in media to promote the only fight the public wants to see...

EXT. CLAY HOUSE - CASSIUS, SR. - DAY

ALI (V.O.)
 You want me to buy you a drink?

Ali's dad sits on a crate, painting the door of a delivery truck. He looks up...Ali is there. Emotion wells up in both men. The younger "rebelistic" son, seeing his father, who is so like him. The older hep-cat who got cheated by life of his potential and promise. In this case, his boy, his boy's name, pride and reflected glory...

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.
 I don't drink no more.
 (squints at him)
 You wanna fight?

ALI
 I don't wanna fight no more. Not
 with you...

As they embrace, Odessa comes out, watches them.

EXT. BROAD STREET - PHILADELPHIA - DAY

Ali stands on the street corner, shades, incognito. A gold Cadillac pulls up: JOE FRAZIER. He is wearing a lemon yellow cowboy outfit, Stetson hat, striped pants. Ali looks at him in disbelief.

ALI
Who dress you, Joe? You look like
Dale Evans.

FRAZIER
Shut up. Get in.

Ali gets in, Frazier takes off. He sits sideways on the seat, steers with one finger, flicks on the radio: Isaac Hayes.

FRAZIER (CONT'D)
What the hell you in Philly for?
Philly my town.

ALI
To be closer to you, honey.

FRAZIER
Fuck you.

ALI
There be two undefeated heavyweight
champions! And they ain't fighting!

FRAZIER
I wanna fight you! Said it a
hundred times. The Man won't let
you fight no more. What you
complainin' to me for?

ALI
'Cause you gotta get behind this
and we gotta do this.

Frazier screeches to a stop in the middle of Columbia Avenue.

FRAZIER
We..."gotta" do nothin'!!!

ALI
You wanna get this on, Joe? You
and me? Or not?!

FRAZIER
What about your license?

ALI
I can fight in Atlanta.

FRAZIER
How's that? What about the Boxing
Commission?

ALI
Georgia ain't got no state boxing
commission. And Atlanta got a
black city council; a liberal
Jewish mayor, Sam something. It
all set. I do a prelim in Atlanta
with Jerry Quarry. But we got to
get the steamroller movin' now.

FRAZIER
What I got to do?

ALI
You announce that if I beat Quarry
you give me the title shot.
(puts it to him)
So what you say...maaan?

Frazier stops in front of his renovated duplex in the North
Philadelphia ghetto.

FRAZIER
My daddy was a sharecropper. I
worked in a slaughterhouse...right
on that corner. I came up from
nothing.
(raises fist)
What I got, I got with this. And I
already got the title. So I got
nothing to win and everything to lose.

ALI
But you know you ain't the champ yet.

FRAZIER
(looks at him)
Yeah..."yet."
(beat)
All right. You beat Quarry, I'll
get inna ring and fuck you up...

They drive off. After a moment, Frazier looks sideways at him.

FRAZIER (CONT'D)
(quieter)
You need any money or anything to
tide you by...?

ALI
 (turns away)
 I'm fine. Thanks.

And Ali rests a hand on Frazier's shoulder, and they drive off like that.

INT. FIFTH STREET GYM - ALI + LARRY HOLMES - DAY

sparring. Ali's sweating more than we have seen him sweat before. It's pouring off him. It stains wet his grey sweatsuit. INTO HIS EYES, through the headgear...

WIDER

Bingham takes pictures. Sarria, Rudy and the media in force are there for the start of Ali's comeback.

FROM BEHIND ALI'S HEAD GEAR

Ali spots...a figure step through the door. It's Bundini. Ali, seeing everything all the time, reacts not at all, turns his back. Bundini is thin, drawn, stooped, but clear-eyed. Everyone turns. It takes tremendous courage for Bundini to walk to the ring, expecting another rejection.

ANGELO DUNDEE
 TIME!!

Ali goes to Angelo in his corner.

ANGELO DUNDEE (CONT'D)
 Weight's comin' down. 222.

Ali first acknowledges Bundini. Ali moves down the rope, scowls down at him.

ALI
 What you want?

BUNDINI
 Take me back, boss.

ALI
 You want me to take you back?

BUNDINI
 I'm clean.
 (beat)
 And you a resurrection. This is
 God's act. Anybody love poor
 people and little people and
 fucked-up people gotta be a prophet.
 (MORE)

BUNDINI (CONT'D)

And the prophet is going home. You
the sun. Let me live in the light.

(pause)

Take me with, boss.

(beat)

...I'll do anything.

Ali considers this man: all jive and bullshit and also his
shaman and resident poet.

ALI

(quietly)

You can't hit what you can't see.

Bundini slowly comes alive, then:

BUNDINI

(quietly)

Float like a butterfly, sting like
a bee.

They look at each other.

ALI/BUNDINI

(quietly)

Rumble, young man, rumble!

INT. CITY AUDITORIUM, ATLANTA - ALI + QUARRY - NIGHT

We've entered mid-fight in the second round. We're VERY
CLOSE. Quarry has Ali against the ropes. Ali pushes him
off. Quarry comes in again. Ali dances, feints and catches
Quarry over his right eye with a jab thrown while going
backwards!

QUARRY

shakes it off. Reorganizes. Throws two jabs, a right to
the body and tries to follow it up with a left hook. Ali
ties him up. The ref separates them. Quarry comes in again.
Ali throws a left cross over Quarry's right, which Ali
leaned away from, and adds two rapid, glancing jabs to the
same spot. And Ali OPENS A CUT. The BELL sounds, ending
Round Two.

CROWD

goes nuts, that part that's pro-Ali: Atlanta's black elite
and scattered whites. And the thunderous noise becomes one
sound, one momentum, cheering their warrior saint, their
defiant champion's return. And their ROAR becomes
THUNDER...a momentum unto its own, driving...

ALI'S CORNER: ALI

can't wait for the bell to ring. He sucks in a huge breath through his nose and blows it out. Angelo applies Vaseline.

BUNDINI

You the man! You Superman! Ain't
no kryptonite in this ring tonight!

The BELL sounds Round Three.

INT. THE RING - OVER ALI

Past him, hearing him, we ARE him. We think what he thinks; see what he sees. Quarry's corner worked on the cut. Ali feints a left and throws a left cross over Quarry's attempt to block it. Quarry comes in again. Ali's next three ripping left jabs almost like karate shots...all with a sharp snap at the point of impact...

QUARRY'S EYEBROW

streams blood... Interposing himself between their arms...

REFEREE

stops the fight. Irish Jerry Quarry damned by skin that cuts and bleeds.

CROWD

goes nuts! Their champion has returned. ALI throws his arms in the air. QUARRY'S arguing not to have the fight stopped. Now he appeals to Ali!

CLOSE: ALI + QUARRY

Ali knows Quarry's anguish. They embrace. Ali says things to him. And for that moment they are an island. Ali and Quarry, their arms interlocked, are their own tribe. Two pugilists, no longer adversarial, a class unto themselves. Then...

ALI'S

picked up by Angelo. Bundini's run into the ring. Ali's arrived. He is coming back.

INT. MUHAMMAD'S DRESSING ROOM - ALI - NIGHT

seated, being examined by Pacheco, his hands still taped. The dressing room's crowded. Belinda enters, embraces her husband. Then Ali hears a familiar voice. He sees Herbert Muhammad, along with the expressionless Joseph 13X and

another NOI Man, have entered.

BELINDA

(low)

...you don't need their management...

Ali squeezes her hand...and Herbert quietly comes over.
He's nervous.

HERBERT

As-Saalam Alaikum...Brother Muhammad...

ALI

All praise to Allah...

(a beat, and
softly...)

...Alaikum Salaam...

And people, feeling the awkwardness, give them room...moving
out of earshot.

HERBERT

(beaming)

The Messenger has lifted the
suspension, Muhammad. Congratulations.

ALI

You saying I can be a Muslim again,
Herbert?

HERBERT

Yes.

ALI

(cold)

I never stopped. Like I never
stopped being champ.

HERBERT

I begged my father to reinstate you.

ALI

When? After I promoted Quarry
fight? After I won it?

HERBERT

We can get you Frazier.

ALI

I already got Frazier.

HERBERT

We can get you five million dollars
for Frazier.

ALI
Are we talking management, talking
money or talking religion?

HERBERT
When you...

ALI
(interrupts)
When I got leery and talked up how
come I'm broke, then came the
suspension. Now, you explain that
to me, my brother...?

HERBERT
It's my father...

ALI
(puts a hand on
his shoulder)
I love the Nation, Herbert. I love
Elijah Muhammad. But it don't own me.

Herbert's convinced he's getting told "no."

ALI (CONT'D)
Now, you go on out. And you make
the Frazier deal.

The reversal surprises Herbert; angers Belinda.

HERBERT
My brother!

Ali stops him, keeps him distant.

ALI
Yeah...

Herbert and Joseph 13X leave.

BINGHAM
You b-b-becoming a Christian?
Forgive and forget?

Belinda stares at him, containing her fury. Ali confronts
her look, frankly, then turns to get dressed.

INT. THE DINING HALL - ALI - LATE AFTERNOON

and Belinda, with new twin babies; Maryum; Dundee; Pacheco;
Cassius, Sr.; Sarria; and Ali's entourage. They're all
around long tables, eating dinner. A large sign over the
kitchen counter with "Lana Shabazz' Ten Commandments"...like:

#7 "Anyone bringing guestes in for dinner without prior notice will be awarded thwacks on skull with sharpe object."
 #8 "Please waite, Rome wasn't burnt in a day; it takes a while to burne the roaste." Lana Shabazz answers a phone and brings it to Ali. Ali's got one of the twins, feeding her a bottle and drinking from it, too.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. ABC WIDE WORLD OF SPORTS SET - COSELL - DAY

HOWARD COSELL
 Muhammad, you T.K.O.'ed 'em...

ALI
 What are you talking about, Howard?
 Quarry?

HOWARD COSELL
 (reads)
 No. "The Supreme Court ruled today
 in the case of the United States vs.
 Cassius Clay, a.k.a. Muhammad
 Ali..."
 (looks up)
 You won an 8-0 unanimous decision.
 You're free.

INT. THE DINING HALL - ALI - LATE AFTERNOON

takes in the news, thanks Howard and hangs up. It is a shining moment after living under the threat of imprisonment for three-and-a-half years.

ALI
 I'm free.

ANGELO DUNDEE
 What are you talking about?

ALI
 Supreme Court set me free.

BUNDINI
 That's 'cause they know the king is
 gonna go home to his throne. And
 they know everybody's with you, now.
 And they wanna be on the RIGHT side!

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN - WIDE - NIGHT

A sea of glitter: the Black royalty of America in their '70's robes. Movie stars 20 rows back. Burt Lancaster is Cosell's color man. Frank Sinatra is working as a still

photographer. In the press section are Plimpton types, Schulberg/Mailer types, Lipsyte, Cosell.

MICROPHONE

descends from the overhead lighting grid. The announcer's hand takes it...

ANNOUNCER

Ladies and gentlemen, fifteen rounds of boxing for the heavyweight championship of the world...

ALI looking out the hood of his robe, dancing, shaking it out, loosening up.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

...the contender and former heavyweight champion of the world, seeking to regain his title, from Louisville, Kentucky, Muhammad Ali!!!

Catcalls and boos. The other half is a comeback sound. It is a nation divided: pro-war right-wingers, Nixon supporters are for Frazier; the anti-war movement, celebrities, New York liberal establishment, blacks, Puerto Ricans and hippies are for Ali.

ANNOUNCER

And in the opposite corner, the current heavyweight champion of the world, Smokin' Joe Frazier...!

The contentious roar diminishes only slightly for the announcer.

ALI'S EYES

deep in his focused concentration. His attention so arrow like it reminds us of the younger man in the Liston fight...pure purpose.

THE RING

...only SILENCE as the referee's instructions are given in SLO-MOTION. Ali bounces on the canvas. We HEAR his feet shift, turn, dance...and his breathing, expectant. Here comes the return of what was unfairly taken: his heavyweight championship.

DISSOLVE TO:

MID-FIGHT - ALI

looks swollen, out of breath. Something's wrong! Two solid Ali jabs and a right hook connect. But they slow down Frazier not at all. Joe Frazier, short and compact, like a pit bull, bobs and weaves his way inside Ali's longer reach.

ALI'S CORNER - DUNDEE + BUNDINI

shouting instructions. None get through. Ali looks slow. Older.

INT. RING - PROFILE: ALI + FRAZIER

Frazier, off his bobbing and weaving, launches his devastating left hook to Ali's head. Frazier is making the most of what he is: smaller. Ali clinches.

VERY LOW: FRAZIER + ALI

The referee separates them. Both men throw and miss...Ali on the right, Frazier on the left. Ali throws a hard left that catches Frazier but doesn't stop him. Now Frazier connects with a wild left hook into Ali's cheekbone. THE UNTHINKABLE HAPPENS...

OVERHEAD: ALI

is knocked down onto his knee. Ruled a slip, he stands immediately and continues. Ali, backed against the rope again, blocks shots, pushes Frazier into the middle of the ring...

ALI SWINGS FRAZIER

around. But Frazier cranks his left. ALI SEES IT COMING...

ALI
(to himself)
Hook's comin'. Lean back, man!
Move back! WORK LEGS...!

But Ali's legs DON'T work fast enough. Frazier's hook CRASHES into Ali's face. Ali goes rubbery as he backs to the rope. Ali comes out and backs to the rope on the other side, with cartoon rubbery legs. But the mimicry is camouflage. He really is wobbling. The crowd is going wild. We HEAR everything, now.

FRAZIER

is wary. He doesn't trust Ali. He walks across the ring, allowing Ali to recuperate...THE BELL. Ali walks to his corner, drained...

HOWARD COSELL (V.O.)

Ali was out! He was out on his feet. Joe almost had him. Frazier must have thought Ali was playing possum. 'Cause Ali's a clown. Others have come in on Ali when he's playing possum and gotten knocked out.

Ali saved himself with GUILLE.

ROUND FIFTEEN:

They clinch. They separate. They both...as if mirror images of each other...crouch, looking for shots. Ali's right is down. Frazier's right is down. As they both rise up out of the crouch, Frazier's out of the box first. Ali's right is coming around. Frazier's left hook slams Ali across the jaw. Ali goes down. Half the crowd ROARS for Frazier. Ali gets right up and stands in the corner and takes the mandatory eight-count. The right side of his face is swollen like a balloon. They resume...

OVERHEAD: ANOTHER CLINCH

Ali takes another right, but the ropes hold him up. Another left catches Ali. Frazier's face is a grotesque, swollen mask. He doesn't care.

ALI

is exhausted. Labored breathing. The crowd cheering Frazier.

THEN THE BELL.

Ali drops his arms. He knows he lost. Frazier raises his arms. He knows he won. Half the crowd cheers.

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, ALI'S DRESSING ROOM - ALI - NIGHT

ANGELO DUNDEE

Hell of a fight, champ...

Not only have we seen Ali lose for the first time, not only do we see him bruised, but when a fighter's beaten, everybody who believes in him is beaten. Angelo's cutting the tape off his hands. Bundini places an ice pack on the back of his neck.

HANGERS-ON

They stole it from you! (etc.)

Bundini's wise enough to say nothing.

ALI
 Shut up! I lost.
 (louder)
 Get outta here...

Rudy heard...

RUDY
 Go on! Everybody out!

As they leave, the door reveals packed media outside. Door closes. Now it's only the inner circle.

ANGELO DUNDEE
 (to Pacheco)
 Ferdie, take a look at this...
 (to Ali)
 It was still a hell of a fight.

ALI
 Where's Belinda?

PACHECO
 She fainted... They took her to
 the aid station. She's okay.

Pacheco looks at Ali's hand. It shakes. Pacheco looks at Ali's eyes and has him follow his finger.

ALI
 My hands was in sand, Angie. My
 feet in water...

ANGELO DUNDEE
 Maybe we shoulda had more time
 between Blin and this, you
 know...to get back into...

ALI
 Woulda, shoulda, coulda...
 (pause)
 After three-and-a-half years,
 this...from how far back...comeback is.

Ali throws a water bottle. It shatters and splays wet down the wall. There is mature, deep-seated, dead-serious molten anger. Everybody in the room feels it.

INT. CORRIDOR

With Bundini, Bingham, Rudy and Sarria as a wedge, Ali drives through reporters on the way to Belinda. Press mob Ali...

PRESS
Were you robbed?

ALI
I lost. You lose, you don't shoot
yourself. The world goes on.

ANOTHER REPORTER
Joe said he didn't think you wanted
to fight him again...

ALI
(stops)
Oh, how wrong he is.

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, AID STATION - BELINDA - NIGHT
sees Ali...the beating. She begins crying.

BELINDA
My God. They killed you!

Ali moves to her, followed by Bingham and Pacheco. A
doctor's approaching with a sedative in a syringe.

PACHECO
Get away from her. What is that?

Ali leans over, speaks softly.

ALI
I ain't dead, baby! C'mon.

Embracing her, his eyes connect with Dundee. Ali's Supreme
Court victory is meaningless. It's drowned by the loss of
what the political persecution took from him: his prime,
his season that would have been his most brilliant.

INT. SAN DIEGO SPORTS ARENA, ALI VS. NORTON I (2ND ROUND) -
TWO FIGHTERS - NIGHT

BLUR in SLO-MO. Focus is beyond, to the crowd.

OVER ALI: OUT-OF-FOCUS KEN NORTON'S RIGHT FIST
starts an arc...or jams towards us.

RIDING NORTON'S FIST - SLO-MO

towards Ali. We PASS crowd, the lighting grid above and
SLAM into the side of Ali's jaw, and on the moment of impact...

ECU: X-RAY IMAGE - SLO-MO

of Ali's jaw breaking, shearing, leaving an eighth-inch gap in the bone of the lower mandible...and becomes...

CMS: ALI

taking the shot, covering and assaulting, covering with his left, which he turns into a jab, aggressively going after Norton.

IMAGE TURNS TO WHITE AS...

INT. SAN DIEGO SPORTS ARENA, ALI'S CORNER - WHITE TOWEL

fills the frame. Go behind it as they shield Ali spitting blood into a bucket.

ALI

I can move my jaw with my tongue.
He got me...

Pacheco looks into his mouth.

PACHECO

(concerned)

It's broke. I think...I think your
jaw's broke.

Meanwhile, Ali spots...

REFEREE

curious about the activity in Ali's corner, starts over...

PACHECO

nods to Dundee. Dundee starts to reach. Ali snatches Angelo's hand holding the towel. Angelo's about to end the fight...

ALI

Ain't stoppin' nothin'...!
(glares at them)
Nothin' stoppin'...!

A BELL sounds and Ali goes out to fight in an OVERHEAD SHOT.

BURN OUT TO WHITE:

INT. SAN DIEGO SPORTS ARENA, ALI AND HIS CORNERMEN +
SECURITY - NIGHT

leave the ring and another defeat, as they move up the aisle
towards the locker room...

INT. ALI'S WOODLAWN AVENUE HOUSE (CHICAGO), LIVING ROOM -
ALI - DAY

watching television. The place is a huge mansion on
Chicago's South Side.

HERBERT

Now that Smokin' Joe's run out of
tomato cans to beat up, I finally
got Yank to commit to a rematch
with you in about six months.
Frazier said he'd be happy with
three mil...

(beat)

WIDEN TO INCLUDE THE LIVING ROOM WITH BINGHAM, ALI'S
TWINS -- RASHEEDA AND JAMILLAH -- MUHAMMAD, JR. AND MARYUM

HERBERT (CONT'D)

I'll fly to Jamaica and get Yank to
sign right after Joe beats this big
stiff.

(to TV)

OVER ALI: CONSOLE TV

They watch the Frazier-Foreman fight from Jamaica amid the
wonderful chaos generated by kids and their toys, who crawl
all over Ali as if he were furniture. Frazier and Foreman
are in the center of the ring... We SEE Don King in
Frazier's corner.

ALI

(through still-wired-
together jaw)

Foreman call me one time after he
won the Olympics...

Meanwhile, Frazier bobs and weaves, ducks and moves like he
did with Ali. Joe throws a left hook, leaning forward with
it. Before it lands, Foreman unleashes a hard right that
jolts Frazier SIDEWAYS. Frazier throws another hook that
misses. Foreman hits him with a combination of right and
three lefts...two hooks and an uppercut that LIFTS FRAZIER
OFF THE GROUND. Ali leans in to SEE...

HOWARD COSELL
 (shouting)
 DOWN GOES FRAZIER! DOWN GOES FRAZIER!

ON TV: THE RING

Frazier stands. The referee does the mandatory eight-count. Foreman bangs Frazier into the corner and blasts him again. Frazier tries to muscle out of the corner. Foreman lifts and throws him back into the corner. Foreman's power is unreal. Frazier is the man who beat Ali. Now, Frazier feints and slides sideways, and Foreman hits him in the back of the head. Frazier goes down again. It is savage. Here is a new world champion: George Foreman.

BINGHAM
 (wry)
 B-b-be easy gettin' a Frazier fight
 now. He ain't the champ of
 anything except getting knocked down.

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN (ALI-FRAZIER II) - HANDS + ARMS - NIGHT

grabbing. Holding. Ali's got Joe's powerful left tied up this time. A clinch. Separating. A punch. A hook. Clinching. They separate...

OVER JOE:

Ali, having Joe at the right range, hits him. Joe moves in. Ali DRAGS him closer and ties him up. They dance...

THEIR BODIES

Ali does a little shuffle, circles to keep Joe at hitting distance, lands a combination. Joe closes, but Ali won't let him in and ties up Joe. We hear a BELL and that's the end of the fight. Not a bang; a whimper.

REFEREE

holds up Ali's hand and mouths silently words we cannot hear. And as we MOVE CLOSER INTO ALI'S EYES, we see no exaltation. This is a victory, but a hollow one. It's a decision eked out.

INT. NEW YORK COFFEE SHOP - WIDE

The inner circle: Ali, Pacheco, Dundee, Bundini, Bingham.

ALI
 So.

ANGELO DUNDEE

So we only eked this one out. And George Foreman makes Frazier look like a sissy.

PACHECO

You see their fight?

HOWARD BINGHAM

You mean the Joe Frazier falling-down lesson?

PACHECO

And Foreman is 24. You are 32 years old. I don't want to see your head get turned into someone's bull's-eye.

ANGELO DUNDEE

...but, you go? We're the corner, same as always. But it ain't gonna be easy.

ALI

(to Angelo)

You think I still got the tools?

ANGELO DUNDEE

You got the tools, Daddy. But they different.

ALI

(thinks; decides:
go)

Well, you better sharpen 'em up. 'Cause we goin' to Africa.

BUNDINI

The motherland. From the root to the fruit. We gonna rumble...in the jungle.

ALI

It's time to be heavyweight champion of the world again.

BUNDINI

Yeah, man!

INT. NEW YORK PRESS CONFERENCE - DAY

DON KING

"Rumble in the Jungle!" That's the name I given it.

Ali and Don King hold court with the press. Also there is George Foreman and his trainer, Dick Sadler, and his manager, Nilon.

DON KING (CONT'D)

A historical happening. This event will show that the black man has arrived on the world stage. Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire.

PRESS REACTIONS:

where's Zaire?

REPORTERS

Don. Zaire? Why not Antarctica?
What's wrong with New York City?

DON KING

Because you miss the significance. I dream, as Martin Luther King once dreamt, that a man could be judged by the content of his mind. This is about black men helping black men, overcoming four hundred years of racial depression to the dawn of a new day of liberation...financial and otherwise.

King getting really evangelistic...

DON KING (CONT'D)

It will raise up the spirit of our inner cities. It will rise up and fill with hope the souls, the unrequited needs of the black proletariat, that is, the discouraged, dispirited, denigrated, denizens of the demimonde, that is called...the ghetto.

Ali's looking at him in amazement.

ALI

Man, you crazy.

Don King laughs. As the press digs King...MOVE ONTO Foreman, and here's what's wrong with all of this...we SEE that Foreman, eight years younger, two inches taller, almost as fast and seemingly twice as strong, is not beatable by Muhammad Ali. Foreman just doesn't hurt you, Foreman can kill you. How is Ali not going to get killed by this man

with death in his eyes and indifference on his face?
 Meanwhile...

DON KING

Ten million dollars. With one
 stroke of the pen, you split the
 world's biggest emolument of the
 history of sports!

Ali signs a contract; then Foreman. Flashbulbs.

DON KING (CONT'D)

The "Rumble in the Jungle"!

Don King bursts out laughing.

EXT. KINSHASA AIRPORT, TARMAC - ROOF - PAST HEADS - DAY

PUSH THROUGH people and SEE an Air Zaire DC-10 pulling in.
 A ramp is wheeled up. The plane stops taxiing. Zairian
 officials in safari suits, paratroopers with white helmets,
 LT. NSAKALA and hundreds of African, European and American
 media with cameras and lights approach. The hatch opens. A
 ROAR emerges from the right and left. We don't see the source.

INT. AIR ZAIRE DC-10'S - ALI

Belinda's behind him. Bingham's there, Bundini, Angelo
 Dundee, Sarria. As they crowd to the door, we're shooting
 OVER ALI starting down the ramp. He looks up. We don't see
 what he sees. We see only the crowd of people at the foot
 of the ramp, including Don King in a dashiki and the crowd
 on the tarmac.

FRONTAL: ALI

looking ABOVE the receiving party. The ROAR again. He
 looks side to side, almost distracted from King and the
 officials. He waves. Distant CROWD ROAR increases.
 They're chanting something. We don't understand the words.
 It contains his name. Now...

PAST ALI: REVEAL A THOUSAND PEOPLE

are beyond the receiving party. They're on the roof of the
 airport. They're sitting on balconies and fences. They're
 waving their arms. They're on every possible horizontal
 surface that can support weight. They're shouting in unison,
 a syncopated ROAR...his name and something else. Ali moves
 through the receiving party, as if in a trance, to get
 through the airport to the other side. Security tries to
 keep up...

EXT. AIRPORT ENTRANCE + STREET - ALI

emerges and reacts. He's electrified. Dundee, Bingham, and a few cops are with him. Everybody else got left behind. REVEAL 10,000 people are OUTSIDE the airport, cheering his arrival. Their cheer is thunder.

ALI
 (to Zairian Official;
 shouts)
 What are they saying, man?!?! Why
 they saying that?

ZAIRIAN OFFICIAL #1
 They say, "Ali, boma ye. Ali, boma
 ye."

ALI
 What's that mean?! I don't understand!

ZAIRIAN OFFICIAL #1
 It mean...!

ALI
 (can't hear)
 What?!

ZAIRIAN OFFICIAL #1
 (has to shout)
 It mean..."Ali, kill him! Ali,
 kill him!"

Ali moves forward. The Zairian Official and four cops fade back, nervous about being in so large a crowd. The crowd's a tidal wave, carrying Ali forward, supporting, never mobbing him.

MUHAMMAD ALI

is overcome. This is all for him. He is their hero. He defied the world's powerful. They tried and could not destroy him. His defiance made him their champion. And now he has come to contest his rightful title against the numb instrument of the all-powerful. He raises his arm, too, and shouts...

ALI
 Ali, boma ye!

Ten thousand voices carry it on the wind and take away Ali's breath.

ALI (CONT'D)
 Ali, boma ye!

DON KING, ZAIRIAN OFFICIALS #1 + #2

in the rear realize, as do we, this is NOT MERELY A BOXING MATCH.

CUT TO: INT. AIR ZAIRE DC-10 - NIGHT

A towering man in denims with sequins blocks our view of the door as he walks out onto the ramp. Only now do we see BEYOND HIM a small welcoming party. Native African dancers, a big banner that proclaims, "Welcome, George Foreman," the Zairian paratroopers, media and a few dozen of the curious.

FRONTAL: GEORGE FOREMAN

looks like "Superfly" on steroids. His entourage follows him down the ramp. DICK SADLER, tough and smart, is the Louis Armstrong of trainers. ARCHIE MOORE, crafty and wise, wears a blue shirt and blue pea-cap.

If George Foreman wonders at the paucity of his reception, he doesn't let on.

INT. ALI'S HOUSE, N'SELE - ALI - MORNING

sits in EXTREME CLOSE-UP drinking coffee...lost in thought. He's somewhere else, puzzled, alone in his thoughts. He wears grey sweatpants, a thin-rubber long-sleeved T-shirt under his grey sweatshirt. He's oblivious to the Euro-modern furnishings. Then it's time, and he leaves...

EXT. N'SELE COMPOUND - WIDE: ALI

enters from his bungalow. We SEE we're in a compound. They are white and severely truncated houses linked by sidewalks and too many large street lamps. As Ali starts to jog through this imitation of suburbia with the scale all wrong. It's like a Gulag in reverse for the rich and powerful to be within while keeping the rest of the country out. As Ali passes, REVEAL we are at the bank of the Congo River. As Ali starts his predawn run, across the river the first band of magenta tints the horizon and reflects molten on the water.

TRACKING SHOT: ALI + DUNDEE, SARRIA IN A PICKUP TRUCK - RED DAWN

plus two trainers and the ever-present Zairian POLICEMAN, Lt. Nsakala. The early paints the red-earth ochre.

ALI
 (to himself)
 Fast. Six left jabs flash from his chest and shoulder, followed by a right hook and left and right uppercuts.

ALI (CONT'D)
 (to himself)
 Back up, maaan...
 (weaves suddenly;
 another voice)
 ...you fast!

Ali slides to the right and throws a left jab and hooks off the jab.

EXT. KINSHASA ROAD - EMPTY ROAD - MORNING LIGHT

Ali ENTERS, running. The road is lined with Mobutu's green billboards in French and English, proclaiming Zaire wonderful. A few kids emerge from behind the signs, coming out from between...and they trail Ali.

KIDS
 Ali, boma ye!

ALI
 (repeating)
 Ali, boma ye George Foreman!

And he throws a couple at an imaginary George Foreman. There are 15 to 16 kids, now.

ALI (CONT'D)
 You out, sucker!

Curious, Ali runs behind the green signs from where the kids came.

ALI'S

still jogging. Behind the signs, he becomes a magnetic attraction. People are surprised to see Ali. He's making their day. Euphoric kids parallel him, run with him, follow him...

PAST ALI:

the concrete-and-cinder-block walls to the dusty, bare ground are chromatic. Primary colors. Ethnographically interesting.

ALI SEES interiors. Broken walls. No roof. No plumbing. People come from a ditch with a shower curtain for privacy, surprised to see Ali. Faces indifferent to squalor. This is the ethnographically "interesting" surface of what, in fact, is civic disintegration starting to occur... It is the human concomitant to 13 years of Mobutu kleptocracy.

ALI

looks at the backs of the signs. He and we realize the signs' purpose: to hide the makeshift plastic walls and rooms made from cardboard containers and oil drums from the foreigners traveling the road to Kinshasa. One TEENAGER WITH A WITHERED ARM and a big smile runs up...

TEENAGER
(broken English)
You beat them, Ali!

ALI
Foreman? I kill him!

He mimes knocking out Foreman. Something powerful is affecting Ali. We don't know what it is. Ali slows down...

...throws two lightning jabs and a hook. Ali reaches to the kid's head and pulls a coin. He flips it to another kid and walks on. A SECOND TEENAGER comes out and wants Ali to look at something around the back. He takes Ali's hand...and holds it. Ali complies. The entourage follows...

AROUND CORNER: KIDS' PAINTING ON WALL

It's an imitation fight poster. Childlike caricatures in Basquiat-like brush strokes. Foreman's got crosses for eyes. He's out! Ali is victorious! His fist is raised. His cartoon face shouts his victory...the people's champion. There's more. There's knocked-out white policemen, knocked-out black soldiers, knocked-out landlords, knocked-out South Africa, knocked-out planes and tanks, knocked-out tse-tse flies...everything!

So much, it means "ALL"...all expectation. This childish painting powerfully affects Ali. The kids look at him. It's still. Some kids in the back leap up in the air to see over taller heads what Ali's doing.

ALI

looks at individual faces. A grinning OLDER MAN with a blue transistor radio (we'll see him later). A smiling kid. A girl with no shoes. A teenage kid jumping up and down...all looking at him. Ali makes four pieces of rope appear. He rubs them together...

ALI (CONT'D)
Shazaam!!!

They become one. Everybody goes nuts. As Ali leaves, his eyes go back to the people and the painting...

EXT. KINSHASA ROAD - ECU: ALI'S FACE - MORNING (GREEN SCREEN)

ALI
(to himself)
...even if I die here. If it kill
me, no matter what...I gotta win.

Concentration has taken him into the athlete's zone, the state of unified awareness wherein dwells his total self-knowledge. And he knows the transaction: what they give him with their adoration, which he converts to power, is in exchange for what he means to them. And what he means to them is specific: he represents them in defying power and vanquishing what oppresses. He validates the existence of expectation, that struggle is possible...George Foreman, mute and unknowingly, represents disinterested power. Ali doesn't "accept" his obligation; he embraces it. It is his purpose, revealed. And he will never waver from it.

CUT TO:

INT. INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL, ANTEROOM (KINSHASA) - ALI - DAY

waits, sitting on a table edge in a corridor. Noise of a press conference setting. Howard Cosell crosses through, smoking. Bingham enters and gestures...they're ready. Ali waves off Bingham, stops Cosell...

ALI
Howard! How many you ugly
sportswriters in there got me over
Foreman? Don't lie.

HOWARD COSELL
(beat)
Some of us...Norman, me...are
worried. How you gonna dance
against George?? He's sparring
with a middleweight, training to
cut you off. He gets you against
the ropes, he can knock you out
with either hand.

ALI
(drops facade)
What's the odds?

HOWARD COSELL

Two-and-a-half-to-one. Against.
We're worried you're going to get hurt.

No one thinks Ali will win.

INT. INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL, MEDIA CONFERENCE ROOM - CLOSE:
ALI - DAY

ALI

This'll be the biggest upset since
Sonny Liston. I want all of you to
write it down! This fight is no
contest!

We've jammed into the middle of Ali in a blast of braggadocio.

ALI (CONT'D)

George Foreman is a big mummy.
I've officially named him "The Mummy."

Laughter.

ALI (CONT'D)

George punches are like "Look out,
here come the left." Whomp!
(stiff-armed swing)
Here come the right! Whomp! Like
a Mummy. But "The Mummy" can't hit
what it can't see. I'm fast!
Gonna dance. Be all over George.
George is gonna feel he surrounded.
(beat)
And I done somethin' new for this
fight; I done rassled with an
alligator.

Anticipatory laughter. They've had twelve years' experience
of Ali's stand-up and know when a new routine's starting...

ALI (CONT'D)

That's right!
(laughter again;
Ali almost loses it)
I have rassled with an alligator.
I done tussled with a whale. I
done handcuffed lightning, thrown
thunder in jail. That's bad! Only
last week I murdered a rock.
Injured a stone. Hospitalized a
brick. I'm so mean, I make
medicine sick.

Laughter.

HOWARD COSELL

Muhammad, I'm sorry. I have to ask.
(he hesitates; he's
sorry, but)

Are you really fast enough, anymore?
To beat George Foreman? Many
people believe you don't have the
same skills, that you are not the
same man you used to be ten years ago.

There it is. Has doubt, spoken truthfully in the open,
closed the mouth of Muhammad Ali? A beat. Then...

ALI

Howard. I didn't want to talk
about this, especially in front of
everybody. But I talked to your
wife! And she told me you're not
the man you used to be...two years ago!

The assembled media crack up. Ali's eyes are wide in mock
amazement.

CLOSE: COSELL

A bittersweet smile and the eye contact with Ali. Cosell
knows...

INT. GYM FLOOR - HEAVY BAG - LATE AFTERNOON

is slammed by a massive fist. It leaves a dent the size of
a deflated basketball. The fist is George Foreman's.

DICK SADLER

holds the bag. Foreman throws hooks, one after the other.
Each blow rocks Sadler. George is literally punching a hole
in the bag. These blows would mash an opponent's liver,
break ribs, destroy kidneys. This man can do more than hurt
you. This man can kill you.

INT. RING - FOREMAN + SPARRING PARTNER - LATER

Foreman is boxing a middleweight. He is smaller than
Foreman and, therefore, faster. And, that's the point. The
partner tries to circle, slide, dance away, and Foreman cuts
him off and drives him to the ropes where he tags him. He
doesn't put a lot behind it. Partner slides...

FOREMAN

darts left and jars him with three left jabs, keeping him on
the rope. Foreman's training to defeat Ali's dancing, his
"float + sting" tactics.

CLOSE: GEORGE FOREMAN

is young, has unreal power and he can move.

CUT TO:

INT. TRAINING COMPOUND - METAL GRILL DOORS: ALI'S ENTOURAGE

is entering. Lieutenant Nsakala is there, too. They time-share the facility. Foreman's entourage with conga drummers are exiting. Ali and Foreman are never closer than 10 feet apart. Foreman says nothing. Ali starts banging his hands on Foreman's conga and shouts over the percussion at Foreman...

ALI
Salaam Alaikum, brothers!
(raises one arm)
The champ is here!

SIDE ANGLE: THE TWO ENTOURAGES

pass. Comparatively, Foreman looks bigger. He is more dense of bone. He's taller. His chest seems deeper and his shoulders wider.

AND FOREMAN'S EXPRESSION

is casual, unrattled by Ali's antics. He is menacing in his indifference. It means he's ALSO immune to getting psyched out by Ali.

INT. RING - CROWD - LATER

Bundini's in Ali's corner. Ali's sparring partner is Larry Holmes. Ali's hands are at his side. He dances, bicycles, shuffles, dances, dodges, doesn't throw anything, his elbows at his side. Ali is training to DANCE from Foreman. He's fast, but not seemingly suspended in air as he was 10 long years ago against Liston.

INT. N'SELE COMPOUND, ALI'S HOUSE - BELINDA - MORNING

BELINDA
Here's your water.

ALI
Bottled water. Frozen steaks.
Brought all this stuff like
Africans don't have steaks...

BELINDA
You could pick up parasites...

ALI
They eat it.

BELINDA
You're seeing what you want to see,
Muhammad...

ALI
Mobutu eats it...

BELINDA
Mobutu is taking care of Mobutu and
stealing all the wealth and sending
it to Switzerland...

ALI
(pause)
So? What's that do with any of why
we here?

BELINDA
(she doesn't get it)
We're here 'cause Don King got
Mobutu to put up ten million
dollars. Don King don't give a
damn about Africa. He worse than
Herbert.

ALI
Here come "Herbert."

BELINDA
Yeah. 'Cause where was he when we
was broke and borrowing money? And
Bundini and all them that "love
you"? Disappeared, is where they
were.

(on a roll)
All over you when you got it and
drop off you when you don't...

ALI
Money? I do "money-making"
whenever I want. Money is easy.

BELINDA
(running on)
And Don King fit right in...that
double-breasted hipster is now a
dashiki-wearing rip-off.

ALI
Don King delivered the first black-
promoted championship fight in Africa!

BELINDA

Don King talks black, lives white
and thinks green! Why you
defending him and "brother" Herbert?
(against me)

ALI

'Cause clean-cut Muslims parading
on the South Side of Chicago don't
get this done! I got to put
honkeys with connections and bad-
ass niggers to it, too.

BELINDA

(not hearing)

And now they got you up against
George Foreman. Do they give a
damn you could get killed?

ALI

That what this is? Think I gonna
lose? Puttin' doubt on me?

BELINDA

(tears flow)

I think: why is my Muslim husband
letting himself get strung up on a
cross...? It means, "tell me."

He won't. Ali picks up his bag and starts out...

BELINDA (CONT'D)

Maryum is sick. Maybe I oughta go
back to Chicago and look after her.

ALI

Sure.

BELINDA

I'll be back before the fight.
(sarcastic)
If that's all right, my husband...

He walks out the door.

CUT TO:

EXT. KINSHASA ARENA - 75 ZAIRIAN TRIBAL DANCERS - NIGHT
to percussion. The number.

ALI,

Angelo and Bingham in the empty seating, looking at the ring under the canopy. Behind them is the rehearsal. Meanwhile...

CUT TO:

EXT. ARENA, ENTRANCE - TWO CARS

arrive, including in the first an Interpreter, Zairian Official #2, a Policeman Driver; and in the second car is Don King, Herbert, VERONICA, and another American Woman (silent bit). They're in a hurry...

EXT. ARENA - ALI

is being taught to dance by two dancers. They fail. In the background, workers are raising gigantic Mobutu portraits. The Pointer Sisters begin.

AISLE

Don King and entourage approach.

DON KING
(over the drumming)
Champ! Champ! George had an accident.

ANGELO DUNDEE
(suspicious)
What are you talking about?

Pointer Sisters start "Yes, We Can Can."

DON KING
Got cut. Right above his right eye.
His sparring partner's elbow.
Split it open, so...

ANGELO DUNDEE
Can he fight?

DON KING
Not for six weeks.

Ali laughs.

DON KING (CONT'D)
This is not a humorous situation,
my champion. This postponement
could be long, especially if George
leaves.

ANGELO DUNDEE

Are you tryin' to pull something,
Don? Ali wants his title. And he
wants it back in Zaire. George
leaves, he ain't comin' back.
George don't like it here.

Pointer Sisters' rehearsal cuts...re-organizes.

DON KING

How right you are, my suspicious
and short Italian brother. And my
fiduciary responsibility to this
first all-black promotion is like a
garden in the African sun. It must
grow! It must bloom! It cannot
flower in the gloom and shade of
postponement to some dome. Like
the Astrodome, the Super-dome, any
dome outta Zaire, where it be
deprived of light and bled of water.
'Cause what gonna bleed...is money.
A hemorrhage of cash.

(sees it all)

...blood on the floor. Double
hotel costs. Double travel costs.
Airplanes. Food and beverage...

ANGELO DUNDEE

(rhetorical)

What do you expect us to do, Don?

DON KING

(moves close to Ali)

Muhammad. Find a way to get George
to stay. Be Moses in reverse: do
NOT let my people go! Stay the
fuck right here, in Egypt, if
you'll pardon my Swahili.

BINGHAM

L-l-l-lingala.

DON KING

What?

BINGHAM

Lingala. They s-s-s-speak Lingala.

DON KING

Who cares?

Pointer Sisters probably end here. After a beat, percussion
starts up. Dancers drift in.

ANGELO DUNDEE
 (pissed, dissed big)
 If George goes? You forfeit five
 million. You crawl back to
 Cincinnati. You ain't promotin' a
 charity raffle...

We see Herbert watching all of this closely...particularly
 the challenge to Ali/Dundee.

DON KING
 (irrepressible)
 If George goes? George goes, my
 champion, I will get you Joe
 Frazier. Ali-Frazier III...the
 fight everybody want to see.

INT. PRESS CONFERENCE

ALI
 (interrupts)
 Truth is...George knocked himself out.

Don King laughs, nervously. Ali is daring George to stay.

ALI (CONT'D)
 That's right. He did three rounds.
 Knew he was gonna lose to Muhammad
 Ali and knocked himself out. And I
 predict that whenever the fight is
 set, he might not show up!

DON KING
 (double entendre)
 You bad!

ALI
 I'm a bad man!

DON KING
 Ain't no doubt about it.

ALI
 And you tell the same thing to George.

Media laugh, Don King goes along, Ali continues...

ALI (CONT'D)
 (to King)
 I been watchin' you! I heard you.
 I know he's your man. I know you
 got him picked. But the man's in
 trouble.

(MORE)

ALI (CONT'D)

The whole world was gonna know.
But, now, he ain't gonna show.
That's why he knocked hisself out
when he was training.

DON KING

(laughs to dismiss
Ali)

We will reschedule the fight, and
to ensure George is ready, we are
thinking of postponing from
September 24th to October 30th.

REPORTER

What about the concert, Don?

DON KING

That would go off as planned on
September 22nd and 23rd.

ALI

(skeptical)

Uh-huh. I want all helicopters
guarded! Private boats. Private
jets. I want the airport -- I'm
serious -- I want President Mobutu
and all his paratroopers. Mobutu
and all his paratroopers. I want
all of you "Zaireans" to be on
guard! Watch all strange boats
tryin' to slip away! They might be
takin' him out.

ANGELO DUNDEE

The bus station.

It's Ali kidding on the square. A serious point delivered
not seriously to be taken seriously.

ALI

Yeah. Watch the bus station.
Watch everything! Elephant
caravans. He might sneak out by
elephant.

BUNDINI thinks of a line and whispers it to Don. Don leans
past Dundee to pass it on Ali.

ANGELO DUNDEE

What you say?

DON KING

I ain't talkin' to you!

ALI
 (to King)
 Hey!!!

His eyes flash. He leans forward and puts a finger in Don King's face.

ALI (CONT'D)
 Don't talk to Angelo like that!
 Don't you talk to him like that
 ever again!!!

Ali ain't fucking around. Ali has reasons for working with Don. Belittling Angelo cuts across all that. Danger's in the air. Dundee puts his hands up.

ALI (CONT'D)
 You think you're callin' these
 shots, Don? You're not.

Ali pulls out a comb and starts to comb his hair.

ALI (CONT'D)
 (to King)
 They know!
 (segues into a
 routine)
 All those ladies out there know.

Ali being mercurial is unexpected by Don. Laughter from particularly the women as he combs his hair and segues...

ALI (CONT'D)
 (mock demagoguery)
 They know I'm ready! I see fear in
 the eyes of his followers! I see
 fear! This is the fight that
 Muhammad Ali was supposed to be
 ended. The myth of Muhammad was
 supposed to fall!
 (hits the table with
 his fist; glares at
 King)
 Supposed to be my destruction!
 (French voices and
 laughter, understated)
 They miscalculated. They misjudged.
 They got it...wrong.

Ali's served notice to anyone with ears to hear it: he's multidimensional, strategic and dangerous as hell. A taste of what's to come.

EXT. VERANDA - ALI, BUNDINI, BINGHAM + ANGELO - DAY

Waiters scurry. Ali talks to a blonde reporter from France and settles next to Lloyd Price, without a shirt. Everyone crowds around their table. A ZAIRIAN INTERPRETER and Lieutenant Nsakala are present. Ali disregards their presence because his attention tracks...

ALI'S POV: VERONICA

seen over the heads of Zairians. She's 5 feet 10 inches tall. Without acknowledging she's the object of Ali's attention, her radar tells her she's the object of Ali's attention.

ALI (V.O.)
Say, girl...!

Veronica turns, sees Ali. Lights up.

ALI (CONT'D)
C'mere. I know you?

OVER VERONICA as she makes her way to the table by Ali's side, where he takes her hand in his.

VERONICA
I don't think so.

ALI
What's your name?

VERONICA
Veronica Porche.

ALI
Like the sports car.

VERONICA
(laughs)
Yes.

ALI
But with a little something extra.
(beat)
Veronica, I know you now. C'mere,
sit down.

He steers her into the chair next to him, which is immediately vacated by Lloyd Price.

ALI (CONT'D)
You with Don?

VERONICA

Don brought me here, but I'm not
"with"...anybody.

The others are paying them no attention. Bundini stands to talk to Howard Cosell. There's an ocean of side conversations. Ali's presentation to Veronica is natural, open admiring. It is not seduction. It's more seductive than seduction. She feels from Ali nothing predatory or exploitative...only the warm rays of the sun from his open face and appreciating eyes. Still holding her hand...

ALI

Where you from?

Meanwhile, George Foreman, with Sadler, Moore, Broadus, sees and laughs at Ali and Veronica and onto George Foreman going into hotel.

VERONICA

L.A. But my people are from
Louisiana. We're Creole. So I'm
African, French, Spanish, my
mother's grandfather was Jewish.

ALI

(looking at her
admiringly)
Well...they all came together real
nice.

VERONICA

You know...
(hesitating; low)
...I'm glad you said what you did.
You made sure this fight stays here.

ALI

All them writers in there think
Foreman gonna...kill me!
(eyes go wide)
What you think?

VERONICA

Ali, boma ye.

Meanwhile, 15 Chinese and some Vietnamese approach and wait patiently. Ali has to force his attention away from Veronica to respond... They all bow. He bows.

The Zairian Interpreter translates English to French to another Zairian, who speaks Mandarin. It all gets lost in chaos while Bingham shoots pictures and a Plimpton type explains pedantically to Bundini...

PLIMPTON TYPE

...she's an African "succubus."
Means witch doctor.

BUNDINI

Succubus? Suck my dick. They
ain't room in Africa for more than
one witch doctor. And that's B'dini.

The eyes of some of the Asians are very emotional. Ali
stands up and bows to them. Chinese bow themselves away.
Ruth Pointer arrives. Ali kisses her. She sits, but talks
to Bingham.

ALI

You been to Hong Kong? Taiwan?
Thailand?

VERONICA

No.

ALI

I can't go there. All the ladies
out there from Indonesia, Japan,
Hawaii, India...

(high-pitched voice,
imitating female fans)

"Ali-i-i-e-e-e! Ali-e-e-e! Oh,
Muhammad Al-i-i-i!"

(speaks in faux foreign
language, imitating
female fans; to Bingham)

You seen those people from Thailand?
I was in Bangkok -- I couldn't walk.

(laughter; hangs his
head)

I couldn't...I just couldn't do
nothin'. "Get me outta this
country!"

(laughter)

The women were so pretty...

BINGHAM

'B-b-b-bout Hong Kong, man?! You
know what I heard?

ALI

(interrupts)

Ladies in Thailand, their hair
comes down to their knees...and
they about Veronica's
complexion...and they bad!

(MORE)

ALI (CONT'D)
 But they ain't nothin' like the
 "sisters."
 (holds Veronica's
 hands, looks deep
 into her eyes)
 Ain't NOTHIN' like the sisters!

Veronica laughs as Ali mocks swooning over her... Another news crew arrives.

NEWS CAMERAMAN
 Champ...

ALI
 (to Veronica)
 Let's go for a ride.

EXT. KINSHASA SHANTYTOWN - KIDS - DUSK INTO NIGHT

and old people, teenagers in dirty T-shirts with strange hats. Their eyes are wide.

REVERSE: ALI

shows his bare hands. Now he rubs them together and MAGICALLY pulls from his closed fist a colored scarf. The kids scream.

VERONICA

squints, trying to figure out how he did it, because...

ALI

shows the scarf, pushes back his cuffs so that he can't hide anything up his sleeves. His wrists are bare. He shows both sides. Now, he takes the scarf and pushes with his right hand and feeds it into the closed fist of his left. He looks up wide-eyed at everybody. Then, he opens his fingers and the scarf is not there!

ALI + VERONICA

walk, towering over the kids. One girl holds Ali's hand. The others maintain a respectful proximity so that they don't invade the space around Ali.

ALI
 So why you glad we still here?

VERONICA

Holdin' this in Africa make people
proud. All over the world.
They're proud of you. Anybody can
fight in Vegas.

ALI

That's one job. I got two...

They pass through cinder-block houses, shipping crates, oil
drums for cooking fires, a few car parts.

ALI (CONT'D)

(melodramatic)

...gotta whup George!

VERONICA

Islamic faith help you to that?

ALI

Listen, girl, as a Muslim, I am
busted out and failed in the eyes
of God. I shoulda discovered Islam
at 50! 'Cause I am weak on women.
They take my eyes and my heart
follow...causing me to be a lovin'
husband and a terrible husband...!
(looks down at her,
intensely)
...green eyes and cocoa skin...?
(feigns wobbly legs)
...okay, rest of me, let's go!!

Veronica laughs. She brings his hand up to her mouth and
kisses it. Hand in hand, a towering man and a towering
woman walk away at their ease against the soft sky with
their entourage of teenagers and kids. On the perimeter, a
kid does flips and, then, gets distracted...

INT. N'SELE GYM - SPEED BAG - DAY

A syncopated, obscuring, blurred shape of the bag turned
into a percussion instrument by Ali's fast hands trying to
get even faster.

ALI

(to himself)

Faster! Faster!

DUNDEE

(shouts)

TIME!

Ali SLAMS a right hook at the bag. It almost explodes.
 OPTIONAL: Ali takes body hits, tries sliding off head shots.

INT. RING - ALI'S EYES

feints his left and throws a right. It surprises Holmes.

HOLMES

You can't lead a right hand. Not
 at him!

ALI

Why not?

HOLMES

Too long...to get it there. Man, I
 mean, to think you could hit him
 with a right lead...it's insulting...
 Nobody would lead a right...

Ali sees something beyond the ring. And, now, flicks four
 ripping left jabs into Holmes and slides sideways as Holmes
 tries to catch Ali with a right. But Ali changes directions,
 changes back and now comes over Holmes' right with his own
 left cross, and a six-or-seven-punch combination. It is Ali
 dancing and floating. Crowd cheers..."TIME."

BUNDINI

meanwhile, has thrown his arms around Dick Sadler, Foreman's
 manager. (We realize this is why Ali segued from serious
 work to snapping his traditional left jab.)

BUNDINI

I got him! Lock him up.

SADLER

(laughs)

Hey, hold up, chump! Make this
 chump turn me loose.

Sadler's there with his wife and another couple. Rudy joins,
 laughing. Bundini turns loose Sadler. Ali and Sadler like
 each other.

SADLER (CONT'D)

This is my wife, Irene...

Sadler affectionately puts an arm around Ali's neck and
 reaches up and pretends to hit Ali on top of the head with a
 fist for Bingham's camera. Ali bites his lower lip and
 starts wrestling with Sadler, putting him in a headlock.
 Sadler's arm is around Ali's waist.

ALI
 Hey! Look! Look at George
 Foreman's trainer, feelin' me up on
 purpose! On the side, to see if
 I'm in shape!

More laughter. Sadler's beret falls off. Rudy puts it back on.

IRENE
 Can I have your autograph?

ALI
 We'll, you ain't gonna find no fat!
 Watch out!!

SADLER
 (lunges for wife's
 note pad)
 Give me that thing!

BINGHAM
 (breaking through)
 Muhammad. Give her an Ali button!

The gang laughs.

SADLER
 No, you ain't.
 (concedes)
 All right, give my wife an Ali button.

ALI
 She's gotta put it on.

SADLER
 Give my wife one.

BINGHAM
 Bo'dini, you got Ali buttons?

ALI
 "George" buttons is all I got. In
 my bedroom! All over the bed!
 Everywhere! To remind me...of all
 of ya'. All of ya'! Reminds me of
 all ya'!

Throughout the above he's pretending to jab at Dick, who's laughing and feinting at him. It's raucous. Fond relationships transcend the adversarial roles. They are all of the tribe of boxers. Sadler is a particularly bright and talented man. Meanwhile...

INT. COMPOUND, OTHER SIDE OF THE RING - AN OLDER BRADLEY

accompanied by an American Reporter is nabbed by a French news crew.

ORTF INTERVIEWER

(in French)

Pardon. Vous êtes de l'ambassade des Etats-Unis? Vous avez une prédiction?

ORTF INTERVIEWER

(English translation)

Excuse me. You are from the U.S. Embassy? Do you have a prediction?

BRADLEY

(in French)

(caught; smiles)

Je suis avec l'Agence américaine d'informations. Il ne m'est pas permis d'exprimer mes préférences entre deux citoyens des Etats-Unis.

BRADLEY

(English translation)

(caught; smiles)

I'm with the U.S. Information Agency. I'm not allowed to take favorites among two United States citizens...

He walks away.

EDGE OF THE RING: ANGELO DUNDEE

sits on the apron of the ring. Ali joins him.

ANGELO DUNDEE

(meaning Sadler)

He gone?

ALI

Yeah.

EXT. COMPOUND - SADLER - DAY

leaving, steals a glance at Ali and Dundee. It's adversarial. The camaraderie was not false. Both are true. But being strategic, he is a threat to Ali. George has a first-rate team.

INT. INTERCONTINENTAL, ALI'S SUITE - ALI - DAY

enters with Howard Cosell and Howard Bingham and a two-man news crew.

BELINDA
Hello, Muhammad. Bingham. Mr. Cosell.

HOWARD COSELL
(tight)
Hi...Mrs. Ali.

ALI
When did you get in?

BELINDA
Just now. Muhammad, may I have a word with you, please?

Belinda starts towards the bedroom. Ali looks to Howard and gestures with his hand to get rid of everybody. As the bedroom door closes, Cosell, crew and Bingham can't wait to get out of there.

INT. INTERCONTINENTAL SUITE, BEDROOM - DAY

BELINDA
What is going on?

ALI
You know what's going on.
(it's not the first time)

BELINDA
But I don't have to have it thrown in my face. I don't have to read about it and have people call me up on the phone about it...

ALI
I didn't mean for it to come out...

BELINDA
Oh, hell, Muhammad, you got no discretion. You never did. You humiliate me!

Belinda slams a lamp standing next to her.

BELINDA (CONT'D)
I clean for you. I cook for you.
I feel every punch you take.

ALI
I know that.

BELINDA
Then why you got to be visible with women?

ALI
I didn't mean for it to be...

BELINDA
I live with the casual ones.
(gestures to Veronica's clothing)
But this, this...I can't hold it together anymore.

ALI
I don't want to hurt you. It's wrong. You're a good wife to me.

BELINDA
Then why do you disrespect me this way?!

ALI
I respect you. I always respect you.

Belinda pauses. A terrible question occurs to her.

BELINDA
Do you love her?

Ali doesn't answer.

BELINDA (CONT'D)
Do you want to marry her?

ALI
I follow my heart.

BELINDA
"You're following your heart"?
(sarcasm falls away)
That's what you do. No matter what anybody says. Or thinks. Or what it does...
(pause)
And what happens now?

ALI
I fight George.
(after a beat)
I didn't come this far to quit.

BELINDA
Neither of us did.

Ali looks at her a moment. Then he leaves. Silence. Belinda sits on the bed. She looks up. Then she comes apart. She rips open a closet. She finds Veronica's clothes, rips them, shreds peignoirs, overturns a night table, strips the bed, smashes more furniture, throws Veronica's suitcase at the mirror. It does not break. She looks around the wrecked room. Bingham is standing there.

BINGHAM
Belinda?

Belinda looks up, tears in her eyes.

BINGHAM (CONT'D)
You can't beat him. You can't beat him, 'cause you can't not love him.

INT. ALI'S HOUSE, N'SELE, SHOWER - ALI - NIGHT

under the water. It flows like silver down the contours of his face and neck. He is in that zone of concentration where the best athletes go...where the pre-motor cortex's activity dominates and facial expression becomes blank, eyes look distantly...Ali's in his domain...in the groove.

EXT. COMPOUND, N'SELE, REAR SHOT: ALI'S CITROEN - NIGHT

and outriders depart.

INT. MOBUTU'S PALACE, A SITTING ROOM - SERVANTS - NIGHT

prepare a luxurious setting. On a platform is a large TV set. In front of it, with low tables are two large armchairs with antimacassars. At the door are Mobutu's spit-and-polish paratrooper bodyguards. They STOMP their feet to attention as...

MOBUTU

in his tan uniform and signature leopard-skin hat enters, followed by an entourage of aides.

MOBUTU'S MILITARY AIDE
(in French)
We are ready, your excellent
President for Life...

MOBUTU
(in French)
Invite Monsieur Idi to join me
now... The Banker? The American?

MOBUTU'S MILITARY AIDE
 (in French)
 They are waiting in the sitting room.

INT. ALI'S DRESSING ROOM - DUNDEE

wrapping Ali's hands, tears the tape into narrow strips to go between the fingers. Doc Broadus, from Foreman's camp, observes the wrapping, then signs it. In addition to function, the taping feels ritualistic.

CLOSE: ALI'S

attention is focused elsewhere...on his action: what he will do, his strategy.

LIEUTENANT NSAKALA
 (from doorway)
 Countdown! Countdown!

RUDY
 Countdown is on, bro. Five minutes.

Ali gets off the training table. Angelo has finished. He puts on his robe and starts warming up before the mirror, throwing punches for a full minute.

HERBERT

enters. Ali and Herbert go to an alcove.

ALI
 Thanks to Allah...
 (praying)

LIEUTENANT NSAKALA
 (shouts)
 Four minutes!

Sarria sticking sealed bottles filled with honey, orange juice and water into the water bucket. As Ali puts on the robe, the others gather up the gear, start out. Herbert moves to Ali, preparing for the entrance, to be as close to him for the cameras as possible...

ANGELO DUNDEE
 Give us a moment. Alone.
 (off Herbert's look)
 Hey. This is my religion!

Herbert and Pat Patterson, the bodyguard, with his chrome-plated .45, follow the others away from Ali. Angelo begins applying Vaseline on Ali's face. They're alone in the room.

ANGELO DUNDEE (CONT'D)
 It's hot. Humid. Monsoon season's
 about to start. May hit 140 in the
 ring under the lights. You all right?

ALI
 Why?

ANGELO DUNDEE
 Where you at?

ALI
 (looks up)
 Foreman ain't no mummy. He's
 knocked out eight out of eleven
 before the end of the third round.
 He the most dangerous fighter I
 ever fought.

ANGELO DUNDEE
 I'd worry if I was hearin' anything
 else.

Ali loosens up his neck.

ALI
 And I can't WAIT!

LIEUTENANT NSAKALA
 Three minutes!

ANGELO DUNDEE
 Dance. That's the most important...

Ali looks at Dundee enigmatically. Before Angelo can ask...

BUNDINI

throws towels across Ali's shoulders. Ali puts on his long
 African robe, which is white with African-graphic trim on
 the cuffs of the sleeves and the hem.

BUNDINI
 (whispers)
 Forget every battle of man against
 man, of mind against mind, of soul
 against soul. This is the one.
 This is the greatest.

Ali nods to him.

BUNDINI (CONT'D)
 This is it.

LIEUTENANT NSAKALA

Two minutes!

BUNDINI

The prophet's come back to claim
his own! Get the pretender off
that throne!

BUNDINI/ALI

Rumble, young man, rumble! It's
the "Rumble in the Jungle"!

WIDE FROM ABOVE: ALI'S CAMP

starts moving towards the door. They open the door. It is
guarded by a handpicked squad of paratroopers and Lieutenant
Nsakala.

LIEUTENANT NSAKALA

(shouts)

One minute!

INT. CORRIDOR

Paratroopers on either side like a wedge, guarding Ali with
Angelo, Bundini, Rudy and Herbert, as they push through the
door, out into the hall.

TRAVEL WITH THEM AS

people in the corridor at the end see Ali. The chant begins...

THE PEOPLE

Ali! Ali! Boma ye, Ali! Ali!
Boma ye!

The sound from the corridor picks up a second reverberation
that booms from a distant vast space. As we move towards it,
to encounter it. And suddenly we...

BURST OUT INTO THE STADIUM...

EXT. KINSHASA ARENA - WIDE: EVERYTHING - NIGHT

Lights flood it. They pour down artificial sunshine.

THE PEOPLE

Ali, boma ye! Ali, boma ye! Ali,
boma ye!

ROARS from 65,000 voices at a quarter to four in the morning.
The moon is out, revealing storm clouds.

HIGH + WIDE SHOTS: ALI

and entourage. The crowd goes nuts.

TRAVELING WITH ALI THROUGH THE MASS

The crowd roars; Angelo behind, Bundini on one side, Pacheco and Sarria.

EXT. RING - WE ENTER

They cheer. Ali raises his hand and salutes them. Ali dances from one end of the ring to the other...dances into George's corner... The crowd roars.

ANOTHER ANGLE: ALI

dances back to his corner...

ANGELO DUNDEE

George is playing prima donna. He wants to make you wait.

Ali laughs. You won't psyche out Muhammad Ali with that stuff. Instead, Ali uses the time. He tests the ropes. He gets the feel of the distance between the center and the corner.

CLOSER: ALI

circles the ring. He looks at the crowd from different angles, from the corner, the center... He looks up at the lights and gets used to the heat from them.

ALI'S FEET

do a shuffle. He feels the canvas. He feels the soft spots. The firm spots. He feels how much slide there is because of the resin on the canvas, how much spring there is in the boards...

ALI

sheds his robe, now, and throws a blistering array of jabs and hooks. The crowd goes nuts. Ali looks ringside and sees...

ALI'S POV: JIM BROWN

Lloyd Price...further along...Robert Lipsyte.

EXT. ARENA - AISLE - SUDDENLY

out comes Foreman in his red robe, Archie Moore following in his blue pea-cap, and Dick Sadler -- never a fashion plate -- in the world's least-attractive T-shirt, followed

by former featherweight champ Sandy Saddler.

CROWD

Foreman! Foreman! Foreman! Foreman!

THE RING - ALI

is shadowboxing as Foreman climbs in the ring and crosses past him, near to him. The look on Ali's face is indifferent. Foreman goes immediately to his stool. He doesn't move around the ring. He doesn't touch the ropes.

DISSOLVE TO:

DON KING

as tall as only three other men: Foreman, Ali and Bundini, walks into the ring wearing black...

ZACK CLAYTON,

the referee, moves to the center of the ring. A great roar fills the air: "ALI, BOMA YE! ALI, BOMA YE! ALI, BOMA YE!"...another one. "FOREMAN! FOREMAN!"

OVERHEAD

as Ali, Foreman and both their crews meet in the center of the ring.

CLAYTON

Now, both of you know the rules.
When I step back, I want a good,
clean break.

(Clayton keeps going)

No hitting below the belt, no
kidney punches, no...

ALI

Motherfucker, you 'bout to discover
you ain't nothin'.

CLAYTON

Ali, be quiet!

George's eyes glare. Ali rocks back and forth, ready to rumble.

CLAYTON (CONT'D)

No kidney punches. Now...

ALI
 (past the ref;
 eyeballing George)
 You been hearin' about me for years.
 All your life you been hearin'
 about Muhammad Ali. Now you gotta
 face me.

CLAYTON
 Ali, I'll disqualify you. Now, I
 want a good, clean, sportsman fight...

ALI
 (to Foreman)
 You never should have come to Africa.

Foreman is unfazed by all of this. His cold eyes say
 "battery and homicide."

CLAYTON
 (blows up)
 All right!!
 (beat)
 Now go to your corners and come out
 fighting when you hear the bell,
 and may the best man...win...

DISSOLVE TO:

Ali turns his back and continues to shuffle and shadowbox.

DISSOLVE TO:

OVERHEAD: ALI + FOREMAN'S

corners are clear. Ali is facing his corner, praying to
 Allah. Foreman is bent over at the waist, flexing and
 releasing the last tension in his huge shoulders, as the
 bell for ROUND ONE clangs...

THE RING - BOTH

charge out and stop as if they ran into a brick wall five
 feet from each other. Then Ali dips, throws a left, which
 George takes on the shoulder...a BIG RIGHT HAND to George's
 head. The crowd goes nuts. George clinches, picks up Ali
 and swings him through 180 degrees with his power. As he
 puts Ali down, Ali pushes George's head down and away and
 Ali clocks him with ANOTHER RIGHT. Foreman clinches and
 drives Ali back to the rope. Ali throws ANOTHER RIGHT that
 lands. Ali dances, circles, stays out of Foreman's way.
 Then he slams him again with a right.

Foreman gets Ali in the corner, throws vicious combinations and a hook that nails Ali in the body and a wild shot hits Ali on the side of the head. CLOSER ON ALI...stunned, his eyes clear. He's just taken a Foreman shot. He pushes Foreman, the stronger man, out of the way and dances and circles. Foreman ties him up again. Ali pushes out, dances and hits HIM with a RIGHT. Ali ties him up, and there's the BELL.

ALI'S CORNER: ALI

ALI
(to himself)
Legs heavy...air's heavy...like sand...

SLOWLY MOVE IN ON ALI

as Angelo and Bundini's talk fades away. We see Ali's awareness in a deep concentration. He is holding counsel with himself. Ali stares into space across the diagonal to the other corner, but not really at Foreman. Ali is weighing something. A gamble. He blinks, and whatever it is, he's decided it NOW. AMBIENT SOUND starts to come back as Ali's attention returns to the present and he ignores...

ANGELO DUNDEE
...keep moving. Don't let him put
you into the corner. Stay off the
rope!

THE BELL FOR ROUND TWO

Ali charges into the center of the ring, provoking Foreman to chase him, and Ali immediately BACKS TO THE ROPE. And stays there! Seizing opportunity, Foreman throws big hooks. ALI IS DOING EXACTLY WHAT HE'S NOT SUPPOSED TO DO. He gets off the rope and backs to the rope on the other side. Most of the shots are blocked by the gloves of both men. No damage. Then George throws a left, which Ali blocks, and a big right hook.

ALI

turns away. Nevertheless, it crashes into his jaw.

MACRO ALI

TIME SLOWS. He ties up George. We SEE Ali's hurt. Dazed. But he must make George believe he's unhurt.

ALI
That all you got...? That it?

Foreman reacts. Ali takes vicious hooks to the midsection, hangs on and goes right back onto the ropes, tying Foreman up.

LOW ANGLE

George's shots are taken on Ali's elbows and gloves. But for every four that are thrown, one or two tremendous hooks get through to Ali's ribs, his side.

ALI'S FACE

reveals impact, but nothing diminishes the TERRIBLE FORTITUDE with which he endures. Now, he ties up George. Now, George drives Ali into the corner and pummels him.

ANGELO + BUNDINI

going crazy in the corner!

ANGELO DUNDEE

Get off the ropes! Get off the ropes! Get off the ropes! Dance!

Ali blocking, getting hit. WORRIED FACES in the crowd. One woman looks away.

ALI'S EYES

alive, more than alert, the sharpest eyes in boxing.

FOREMAN'S LEFT JAB

coming in. Ali feints, shifts. It misses by a quarter of an inch.

FOREMAN HOOKS OFF HIS JAB

Ali leans back on the top rope. Foreman's punch falls short and connects with little effect. That's how good is Ali. The techniques BECOME CLEAR.

Foreman goes upstairs, throws three hooks, all get taken on Ali's gloves. Foreman slams a hook that began in Cape Town and ends up in Zaire, into Ali's abdomen. And another. Ali takes the shots, hangs on.

ALI'S EYES

are bright like stars. His white mouth guard shines. A grimace? A grin?

ALI
 (to himself)
 There is nothin'... Nothin'!
 (another Foreman
 hook lands)
 ...I cannot take.

Ali pushes Foreman off and Ali connects with a left and a straight right to the jaw. They pound but don't stop George. Ali ties him up. Ali's jabs end the round. Nothing effective, but Ali shakes his head, disapprovingly, puts his hand on the back of George's neck, and as the BELL sounds...

ALI (CONT'D)
 Thought you was bad!

George laughs. He won the round overwhelmingly.

ALI'S CORNER

is apoplectic.

BUNDINI
 Dance, dance!

DUNDEE
 Get off the ropes! What are you
 doin'?!

ALI
 (it gets quiet; to
 himself:)
 Here come George's "murder" round.
 (refers to Round Three)

Ali pushes away from his handlers and rises. He opens his arms to the crowd. We hear a massive "ALI, BOMA YE" start up.

CLOSER: ALI

opens his arms as if the roar of 65,000 voices is sunlight. By opening his arms, his skin soaks it in and converts it to power. And the BELL STARTS ROUND THREE.

EXT. THE RING

They trade. Nothing. Foreman advances, Ali backs to the ropes, tags Foreman with a couple of harmless left jabs. Now Foreman opens up with heavy artillery. Ali gets in a couple of shots, but for the center of the round he's pummeled by Foreman. Midway through...

FOREMAN accepts a left jab, and while Ali's left arm is out with it, Foreman hammers a right into the exposed lower

midsection of Ali and then follows it with six tremendous hooks to Ali's abdomen. Ali pushes him away. Foreman comes in again. Foreman gets him on the rope again, and a surprising right on the left side of Ali's face.

ALI

ties up Foreman's left in the crook of his elbow, and they stagger, married, awkwardly, into the center of ring. The referee separates them.

ANOTHER ANGLE: FOREMAN

charging and throwing heavy shots. Ali takes some on his elbows, arms, biceps and shoulders. NOW we see Ali lean BACK. WAY BACK. 45 degrees back... We start to hear the TWANG of the rope. We get it. Ali is using the rope as a shock absorber. Some Foreman punches get through, but the rope TWANGS and Foreman's hitting a trampoline with a hammer. Between deflection and being ring-wise, Ali dilutes much of what George throws. Then Foreman drives three powerful hooks into Ali's side.

ALI'S BODY SPASMS

But, as if inconsequential...

ALI
George! Show me something.

Ali -- insulting, taunting -- snaps jabs into George's face, talking through his mouthpiece...

ALI (CONT'D)
Where's your punch, man?!

BUNDINI/DUNDEE (O.S.)
Ali, get off the ropes! Stick 'em!
Jab! Off the ropes!

UP CLOSER: ALI

blocks a rage of Foreman head shots with his fists, the abdominal shots within his elbows. Each Foreman punch is a haymaker.

FOREMAN

suddenly switches.

FROM THE FLOOR: FOREMAN'S UPPERCUT

comes from camera and slams right through Ali's guard, right into his jaw.

ALI'S

hurt! He holds on.

DUNDEE/BUNDINI (OVER)
Off the ropes! Dance, champ, dance!

Ali's pushed back like a rag doll.

FOREMAN

throws a right hand. It, too, slams through Ali's guard.
He's in trouble.

ALI'S EYES

flash. Roll in his head. He sees neon. TIME SLOWS...lights
dim...

ALI
(calmly)
...been here before.

ANGELO DUNDEE (V.O.)
(distant echoes)
Ali, move!
(beat)
Dance, champ!

Ali glances at the crowd. He SEES: the OLD MAN with the
transistor radio on his shoulder from the shantytown, urging
him on!

ALI
(to himself)
Open the door, Richard...outta this
room... Put on your coat,
man...get out...

THE RING: FOREMAN

slams shots into Ali's kidneys, his ribs. Ali will piss
blood for two months. But Ali stays on the ropes. AS TIME
CATCHES UP TO NORMAL...

ALI (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Think my fight's over...? That...
(to George)
...all you got? That the hardest
you hit?

ALI comes off the rope, and Ali hits Foreman with a terrific
three-shot combination, a right-left-right. WHAM-WHAM-WHAM.

Feints. Hits Foreman with a left-right. WHAM-WHAM!

ALI (CONT'D)
C'mon, chump!!!

The BELL. It's an Ali rally at the end. He throws Foreman a look of contempt as he walks to his corner.

ALI'S CORNER

ANGELO DUNDEE
(panicked)
Get off the goddamn ropes!!

ALI
Took somethin' away from him, Angie,
that round...

BUNDINI
You gotta move! Stick and MOVE!

ALI
(to himself)
They don't know what's happenin'.

Ali looks to the left and sees Jim Brown.

ALI (CONT'D)
(to Jim Brown)
You bet the wrong horse! He can't
fight no better than you can act!

Jim Brown laughs.

WE DON'T HEAR A BELL. INSTEAD, WE'RE SUDDENLY IN THE LAST 15 SECONDS OF ROUND FOUR.

EXT. RING, ROUND FOUR, FIVE, SIX - FOREMAN BARRAGE

Ali is braced on the ropes, as far back as the ropes will go. Foreman throws a barrage of shots, he slams in five and six at a time. THE BELL.

ALI

covers with gloves at his head. Elbows at his ribs. When head shots come in, Ali slips them the right or left, or turns them into glancing shots, or just leans straight back so that they all fall short by quarter of an inch. The BELL.

ALI

covering, taking the most powerful hooks Foreman's thrown in the fight, one after the other to the body.

ALI
 (to himself)
 Take it! Terrify him with what you
 can take...

Ali's eyes are stars. He sees everything. He sees things no one else can see in the quantum physics of deflecting the force of Foreman's blows.

FOREMAN

desperate, pounds a left to Ali's side, a blocked left to the head, three lefts to the belly, which get through! Ali's left arm convulses downwards, involuntarily, with the blows. What Ali's not ready for and doesn't block is the right hand that follows. This shot is jarring and concussive. He grabs Foreman's neck and has to hold on.

The BELL.

EXT. RING - ALI - MID-ROUND SEVEN

leaning way back at impossible angles -- soaking up George's shots. George is SLOWER...BUT Ali's not throwing at all!

ALI
 (hisses to George)
 Eight more rounds... You runnin'
 outta gas?

Then...Ali comes out from under.

WHAM. WHAM. WHAM. WHAM. WHAM.

Five hard shots are followed into Foreman's puffed face. They surprise and enrage him.

WIDER: GEORGE

drives Ali with his 220 pounds...George's arms and fists now SWING HEAVILY. Some get through. Ali's right eye is puffy. Both tie up. And BELL ends the round.

EXT. RING - ALI'S CORNER

Angelo and Bundini talk. Neither we nor Ali hear them.

ALI
 (to himself to George)
 ...can't let you get that second
 wind which you don't know is out
 there for you.
 (MORE)

ALI (CONT'D)
 (talking to George in
 his head)
 Want the title...wear the
 heavyweight crown?
 (to himself)
 Jaw broke? Nose smashed? Face
 busted? You ready to die? Is that
 you?
 (towards George)
 'Cause you gonna meet a man who
 will die before he let you win.

A tall African Girl walks by with the number "8." As she passes near Ali, she has the audacity to wink at him. ALI happens to see it. He winks back at her. She smiles. He brightens right up! THE BELL RINGS.

EXT. RING - ALI

goes to the ropes, throws a couple and, now, comes off the ropes. He's in the center of the ring. HE'S HUNTING. A couple of lefts from Ali. Foreman throws a haymaker and almost falls out of the ring. Ali's in the corner, having avoided the shot.

FOREMAN

gets in a couple of lefts that Ali deflects. Ali takes another on the cheek, leans way back again. Suddenly, he seems tired, as is Foreman. Tied up, they go diagonally to the other corner of the ring, both fighters exhausted, leaning against each other. Resting. BUT...

EXTREMELY CLOSE: WE SEE ALI'S EYES ARE DEAD SHARP

He's faking.

FOREMAN

backs Ali into the corner.

ALI

hits Foreman with a left. Foreman launches a short left that Ali counters with a BIG RIGHT CROSS that connects.

FOREMAN'S

head snaps around. Sweat sprays in a parabola of light. Crowd ROARS with expectation. George Foreman tries a right uppercut, fails as Ali circles, guiding Foreman onto the ropes. Foreman's on the ropes NOW.

ALI'S EYES

know the moment is...

ALI
(to himself)
Now...

ALI'S

short, chopping right turns Foreman's head down.

CLOSER: FOREMAN

comes over the ropes and turns back into...

ALI'S RIGHT HOOK

slams his head down and sideways. And Foreman charges into Ali.

CLOSE SLO-MO: ALI

snaps a combination: an overhead right to Foreman's face, a short chopping left and a right hook. Ali's eyes light up like white phosphorus.

ALI (CONT'D)
(to himself)
RIGHT NOW!

FOREMAN

wrestles Ali into the center. And the most significant moments begin...

SLO-MO: ALI ON THE LEFT + FOREMAN ON THE RIGHT

...and Ali's left hand is extended way behind him with the wrist bent, no power. As it passes his body, Ali converts it into a left hook. As he's doing this, he's dropping his left foot back. The left foot DOES NOT support a left hand. It's for a right hand so the body can untorque across with the punch. And Ali is already cocking his right. Meanwhile, the left connects with Foreman's jaw and raises his chin. As the left is departing Foreman's chin, Ali launches the RIGHT.

SLO-MO: AS ALI'S RIGHT HAND

comes in, Ali's torso untorques, transitioning all 217 pounds to Ali's left foot and putting that weight and power behind his right fist that crashes into George Foreman's chin...and the impact transfers to Foreman's skull...and Foreman's head snaps around. He is gone. He is falling in a spiral...a metaphor for vertigo...turning downward into

unconsciousness. And through the spiral, Ali has moved with him, pivoting with the falling Foreman, his right fist cocked to unload again if he has to. He never does...

MASSIVE OVERHEAD: FOREMAN

down. Ali is pushed into the corner by referee Zack Clayton. Foreman is counted out. Clayton raises Ali's hand. 65,000 people go crazy!

TOTAL CHAOS

Ali is seized by Rahaman, Dundee, Bundini. And in the corner, hardly seen by anybody, Ali, now, faints. Veronica, with a DON KING AIDE, is overcome. Tears stream down her face.

EXT. THE ARENA

As if finally released from the suspense, the sky opens. The monsoon begins.

EXT. THE STREETS OF KINSHASA, OUTSIDE THE STADIUM, ZAIRIANS - NIGHT

celebrate. The city is crazy with the air of liberation in the rain. People are drunk, bowing to one another, extending their arms and legs in strange gestures. Laughter. THUNDER is deafening in the downpour. People celebrate despite the storm, dancing on sidewalks on Rua Absini.

EXT. KINSHASA ARENA - NIGHT

Almost empty. The downpour. The last fans rip down one gigantic image of Mobutu...

INT. MOBUTU'S PALACE - THREE MEN

waiting, now rise. One, in Saville Row, is from a London Bank. The other is Bradley, the USIA/CIA character. The third is Idi Amin of Uganda. As everybody shakes hands, they sit down and servants appear. Everyone is pleased with themselves...

BRADLEY

(in French)

Ce soir, le Zaire a été le sujet central dans le tous les centres européens. Félicitations, Monsieur le Président pour la vie.

BRADLEY

(English translation)
Zaire was the center of the world
tonight in every banking capital,
all over Europe. Congratulations,
President for Life.

MOBUTU

Yes.
(then in Lingala to
servant)

LONDON BANKER

What's on the menu...?

INT. CITROEN ON KINSHASA ROAD - ALI - NIGHT

rides through the downpour with Belinda and Bingham in the
front seat. She gently holds, almost supports his hand.

ALI

(low; about them)
I don't know what's gonna happen.
(beat)
Maan, everything is crazy.

BELINDA

...I didn't come this far to quit.

They drive through a fishing village with dense foliage in
part. Ali looks, sees...

ALI'S POV: WOMEN + SOME MEN

have brought their children out into the rain to see the
champion so they can say when they grow up they saw him pass
by. Plastic or clothing protect the children from the rain.
One man holds up his son. Ali rolls down the window.

INT. INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL, BAR - DICK SADLER

shouting French to the bartender. Folks who look like Jim
Brown, Schulberg/Mailer types...hang out, half drunk...and
argue about flights out with extortionate petty bureaucrats
like Zairian Official #2. Flights have been cancelled,
tickets rendered no good, passports confiscated, etc.
There's a stoned Hunter Thompson/Bill Cardoso type with a
couple of Zairian hookers. The Hunter Thompson type is not
very discreetly smoking Congolese weed.

REVEAL: IN THE BACK CORNER OF THE BAR ARE...

DON KING + HERBERT MUHAMMAD.

King is importuning Herbert, his hands work the air, gesticulating madly, building whole castles of hype and hustle. We can't hear what he's saying. Herbert listens. Then Don King stops and looks at him, and Herbert nods his head "yes." Then Herbert starts saying something and Don King nods his head "yes." Whatever's happening here, a deal for the future has been struck.

EXT. ALI'S COMPOUND, N'SELE - ALI - PRE-DAWN

Rain stopped. The cold, blue light is illuminated with magenta at its base as dawn starts to rise over the Congo River.

WIDE: ALI

in a pale green shirt and slacks, walks towards the water, followed by Zairians, teenagers, some kids who snuck into the compound, two older men. No media; no elite; no hype. One policeman who staggers, drunk. Ali doesn't so much as walk to a destination as amble. He rubs the head of a 12-year-old boy who starts shadowboxing five feet in front of him.

ALI

You think you got a chance, chump?
Now you in trouble.

Ali begins to spar with the 12-year-old, who is fast and knows a little bit about boxing.

ALI (CONT'D)

You even dream of beating me? You
better wake up and apologize!

Kid throws a punch. Ali collapses to his knees.

ALI (CONT'D)

He too much for me!

Some laughter. Then Ali stands and puts his hand on the boy's shoulder. He ambles with the group towards the river. The sun's coming up on the other side.

FADE TO BLACK.