

ARANYAK

(Of the Forest)

by

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Based on the novel

by

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Episode 1

BLACK

Moments pass. But still...BLACK.

Then, we hear the faint call of an Indian Cuckoo, echoing through the wild. As the sound grows, we hear the chirping of other birds too. The rustling of leaves. The gentle flowing of a brook. But the sound of the cuckoo dominates.

Still BLACK.

SLOW FADE IN:

EXT. DALHOUSIE SQUARE -- PARK - DAY

We now see a grey-haired SATYA(male, 50). From behind, but face turned to offer a profile. He is staring blankly into the void. As we slowly pull out, we see Satya is sitting on a park bench in 1945's Dalhousie Square, Calcutta.

We see a little BOY hawking newspapers on the pavement behind him. The boy is yelling. But we don't hear him. We hear the cuckoo. And the sounds of the forest.

We keep pulling out. A two-car tram passes by on the street behind Satya, blocking our view of him for a few seconds. Pedestrians walking, hurrying. Street vendors. People jumping in and out of double-decker buses. An old woman begging for alms with a sleeping baby in her arms.

We can see the hustle and bustle. But we don't hear it. We hear the cuckoo. And the many sounds of the forest echoing through the wild.

As we pull out even more, Satya begins to get lost in the crowd. More and more. Until we can't see him anymore. We only see the city of Calcutta. But we still hear the cuckoo calling.

HOLD

INLAY TITLE: ARANYAK (and then, gently) - OF THE FOREST

SLOW FADE TO
BLACK

INT. HOSTEL ROOM - DAY

A typical North Calcutta men's messroom. Three beds against three walls. A table stacked with Homer, Shakespeare, Byron, Kalidas etc. A shirt hanging from a nail on the wall, half-covering a wall calendar hanging from the same nail.

Signs of masculine untidiness everywhere around the room. There's a clock on the wall. The time is a little over 11:15 AM.

Satya (now 25) is lying on one of the beds, one foot over the other knee. We can hear the sound of rhythmic mantras being chanted.

PRIEST (O.S.)

*Jaya jaya debi
Charachara shaare
Kuchojoge shobhito
Mukta haare*

Satya rises. Walks up to the window, tries to light a Birds Eye. Fails. Throws the matchstick outside the window and looks down to see -

EXT. HOSTEL COMPOUND - DAY

A Saraswati Puja pandal. A bare-bodied PRIEST sitting in front, chanting mantras. The deity's idol. Veena in hand. A benevolent kohl-eyed face. Riding her mount - a swan. A PRIEST sitting in front, offering prayers, chanting mantras. Before him - offerings of various kinds. Incense sticks. A mound of sliced sugarcane. Another mound of Palash flowers.

PRIEST

*Beenaronjito
Pustakahaste
Bhagabati bharati
Debi namahustute*

The priest offers flowers at the deity's feet. Satya's gaze shifts to a makeshift shed a few yards away from the pandal. Two COOKS are cooking hodgepodge in a massive cauldron. As one of them stirs, the other is grinding spices. Fumes rise from the cauldron.

Satya swallows hard. His gaze shifts again - to a MANSERVANT (35) crossing the yard diagonally. Satya immediately moves away from the window.

INT. HOSTEL ROOM - DAY

Satya rushes back to his bed, quickly lies down and faces the wall.

His roommate AMAL(male, 25) walks in, clad in a red checkered *gamchha*(towel). He has just had a bath, his hair is wet, he looks refreshed and cheerful. He pulls off the shirt from over the calendar.

Manservant walks in, sees Satya in bed.

MANSERVANT

Dadababu?

Satya doesn't answer.

MANSERVANT (CONT'D)

Dadababu?

Amal is now combing his hair in a small mirror hanging from the wall. He looks at the unmoving back of Satya through the mirror and smiles.

MANSERVANT (CONT'D)

(to Satya)

Manager Babu has sent this note. He has said that you need to pay at least ten rupees today.

There's a chit of paper in the servant's hand. Satya feigns slumber. The manservant hesitates, then hangs his head.

MANSERVANT (CONT'D)

He has said...he has said you need to pay your rent. Or else...you are not welcome to the feast today.

Satya opens his eyes, frowning. We see hurt in them. The smile on Amal's face fades away. He blows at the comb, gestures to the manservant to leave. The manservant places the note on a table nearby and departs.

AMAL

What did they say at Braithwaite & Co.?

Satya turns to ensure that the servant has left. Sits up in bed. Shakes his head and sighs.

AMAL (CONT'D)

And Imperial Bank?

SATYA

Same.

AMAL

No vacancy?

SATYA

No vacancy. Imperial Bank, Food Corporation, Port Trust, Asiatic Society - it's all the same. No vacancy.

AMAL

Damn!

Satya tries to light the cigarette again. Blasted thing just won't light. Satya gives up, but the cigarette still lingers between his fingers as he seems lost in his thoughts

SATYA

Sometimes I wonder, you know? All these people on the streets - rushing, piling over each other to board a tram or a bus, always in a hurry to be somewhere - where do all these people go? Do they all have jobs?

AMAL

That's why I tell you, my friend...

Amal flicks a lighter in front of his face.

AMAL (CONT'D)

(contd)

Start a business of your own.

Satya grabs Amal's wrist and turns it to examine the lighter, then uses the flame to light the cigarette. Takes a deep puff and lets out a billow of smoke. Shakes his head.

SATYA

I'm not cut out for all that.

Amal lights a cigarette for himself and takes a puff.

AMAL

And how do you know that? Give it a shot at least? Start small. Come and join me.

SATYA

And sell saris and petticoats to women in Burrabazar? No way!

AMAL

You're just...impossible!

Satya doesn't say anything. Puffs away.

AMAL (CONT'D)

Look Satya, the situation isn't good. And you might as well realize that sooner rather than later. There are thousands of candidates for every vacancy in Calcutta. Can you imagine that? Tens of Thousands!

SATYA

Well, in that case, I'll stop waking around the city with the sun on my head from tomorrow, looking for jobs. What say? I'll stay here, the whole day, and who knows - the manager might even bring me my lunch himself. Eh? Personally! Free lunch!

AMAL

I'm not saying that.

SATYA

Then what are you saying?

Amal stares at Satya for a few seconds. Then smiles. Throws the cigarette out of the window and proceeds to put on his trousers.

SATYA (CONT'D)

Where are you off to?

AMAL

Correction. 'We'. Where are we off to?

SATYA

What?

Amal zips up his pants, flings the wet towel on his bedpost with impeccable aim and picks up an invitation card from the table.

AMAL

Do you know what this is?

SATYA

What?

AMAL
Free lunch!

INT. HINDU COLLEGE -- STAGE - DAY

A play is being staged. A banner in the background says -
'Hindu Hostel Annual Spring Festival'. Satya and Amal sit in
the front row.

ACTOR 1
O day and night, but this is
wondrous strange!

ACTOR 2
And therefore as a stranger give it
welcome. There are more things in
heaven and earth, Horatio, than are
dreamt of in your philosophy. But
come, here, as before, never, so
help you mercy, how strange or odd
I bear myself...as I perchance
hereafter shall think meet to put
an antic disposition on, that you,
at such times seeing me, never
shall - with arms encumbered thus,
or this headshake, or by
pronouncing of some doubtful
phrase...

DISSOLVE TO:

We now see a VENTRILOQUIST performing.

VENTRILOQUIST
Gadadhar?

DUMMY
Yes, sir?

VENTRILOQUIST
What is this that I'm hearing about
you?

DUMMY
(hesitates)
About me, or from me?

VENTRILOQUIST
About you, Gadadhar.

DUMMY
Well, what have you heard?

VENTRILOQUIST
Is it true that you are in love?

DUMMY
Yes.

VENTRILOQUIST
With a puppet?

DUMMY
Yes.

VENTRILOQUIST
I can't have that.

DUMMY
Stop trying to control my life!

VENTRILOQUIST
I will not have my act ruined
because you fell for a dummy.

DUMMY
You're so selfish! You only think
about yourself. It's always you and
you and you. You even talk to
yourself! As if I don't even exist!

Audience laughs, as do Satya and Amal. Act ends, applause,
ANNOUNCER comes on stage.

ANNOUNCER
And now, for our next
act...(becomes inaudible)

AMAL
(to Satya)
Do you remember Avinash?

SATYA
Who?

AMAL
Avinash Roy Chowdhury? Our batch?
Philosophy?

SATYA
Oh yes, yes. That guy from
the...the -

AMAL

The zamindar family, yes.

SATYA

Didn't he use to be on the college
debate team?

Amal gestures towards the stage. Satya looks surprised. Curtains part. AVINASH (Male, 25) sings a Kirtan. Satya is mesmerized. Sinks back in his seat with a content smile on his face.

INT. HINDU HOSTEL -- DINING ROOM - DAY

We see the spring fest lunch in full swing. Satya and Amal sit side by side as piping hot hodgepodge, fried slices of brinjals, chutney and sweets are being served. As we slowly zoom in on Satya, we see him eating to his heart's content. Mouth a little too full. Plate a bit too loaded with food. While Amal is speaking to his other friends as he eats, Satya's entire concentration seems to be on the food.

INT. HINDU COLLEGE -- CORRIDOR - DAY

Satya and Amal are speaking to a few junior students. Amal sees someone passing by.

AMAL

Ah, and there he is!

AVINASH

Oh! You came?

AMAL

Of course, I did. You sent me the card, how couldn't I? And I dragged him in too. (gesturing towards Satya) See if you can recognize him?

AVINASH

Oh my God! Satyacharan, right? What a pleasant surprise! It's been so many years!

SATYA

(smiles)

Yes!

AVINASH

Where do you live? What are you doing these days?

SATYA

I...I live nearby...

AVINASH

It's so good to see you, brother! I still remember that debate. And the medal you were awarded by Sir Gurudas Bandyopadhyay himself. It was a pleasure to have lost to someone like you.

Satya blushes as Amal pats his back genially.

AVINASH (CONT'D)

Where did you say you lived?

AMAL

(cuts in)

He and I share a room in a hostel on College Street. Just a temporary accommodation.

AVINASH

Well, my car is waiting outside. Why don't I drop you?

AMAL

I have to keep another invite, brother. But I'm sure Satya won't mind your company.

AVINASH

(to Amal)

Popular guy, eh?

Amal gives his best French shrug.

AVINASH (CONT'D)

Well then, come Satya. We'll talk in the car.

Satya and Amal have a quick exchange of glances. Satya's is awkward and helpless. Amal shuts his eyes in a gesture of assurance. They depart.

EXT. HOSTEL - DAY

A car pulls in. Avinash and Satya alight, smiling.

AVINASH

...and then, I remember you said - 'religion should only be of academic interest', and I said - 'I completely agree with you, which is why it must be part of the curriculum', and for the next five minutes, you literally tore my arguments apart.

Satya smiles.

AVINASH (CONT'D)

Oh, those were the days. It's really good to see you, brother. Listen, what are you doing tomorrow afternoon? If you are free, why don't you come over to my place for a cup of tea?

SATYA

Well...

AVINASH

I won't take no for an answer. Let's say 4:00 in the evening? 33/2, Harrington Street. Don't forget. I'll expect you tomorrow. Ok? Bye for today.

Avinash gets back into his car and taps on the front seat with his walking stick. The car drives away. Satya stares after it for some time. Then looks up at the hostel building, with disdain. Does not enter. Walks away.

FADE TO:

EXT. AVINASH'S MANSION - DAY

A Nepali CHOWKIDAR puts a few drops of Brasso on a piece of rag and starts polishing a nameplate that says - Rai Bahadur Nripendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury, 33/2. There are wisteria and bougainvillea vines on the compound wall.

Satya stands at a distance hesitantly, watching Avinash's car standing under the portico inside the gates and beyond the lawns.

The chowkidar notices him, walks up to him and asks him something (inaudible). Satya responds, the chowkidar nods and holds the heavy iron gates open for him. Satya enters.

EXT. AVINASH'S MANSION -- PORTICO - DAY

Satya is looking here and there. A uniformed BUTLER appears and ushers Satya in.

INT. AVINASH'S MANSION -- LIVING ROOM - DAY

The butler offers Satya a seat and goes inside the house. Satya doesn't sit. He walks to a bookcase and examines the contents. We hear four heavy gongs of a grandfather clock. Satya pulls a book out of the case and browses through.

Avinash walks in.

AVINASH

Nothing about you has changed,
brother! Not even your habit of
being a stickler for time.

Satya plugs the book back.

SATYA

Today's Sunday. I didn't have much
to do.

AVINASH

Come, let's sit. Hope you didn't
have trouble finding the place?

Satya smiles and shakes his head. The two sit.

AVINASH (CONT'D)

Now tell me. What will you have?
I've got some good tea. Straight
from the gardens of Makaibari. You
do drink tea, don't you? Manohar!

BUTLER(O.S.)

Huzoor?

The butler appears. While Avinash gives him the instructions, we see Satya. He is sitting uncomfortably on the edge of the sofa. The smile on his face fades and reappears as Avinash (O.S.) turns his attention to him.

AVINASH (O.S.)

It was such a pleasant surprise
bumping into you yesterday!

SATYA

Do you live here all by yourself?

AVINASH

No, no! My father and my brother live here too. My sister-in-law too.

SATYA

And your mother?

AVINASH

Maa passed away two years ago. Thrombosis. I was very close to her. My father has always been...distant, you know? And my elder brother has taken after him. To tell you the truth, neither of them appreciate the fact that I am more interested in music than in the family's business. It is my sister-in-law who comes to my concerts once in a while.

SATYA

I don't see any of them around?

AVINASH

They've all gone to my cousin sister's wedding, in Mymensingh. That's where our ancestral home is. My forefathers were all zamindars there. We still have the zamindari in Mymensingh, and my brother manages a timber business here. But our main business is in the Chota Nagpur plateau.

The butler walks in again, this time with a tray loaded with tea and savories. Satya watches the plates, shifts uncomfortably in his seat. The butler serves and leaves.

AVINASH (CONT'D)

Come.

Satya picks up the cup of tea and takes a sip. Looks at the tea in the cup once.

AVINASH (CONT'D)

Ok?

SATYA

Excellent!

AVINASH

Good, good. I'm glad you like it.
Tell me Satya, what are you doing
these days?

Beat.

SATYA

I've been looking for a job.

AVINASH

Weren't you teaching in a school
somewhere? That's what Amal had
told me.

SATYA

In Jorashanko, yes. I quit, around
two years ago. I don't think I'll
go back to teaching again.

AVINASH

And you've studied law too, haven't
you?

SATYA

Yes, but I don't want to practice.

Avinash is thinking. There's a frown on his forehead. Satya
watches the pastries on the plate. He takes a sip from his
cup of tea.

AVINASH

Well obviously, someone so
deserving as you won't have a
problem finding a good job. Have
you been able to make some progress
in this regard?

SATYA

I'm...in advanced stages of
conversation at one or two places,
yes.

AVINASH

I see, I see.

Avinash keeps his cup and saucer down on the table.

AVINASH (CONT'D)

If you don't mind, brother, I have
a proposal for you. As I was
telling you, we have a forest
estate in the district of Purnia.

(MORE)

AVINASH (CONT'D)

Almost thirty thousand hectares of forest land. We have a collector there, who is in charge of general administration and rent collection. But we are looking for someone trustworthy to take care of the region, and to manage the affairs of the estate. Would you be interested?

Satya is visibly trying to keep a straight face. He finishes the tea and keeps the cup and saucer on the table. Avinash waits for his answer with a patient smile on his place.

SATYA

Let me think about it, for a day or two?

AVINASH

What's there to think about, Satya? I'll write to my father today. We're looking for someone we can trust. We certainly don't want someone from the extended family as an employee there - because most of these people are utterly dishonest. That estate needs an educated, intelligent and responsible man like you.

As Avinash is speaking, we zoom in on Satya's face.

AVINASH(O.S.) (CONT'D)

Thirty thousand hectares of land - not a matter of joke! So many tenants and subjects! We don't want to leave such a mammoth responsibility to just about anyone. You are my friend, I know you personally. Just nod - and I'll write to my father and ask him to send the appointment letter right away.

PRELAP: We hear the sound of a train's steam-engine, along with a whistle.

EXT. RICE FIELDS - DAY

We see a group of five or six children playing in the muddy rice fields. They splash the muddy water at each other, giggle. Then they stop and look at something. The train passes by.

INT. TRAIN - DAY

We see Satya sitting next to the window in a crowded train. A FELLOW PASSENGER (male, 50) has fallen asleep and his head is resting on Satya's shoulder. Satya looks irritated, he tries to raise his shoulder to push the man's head away. Fails. The man is fast asleep.

Satya gives up, looks out of the window. From his POV, we see the landscape outside. The flat plains and farmlands of Bengal.

INT. TRAIN - LATER

We are still seeing the world outside the train's window from Satya's POV. The landscape has changed. It's undulating now. There are hillocks in the distance. Small woods here and there. We now see Satya's face, as he looks at the scene outside his window with a soft smile on his face and curiosity in his eyes.

EXT. BNR RAILWAY STATION - DAY

The train picks up speed and leaves a small station, clearing our view of the solitary passenger that has alighted on the cemented platform. Satya has a small steel trunk in his right hand and a hold-all in his left. We see a pillow and a blanket peeping out of the hold-all.

Satya looks left.

Satya's POV: the left stretch of the platform. Empty.

He now looks right.

Satya's POV: other than a solitary goat munching on the grass under a Litchi tree, empty. In the distance, the rear end of the train, diminishing in size.

Satya's gaze shifts to the Ticket Room. Abandoned. Cobwebs on the ticketing window shivering in the gentle breeze. The breeze hits Satya, his hair moves, he gives a shiver. He looks towards the horizon. The sun is setting.

He puts his luggage down on the platform and rubs his arms to generate some warmth.

Absolute silence. Not a soul anywhere. Except the goat, which isn't bleating.

Satya looks here and there. He now looks worried.

SATYA (V.O.)

What place is this? Where have I
come? What have I done? For just a
few rupees?

Far away in the background, we see an old man clad in a dhoti and cheap shawl step onto the platform. This is the COACHMAN (65). He has seen Satya. Satya hasn't seen him. He is still in the background, we see him walking towards Satya.

OVERHEAD SHOT: We see the coachman reach Satya. Satya turns around. They speak (inaudible). The coachman picks up Satya's luggage and walks away. Satya follows him.

MONTAGE: WILDERNESS - DAY

- Vast wind-swept undulating fields.
- A seemingly unending row of date palm trees.
- A tiny plant with beautiful yellow-black flowers shivering in the breeze.
- The last segment of the sun's disc almost about to sink beneath the horizon.
- A thin veil of fog hung over the heads of the trees.
- A flock of geese flying over a verdant field.
- A bullock cart trudging along through a kutchha pathway.

INT. BULLOCK CART - DAY

Satya is swaying as the cart wobbles on the unpaved path. We see his luggage in the background. A decidedly uncomfortable journey. But Satya's attention seems to be somewhere else.

EXT. SKY - DAY

Satya's POV: A murmuration. Hundreds of starlings. Rising and falling. Together. We follow the phenomenon for sometime.

EXT. HORIZON - DAY

The sun sets.

EXT. WILDERNESS - NIGHT

The cart has stopped on its tracks. We hear foxes yelping in the dark. An eerie atmosphere. The old coachman lights a lantern with the help of a flint. A nightbird screeches. Rustling sounds in the darkness.

INT. BULLOCK CART - NIGHT

Satya clutches his pillow in fear.

COACHMAN(O.S.)
Hut! Hurrurr...ho!

The cart moves again. Satya is still clutching the pillow.

Satya's POV: We see the arched rear opening of the cart. The canopy over Satya's head is made of bamboo slices and thatch. Through the opening, everything is - DARK.

EXT. WILDERNESS - NIGHT

BIRD'S EYE VIEW SHOT: A small speck of light meandering through the blackness.

We hold the shot. We see the cart travel. We hear the tinkling of the bells around the bullock's ankles.

INT. BULLOCK CART - NIGHT

The lantern is tossing around violently. Satya's hand enters the frame and holds it steady.

SATYA
Garowan-jee?

COACHMAN(O.S.)
Babu?

SATYA
Shouldn't this lantern be up there with you?

COACHMAN(O.S.)
The light is for you, Babu. The bulls can see just fine.

Beat.

SATYA
And you?

COACHMAN(O.S.)

I see what they see, Babu!

Satya considers the situation for a moment. Lets go of the lantern. It starts tossing around again. Satya's shadow dances around inside the cart.

EXT. WILDERNESS - NIGHT

Black. Or is it? Our eyes get used to the black. Woods all around. The cart is moving through the woods. An unknown shadowy beast snorts, we see its breath vapor in the air. It now moves past the frame to clear our view of the cart, as it trudges along. The two bulls are massive.

The coachman is covered from head to toe in the shawl. Only the reins have emerged from within the garment.

INT. BULLOCK CART - NIGHT

Inside the cart, we now "see" Satya lying in a foetal position. He too is covered from head to toe in his blanket. He is shivering uncontrollably. The lantern is still tossing around and squeaking.

INT. BULLOCK CART -- INSIDE BLANKET - NIGHT

We are inside the blanket now. A flimsy urban fabric, we can see a speck of light oscillating to and fro outside. Satya is trying to cup his hands together and blowing hot air into his palms, as he shivers in the freezing cold.

His face contorts in the cold. We now hear his teeth chattering, his breath growing heavier. He looks in trouble.

COACHMAN(O.S.)

Babu?

Satya looks at the light through the blanket as it darts around. He tries to say something, but his voice has become hoarse. His eyes are shutting down. He tries to force them open.

COACHMAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Are you alright back there, Babu?

We still have a long way to go.

On hearing this, Satya can't take it anymore. His head collapses and he wilts away. The light goes out.

BLACK. SILENT.

We now hear a rhythmic sound. Like tapping. Faint and distant. It's unclear what the sound could be.

COACHMAN (O.S.)

Babu?

INT. CUTCHERRY -- SATYA'S HUT - DAY

Satya slowly opens his eyes.

Satya's POV: A blue rhombus. It takes us a few seconds to realize - it's a window, and we are seeing the sky through it. We continue to hear the rhythmic tapping sound.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (O.S.)

Babu?

Satya turns his head slowly to see GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (Male, 60).

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (CONT'D)

How are you feeling now?

SATYA

Have we...reached?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Yes, Babu. A couple of hours ago. I think you were unprepared for the cold. We had to carry you in here, put a few blankets over you and let you sleep it off.

Satya looks around the hut. Walls of dry grass and the narrow trunks of wild pines, cemented off with mud. Roof of bamboo, thatch and timber. A work desk in one corner, a chair in front of it. A small cupboard in another, with a Chubb's chest next to it.

Satya tries to perch himself up on his elbow, but fails.

Goshtho Chakraborty takes a couple of concerned steps forward.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (CONT'D)

You haven't had anything to eat last night, so you may be feeling a bit weak. Nothing that a glass of hot milk can't solve. I'll have it sent to you.

Satya lays back and rests his head on the pillow.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (CONT'D)

Please rest, we can speak later in the day. Or tomorrow - whenever you are feeling better. I am the head clerk here. My name is Goshtho Chakraborty. Welcome to the forest, Babu!

Goshtho Chakraborty leaves. Satya lies back and looks out of the window. The tapping sound continues. His eyelids shut in on themselves.

FADE OUT

EXT. CUTCHERRY - DAY

Satya is standing outside his hut and looking around. A large section of the forest has been cleared to erect a few scattered huts. Smoke coming out of one particular hut. A few smaller ones here and there. In one corner, a native old man is chopping wood, next to a large pile of wood. We recognize the source of the rhythmic sound now.

Satya's POV: A distant hillock. Atop, a large picturesque tree, white leaves. Vast fields filled with swaying blades of catkins and tamarisks. Forests in the distance. Not a single soul to be seen anywhere.

We see Satya now. Unshaved, unkempt, sickly. Dark circles around his eyes. He stares at the horizon, blankly. Satya now looks towards his left. A field of thorny shrubs, merging in the distance with the tree-line of the jungle.

Satya looks towards his right now. A jute string stretched across two erect bamboo poles. A modern city-styled pair of trousers and a shirt hanging from it.

Satya looks down at the faded dhoti he is wearing, and at the heavy shawl. Doesn't seem to recognize them. Chopping sound stops.

Satya walks around a bit. In the background, we see the native old man carrying a pile of firewood into the hut with the smoke. Satya's pace is slow, his gait feeble. As he walks, a well comes into the frame. Satya stops next to it.

Peers in. We don't see what he sees. He looks here and there to ensure that no one is around.

Picks up a pebble from the ground, looks around again and drops the pebble into the well. A few seconds later, we hear a faint splash.

Satya looks at the bucket at the end of the rope. Rubs his cheeks and chin to feel his beard. Picks up a rusted iron hook kept beside the well, inspects it, keeps it down.

INT. CUTCHERRY -- KITCHEN - DAY

A shaved and bathed Satya sits on a sitting mat on the floor of a hut, watching a cat wandering around him. The walls of the hut are covered in soot. In the background, smoke rises from an earthen oven.

A COOK(male, 60) brings a massive bell-metal plate and places it in front of him. The cat immediately comes and sits next to Satya.

Satya looks down at the plate and sees a mountainous heap of steaming hot rice, with a few curries and fries on the side. A single green chilly crowns the heap of rice. The cat meows offscreen.

SATYA
(to the cook)
I won't be able to eat so much.

The cook's deadpan expression does not change. Nor does he say or do anything. Simply turns around and leaves. Satya is left alone in the hut. He looks at the cat. The cat looks at him.

SATYA (V.O.)
Perhaps you understand what I'm saying?

The cat meows.

EXT. CUTCHERRY - DAY

Satya is rinsing his mouth with water next to the well. In the background, we see the cat eating from his plate in the kitchen. The cook shoos the cat away, picks up the heavy plate.

Satya wipes his hands and mouth on a small *gamchha* and puts it on the jute wire. He notices a woman behind the kitchen hut. He (we) can't see the woman very clearly. The woman spreads the end of her tattered and dirty saree, and the cook pours the contents of the plate in it.

We see a closeup of the woman now, as she looks up at Satya. Beautiful eyes. An ugly, gashing scar on the right cheek. Fear in her eyes.

She grabs the leftovers and runs away.

Satya watches her go. When she disappears from view, he turns around to inspect the horizon.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (O.S.)

The locals call that tree Grant
Sahib's banyan tree.

Satya finds Goshtho Chakraborty approaching him with a few account books in his left hand and a walking stick in his right.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (CONT'D)

They say an old British surveyor
had come and camped here for a few
weeks to draw a map of the region.
Lord Malcolm Grant. He was the one
who planted that tree.

SATYA

That tree? The one on the hilltop?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

On a clear day, you can see as far
as up to Azmabad and Labtulia from
up there.

SATYA

That's a banyan tree? But the
leaves are all white!

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Those are not leaves, Babu. They
are cranes!

Satya turns around to look at the tree in awe. Indeed, a couple of cranes fly away from the top of the tree. The entire tree has turned white.

SATYA

That's just...incredible!

Goshtho Chakraborty smiles.

SATYA (CONT'D)

(whispering)
And beautiful!

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Come Babu, we will sit in your hut.

Satya watches the walking stick in the old man's hand.

SATYA

How long have you been here,
Goshtho Babu?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Oh, let's see now! I came here in the spring of '88. That's the year they built that bridge over the Ropmati near the borders of the estate. Of course, when I came, even the river was within our estate. But the government annexed a vast chunk of land to build that bridge.

SATYA

Are you telling me you've been here in the forest for more than 40 years?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Hard to believe, isn't it? It was tough in the beginning. No one to speak to, nothing to do, nobody to meet. But after a while, you will get used to it.

Satya scoffs. The aged man notices him scoff.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (CONT'D)

And then a time will come, when you won't be able to stay away from it for even half a day. You...you won't understand it now. When I was your age, I didn't understand it either. But...it did happen. It does happen. She won't let you leave.

They have reached the doorway to Satya's hut. Satya stops walking.

SATYA

Who won't let me leave?

Goshtho Chakraborty turns around to face Satya, a wise, amiable smile on his face. His next words are gentle, but they carry weight. And also a warning.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

The forest, Babu! The forest won't
let you leave!

We see Satya's face now. There's a mix of disbelief, fear and arrogance in his expression.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY (CONT'D)

Come.

They enter Satya's hut.

FADE OUT

INT. CUTCHERRY -- SATYA'S HUT - NIGHT

Satya is sitting at his desk, still clad in the dhoti. The shawl is wrapped around his shoulder now. There's a kerosene lantern on the desk, its top permanently coated with soot.

In the light emanating from the translucent portion in the bottom, Satya is trying to read one of the account books we had seen earlier in Goshtho Chakraborty's hands. The other three are kept aside.

Satya squints, scratches his head. Turns a page, looks lost.

He pushes the book away. Watches it for a second or two, then snaps it shut. Rises from the chair. Looks around, as if searching for something.

SATYA (V.O.)

Enough is enough! Get out of this
hellhole. Write a letter to
Avinash's father. Saying thank you,
Mr. Rai Bahadur. But no thank you.
I'm better off half-fed in the city
than in this hellhole. Where's that
damned pen?

The same trousers that were drying in the sun are now hanging from a nail on a wooden pillar near the bed. Satya walks to it and rifles through its pockets. Pulls something out.

In his hands, along with a pen, we now see a small chit of paper - the note from his former hostel manager. He looks at it for sometime.

As he reads it, there's a frown on his forehead. He looks up and stares into the void, his face shows hurt and helplessness. He crumples the note and chucks it away.

Plonks back down on the chair, and buries his face in his palms. A soft sound makes him turn around.

MUNESHWAR SINGH(male, 50) enters. Bronzed face, beady eyes, twisted moustache. Tall, muscular frame, iron bangles around his wrist, a thick and long stick in his hand. He picks up the crumpled paper from the ground and throws it in the bin beside the door.

SATYA

What's the matter, Muneshwar Singh?

MUNESHWAR SINGH

Huzoor, I have a big favour to ask of you.

SATYA

Favour?

MUNESHWAR SINGH

A request. Huzoor is kind, so I thought let me go and tell my problem to Huzoor, and he will surely find a solution.

SATYA

What is it?

MUNESHWAR SINGH

The last manager Babu who was here....if Huzoor wouldn't mind my saying so...he was very strict. And...(hesitates)...

SATYA

But what's the matter? Tell me clearly.

MUNESHWAR SINGH

Huzoor is too kind. If Huzoor could ask the treasurer Babu to give me two annas, then I could buy a pot.

SATYA

A pot?

MUNESHWAR SINGH

I have been a sepoy here at the cutcherry for over 30 years now, Huzoor. Have been guarding the cutcherries of Azmabad and Labtulia as well. Two years ago, when those bandits came, I killed two of them Huzoor(holds up two fingers).

(MORE)

MUNESHWAR SINGH (CONT'D)

And they shot me here (points to his waist), and here (upper arm), and here (spine).

Beat.

MUNESHWAR SINGH (CONT'D)

I've been meaning to buy a pot for years now, Huzoor. But an iron pot in the markets of Naugachhia would cost six annas at least. A poor man like me can't afford to...I have managed to save four annas so far, but the rest of it...so I thought I'll go to Huzoor, Huzoor is too kind, he will find a solution to my...

We see Satya now. He is at a loss for words.

SATYA (V.O.)

A pot! All that the man wants in return of thirty years of service and three bullets to his body is an iron pot. Six annas. That's less than half a rupee.

Muneshwar Singh stands, hands folded. His shadow has fallen on the wall behind him. It is moving. His face has lit up with anticipation.

Satya nods briefly.

SATYA

Fine. Tomorrow.

Muneshwar Singh bows and throws a *selam*(salute) at Satya.

MUNESHWAR SINGH

I knew it! Huzoor is too kind. You can tell. By the eyes.

Still saluting, Muneshwar walks backwards and moves out of the door, vanishing in the darkness. We can hear him outside.

MUNESHWAR SINGH (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Always by the eyes!

The foxes yelp. We see Satya. Especially his eyes. He picks up the lantern from the desk and keeps it on a wooden bedside table. Then he picks out a storybook from inside his trunk and lies down in bed with it.

FADE OUT

EXT. CATKIN FIELDS - DAY

A breeze is gently sweeping the white catkins in an open field. Satya stands in the middle of it, taking in the beauty. Breathes in deeply and shuts his eyes. Then opens them and looks around.

SATYA

All this is part of the estate?

We now see Goshtho Chakraborty standing at a distance, behind Satya.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Yes, Babu. We are less than 2 kilometers from the cutcherry. The estate is spread over 30,000 hectares.

Satya looks around. Only white catkins spread all the way to the horizon, as far as the eyes can see. He turns to his left. From his POV, we see the faint blue outline of hills.

SATYA

What are those hills?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Those are the hills of Mahalikharpur. The forest is very dense up there. Lot of wild animals too. Especially bears and leopards. Big snakes too.

SATYA

And those?

Satya has now turned towards his right. From his POV, we see the outline of trees etched against the sky.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

That is the notorious Mohanpura Forest Reserve.

SATYA

Why notorious?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Lot of wild animals. Tigers, leopards, wild elephants, boars. Especially the boars. Razor sharp teeth. They often come out of the forest and wander into farmland.

SATYA

Snakes too?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Snakes too.

SATYA

Excellent! Is there any place
around where there are no wild -

Satya stops abruptly, he has noticed something. There's
someone watching him from within the catkins.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Hey you! Come on now, get out of
here! Get lost!

The catkins rustle. The figure scoots.

SATYA

Isn't that the...I think I saw that
woman in the cutcherry too, near
the kitchen...

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Apologies, Babu! I'll ask the
sepoys not to let her wander around
the cutcherry.

SATYA

Why? Who's she?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Just a poor beggar. She won't
bother us anymore. Come.

The two of them start walking back.

SATYA

Why are you leaving, Goshttho Babu?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

I'm an old man now, Babu. I was
younger than you when I first came
here. Gave a good part of my life
to the forest. Had a wife back
home, a baby boy. I'd thought I'll
send home most of what I earn here.
And I did. But I myself couldn't go
back.

SATYA

You never went home in all these
years? Not even once?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

It wouldn't be accurate to say that I never went home. I did. Once. My boy had just turned 4. I wanted him to see me, to remember my face. He should know who his father is. But when I went home...I saw...

SATYA

What did you see?

Beat.

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Nothing, Babu. That was a long time ago. I've grown too old now. My head hurts if I try to recall things these days. Do mind your step, there's a ditch here.

Goshtho Chakraborty walks ahead. Satya watches him curiously.

SATYA (V.O.)

What happened to the old man when he went home? What did he see there?

GOSHTHO CHAKRABORTY

Come, Babu. It'll get dark soon. The foxes will come out.

Satya looks up at the sky. The stars have started twinkling.

EXT. CUTCHERRY - NIGHT

We see the windswept desolate area outside the cutcherry in the fading twilight of dusk. Foxes yelp. Fireflies glow in the shrubs and bushes. Not a soul to be seen anywhere. Far away in the horizon, we see the silhouette of Grant Sahib's tree. A crane swoops down and lands on the tree, merging with it.

SATYA (V.O.)

How could someone live like this? Alone? Desolate? Day after day? Month after month? Year after year? No one to talk to. No hospital. No school. Not even a bioscope. The nearest village was more than 40 miles away. 40 miles!

EXT. CUTCHERRY - DAY

A 25yo man is being carried by three other equally aged men into the front yard of the cutcherry. The man's left foot is bleeding profusely. Muneshwar Singh orders the men to lay the injured man down on the ground. A few other men gather around them.

SATYA (V.O.)

Almost a day's journey on foot.
Three hours on horseback, if you
know how to ride a horse.

We now see Satya standing in the veranda of the cutcherry with a book in his hand, looking at the injured man.

SATYA

What happened?

MUNESHWAR SINGH

Boar got to him, Babu.

We now see the man's foot. Large chunk of flesh missing. A piece of bone protruding out of the wound. The man seems unnaturally silent and composed. Satya looks on, scared, nauseated.

INT. CUTCHERRY -- KITCHEN - DAY

Satya is seated cross-legged on a mat on the floor, the cat is sitting a few feet away from him. Cook brings food. Satya looks down at the plate. Same rice, same curry, same fries.

SATYA

(to cook)

Listen, I can't eat this much.

No response. Cook turns around and leaves.

Satya sighs, looks at the cat. The cat looks at him.

EXT. CUTCHERRY - DAY

A bare-bodied Satya, clad in a dhoti, pours oil from a bottle onto his palm and rubs it all over his head. Then rubs it over his torso.

Then walks towards the well and picks up the iron bucket, preparing to lower it into the well.

A SERVANT(male, 40) comes running and says something in the local language. It is clear that he is trying to help Satya draw water from the well for his bath.

Satya waves him off, refusing his help. The servant stands at a respectful distance and watches Satya. One by one, we see several other people around the yard, who have stopped working. They are all watching Satya with their mouths open.

Satya is conscious that he is being watched. He casually drops the bucket into the well and the rope starts speeding in too. He catches the rope in time to avert an accident. Gathers himself.

Starts pulling up the filled bucket. It's too heavy. Satya applies all his strength. Struggles. From the corner of his eyes, watches everyone around the yard still watching him.

The servant is watching too, looking very concerned.

With great difficulty, Satya manages to get the bucket out of the well. Grabs it. Smiles, and is just about to lift the bucket and pour it over himself, when a frog jumps out of the bucket and lands on his back.

Satya is shocked, lets go of the bucket, it falls into the well.

OVERHEAD SHOT: Two servants come running, Satya is jumping around. The servants try to help him, calm him down. All three exit the frame.

One servant reenters the frame. Lowers the iron hook into the well and drags the bucket out.

Then picks up the frog from the ground. Drops it back into the well.

EXT. CUTCHERRY - NIGHT

A rabbit is gnawing away on spinach leaves. In the background we can see the huts of the cutcherry, lights glowing inside.

The rabbit stops gnawing. Sniffs the air. Its ears perk up. Lifts its hind legs and thumps on the ground.

Again.

Then again.

And again.

It lifts its hind legs one more time, but before it can thump down, a snake darts out of the darkness and grabs the rabbit. The rabbit lets out a dying squeal.

INT. CUTCHERRY -- SATYA'S HUT - NIGHT

Satya is sitting at his desk and going through some papers. Looks up as he hears a squeal outside. Frowns. Looks at a window. It's pitch dark outside. Squeal dies down. Satya returns to the papers.

Muneshwar Singh enters.

MUNESHWAR SINGH
You sent for me, Huzoor?

SATYA
Has Goshtho Babu returned?

MUNESHWAR SINGH
Not yet, Huzoor. He's supposed to return only by dawn.

SATYA
All these accounts... they are completely messed up. Nothing is in order. No proper papers. No receipts. Nothing.

Satya throws the papers on the table and pinches his eyes.

SATYA (CONT'D)
How on earth am I supposed to work like this? Where would I even start?

Muneshwar Singh doesn't say anything.

SATYA (CONT'D)
You may go now. And ask Goshtho Babu to see me as soon as he returns.

Muneshwar Singh nods and leaves the room.

Satya looks towards the window again, looking worried. Then shakes his thoughts off and throws his head back in frustration, shutting his eyes.

Then opens his eyes to find a massive bat hanging upside down from the ceiling of his hut. The creature seems to be looking straight at him.

SATYA (CONT'D)
 (struggling to speak)
 Muh...Muh...!

Satya tries to reach for a paperweight on the table, his eyes still locked with the bat's. The bat still seems to be looking straight at him.

As he gropes around blindly on the table, he pushes the paperweight off the table by mistake. The heavy paperweight lands on his still trunk kept next to the table, letting out a loud metallic sound and giving him a start.

The bat immediately starts flying around the room.

SATYA (CONT'D)
 (yells hoarsely)
 Muneshwar Singh!

FADE OUT

EXT. CUTCHERRY - DAY

A gentle breeze blows over a bed of marigold flowers. A beautiful red-breasted robin comes and perches on the heavy leaves of a croton plant. Three butterflies are fluttering over the marigolds. Other birds chirping.

A bullock cart waits in the front yard of the cutcherry. A SYCE(male, 45) feeds grass to two horses. The bullock cart's coachman walks up to him.

Two MEN (both 45) sit on a small mound at a little distance, chatting(inaudible).

Satya steps out of his hut in a shirt and dhoti. The two men rise and run up to the horses.

Satya glances at his pocket-watch, puts it to his ear, then boards the back of the cart. The two men on horses ride ahead, leading the way. The cart follows.

SATYA (V.O.)
 My first survey. Taxes hadn't been coming in from a section of the forest called Labtulia. A day's ride from here. Through the jungles. And the hills. And through Fulkiya Boihar. Fulkiya...Boihar. What a beautiful name!

EXT. MEADOWS - DAY

We see the two horsemen gently trotting through a meadow covered in beautiful and colorful flowers. Behind, we see the cart making its way through.

SATYA (V.O.)
The plateau of petals!

We see Satya admiring the flowers from the back of the cart.

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

The cart has stopped, as have the two horses. Satya watches the two riders and the coachman gorging on food off their red towels. He looks down at his own food in disgust. Keeps it away.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

The sun is about to set. The cart is making its way through rough terrain. There are no roads. The resulting discomfort is visible on Satya's face.

SATYA
Garowan-jee? Listen, Garowan-jee?

COACHMAN
Yes, Babu?

SATYA
One second, let me get off. I'd rather walk. It's quite bumpy back here...

COACHMAN
That wouldn't be a good idea, Babu.

SATYA
Why?

COACHMAN
Place is slithering with snakes. The bullocks have anklets, they tingle and keep the snakes away. But walking on foot might be risky. But if you really want to -

Satya promptly gets back to his place, his eyes looking scared.

SATYA

No, no...no problem. I'm fine back here.

The cart moves on through the woods.

EXT. LABTULIA CUTCHERRY - NIGHT

A modest hut in a clearing in the middle of the jungle. In the dark, the silhouette of two horses. As they snort, we see their breaths vapour up. Behind them, the silhouette of the bullock cart.

A man comes running towards the bullock cart.

EXT. LABTULIA CUTCHERRY - DAY

Satya is standing and looking at something. From his POV, we now see a dense and completely impenetrable section of the jungle. Various sounds of unknown birds float in the air.

We see the hut in the background. A man comes running towards him with a bowl in his hand. This is the COLLECTOR (male, 60).

COLLECTOR

A little tea for Huzoor?

Satya takes the steaming bowl in his hand.

SATYA

This is berry season, isn't it?

COLLECTOR

Yes, Huzoor.

SATYA

Are the tenants paying rent on time?

COLLECTOR

Hardly, Huzoor. I'm here all by myself, and the forest is huge - spreads 12 miles this side. More than 20 over there. And that other side, behind you -

SATYA

You live alone here? All by yourself?

COLLECTOR

Yes, Huzoor.

Satya takes a sip of the tea. Winces. The collector notices this.

COLLECTOR (CONT'D)

Do forgive me, Huzoor. I'm making tea after almost ten winters.

SATYA

How long have you lived here?

COLLECTOR

All my life, Huzoor! Almost 40 years!

SATYA

You stay alone in the middle of the woods, don't you feel scared?

COLLECTOR

Scared of...what, Huzoor?

Beat.

SATYA

What do you eat? Is there a market nearby?

COLLECTOR

Oh yes, Huzoor. In Bheemdas Tola. Around 15 miles from here. But I hardly go there. There's plenty to eat around here. There's eggplants behind the shrubs over there. Berries in the backyard. And of course, plenty of grass.

SATYA

Grass?

COLLECTOR

Grass, Huzoor. Grass seeds. You boil them, mash them, sprinkle some salt, perhaps rub in a black chilli or two. Delicious! Quite filling too.

Satya stares at the man.

SATYA (V.O.)

Grass! The man had survived on berries and grass for 40 years!

EXT. LABTULIA CUTCHERRY - NIGHT

A stream of 20-30 men walk in and sit down in the front yard of the hut, a little distance from the fire.

Satya is sitting on a camp-chair, near the fire. He watches the illuminated faces of the men. Most of the men are bare bodied. Some of them have a staff or a stick in their hands.

SATYA (V.O.)

40 years! I wouldn't survive a single night here by myself.

The men have now started singing. It's more of a collective chant than a song. Fire crackles.

Collector comes running with a grin on his face and shows Satya a huge Rohu fish. Satya smiles politely and nods. Collector leaves. The men continue to sing.

We now see the fish being roasted over another small fire in the distance. The chant has changed to a slightly faster tempo. One man's voice is in the lead. We see the man, around 60yo, bare bodied, blind in one eye.

SATYA

These men...they are all our tenants?

COLLECTOR

No Huzoor, they are from the village nearby. They've come to eat rice.

SATYA

Eat...rice? What do you mean 'eat rice'?

COLLECTOR

They don't get to eat rice, you see? They can't afford it. When they heard that you've come, they must have realized that there will be rice at the cutcherry tonight. So they've all flocked here. To eat rice. Tomorrow, you will see more of them.

Satya stares at the collector's face for some time. Then at the group of chanting men, with a look of disbelief on his face.

SATYA (V.O.)

In all my life, in all the years I had spent in the city living what I thought was a civilized life, I had never, ever, heard of anything like this!

The lead singer now stands up. Raises his staff in the air and chants on, dancing a little. Satya watches on.

SATYA (V.O.)

What my sense of urban courtesy would never permit me to do, what my civilization had always taught me was rude, or impolite, or dishonorable - that simple act - the coming together of a group of men to eat rice...

The collector carves a slice off the roasted fish and places it on a brass plate, next to a small mound of rice.

The men all watch him do this, still chanting. The collector hands over the plate to Satya. Satya looks down at the plate, then at the men. They are all staring at him, and chanting.

SATYA (V.O.)

...just a handful of rice! That simple act seemed the most natural thing to me. As if I, and everyone like me back in the city, had been wrong all along! And these men, who traveled 15 miles to eat a fistful of rice...were right!

We now see the beautiful bejeweled sky, stars twinkling on a dark firmament. Below it, the fire burns on. The chanting has slowed down now.

INT. LABTULIA CUTCHERRY -- HUT - NIGHT

Moonlight streaming through an unbarred window. Satya is lying in a makeshift bedding spread on the floor of the hut. He is shivering in the cold.

We now see his breath vapouring up, as he clutches his blanket and tries to blow hot air into his arms. He raises his head and tries to look at something. From his POV, we see the collector lying on the ground, without any blanket or bedding whatsoever.

Satya collapses back on his bed. A nightbird screeches. Then another. Satya lifts his head and looks up at the window. We see the crescent of the moon through the window.

Then we hear a muffled growl. Then a grunt of some sort. A horse lets out a neigh. Satya's ears have perked up.

Suddenly, the sound of a twig snapping. Followed by the sound of hooves. Dozens of hooves. Bushes and branches crashing. Just outside the hut. The entire hut begins to shake. In the beam of moonlight, we see dust rising up the floor of the hut. Satya puts his palms to his ears. The collector is still fast asleep.

SATYA
 (over the sound of the
 stampede)
 Tewari! Tewari!

The collector shows no movement.

The intensity of the stampede increases. Thatch and straw start falling from the roof of the hut.

SATYA (CONT'D)
 (yells)
 Wake up, Tewari!

The collector sits up, rubbing his eyes.

COLLECTOR
 (sleepy voice)
 Huzoor?

SATYA
 What's that noise?

COLLECTOR
 That's nothing, Huzoor. Just a herd of nilgais being chased. Nothing to worry about.

SATYA
 Chased? Chased by who?

COLLECTOR
 Not sure, Huzoor. Must be a tiger or a bear! Or perhaps a wild boar! Don't worry Huzoor, they can't come in here.

Satya looks at the door at the entrance of the room. We see that it's a flimsy frame made of grass and a few bamboo sticks. It's shaking in the force of the stampede, almost about to collapse.

It keels over and falls flat on the ground.

SATYA

Oh!

The collector has promptly gone back to sleep.

From Satya's POV, we see the moonlit ground just outside the door. Dust is rising from the ground. The sound of the stampede is now deafening. It grows even more in intensity. Satya shuts his eyes tight, still trembling.

We see the ground outside through the door again. For the fraction of an instant, we seem to get an incomprehensible glimpse of a running animal outside.

SMASH CUT TO:

BLACK

We continue to hear the roar of the stampede as -

END CREDITS ROLL