

A Hope in the Unseen

by

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Based on the book by Ron Suskind

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD:

FRANK W. BALLOU SENIOR HIGH

One of the most troubled and violent
schools in a blighted corner of
Washington D.C.

Feb. 24, 1994.

HIP-HOP rises from the gym.

INT. GYMNASIUM - BALLOU HIGH - DAY

M.C. HAMMER BLARES from 6'-high speakers. Eight hundred African American teenagers sway to the back beat. The top row of the balcony is occupied by "crews" from nearby housing projects who wear Nautica, Hilfiger, or Fila and hundred-dollar sneakers. They are the school's social elite. Just below them are the jocks. Ballou's mandatory 2.0 average for team play means there aren't too many of these. The remaining kids are normal duck-and-run adolescents from poverty-line homes.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON, an aggressive little gamecock of a man, grabs the mike.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON

All right, Ballou High! Give it up
for Mayor Marion Barry!

The kids whistle and applaud as the MAYOR rises, wearing an embroidered kufi over his bald spot.

MAYOR BARRY

Yes! I like what I see!

This gets another roar from the crowd. Principal Washington signals for the MUSIC to be shut off and the crowd settles down.

MAYOR BARRY (CONT'D)

Beautiful young black people, studying everyday, workin' to learn all they can and improve their minds. You are our community's future! I've got one message for you kids. Stay in school. Too many of you drop out or transfer. Over one thousand students at Ballou and only sixty-four kids went on to college last year. We can do better! We must do better.

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The audience shifts. They've heard many versions of this speech over the years.

MAYOR BARRY (CONT'D)
I believe in you! Now the school is gonna give some awards today to those kids who, against all odds, are excelling here at Ballou. Every student who got straight A's in the last marking period is gonna get a check for a hundred dollars! That's right!

Principal Washington takes the microphone.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON
I want these kids to come up and get recognized for their achievement in front of everyone.

Groans from the audience.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON (CONT'D)
Now settle down! Let's show how proud we are of our top students.
(reads the first name)
LaCountiss Spinner.

LaCOUNTISS is a quiet girl and desperately embarrassed. As she passes other kids, we hear scattered laughter, hissing and the dreaded words "whitey" and "oreo". LaCountiss grabs her check and heads for the exit as fast as she can.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON (CONT'D)
Darlene Chapman.

DARLENE comes forward and someone calls out "nerd", then "egghead". Darlene holds her head high, refusing to be intimidated. She takes her check and sits back down again.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON (CONT'D)
LeRoy James.

LeROY tries to duck out the auditorium door. This results in hoots of derision. A TEACHER spots LeRoy and forces him to come back for his check.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON (CONT'D)
Cedric Jennings.

No answer. A murmur moves through the room. PHILLIP, a handsome kid, the class clown, rises.

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PHILLIP

Ceeeedric. Where are you? We know
you're here.

The kids laugh, egging Phillip on.

PHILLIP (CONT'D)

Ceedric... Oh Ceeeedric... come get
your reee-ward!

The Chemistry teacher, MR. TAYLOR, scans the sea of faces in
the bleachers for Cedric, frowns.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON

Has anyone seen Cedric Jennings?

Mr. Taylor walks out.

INT. CHEMISTRY CLASSROOM - DAY

An almond-eyed, clean-cut, lanky student is seated at a
computer that's been obsolete for five years. This is CEDRIC
JENNINGS, 17. He wears a white shirt, pressed khakis and
black felt shoes. The notebooks resting at his elbow have
"MIT" doodled all over them.

On screen we see "Scholastic Aptitude Practice Test, English,
Part 3."

CEDRIC

(whispers the vocab
words)

Cacophony. Al-alliter-ation. Facade.

They might as well be Greek. Cedric reaches for a dictionary
on the table as Mr. Taylor enters.

MR. TAYLOR

I'm disappointed in you.

Cedric pauses, doesn't look up from his work.

CEDRIC

They give out the checks?

MR. TAYLOR

Yep.

CEDRIC

Then I'm glad I wasn't there.

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MR. TAYLOR

You worked hard, Cedric. Why should you be ashamed to claim something you earned?

Cedric turns off the computer, sits and stares at his reflection in the darkened screen.

CEDRIC

(quiet)

I just get tired of the abuse.

Mr. Taylor fiddles with some papers on his desk as he searches for the right words, then he takes a deep breath, intones:

MR. TAYLOR

You're in a race, a long race. You can't be worryin' about what people say from the sidelines. They're already out of it. You gotta just keep on runnin', keep your goal in sight --

CEDRIC

(smiles)

It's always Bible quotes or race metaphors with you, Mr. Taylor.

Cedric gathers his books and heads for the door. Mr. Taylor calls after him.

MR. TAYLOR

You heard from that MIT summer program yet?

CEDRIC

(stops, shakes his head
no)

Think I should have by now? I mean, if I was in an' all?

MR. TAYLOR

Not necessarily. It's early yet.

CEDRIC

I'm not gettin' my hopes up or whatever. I mean, I know how tough it is. Gettin' in that program, it's like a stamped pass to get into MIT.

(CONTINUED)

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MR. TAYLOR

They need kids like you. Don't be doubting, Cedric. You got to stay the course. Remember, 'the race goes not to the swift nor the strong, but he who endureth to the end.'

Cedric's face splits in a grin, and for the first time, we see the light in his eyes.

CEDRIC

A race metaphor and a Bible quote.
You on your game today, Mr. Taylor!

Mr. Taylor laughs as Cedric goes. MUSIC BEGINS. Bobby Brown singing "Don't Be Cruel". (Note: all specific cues are suggestions only.)

INT. BALLOU HALLWAYS - DAY

The linoleum is old, the paint grey with dirt and defaced with graffiti. The place reeks of hopelessness and despair. Cedric slings on his backpack, heads for home. A group of kids spot him. One is Phillip.

PHILLIP

Yo, white boy. Why weren't you at assembly today? Where were you? Hidin' in the bathroom?

Phillip's friends laugh. Cedric's used to this. He knows the worst thing he could do is react.

PHILLIP (CONT'D)

Whoa, look out for Mr. Nerd boy. He's soooo cool.

Cedric just keeps going.

EXT. BALLOU - DAY

Cedric cuts across the parking lot, passes a "crew" kid, a drug dealer named HEAD. Head is no older than Cedric, light skinned, dead-eyed and smooth. He confers with another CREW MEMBER and we see the flash of a GUN in Head's waistband. Then he gets into a shiny new Lexus with two pretty girls.

BY THE BASKETBALL COURTS

The Ballou basketball team is practicing as Cedric passes. Lots of kids hang around watching the star player, JAMES, a tall, handsome kid.

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As Cedric goes by, their eyes meet briefly. James smiles, waves at Cedric. A friend. Cedric waves back.

EXT. BUS STOP - MARTIN LUTHER KING BOULEVARD - DAY

Cedric waits for his bus with another kid, TREVOR. Trevor is smaller, but athletic and quick. He tap dances, as if to the Bobby Brown SONG on the TRACK.

Nearby, TWO DEALERS are talking. Cedric glances their way. Both guys are in their early 20s. One wears a fine-looking, long-sleeve Redskins football jersey and the other has on a soft leather jacket. Cedric keeps away from them, but he can hear snatches of their conversation.

REDSKINS

You won' believe what that woman be doin' on her knees to get that little rock.

SOFT LEATHER

Hey, I want some of that. Next time, you send her to me. I give her what she needs.

Soft Leather grabs his crotch, then throws his head back in a toothless laugh. Cedric waves goodbye to Trevor as he boards the bus.

INT. BUS - DAY

Cedric slides into a seat and looks at the dreary neighborhood sliding by. The bus passes a broken-down elementary school. Tiny black kids play rudimentary games on hard asphalt behind a chain link fence.

CLOSEUP ON CEDRIC AS WE FLASH CUT TO:

A MEMORY - EXT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - DAY

LITTLE CEDRIC, age 5, walks up to the school with his mother BARBARA JENNINGS. Barbara wears a plain black dress. Her face is warm and concerned as she straightens Cedric's clothes, pats his hair.

YOUNG BARBARA

Cedric, honey, you gonna do so good. You're a little man now, goin' to school.

Little Cedric nods, but his face is full of apprehension. His mother pulls something from her purse: a KEY around a chain. she puts it over his head.

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YOUNG BARBARA (CONT'D)
So you won't lose it.

LITTLE CEDRIC
(self-conscious of his
looks)
Ma? Can I wear it underneath?

She nods and slips it under his white shirt. Little Cedric feels for the key.

YOUNG BARBARA
Now, when it's time to go home, don't
be talkin' to any of the bad men.

LITTLE CEDRIC
I won't, Mama.

YOUNG BARBARA
What you gonna do?

EXT. ROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD STREET - DUSK

Little Cedric makes his way past homeless people, men dealing drugs, hookers, with his hand on the chain with the key.

LITTLE CEDRIC (V.O.)
Walk fast and don't talk to nobody.

YOUNG BARBARA (V.O.)
That's right. That's good. And when
you get home?

INT. STAIRWELL - JENNINGS APARTMENT BUILDING - DUSK

Little Cedric runs up three flights of stairs. He makes it to the apartment, fumbles for the key, opens the door.

LITTLE CEDRIC (V.O.)
Turn on the lights, double lock the
door, and call you.

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - NIGHT

The room is dark. The little boy reaches for the light. We CUT BACK as he turns it on TO SEE:

CEDRIC GROWN UP, as he is today. He double locks the door, just as he's done since that first school day. The apartment is modest but not grim. There are two bedrooms and a living room/dining room/kitchen combination. The furniture is worn but well cared for.

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Cedric puts down his backpack, sifts the mail quickly, looking for word from MIT. But all he finds are bills. He walks into the kitchen, picks up the phone and dials.

CEDRIC
Hey, Mama. I'm home.

MUSIC ENDS.

INT. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE - DUSK

Barbara Jennings is older now. But her face is still pretty, if care worn. She sits in her tiny cubicle at a cluttered desk as she talks to Cedric.

BARBARA
You got a lot of homework tonight?

CEDRIC (V.O.)
Did most of it in school.

BARBARA
Okay, honey. You get yourself something to eat and I'll see you in a little while at Thursday prayer meeting.

CEDRIC (V.O.)
Okay, Ma. Bye.

Barbara hangs up, turns back to her desk and faces a stack of bills. She opens her checkbook and finishes filling out a personal check.

INSERT - CHECK FOR \$445.22 - SHE WRITES AT THE BOTTOM "RENT"

Now she balances the checkbook. After subtracting the rent money, there's a grand total of \$42.00 left in her account. She stares at the figure, rubs her eyes. Rises. Gathers her belongings.

EXT. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE - DUSK

Barbara opens her umbrella against a light rain. She crosses the street to the bank machine.

CLOSER - SHE WITHDRAWS \$30, A \$20 AND A \$10

INT. BUS - DUSK

Barbara finds a seat. She folds the 10 and the 20 and puts them into her pocket where she can get at them quickly.

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As the bus jostles through traffic, we begin to hear the sound of a GOSPEL CHOIR rise up on the TRACK.

EXT. SCRIPTURE CATHEDRAL - NIGHT

Scripture Cathedral stands like a giant glowing ark above the ruined neighborhood. The MUSIC comes from inside. It's an upbeat spiritual, "Completely Yes".

INT. SCRIPTURE CATHEDRAL - NIGHT

Home of the black Pentecostals. This is truly a cathedral for Washington's down and out. There's a 60' ceiling and a 40'-tall illuminated cross. Tonight, the place rocks.

The congregation is led by BISHOP LONG. He's a heavysset man in his early 50s with a wide leonine head atop a cinder-block body. In the choir, Cedric steps forward and sings the solo. His voice is clear and true. This is the world where he's most at home, where he shines.

CEDRIC

'Lord, I give my everything to You.
I give it completely through and through.
From the bottom of my heart, to the
depths of my soul,
I say yes, Lord. My soul says Yes.'

Barbara sits in a back pew watching her son with pride. A matron behind her puts an arm on her shoulder. This is LOUISE. She whispers.

LOUISE

Ain't your boy all that tonight!

Barbara smiles briefly, but then her eyes shift to the missionary men who rise and starts down the aisles with wicker baskets. It's collection time. As Cedric pauses in the solo, Bishop Long steps forward.

BISHOP LONG

(shouts)

Let's talk about when you give your
last dollar to God. If you have one
dollar in your pocket, then you give
the Lord that dollar.

The congregation murmurs "Amen", "You tell it", "Hallelujah". Barbara gets out her \$20 and her \$10, fingers them nervously.

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BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)

Only when you trust Jesus to take care of you will you know what faith is all about. Faith is taking your last \$10 from your checking account and saying, 'God, I give this to you because I have nothing but faith, I live on faith, and I know in my heart that you'll bring it back to me in ways too grand and too many for me to even imagine.'

The missionary men have reached Barbara's row. They extend the basket towards her. Other parishioners, people who can ill afford to part with their money, are adding their bills to the pile. Barbara pulls the \$20 and the \$10 from the pocket of her dark blue skirt. The basket gets closer. She hesitates. She wants to give it all, but she can't do it. At the last minute, she drops in the \$20 and keeps the \$10.

The choir starts to sing the chorus of "Completely Yes" again. We REMAIN long enough to enjoy the upbeat lyrics, to see the ecstasy of the congregation, to let the beauty of the music sink in and then...

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Cedric and Barbara walk home through the rough neighborhood. The two walk in comfortable silence as the MUSIC ENDS. But then:

CEDRIC

Mama?

BARBARA

Yes.

CEDRIC

What if I don't get in the summer program at MIT?

BARBARA

Don't you be worryin' about MIT. If it's meant to happen, it will. Your grades are perfect, your recommendations are good. They'll see you're special.

Cedric says nothing. He's not convinced. Barbara looks over.

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BARBARA (CONT'D)
I remember when you were just this high, I used to help make the congregation dinner during the service, you remember?

CEDRIC
So they'd let us eat for free.

INT. BASEMENT - SCRIPTURE CATHEDRAL - NIGHT

Barbara works in the kitchen.

BARBARA (V.O.)
I was down there workin' one Sunday while you were upstairs in the Children's Choir.

Louise runs in.

LOUISE
Your baby is singing... front of everyone!

Barbara drops a tin of chicken and runs out, wiping her hands on her apron.

INT. SCRIPTURE CATHEDRAL - NIGHT

The Children's Choir is 50 strong. Little Cedric, possessed of the spirit, has stepped in front. His high voice can be HEARD above all the others.

LITTLE CEDRIC
'Please don't let them hurt the children.
Please oh please, Jesus, don't let them hurt your children...'

The crowd is crying out "Sing it!", overcome with joy, as Barbara enters. Little Cedric's voice grows in power and confidence. He finishes and then the room erupts in applause.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Mother and son continue walking home. Cedric's smiling now.

CEDRIC
I guess I've heard that story about a million times.

BARBARA
I was thinkin' about it tonight.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

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BARBARA (CONT'D)

God meant you to be out front, Cedric.
And that's where you'll be. Someday
you'll be so far from this place --

CEDRIC

(firm)

I'm not special, Ma. The other kids,
they think I'm trying to be better'n
them. I'm not tryin' to set myself
apart.

This stops Barbara in her tracks. She takes Cedric by the
arm.

BARBARA

Honey, you're not tryin' to be better.
You want something better. Don't you
ever be ashamed of that. When other
kids talk that way, you remember it's
just the crab-in-the-bucket syndrome.
One crab tries to get outta the
bucket, all the others got to pull him
down.

CEDRIC

(heard it all before)

I know. I know, Mom.

(lightening it)

But I don' even know what's outside
that bucket.

BARBARA

Honey, the whole wide world.

Cedric smiles. They pass a group of HOOKERS hanging on the
corner. One calls out to Cedric.

HOOKER

You a cute one. You gonna drive them
wild.

BARBARA

See? I told you you're special!
She's a pro. She oughta know.

Cedric ducks his head but Barbara laughs.

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - NIGHT

Barbara and Cedric enter and go their separate ways. Barbara
heads for the kitchen, Cedric to his bedroom.

INT. CEDRIC'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

He flips on the light. It's like a bear's cave, filled with strewn clothes, shoes, magazines, random papers, books. Cedric turns as he hears the distant pop of GUNFIRE. But that's nothing new. Gunfire is the background noise in this neighborhood. Cedric TURNS ON his TV and flops on the bed. He picks up a brochure.

The cover photo shows MIT. The heading reads: "MINORITIES INTRODUCTION TO ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE... MIT MITES". HOLD ON Cedric staring at the image as we HEAR:

JOANNE NELSON (V.O.)
Ready for the test today, Cedric?

INT. MATH CLASS - BALLOU - DAY

MS. JOANNE NELSON is a dark-skinned, soft-spoken woman who teaches Unified Math. She's neither dedicated nor disillusioned, just overworked. Cedric is one of the first students to arrive. He slides behind his desk.

CEDRIC
Uh-huh. I mean, I think I'm in good shape. The trigonometric functions... I had some trouble at first with those, but they're comin' easier now.

Students come in. Trevor, the kid we saw tap dancing at the bus stop, sits in front of Cedric. They exchange an elaborate handshake as Trevor passes.

TREVOR
Yo, whazzup?

CEDRIC
Whazzup wi't you?

TREVOR
See the Grammys last night? Warren G. is the man.

A very pretty girl, JANECE, purposely takes the seat right next to Cedric. He glances up, surprised.

Ms. Nelson slips the sheets of the mimeographed test to Cedric. He takes out a ruler and digs right in, confidently draws two vertical lines, noting points for asymptotes, limits and intercepts. As he works, he sneaks another look and sees Janece still staring at him. He's pleasantly surprised.

THE CLOCK says 8:30. We DISSOLVE TO: 9:00.

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Cedric finishes the last problem. He looks up. He's the first student done. He smiles and picks up his pencil again, impulsively scribbles across the bottom of the test: "I LOVE THIS STUFF."

Then he rises and smiles at Janeece as he heads out. She doesn't smile back.

INT. BALLOU HALLWAYS

Cedric moves down the crowded halls to the next class. Janeece runs after him, grabs his arm.

JANEECE

Hey, Cedric. Why didn't you help me out wi' that test?

CEDRIC

(confused)

Help you? You mean study and all? I'll do that any time you say, Janeece. After school --

JANEECE

Not tutor me, you geek! Show me the answers. You hid your paper!

Only now does Cedric realize Janeece wasn't looking at him. She was trying to cheat. Phillip approaches. Cocky as always.

PHILLIP

Cedric thought you were lookin' at him.

Phillip makes kissy noises at Cedric. Janeece slips an arm around Phillip's waist.

JANEECE

(to Cedric)

In your dreams.

Cedric closes his locker, straightens and tries to walk away with his dignity. He knows it takes more courage to avoid these fights. He sees Trevor up ahead.

CEDRIC

Yo, Trevor, wait up, man.

Trevor looks uneasy but waits.

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CONTINUED:

PHILLIP
 (calls after Cedric)
 The amazing nerdboy. Always lookin'
 out for hisself.

There's a crowd playing a craps game in the hall. Cedric and Trevor can't get by.

TREVOR
 Come on, Cedric. Just go around 'em.

But there's no time. Phillip runs up and spins Cedric around.

PHILLIP
 Hey, uppity white boy! I'm talkin' to
 you!

CEDRIC
 (quiet)
 What did I ever do to you, Phillip?

PHILLIP
 That's a good question. Let me
 explain.

Out of nowhere, Phillip sucker-punches Cedric in the chest hard. Cedric doubles over, drops his books, staggers back to his feet to fight. The two boys circle, the craps players rise and call encouragement. Someone pulls out a KNIFE.

TREVOR
 Cedric, look out!

Cedric turns, sees the knife. But then, a BELL SOUNDS. An armed SECURITY GUARD appears and starts to clear the halls. The craps game vanishes. The knife disappears inside someone's coat. Phillip flips the finger at Cedric and strolls off with Janeece on his arm.

TREVOR (CONT'D)
 You okay, man?

Cedric nods and pulls away, humiliated. He walks off.

INT. ENGLISH CLASS - DAY

Cedric slides into his seat, still hurting. He touches his chest. The teacher, MR. MOMEN, a harried, disillusioned, and unsympathetic man, passes out vocabulary tests.

MR. MOMEN
 I'm dividing the class into two teams.
 Cedric, you lead one of them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC

Mr. Momen, I'd rather just --

MR. MOMEN

Don't talk back.

Mr. Momen looks around for another likely candidate. The kids are goofing off, avoiding his glance. Phillip takes his seat, smiles at Mr. Momen. He's the teacher's pet.

MR. MOMEN (CONT'D)

Phillip, you lead the other group.

PHILLIP

Sure thing, Mr. Momen. It would be an honor. And I'd like to thank a lot of people, so many of them such tiny little sorry-ass people, who made this honor possible. And of course, the Academy.

This draws hoots from the kids and a smile from Mr. Momen.

PHILLIP (CONT'D)

If I get all these words right, it's 'cause I worked with Cedric before class. He's always helpin' out the other kids. Right, Cedric?

CEDRIC

I'll help you study any time you want. You'd rather kiss the teacher's a--

MR. MOMEN

Cedric! Put a lid on that attitude or take it out in the hall.

(mutters as he walks
away)

That boy has too much pride.

Cedric falls silent. Phillips gloats on his triumph. They divide into groups. Cedric watches bitterly as Janeece leans close and whispers something in Phillip's ear.

INT. LIBRARY - DAY

Pathetic. There are worn desks and a few ancient books on the nearly empty shelves. Cedric is the only student here. He sits at a bare table, working on his calculus. Trevor looks in.

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CONTINUED:

TREVOR

What you doin' here, Cedric? School's been out an hour.

CEDRIC

Just some homework.

TREVOR

Man, you somethin' else.

CEDRIC

If I don't go home too early, I can wait to turn up the heat.

Trevor nods. He understands about that. He sits next to Cedric, looks at his notebooks with the MIT doodles.

TREVOR

So what's up with this MIT? You been wantin' to go there long as I can remember. Ain't that some kinda white boy's school?

CEDRIC

No, it's not a white boy's school. They have lots of minorities. Mostly Asian. But they want more blacks. They have this summer program to help us get in. I applied to it and I'm hopin' --

TREVOR

(interrupts)

You ever seen MIT?

CEDRIC

No.

TREVOR

Then how you know you'd even like it? Won't be nobody like you. You'd be different. Lonely, that's what I think. You'd never fit in. You should just kick back a little, quit workin' so hard, and go to community college, like me.

CEDRIC

Yeah, well, I may end up there at this rate. I gotta go.

Cedric rises and winces. His chest hurts where Phillip punched him.

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CONTINUED: (2)

TREVOR

Look, man, you can, you know, not listen to this or whatever. But make it easy on yourself. Loosen up. Be more like the other kids. Fit in. Get some different clothes. You gotta live.

CEDRIC

Yeah. I'll think about it.

He lifts his bookbag, heavy with homework, and heads off.
MUSIC BEGINS: BOYZ II MEN, "The End of the Road".

INT. BALLOU HALLWAYS - LATE AFTERNOON

Cedric walks off. He passes a message scribbled in thick black Magic Marker on the cafeteria wall. "HEAD LIVES."
MUSIC CONTINUES.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BALLOU ASSEMBLY HALL - DAY

Morning light comes in the windows. There are about 20 kids here to take their SATs. Cedric sits, pulls out two carefully sharpened #2 pencils. Mr. Momen starts to pass out the SATs. His attitude is brusque, like he expects nothing from these kids and that's what he's going to get.

MR. MOMEN

You will have 45 minutes to complete the first section. Keep an eye on the block. Use only #2 pencils. Remember to fill in each answer completely. If you don't, it will be marked wrong.

He puts a test on Cedric's desk without looking at him. Cedric stares at it, feeling stark terror as he opens the test.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BALLOU HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Cedric comes slowly out of the school. The students charge down the steps as if they've been released for recess. Cedric sits and drops his head in his hands, overwhelmed with despair.

A PUDGY BOY looks at Cedric as he passes.

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CONTINUED:

PUDGY BOY

Can you believe that sorry-ass Cedric?
What kind of pants are those?

As Cedric looks up, he sees Janeece run to Phillip. They laugh and she strokes his new soft LEATHER JACKET. Then they walk off arm in arm.

Now Cedric looks at the kids. Their baggy pants. Their ski caps. Their high-top shoes. Head is making a deal in the parking lot with two kids. He finishes and gets in his Lexus. Like Phillip, he has a nice LEATHER JACKET.

EXT. JENNINGS APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Cedric walks in.

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT HALLWAY - NIGHT

Cedric opens the mailbox and leafs through the mail. All bills. Nothing from MIT. Cedric throws the letters down.
MUSIC ENDS.

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - NIGHT

Cedric sits in the living room watching TV, in a dark mood. Barbara enters, exhausted, hangs up her coat.

BARBARA

How'd the SATs go?

No answer. Barbara knows what that means.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Honey, maybe you shouldn't be watching so much TV.

CEDRIC

(echoing Trevor)

I gotta live.

Barbara reacts, surprised by Cedric's tone. She's about to snap back but thinks better of it. She can see the mood he's in.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

(abrupt)

I want a leather jacket.

BARBARA

I know a boy got killed for a leather jacket.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARBARA (CONT'D)

You dress like that in this neighborhood, you make yourself a target.

CEDRIC

I gotta start tryin' to fit in. How about a pair of those baggy pants, like Snoop Doggy Dog wears? All the kids got 'em.

BARBARA

That kinda clothes symbolizes bad things, bad people, and murder.

CEDRIC

(explodes)

It's just a pair of pants!

He rises and starts to storm out.

BARBARA

Cedric, you come back here. Don't be walkin' out on your mother. There's no money for pants. It's the first week of the month. I paid the rent and all. Nothing left. I spent our last ten dollars on bus tokens so I can get to work. I didn't have any money for lunch. And I'm bone tired. So how about you do those dishes in the sink?

He comes back, still defiant.

CEDRIC

I'm tired, too! I worked hard all day, too. And I hate doing the damn dishes!

Barbara crosses and gets right in his face.

BARBARA

Don't you talk like that to me! I pay the rent here! I support you. I give you everything! You don't want to do your part? You don't like it? When you talk to me like that, I hate you! I wish you were never born!

Cedric is stunned. Tears spring in his eyes. He walks into the kitchen and we hear WATER running. Barbara already wishes she could take back the words.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

She can hear them in her mind. "I wish you were never born."
She closes her eyes.

FLASH CUT TO: A MEMORY

INT. GRIMY KITCHEN - NIGHT

Young Barbara sits at a linoleum table across from a handsome man with Cedric's almond eyes. This is Cedric's father, CEDRIC GILLIAM. Cedric Gilliam is pissed. He rises and his voice is cold and hard.

CEDRIC GILLIAM
Probably not even mine.

Barbara looks at him, tears rolling down her cheeks. This is when she was still young enough and vulnerable enough to cry.

YOUNG BARBARA
You know it is.

Cedric Gilliam points his finger in her face.

CEDRIC GILLIAM
You listen to me, woman, and you
listen good. You have this baby, I'm
outta here. It's that baby or me.

BACK TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - SAME

ON BARBARA, remembering. She won't apologize. Not ever. But now she knows what to do to bring Cedric back to the straight path.

BARBARA
Cedric?

CEDRIC (O.S.)
Yes.

BARBARA
Your father called.

CEDRIC (O.S.)
What about it?

BARBARA
He wants to see you. I said no, but
now I guess I changed my mind.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARBARA (CONT'D)

(beat)

Maybe you oughta see him. Do you
good. I'm callin' your Uncle Bob.
He'll take you and your cousin.

Silence.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

You hear me?

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Cedric takes a breath, then:

CEDRIC

Yeah.

He plunges his hands in the soapy water.

FLASH CUT: now Cedric has a MEMORY:

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - DAY

Little Cedric looks out of a crack in his bedroom as he
watches Barbara answer the door. Standing outside is Cedric
Gilliam. Barbara sees him and registers shock.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

I was wondering if I can see the boy.

YOUNG BARBARA

(cold)

That's a new idea. What brought this
on?

CEDRIC GILLIAM

He should know his father. And my
girlfriend found out about him. So
what's the point of hiding it?

Barbara frowns, angry, but she sees Cedric watching,
wide-eyed and hopeful. She softens.

YOUNG BARBARA

Cedric? Come here.

Little Cedric inches out.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Kinda small, ain't he?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

 YOUNG BARBARA
 (like ice)
 He's only six.

She goes and kneels by Cedric, whispers:

 YOUNG BARBARA (CONT'D)
 Honey, this is your dad. You want to
 meet him?

The little child nods emphatically with hope and excitement.

 UNCLE BOB (V.O.)
 So how long since you seen your
 father, Cedric?

EXT. VIRGINIA SUBURBS - DAY

An '85 Cutlass rolls by.

 CEDRIC (V.O.)
 I don't know. Long time.

INT. CUTLASS - DAY

A heavysset, middle-aged black man drives, Cedric's UNCLE BOB. His son, Cedric's cousin JOE, rides shotgun. He's a big, good-looking kid, 220 pounds of pure muscle with the wide neck and shoulders of a football player. Joe wears Nike high-tops, a Hilfiger jacket and baggy pants.

 UNCLE BOB
 You oughta see him more often.

Cedric doesn't respond to this, but his jaw works with tension. Uncle Bob glances at his son. The look says "make conversation". Joe gives it a shot.

 JOE
 What sports you go out for this year,
 Cedric?

 CEDRIC
 I don't go out for sports anymore.

 JOE
 Didn't you used to play basketball?
 I remember you were pretty good.

 CEDRIC
 Not good enough.
 (MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

(beat)

I seen too many guys waste their lives
thinkin' they'll make it somewhere
puttin' a ball in a hoop.

Joe exchanges a look with his father. Like this kid is
hopeless. Nothing more is said.

Cedric looks out the window as they approach a wall of
concrete and twisted barbed wire.

EXT. LORTON CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION - DAY

The Cutlass pulls up at the guard gate of a 10,000-prisoner
complex in the Blue Ridge foothills. This is where Cedric's
father lives.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

INT. LORTON CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION - DAY

Cedric, Uncle Bob and Joe enter the visitors' room and sit in a cubicle. After a moment, Cedric Gilliam comes in wearing his prison blues. He sits on the other side of the Plexiglas. His eyes go to Cedric briefly, then he looks away to Joe and Bob.

CEDRIC GILLIAM
How you doin', bro?

UNCLE BOB
Better'n you.

CEDRIC GILLIAM
(turns to his nephew)
How tall're you now, Joe?

JOE
Six three.

CEDRIC GILLIAM
Lookin' good.

Now, at last, he looks at Cedric.

CEDRIC GILLIAM (CONT'D)
My son the scholar took off from school to come see me. First time in years. You got big, Cedric.

Cedric says nothing, reacting to the edge of scorn he hears in his father's voice.

CEDRIC GILLIAM (CONT'D)
You got a girlfriend yet?

CEDRIC
A few.

CEDRIC GILLIAM
(to Bob)
He's lyin'. I bet he's never had a girlfriend.
(to Joe)
You jocks, you get all the girls.
What position you playing?

UNCLE BOB
He's starting linebacker.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC GILLIAM

That's good.

(to Cedric)

Tell your mother to get you some better clothes. Like your cousin here.

CEDRIC

Tell her where to get the money.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Ain't my fault she got no money.

(to Uncle Bob)

Cedric's mother makes \$5.50 an hour and tithes ten percent to the church. Always fallin' behind on her rent money. Never makin' ends meet. Meanwhile, that Bishop Long just gets richer and richer. That woman ain't got no sense.

CEDRIC

(low, even)

Don't you disrespect my mother.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Don't disrespect your father or you'll get your mouth smacked.

CEDRIC

Who's gonna do it? You?

Cedric Gilliam rises. So does Cedric. They're eyeball to eyeball, but Cedric Gilliam's behind the Plexiglas. He can't get at Cedric.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

(to Joe)

I've seen him. I'll wait outside.

Cedric turns to go. Joe takes his arm.

JOE

Come on. You come all this way --

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Let him go.

Cedric slams out. Once they are alone:

CEDRIC GILLIAM (CONT'D)

How can that be my child? His mother did that to him.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

CEDRIC GILLIAM (CONT'D)
 Made him all nerdy and faggy.
 Straight-A momma's boy. I shoulda
 taken her to that abortion clinic.
 Lettin' her go alone, that's where I
 made my mistake. Never shoulda gave
 that woman a chance to back out.

UNCLE BOB
 (shocked silence, then:)
 He's a good kid.

INT. WAITING ROOM - LORTON CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION - DAY

Cedric leans against a cinder-block wall. He looks at the families waiting to see prisoners: mothers with small children, women who look like hookers. Wives, sisters, children of inmates. A few old men. HOLD ON Cedric, taking it all in.

MUSIC BEGINS. It's Warren G., the song is "Reality".

CUT TO BLACK:

AN ALARM BLARES

INT. CEDRIC'S BEDROOM - BEFORE DAWN

Cedric turns on a light, hits off the alarm. The clock says 5:30 a.m. It's still dark out as he gets dressed.

INT. KITCHEN - BEFORE DAWN

Cedric makes himself Oodles of Noodles for breakfast. His face is grim.

EXT. APARTMENT - SUNRISE

Cedric cuts across the building's front lawn and marches through the eerie silence of V Street, cutting through the long shadows and early morning wedges of sunlight.

He hits the corner of V Street and 16th. As always, open for business. The same two dealers, Redskins and Soft Leather, warm their hands with their breath. The guns both wear can be glimpsed beneath their coats. Cedric faces them head on for once.

CEDRIC
 (barks)
 What's up?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SOFT LEATHER

What's up wit' you, bro?

The dealers laugh. MUSIC ENDS.

INT. BALLOU HALLWAYS - MORNING

The clock reads 7:15. Cedric walks down the empty hallways with Mr. Taylor, who is rumpled and half asleep. He pulls out his keys.

MR. TAYLOR

You sure are makin' me get up early these days.

CEDRIC

This is the last time. I'll be sleepin' in from now on.

MR. TAYLOR

Oh yeah? Almost done with the project?

Cedric shrugs, doesn't answer directly, as Mr. Taylor opens the door to the Chemistry lab. Cedric enters. As Mr. Taylor watches, Cedric pulls out the elements of his science project on the growth rate of hydrotropic plants.

MR. TAYLOR (CONT'D)

You all right then?

CEDRIC

(abrupt)

Why wouldn't I be?

MR. TAYLOR

(decides not to push it)

If you need me, I'll be in the faculty room. Asleep.

INT. CHEMISTRY CLASSROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

The shadows are long. The clock reads 5:30. Cedric sits at a desk, his work spread before him. But he's staring out the window, deep in thought.

Mr. Taylor enters. Cedric doesn't look over.

MR. TAYLOR

Cedric, what are you doing here?

CEDRIC

Nothin' much.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Mr. Taylor checks his watch, goes to his desk. Sits. He looks at Cedric, knowing something's changed. Then he speaks with studied casualness.

MR. TAYLOR

So, you came kinda down this morning.
Somethin' happen this weekend? What's
goin' on?

Now Cedric turns.

CEDRIC

I saw my father. Out at Lorton Prison.

MR. TAYLOR

(careful)

And how was that?

Cedric closes his books, looks right at Mr. Taylor. His face is straightforward, his voice flat. He talks almost without emotion, the way people do when something means so much to them they can't let their pain show at all.

CEDRIC

My father, you know, he left my mother
and me before I was born. The first
time I saw him, I was six years old.

FLASH CUT:

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - DAY

A CONTINUATION of the SCENE that STARTED EARLIER. Barbara buttons up Little Cedric's coat and he runs to his father with hope and joy.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

He had fine clothes and a fancy new
car. Took me to his apartment.

INT. CEDRIC GILLIAM'S APARTMENT - DAY

Little Cedric runs through the pretty rooms, in awe.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

I remember the rugs were so soft. The
bathroom had all this marble. The
closet was full of suits. He was real
nice to me. I couldn't believe it, I
was so happy. It was around Halloween.

INT. K-MART - DAY

Cedric Gilliam holds Little Cedric's hand. They check out the Halloween costumes. Little Cedric is so excited, he can barely contain himself.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

He took me to K-Mart and bought me a Bugs Bunny costume. That night, my mama couldn't get me to take it off.

INT. CEDRIC'S BEDROOM

Young Barbara tucks Little Cedric in. He's still wearing the costume.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

I slept in that costume my father bought me. I was so happy. I had a dad at last. After that, he came back for me a couple more times.

EXT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - DAY

Cedric Gilliam lifts Little Cedric into the leather seats of his convertible. They drive off.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

We'd go out for awhile. Do this and that. I thought, you know, he was really somethin'. I didn't understand.

EXT. STREET CORNER - DAY

Cedric Gilliam is talking to the drug dealers. Money and nickel bags change hands. In the car, Little Cedric is bored. He crawls below the dash and finds a jar of COINS.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

Then one day I found this jar of shiny coins in his car. And I took them. I was just a kid. I didn't know what I was doing. They were pretty. He found out and he beat me with his belt.

FLASH CUT:

Cedric Gilliam's face filled with rage as he raises his belt. We hear the little boy SCREAM. As the SOUND ECHOES, we CUT BACK TO:

INT. CHEMISTRY CLASSROOM - DUSK

CEDRIC

Beat me so bad he almost killed me.
 Turned out they were some kinda rare
 coins someone gave him for heroin.
 Now he's doing 12 to 35 for armed
 robbery and dealing. I saw him and
 this is what I learned. My father
 thinks I'm not good enough to be his
 kid.

Cedric stares out the window at the grim urban landscape.
 The air in the room is very still. Mr. Taylor is stunned by
 Cedric's words.

MR. TAYLOR

Is that why you want to go to MIT? To
 prove him wrong?

CEDRIC

I wanted to go to MIT for me. Not for
 him.

MR. TAYLOR

You wanted to go?
 (almost afraid to ask)
 The summer program?

CEDRIC

I called. The letters went out two
 weeks ago. If I'da got in, I'd know
 by now.

Mr. Taylor is heartbroken for Cedric, but tries not to show
 it. Cedric rises and loads his backpack.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Crazy, anyway. Wanting to go to
 someplace like that. Probably woulda
 hated it. I'm better off here with my
 own people.

(bitter)

I'll go to community college. Yeah.
 Or trade school. That's the place for
 me. Not somewhere I've never even
 seen.

MR. TAYLOR

(rises)

Hebrews 11:1. 'The substance of faith
 is a hope in the unseen.'

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC

(stops)

That's not how it goes, Mr. Taylor.
You messed it up. 'Faith is the
substance of things hoped for, the
evidence of things not seen.'

MR. TAYLOR

Extra points for you. Take from the
Holy Scripture what you need. Nothing
more. The point is, what your father
wants, what the other kids say,
doesn't mean anything because you know
where you're going.

CEDRIC

Yeah. Nowhere.

Cedric leaves. MUSIC BEGINS. It's a beautiful, rousing
gospel classic, "I'll Fly Away".

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BALLOU - EVENING

Cedric walks off in the failing light. He passes some bums
warming their hands by a trash can fire. He pulls off his
backpack and on impulse tosses it on the flames as:

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SCRIPTURE CATHEDRAL - DUSK

The MUSIC CONTINUES. Barbara waits for Cedric. It's late
and beginning to rain.

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. STREET - DUSK

Cedric wanders through a rough neighborhood. There's a
liquor store ahead with some young men Cedric's age hanging
outside drinking. Cedric approaches, exchanges words. One
passes him a bottle in a bag and he drinks.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SCRIPTURE CATHEDRAL - NIGHT

MUSIC SWELLS, becoming source as we see the choir. Barbara
sits in a pew. Every few moments, she cranes around to look
at the entrance in the rear. Still no sign of Cedric.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The song finishes and everyone sits. Bishop Long rises from a cushioned chair at the center of the altar and moves to the pulpit.

BISHOP LONG
Tonight I have a heavy heart.

Bishop Long waits for the joyous faces to turn somber, matching his mood, and they do.

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)
There is evil in this world: a
darkness, an unholiness that is taking
our children. I presided over a
funeral today.
(his voice falls,
masterfully quiet)
A boy, only fifteen years old, cut
down like so many of our young ones.

Faces sag and heads nod.

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)
Violence, poverty, crime, despair,
loss. What we are up against in this
world, the burden seems too heavy
sometimes. Like the deck is stacked
against us.

Voices call out, "Tell it, brother!" Barbara looks back for Cedric. Again, he's not there.

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)
It feels so hopeless. Like there's no
more that we can do. Children taken
before their time. Victims of
violence. Sons and fathers in prison,
or worse. Where is our refuge? I ask
you? WHERE IS OUR REFUGE?

The congregation is hushed now. He lowers his voice. Softly:

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)
It is here, within these walls.

The crowd shouts "Amen".

IN THE BACK: the door opens slowly and Cedric enters, tentative. He's drenched from the rain, confused, brokenhearted, and unsure he wants to be here.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)

Our refuge... is with each other, and
our refuge is with God. If you don't
have a dime in your pocket, if you
don't have food on your table, if you
got troubles, you're in the right
place tonight.

People shout out Hallelujahs and raise their arms. Cedric
remains quiet, keeping himself apart.

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)

I know all about what you're up
against. I've been there. Trust me.
Do you trust me?

Shouts of "Yes!" MOVE IN ON CEDRIC... his face intent.

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)

Terrible things are happening. You're
low, you're tired, you're fighting,
you're waiting for your vision to
become reality. Seems like you've
been waiting forever and you can't
keep carrying the burden no more.
Sometimes you just want to give up.
But you can't. And you won't. Not
ever. That's why you're here. Your
belief is what keeps you apart.
Belief in yourself, and your God. You
are safe in this protection, and you
will survive whatever may come. There
is nothing you and your God can't
handle! You will survive! Say it, 'I
will make it.' SAY IT!

CROWD

I will make it!

BISHOP LONG

Say, 'I will endure!'

CROWD

'I will endure!'

Now Barbara sees Cedric. Her face floods with relief. He
sees her too, and then loses sight of her as everyone rises
to their feet.

BISHOP LONG

When your family deserts you! When
you are alone and facing a storm!

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)
 Someone is always with you, and that
 someone is the Lord God. God loves
 you! I love you! And YOU WILL REACH
 YOUR GOAL!

Bishop Long turns to the choir and they launch into another
 chorus of the same hymn. Everyone sings.

EVERYONE
 'I'm gonna fly away,
 I will be free one day,
 I've got a home in the sky...'

The lyrics are moving. The congregation starts clapping.
 And again, "I'm going to fly away, I will be free one day,
 I've got a home in the sky!"

Barbara makes her way back towards where she saw Cedric as he
 moves forward to her. They meet and, without questions or
 explanations, start to sing, side by side. MUSIC CONTINUES
 as we:

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - NIGHT

Barbara and Cedric climb the crumbling stairs to their
 apartment. She knows he's been going through something on
 his own, but she doesn't want to press him. All that matters
 is he's here, and they're together against the world again.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Barbara uses her key to open their box and get the mail. On
 top is TV Guide. Beneath is a creamy white envelope. It's
 from THE MIT MINORITY SUMMER PROGRAM.

She touches it softly, then passes it to Cedric without a
 word. Fumbling, he rips it open, reads: "I am pleased to
 inform you..."

Cedric looks up. It's all in his face.

CEDRIC
 This is it, Mama. My life is about to
 begin.

MUSIC ENDS.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

EXT. DULLES AIRPORT - DAY

Cedric kisses his mother goodbye, boards a plane as a new MUSIC CUE BEGINS. It's Bobby Brown again. "Get Away."

INT. AIRPORT - DAY

Cedric sits in his seat and looks out the window, total happiness and peace on his face.

EXT. LOGAN AIRPORT - DAY

MUSIC CONTINUES. Cedric boards a special MIT van. All around him are other minority kids, chattering with excitement. They are better dressed and more affluent than Cedric, but for now he doesn't care.

INT. MIT VAN - DAY

Cedric sits by the window as they cross the Charles River.

EXT. MIT - DAY

Cedric looks up at the pillars and dome of the main building. It's as if all his dreams have come true.

EXT. DORM - DAY

A high-rise right on the river.

INT. DORM - DAY

Cedric turns away from his amazing view on the 9th floor to look at his room. It's spare but pleasant, with clean sheets stacked on a striped mattress.

LATER

Cedric finishes making the bed. He slides his unpacked luggage into a cupboard over the closet. Then he checks his schedule, puts it neatly on the table, lies down on the tightly tucked wool blanket, and drifts into sleep. MUSIC ENDS.

EXT. MIT CAMPUS - DAY

The crowd of kids crosses the trimmed lawns, still light green in early summer. They pass under a banner that reads:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

"MINORITY INTRODUCTION TO ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE -- WELCOME MITES!"

A tall black undergrad in a navy blue MIT shirt, one of their CHAPERONES, is in charge.

CHAPERONE

Okay, everyone! Let's move as a group over to the dining hall, and please, try not to get lost!

An Hispanic boy looks to Cedric and smiles. MARCOS.

MARCOS

This is great! Kind of like we're all on our way up, together!

Cedric nods, hoping against hope that his solitary journey is over for now.

INT. MIT DINING HALL - DAY

A new glass-and-steel building where a tower of pizza boxes waits. Kids grab slices, sodas and settle in chairs. Cedric looks around at the kids. They're about half black, half Hispanic, with a few kids of Middle Eastern descent and a handful of Asians.

BILL RAMSEY, 68, a black engineer, rises to speak.

RAMSEY

I'm Bill Ramsey, class of '51. I'm an engineering professor here at MIT. Call me Bill. No other names, please. If you have any questions or problems, I'm the guy you want to see. Your schedules are in your packets. I hope you're finding your way around. Classes begin tomorrow. Work hard, have fun, follow the rules, and don't end up in my office for the wrong reasons.

(charming smile)

Not that I'd ever be less than delighted to see any of you. And now, let me introduce our faculty director, Leon Trilling.

TRILLING is a bald white man with thick-rimmed glasses. He rises slowly and nods a stern and silent hello. Trilling has none of Ramsey's easy charm. He is a thin-lipped lab goat who exudes pure, arrhythmic, terrifying white power.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RAMSEY (CONT'D)

Professor Trilling is a distinguished professor of aeronautics and astronautics. His bio is in your packet. Read it.

TRILLING

(slight Polish accent)

Welcome, all of you, to MIT. I will be reviewing your work at the end of the program to see how you've done and how you've all enjoyed your visit. And together we will decide whether next year you belong with us here at MIT.

INT. MIT PHYSICS CLASS - DAY

Cedric slides behind a desk as the class fills up. He pulls out a large red plastic folder with MITES stamped on the cover. He carefully selects two pens and two pencils, arranges them with a note pad on his desk. His white Nikes bounce on the speckled linoleum. He is jittery with anticipation and ready to jump in.

Three BLACK GIRLS, who seem to know each other, move into the desks in front of him. One smiles at Cedric. JENICA DOVER.

JENICA

Hey. I'm Jenica.

CEDRIC

Cedric. Cedric Jennings.

JENICA

Where you from?

CEDRIC

D.C.

The girls, chic and well turned out, are ISA and MICAH. All three have cultured accents and are the product of majority white schools.

ISA

I'm Isa.

MICAH

Micah.

CEDRIC

Where you guys from?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ISA

Atlanta. My parents teach at the University.

MICAH

I'm from Baltimore.

JENICA

Newton, Mass. My parents are teachers at Wellesley High.

CEDRIC

(to Micah)

Don't you be tellin' me your folks are teachers.

MICAH

No, my mom's an insurance adjuster. My dad's a lawyer.

Suddenly, Cedric feels alone again. These kids may be his color, but they're nothing like him. They wait for Cedric to contribute to this line of conversation.

CEDRIC

My mama, she works for the Department of Agriculture.

They nod. Sounds good.

MICAH

What's your dad do?

Cedric pauses, decides to face the situation head on. Not apologize for who or what he is.

CEDRIC

Right now, 12 to 35 in a Virginia prison. He's a heroin addict. He's in for armed robbery. My mama raised me. From when I was born, it was just the two of us.

A moment of stunned silence. The girls literally don't know what to say. Cedric is from another world. The teacher, THOMAS LIVINGSTON, a handsome young black grad student and a Ph.D. candidate at MIT, begins to speak. The girls turn to watch him, relieved.

LIVINGSTON

Good morning, everyone.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

LIVINGSTON (CONT'D)

We're starting today with a discussion of particle physics. For some of you, this will be review. Particle physics deals with the elements that make up matter and the forces between them. These elements consist of electrons, neutrinos, and quarks. The forces derive from electromagnetism and its generalizations.

Livingston moves to the blackboard and starts ripping across, jamming the chalkboard with words and drawings. Cedric stares. The kids watch patiently.

Cedric feels a stab of fear. He grabs a pen and starts scribbling madly, jotting down everything on the board.

LIVINGSTON (CONT'D)

Another force, experienced by quarks only, is due to gluons. There are eight types of these and they interact with each other, so that the forces are intrinsically nonlinear. Quarks and gluons never appear as well-separated particles, and the evidence for them, although strong, is indirect.

Cedric tries vainly to write down everything Livingston is saying. When he looks up, he realizes with horror that Isa, Micah and Jenica aren't even taking notes.

INT. MIT HALLWAY - DAY

Cedric heads for the next class. He hazards a conversation with a fair-skinned kid who is half Asian, half black.
ANDREW PARKER.

CEDRIC

How ya doin'?

ANDREW

(cool)

Fine. No problems.

CEDRIC

Oh yeah? I think it's pretty hard. I'm, like, afraid my hand fallin' off takin' notes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ANDREW
 (with pointedly careful
 English)
 Then maybe you need to write less and
 listen more.

Cedric reacts, humiliated. They go into class.

INT. MIT CALCULUS - DAY

The teacher, JOSEPH LEVERICH, is talking to Andrew as if he were a peer. Cedric watches, stunned by Andrew's knowledge and self-confidence.

LEVERICH
 Since most of the tests of convergence for improper integrals are only valid for positive functions, is it legitimate to wonder what happens to improper integrals involving nonpositive functions?

ANDREW
 Obviously.

LEVERICH
 And the natural way you generate a positive number from a given number is to take the absolute value of the number. So consider a function $f(x)$, not necessarily positive, defined on $[a,b]$. Then consider the positive function $|f(x)|$ still defined on $[a,b]$. Will both functions $f(x)$ and $|f(x)|$ exhibit the same kind of improper behavior?

Only one kid in the class has the answer.

ANDREW
 Yes. They will.

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - EARLY MORNING

The clock reads 2 a.m. Cedric is surrounded by handouts. He starts copying notes on Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. He writes: "Population divided into castes (social class, rank). Alphas and Betas more intelligent and manage society. Deltas and Gammas less intelligent and do menial tasks."

He stares at what he wrote. It still makes no sense. He lies down and picks up the book, tries to read.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ON THE BOOK: every other sentence is underlined. The text is swimming.

Finally, Cedric turns off the lights and lies in the darkness, feeling very far from home.

INT. DORM HALL - NIGHT

Cedric comes out of his door into the hall, hears MUSIC and pauses. While he's been studying, other kids are kicking back. Salt 'n Pepa cranks from a BOOM BOX. Doors are open, there's a gathering in Jenica's room. Cedric walks towards the doorway and surreptitiously looks in. MUSIC CONTINUES THROUGHOUT.

HIS POV - JENICA'S ROOM

Marcos is with Jenica, BELINDA (Marcos' twin sister), Isa, and LOUIS, a quiet black kid. BACK TO Cedric listening.

LOUIS

He's freakin' brilliant. I have him in Chemistry.

MARCOS

Andrew and the teacher, it's like they got some kind of secret language.

JENICA

I hear he got a perfect 1,600 on his SATs.

ISA

You know what his favorite saying is?

MARCOS

'The hungriest lion is not the one at the top of the hill, but the one just beneath him who wants to get on top.' It's some kind of Asian thing.

Cedric steps into the doorway.

CEDRIC

I don't get that. He is the lion on top. No one's above him.

Jenica looks up and sees Cedric. The others seem surprised, slightly uneasy but curious.

JENICA

Hey, Cedric. Come on in.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Cedric inches a few steps inside the doorway.

MARCOS

You have Andrew in any of your classes?

CEDRIC

Yeah. Calculus. He and the teacher do all the talkin'. It's like the rest of us aren't even there.

JENICA

Seems like he's intimidating everyone.

CEDRIC

(beat)

I gotta be honest, I feel like all you guys got it up on me.

An uncomfortable silence, then:

BELINDA

Come on, Cedric. You must have great grades if you got into MITES.

CEDRIC

4.2 average. At Ballou. One of the worst high schools in the country. Big deal.

MARCOS

How'd you do on your SATs?

CEDRIC

I don't want to go into it. How about you?

MARCOS

Pretty good. Like, you know, 1,380.

Cedric is stunned. He was considering moving further in from the doorway, but now he stays where he is. Belinda slugs Marcos playfully.

BELINDA

Yeah, he beat me by thirty points. I hate my brother.

JENICA

You both beat me. It's embarrassing, but I sort of froze up and I only got 1,090.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Silence. Like, this is just appallingly bad. Jenica looks embarrassed.

CEDRIC

I got 910.

All look at him. Even deeper silence, then:

JENICA

Yeah, but you're ghetto, Cedric. That makes it okay.

They laugh. After a moment, Cedric smiles. But the numbers are still buzzing in his head. Marcos rises. He hears something. An EXPLOSION OUTSIDE.

MARCOS

Hey, everybody, they're starting! You can see it from my room!

Everyone jumps up and runs out.

INT. MARCOS' DORM ROOM - NIGHT

The kids squeeze up to the window, look out. RAY turns off the lights. Cedric stands near the back as Boston's exuberant FIREWORKS EXPLODE over the Charles River, lighting their astonished faces.

MARCOS

Amazing, huh, Cedric?

JENICA

Isn't it beautiful?

CEDRIC

It's like a dream.

The kids continue watching, but after a moment Cedric slips out.

INT. DORM HALLWAY - NIGHT

Cedric walks back to his room, knowing the others can party and watch the fireworks. But he needs to study more.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CALCULUS CLASS - DAY

Cedric gets back his first test from Mr. Leverich. He got a 50%.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He shuts his eyes, opens them and looks at Andrew's paper. Andrew has 100% plus extra credit for a bonus question.

LEVERICH

Most of you did very well on this first test. I was pleasantly surprised. Since we're just getting into the material, I'm going to allow a make-up test for those who are still struggling.

Leverich looks at Cedric, and Cedric knows he's the only one who needs the make-up test.

INT. DORM STUDENT LOUNGE - DAY

Cedric passes outside the glass window. The kids are inside, goofing off, eating food from the machines. They can get by without studying for hours. But Cedric can't. He heads for the elevator.

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - EARLY MORNING

Cedric stares at calculus notes. He rubs his eyes. Exhausted. Looks at his watch. It's 1:30 a.m. But he can't go to sleep.

INT. DORM HALLWAY - EARLY MORNING

Cedric comes out of his room and almost runs into Andrew.

CEDRIC

Hey, Andrew.

Andrew nods a cursory hello.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

I've been kinda beatin' my brains out studyin' for this make-up test, and I think I've just about got it down. I was wondering if you might have, I don't know, half an hour to go over some stuff with me?

ANDREW

I don't really want to be tutoring people, okay? That's what the counselors are for. I have to be looking up, not down beneath me.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He strolls into his room and shuts the door. Cedric looks like he's been slapped. He walks back to his room, SLAMS the door.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CALCULUS CLASS - DAY

Leverich looks on, worried, as Cedric sweats over the makeup test.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. PHYSICS CLASS - DAY

There's a buzz in the room as Mr. Livingston hands midterms back. Cedric looks like he hasn't slept in days. He forces himself to look at the cover page. Four points out of a possible 26. He rises, walks out into the hall and SCREAMS! Marcos and Louis react. Mr. Livingston spins, follows Cedric.

INT. MIT HALLWAY - DAY

Cedric is beating his head against the wall. Livingston intercedes.

LIVINGTON

What's wrong? Good God!

Unable to speak, Cedric waves the test paper.

LIVINGTON (CONT'D)

Come on now, don't be so hard on yourself. A lot of material is new for everybody.

CEDRIC

That's not true. It's just me! Everyone else in this program comes from a good school!

LIVINGTON

Just keep at it. It will get easier.

CEDRIC

Yeah? When? I work twice as hard as the other kids, but it's like I started three laps behind. I never catch up.

Livingston looks closely at Cedric.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LIVINGTON

When was the last time you got a good night's sleep?

CEDRIC

Before I came here.

LIVINGTON

Go. Take the morning off and get some rest.

CEDRIC

I can't. I'll just miss more stuff.

LIVINGTON

No you won't. I'll help you make up anything you need. Go on, Cedric.

Cedric walks off. Livingston watches him, deeply worried.

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - DAY

Cedric is collapsed on his bed, fast asleep.

INT. BILL RAMSEY'S OUTER OFFICE - LATE AFTERNOON

Cedric fidgets in a hard wooden chair. SUSIE, a West African woman who works for Ramsey, brings him a Coke from their private cooler.

CEDRIC

Thank you, ma'am.

Cedric tries a smile, but looks more like he's on the verge of tears.

RAMSEY (O.S.)

Cedric? Come on in.

INT. BILL RAMSEY'S OFFICE - LATE AFTERNOON

Ramsey sits behind his desk in a modest office, rooting through drawers. Warm light rakes the room. The furniture is old and comfy. Cedric sits in a worn red leather chair.

RAMSEY

Susie, where's the doggone file?

SUSIE

(enters)

Gee, must be here somewhere. Can't imagine where it's hiding.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

She pulls a file out from the top of the desk, right under his eyes. He opens it and sees Cedric's grades.

RAMSEY

(to Susie)

Have I told you you're brilliant today?

SUSIE

I could hear it again.

She exits. Ramsey comes from behind his desk to sit next to Cedric. Ramsey scans the file. Silence. Cedric blurts out:

CEDRIC

Don't send me home.

RAMSEY

(gently)

That's not gonna happen. Relax.

CEDRIC

I'm working all the time, night an' day, but my midterms... a lot of this stuff, I didn't expect --

(stumbles, then)

I thought there'd be more kids like me.

RAMSEY

I'm not going to lie to you, Cedric. It's true this program is stacked with minorities from middle-class families and suburban schools. It's true they have a leg up on you. That's just how it is. But you're the kind of kid I want to see here at MIT. We want your summer to work. Just keep at it. Remember, eighty-two percent of Mites who apply here get accepted. There's three weeks left. A lot can happen in that time.

CEDRIC

(mumbles)

Yes sir. Thanks.

EXT. MIT FACULTY BUILDING - LATE AFTERNOON

Cedric leaves the building, shoves his hands in his pockets.

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - NIGHT

Cedric lies on his bed, surrounded by his books, exhausted. He looks at his watch: 10:30. He sits up, picks up the phone and dials.

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - NIGHT

Barbara sits in the path of a circulating fan, watching TV. The PHONE RINGS and she jumps for it.

BARBARA

Hello?

CEDRIC (V.O.)

It's me, Ma.

Barbara's face splits in a huge grin.

BARBARA

Hey, baby, I was beginnin' to think you'd never call! You havin' so much fun you forget your mama?

INT. DORM ROOM - NIGHT

ON CEDRIC, smiling as he hears her voice. INTERCUT.

CEDRIC

I think about you all the time. How you been?

BARBARA

Okay. It's hot. You just be glad you're in that air-conditioned dorm. Frigerator broke again. And they cut the electricity off for awhile yesterday. I got behind on the bills. But that's enough about me. You have enough to wear?

CEDRIC

Uh-huh.

BARBARA

You studying hard?

CEDRIC

Till two o'clock every night almost.

There's a moment of quiet and Barbara senses there's something more behind this call.

BARBARA

What is it, honey?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC
 (quick, desperate)
 Mama, it's hard. Harder than I
 thought it would be. I don't think I
 can get through the work.

BARBARA
 What do you mean?

CEDRIC
 I mean, I'm failin'. I can't do it.

Sensing the gravity of the situation, Barbara sits up, every nerve on alert. She focuses her voice intently, then says simply:

BARBARA
 Baby, whatever you got to do, you can do.

CEDRIC
 Not this time.

BARBARA
 Cedric, listen to your mama. Hear me good.
 (word by word)
 You haven't even begun to fight.

ON CEDRIC: holding the phone, wanting desperately to believe it. He closes his eyes.

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - NIGHT

Cedric tosses and turns, unable to sleep. His mother's words are on his mind. Suddenly, he throws off the covers, turns on the light and sits at his desk. He pops on a CD. MUSIC PUMPS OUT: L.L. Cool J, "Hey Lover". Cedric TURNS IT UP and starts to work. MUSIC CONTINUES THROUGHOUT the FOLLOWING MONTAGE:

EXT. MIT LIBRARY - DAY

Cedric walks purposely across the campus.

INT. MIT LIBRARY - DAY

Cedric grinds away at his books.

INT. CHEMISTRY CLASSROOM - DAY

Professor Livingston works with Cedric. He writes something on the board. Cedric rises, finishes the formula. Livingston smiles.

INT. CALCULUS CLASS - DAY

The teacher asks a question. Cedric raises his hand, as does Andrew. But Leverich calls on Cedric, who answers as best he can.

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

Deserted except for one kid. Cedric keeps working.

INT. MIT DINING HALL - NIGHT

Kids are laughing, drinking sodas, hanging out. Jenica and Isa see Cedric working at a table. MUSIC ENDS.

INT. TV ROOM - DAY

Cedric sits surrounded by books. He puts his notebooks down, desperately in need of a break. The dorm seems deserted. He rises and TURNS ON the TV, fiddles with the set. The reception is lousy. All he can get are shadow images of the Sisters With Voices on MTV. Someone's behind him. He spins.

The whole gang is in the doorway: Marcos and Belinda, Isa, Jenica, Micah and Louis.

MARCOS

Happy birthday, Cedric. Here's your present.

They hand him a paper bag.

JENICA

It's a ghetto bag 'cause you're soooo ghetto.

Cedric hoots. He pulls out condoms, M&Ms, a rap CD.

JENICA (CONT'D)

You're comin' on that bus trip tomorrow to Cape Cod.

CEDRIC

No, no, I can't. I got lots of work and stuff to do.

MARCOS

No way, buddy, you're goin'.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JENICA

Yeah, you gotta, Cedric. We want to see you in your bathing suit.

MICAH

You can swim, can't you?

CEDRIC

Yeah, well, I can swim and all, but the thing is, I ain't got a bathing suit.

EXT. NEWBURY STREET - DAY

The posse drags Cedric into a store.

INT. POSH STORE - NEWBURY STREET - DAY

Cedric comes out of a back room in a tight little racing suit. He tries in vain to cover himself. The girls double over with laughter.

CEDRIC

I don' know about this one. I need more room in the crotch!

The girls scream and push him back in the changing room.

EXT. CAPE COD - DAY

A bus rolls by. Inside, the kids are singing along with "WHAT WE GO THROUGH" by Warren G.

INT. BUS - DAY

packed with MITES. Cedric is at his buoyant best. He's leading the group. Everyone's clapping, getting into it, and Cedric chimes in for solos now and then. He's the only one who knows all the lyrics. His voice is impressive and it reaches his audience, just like back in church.

EXT. BEACH - CAPE COD - DAY

Cedric jumps into the rolling waves with Marcos, who is teaching him to body surf. They swim out together.

CEDRIC

Hey, man, this is deep enough.

MARCOS

No, you gotta get out beyond the roll. Okay! Here it comes.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MARCOS (CONT'D)
 (turning, starting to
 swim for shore)
 This one! This is a good one! Go,
 paddle fast. You got it!

Cedric swims and both catch the wave. The boys ride it all the way to shore.

EXT. BEACH - CAPE COD - DUSK

A clam bake is in progress. Kids are dancing to music Cedric DJs on a BOOM BOX. He TURNS UP the VOLUME and sings along with Da Brat. He knows every lyric and vocal inflection of every tune. Jenica sits beside him, enjoys the performance for awhile.

JENICA
 Wow, you sure know music.

CEDRIC
 It's sort of all I got.

JENICA
 (beat, then)
 Happy birthday, Cedric.

She kisses him softly. This is the best, purest, least compromised moment in Cedric's young life. He's accepted at last.

INT. PHYSICS CLASS - DAY

Cedric sits watching Professor Livingston with more confidence now.

LIVINGTON
 What does the following figure
 illustrate?

He draws on the board. Cedric raises his hand.

LIVINGTON (CONT'D)
 Cedric?

CEDRIC
 In forward kinematics, the angle for
 each joint in the articulated
 structure is specified. Here it's
 angles 1 and 2.

LIVINGTON
 Correct. Very good.

INT. ENGLISH CLASS - DAY

Cedric gets back an essay on Brave New World. He got a B. He grins.

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - DAY

Cedric puts on a neat white shirt and khakis, surveys himself in the mirror. Takes a deep breath.

INT. DORM HALLWAYS - DAY

Cedric walks out, passing Marcos.

MARCOS

Good luck, man.

EXT. DEPARTMENT OF AERONAUTICS AND ASTRONAUTICS - DAY

Cedric heads inside.

INT. DEPARTMENT OF AERONAUTICS AND ASTRONAUTICS - DAY

Cedric walks down a seemingly endless, empty corridor. His FOOTSTEPS ECHO and he can hear his own heart pound.

UP AHEAD: an office door is open. He approaches. The name plate says: PROFESSOR TRILLING.

INT. PROFESSOR TRILLING'S OFFICE - DAY

Cedric enters and stands inside the doorway, awkward and frozen. The professor, in a casual checked short-sleeved shirt, steps around his wide desk so that the two are face to face.

TRILLING

Come in, Cedric. Take a seat.

Cedric looks down, avoiding Trilling's steely gaze. He finds himself staring at Trilling's feet. Choked with fear, Cedric tries to appear cool and conversational.

CEDRIC

Those are nice... um...

TRILLING

What?

CEDRIC

Shoes. Timberland?

Trilling looks at his brown bucks, as if unaware he was even wearing shoes. He says nothing. He walks around his desk, avoiding the chair across from Cedric.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He opens a manila file on his desk and stares at it for what feels like an eternity. Cedric shifts in his hard metal chair, swallows -- the sound seems to fill the room. Trilling looks up.

TRILLING

So, Cedric, are you thinking about applying at MIT?

CEDRIC

Oh, yeah. I've been wanting to come for years. Like my whole life.

Another interminable silence. Trilling stares at the file again, then returns his gaze to Cedric, unflinching.

TRILLING

(flat)

Well, I don't think you're MIT material. Your academic record isn't strong enough.

Cedric blinks like he's been hit.

CEDRIC

What do you mean, 'academic record'? I mean, my high school grades couldn't be much better.

Trilling looks to retrieve a key number.

TRILLING

I see your SATs are only 910. Right there, that's at least 200 points below what you need to be accepted at MIT. And also, your work here this summer has not been up to that of many of the other students.

CEDRIC

I can't ever have SATs like the other kids. They don't come from the same place as me.

TRILLING

(coldly corrects him)

The other kids don't come from the same place as 'I'.

Cedric's jaw works. He hates this man, his attitude of superiority, his ignorance. But Cedric's voice gets quieter and more intense.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

CEDRIC

I worked harder than any kid you've had here. What you gotta know about me is, when I set my mind on something, anything, I can get there. It's about wanting it more in your heart.

His throat catches on the last words. He's fighting tears.

TRILLING

That perspective, that... belief... is admirable, Cedric. But it can also set you up for disappointment. And at the present time, it isn't enough.

Trilling is anxious to get out of this interview and nothing Cedric says will change his mind. He rises.

TRILLING (CONT'D)

There are lots of other good schools. Maybe in a year or two, if you do well, you can transfer to MIT.

Cedric stands too, faces Trilling, then leaves without a word.

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - DAY

Cedric enters, slams the door and leans against it, as if holding out the world. He slides to the ground with his back to the door. He did his best.

It wasn't good enough. The dream is gone.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

EXT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - DUSK

The sun is setting over the Charles River.

INT. DORM HALLWAY - DUSK

Jenica knocks on Cedric's door.

JENICA

Cedric?

No response. The kids approach. Marcos and Isa whisper anxiously.

MARCOS

I know he's inside.

ISA

What do we do?

LOUIS

Hey, Cedric? You okay?

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - DUSK

Cedric lies curled in a ball on his bed, facing the wall.

INT. PHYSICS CLASS - DAY

Jenica and Isa are seated at their desks as Cedric enters and slips into his seat. Cedric stares straight ahead at Livingston, as if watching what he's writing on the board. In fact, he's not focusing on anything except keeping his emotions in check.

Isa writes a note and taps Cedric's arm. He takes it and opens it, reads:

INSERT NOTE - "What happened?"

Cedric writes something on the other side, passes it back. Isa opens his note, reads:

INSERT NOTE - "I'm going home."

Isa passes what Cedric wrote to Jenica. They exchange a look. Livingston is busy distributing a handout. Jenica quickly writes something else and passes it to Isa, who reads and signs it also. Cedric takes the paper, reads:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

INSERT: "You can't just run away. You have to stay and prove to them you have what it takes. We all care about you and love you. Isa and Jenica."

Cedric stares at the paper and his eyes shine. He wipes them with the back of his hand. He folds the note gently and puts it in his hip pocket.

Livingston drops the handout on Cedric's desk. Cedric takes out his pencil and writes on it:

I AM LOST.

Then he rises, drops it on the teacher's desk, and walks out. Livingston stands up, alarmed, but so does Jenica.

LIVINGSTON
What's going on?

JENICA
Let me talk to him.

Livingston is unsure, but nods. Jenica runs after Cedric.

INT. MIT HALLWAY - DAY

Jenica catches up, grabs Cedric's arm.

JENICA
Wait.

Cedric looks at her with such pain that she hugs him tight. Then Jenica pushes away, looks into his eyes.

JENICA (CONT'D)
If they don't want you, who wants them?

CEDRIC
They want you, Jenica. You're 'MIT material'.

JENICA
I'm not coming here. Trilling said he could practically guarantee me a place. But I told him thanks and all, that's real nice, but I got my heart set on going to Stanford.

Jenica smiles as if this irony makes everything better. But it means nothing to Cedric.

CEDRIC
I'm happy for you, Jenica.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He walks off.

EXT. CAMPUS - DAY

The buses are lined up to take the kids to the airport.
MUSIC CONTINUES.

INT. CEDRIC'S DORM ROOM - DAY

Cedric packs carefully.

INT. DORM HALLWAY - DAY

Cedric walks out carrying his bag, knowing he'll never be back here as a student again.

EXT. CAMPUS - DAY

Isa, Jenica, Micah, Louis, Belinda and Marcos are there to say goodbye.

JENICA

Good luck, Cedric. You gonna call me sometime?

CEDRIC

Sure.

No one believes him. The truth is, no one believes they'll ever meet Cedric again. Professor Livingston waits beside the bus. Cedric faces him as he hands Cedric an envelope, shakes his head.

LIVINGSTON

Good luck, Cedric. I want to tell you, don't give up. And don't get down on yourself. You did a great job here. I wrote you a good evaluation. I hope it'll help you find the right school.

Cedric takes the envelope, indifferent, gets on the bus.

INT. BUS - DAY

Cedric swings onto a seat, then opens the envelope. Inside is a certificate saying he completed the program. With it is Livingston's 10-page evaluation. The opening paragraph catches his eye: "Solid work and steady improvement right up to the last day..." Cedric crumples the certificate and drops it on the floor.

CROSS FADE TO:

EXT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - DAY (EARLY SEPTEMBER)

A fire hydrant has been opened and kids play in the spurting water. It's a hot day.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Barbara sits at the dining room table going over bills. Cedric watches TV, his face distant and grim. Barbara looks at him, worried.

BARBARA

Cedric, you gotta quit watching TV all day and start thinking about next year.

Cedric says nothing. Barbara approaches, TURNS OFF the SET. Cedric takes the remote and TURNS THE TV BACK ON. He's watching cartoons. Barbara's hands go on her hips and she cocks her head.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

When you left you had a plan. You were doing the summer program, then applying to MIT. You knew where you were headed.

CEDRIC

I don't want to go to MIT anymore.

BARBARA

All right, fine. So you need a new plan.

Cedric keeps staring at the TV.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Cedric, look at me when I'm talkin' to you.

Cedric doesn't. His face is hard and set. Frightened but powerless, Barbara stares at her son.

EXT. BALLOU - DAY (EARLY FALL)

Leaves are turning on the trees.

INT. BALLOU HALLWAYS - DAY

Cedric approaches a door marked COLLEGE COUNSELING. He doesn't want to be here. The door is open and Mr. Momen is inside at a desk. He looks up, stern and cold as ever.

MR. MOMEN

Hello, Cedric. Come in.

INT. COUNSELING OFFICE - DAY

Cedric enters, moves uneasily around the room like a trapped animal. He spots a yellow clipping on the wall. The article is about a Ballou student going to Cornell.

CEDRIC

So someone from Ballou got into
Cornell once, huh?

MR. MOMEN

Yes. Once.
(beat)
Nine years ago.

Point made. Cedric slumps into a chair. Momen sits behind his desk, tries on a smile.

MR. MOMEN (CONT'D)

It's not impossible to make it to the
Ivy League from Ballou, Cedric. But
the odds are very, very long. To be
honest, and I think it's high time for
honesty here, a place like MIT... it
was always a hundred-to-one shot for
you.

Cedric remains silent. Momen leans forward.

MR. MOMEN (CONT'D)

Everyone needs a dream, Cedric. But
not an impossible dream. The thing
about you is you set yourself up for
disappointment. You aim for the sky
when what you've got to do is shoot
low. Make sure you at least hit the
target.

CEDRIC

'Shoot low?'

MR. MOMEN

(irritated)

Lower, not low. Don't twist my words
around. You know what I mean. Here.
I made up a list of colleges you might
consider. Where I think you might
have a chance of getting in.

Cedric stares at the paper that Momen shoves towards him. Then he rises and walks out, leaving the paper on Momen's desk.

EXT. THRIFT SHOP IN CEDRIC'S NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Cedric enters. MUSIC BEGINS: "Me Against the World" by Tupac Shakur.

INT. THRIFT SHOP - DAY

Cedric cruises the racks of used clothes until he finds what he's looking for. A brown leather jacket with a longish cut. He slips it on, turns up the collar and looks in the mirror.

Now he sees a box filled with hats. He digs inside and comes up with a jaunty "apple cap", a pinwheel of leather with a stem in the center. He pulls it down, cocks it to one side approvingly. MUSIC CONTINUES.

EXT. GEORGETOWN MALL - DAY

Cedric gets out of a bus and enters the upscale mall: This is a part of town he seldom frequents. The white people he passes glance his way, uneasy. Cedric looks like their worst fear, a gangsta from the hood.

INT. RECORD STORE - DAY

Cedric shifts through the CDs on the sale rack, wearing his new leather coat and hat. He feels someone watching him and looks up. A white SALESMAN looks right over Cedric's shoulder. He smiles mechanically.

SALESMAN

Can I help you?

There's something hostile, even bullying in the man's stance.

CEDRIC

Just lookin'. Thanks.

But the Salesman doesn't go away. Cedric tosses down the CDs and heads for the exit, disgusted.

INT. MALL - DAY

Cedric passes an airy arboretum near the food court on the way out. He stops outside a fancy men's clothing store. Goes inside. THROUGH THE WINDOW, we SEE him quickly SHOPLIFT a leather belt.

He comes out and an ALARM goes off. He takes off with a SECURITY GUARD chasing him. But Cedric is faster and he escapes. MUSIC ENDS.

INT. BALLOU CAFETERIA - DAY

The new Cedric pimp rolls in. Principal Washington approaches.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON
Cedric, what are you doing? Take off that hat. You know hats aren't allowed indoors.

CEDRIC
(shakes his head)
Not takin' it off. This hat is phat.

Cedric sits at a table. Washington arches an eyebrow. This isn't the Cedric he knows. He plucks off the cap and drops it in Cedric's lap.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON
Don't make me give you detention, Cedric.

Washington walks away and Cedric puts the hat back on. Across the room, James, the basketball player, eats his cereal as he watches, concerned. Phillip sits right across the table from James. Head passes by.

PHILLIP
(calls to Head)
Check it out. Sorry-ass Cedric is tryin' to be baaad today.

Phillip and Head laugh. Washington overhears this and turns to shout at Cedric:

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON
Hey! Cedric Jennings! You're in trouble now!

Washington starts towards Cedric. James makes a split-second decision, rises and tips his table so the dishes dump onto Phillip.

PHILLIP
What you doin', man?! Sheei--

Phillip's shirt is drenched in orange juice. Head's gang members start to gather, anticipating a fight. Washington is distracted and runs over to intercede.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON
What's going on here?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JAMES

Sorry, Mr. Washington. I hurt my leg at basketball practice and I was kinda clumsy like gettin' up.

PHILLIP

Yeah, right. Mr. Washington, that's bullsh--

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON

That's enough!

Cedric takes advantage of the distraction and slips from the cafeteria.

INT. BALLOU HALLWAY - DAY

Cedric proceeds to class, still wearing the hat. James runs up behind him and grabs Cedric's arm.

JAMES

What's up wit' you, man? Take off the hat.

Cedric spins to face 6'6" of James.

CEDRIC

Make me, mutha.

James reaches out his python arm and takes the hat off. Cedric grabs it back. James shoves him.

JAMES

What's wrong wit' you, man?

Cedric reaches out to shove back and James catches his hand. Cedric twists, furious. They regard each other eyeball to eyeball for a long beat, then at the same moment, both start to laugh. Big guffaws of helpless laughter. The whole idea of Cedric taking on James is so ridiculous. James gently hands the hat to Cedric.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Don't wear the hat.

CEDRIC

(just curious now)

What do you care, anyway?

JAMES

I care. You a role model, man.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC

Say what?

JAMES

I said, you're a role model. An inspiration or whatever. Hey, I wanna go to college, too.

CEDRIC

You do?

JAMES

Yeah. Lots of us do. I gotta try for an athletic scholarship. That's my only chance. You, you're different.

CEDRIC

Where you wanna go?

JAMES

Florida A&M. They got a fine engineering school down there. I want to be an engineer.

CEDRIC

(beat)

That's cool.

JAMES

Look, Cedric. Here's the thing. You been workin' all your life for something. Why you wanna give up now?

Cedric twirls the hat in his hand, unconvinced. The BELL RINGS for class.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Go on. Don' be late. And keep that hat off. You fine the way you are.

James walks off. Cedric crosses to his locker. He opens it, puts the apple cap on the top shelf. He's about to slip the jacket off, too, but Trevor passes with Janeece.

TREVOR

Yo, Cedric. Lookin' good, man.

JANEECE

That jacket's phat.

Cedric watches Janeece and Trevor as they move down the hall. He strokes the leather once, keeps the jacket on. Then he heads off with other kids.

EXT. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE - DAY

Barbara sits with a bag lunch outside in the fall air. But she isn't eating. She is clearly upset. She pulls an envelope from her purse and stares at it. The envelope is clearly stamped: NOTICE OF EVICTION.

INT. BARBARA'S OFFICE - DAY

Barbara is on the phone. She keeps her voice low.

BARBARA

Yeah, well, I was hopin' the credit union could maybe give me a loan.

(beat)

No, not next month. It's kinda urgent. Yeah. Okay. Listen... they're gonna evict me and my son. I've worked here for years.

(listens)

Yes. I know I already had a loan and I'm payin' it back best I can. Yes. I see.

She hangs up, closes her eyes.

EXT. UNITED PLANNING ORGANIZATION - DAY

A plain building on Martin Luther King Boulevard.

INT. UNITED PLANNING ORGANIZATION - WAITING ROOM - DAY

Barbara sits, hands folded in her lap. Around her are a motley group of neighborhood residents, here to apply for public assistance. Barbara stands out in a simple, sky-blue dress and low, sensible shoes. She is whispering to herself, rehearsing her lines. A BUSINESS-LIKE WOMAN appears at a doorway.

BUSINESS-LIKE WOMAN

Barbara Jennings?

Barbara rises and goes inside.

INT. UNITED PLANNING ORGANIZATION OFFICE - DAY

Barbara sits on the edge of her chair as the Woman peruses the Jennings file.

BUSINESS-LIKE WOMAN

Obligations outstanding, including back rent, court costs and penalties, are...

(shocked)

\$2,790.00?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARBARA

(low)

Yes, ma'am.

BUSINESS-LIKE WOMAN

How did the figure get so high?

BARBARA

The refrigerator broke down and it wasn't paid for. I had to get another one. So now I'm payin' for two. My aunt died. There were funeral expenses. I put them on a credit card. When you live so close to the edge all the time, one thing goes wrong and suddenly... you can't make ends meet. The rent, I thought he'd give me some time. I really did. But now --

BUSINESS-LIKE WOMAN

(abrupt)

We're very short of assistance money this month. I can give you \$491. That's the best I can do.

BARBARA

You don't understand. They'll put us out in the street.

BUSINESS-LIKE WOMAN

I'm sorry. There's only a certain amount of money and a lot of other people in that waiting room.

BARBARA

I've been calling aid agencies, tryin' to get a loan. I've done all I could. This is my last chance. I'm begging you.

BUSINESS-LIKE WOMAN

(rising)

Is there something else?

BARBARA

(soft)

No.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. UNITED PLANNING ORGANIZATION - DAY

Barbara comes out and takes a left onto V Street. She pushes past a food-stamp line that wraps around the edge of another federal building. She starts reciting the first line of the Lord's Prayer like a mantra to suppress panic.

BARBARA

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not
want. The Lord is my shepherd, I
shall not want...

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - DAY

Barbara enters. Cedric's new jacket is on a chair. She can hear the SHOWER RUNNING and Cedric singing "Killing Me Softly" over the DRUMMING WATER. She slumps onto the sofa and lifts the phone, dials.

BARBARA

(speaking low)

Hello, Bishop Long? This is Barbara
Jennings. I'm sorry to be callin' and
all. But I got a bad problem. Yeah.
I'm back due on our rent. I've only
got two hours left.

(beat)

I know that's not enough time. I just
thought maybe...

INT. CEDRIC'S BEDROOM - DAY

Cedric pulls on a T-shirt. He hears MURMURING in the next room.

CEDRIC

Mama?

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Cedric enters and Barbara quickly hangs up the phone. She rises and goes to the kitchen.

CEDRIC

What you doin' home so early?

She doesn't answer. He follows her.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Barbara enters, distraught. She pours herself ginger ale, then returns the bottle to the sparkling new refrigerator. Cedric enters. Barbara turns to him, ashen.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARBARA
Cedric, I failed you.

CEDRIC
What you sayin'?

BARBARA
I'm sayin' I let you down. We got bad trouble. I fell behind. Way behind. We're being evicted. You'll have to pack up your things.

Cedric stares at her; she can't meet his eyes.

CEDRIC
How much?

BARBARA
\$2,790...

CEDRIC
Lord. How?!

Barbara stands, lost. Cedric struggles to keep his voice quiet and controlled.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)
This really is the sin of pride. Too proud to tell you got a problem. Why didn't you tell anyone? Maybe I coulda helped. Got a job or somethin'. And here I'm going to summer programs instead of working.

BARBARA
What was I goin' to tell you? Don't go to MIT? Get a job down at McDonald's?

CEDRIC
How much time do we have?

The truth is unbearable for Barbara. Finally:

BARBARA
They're coming now.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE

FADE IN:

INT. CEDRIC'S BEDROOM - DAY

Cedric sits on the bed. He hasn't packed a thing. He hears a KNOCK at the DOOR.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Barbara cracks the front door. A fat, bald man stands in the doorway in a short-sleeved shirt and tie. He wears a gun on his hip. STEVE TURNER.

STEVE
Barbara Jennings?

She nods.

STEVE (CONT'D)
I'm Steve Turner from the U.S.
Marshall's Service.
(holds out gold badge
in a leather case)
I'm here to evict you from these
premises. You understand how this
works?

Barbara nods, opens the door as Steve leads in a procession of EIGHT POORLY DRESSED BLACK MEN and a HEAVY WOMAN Barbara's age in a "I Love Coffee" T-shirt. None glance Barbara's way. As Barbara watches, they start laying dirty hands on everything she owns.

COFFEE WOMAN
Let's get it out!

Two grimy men lift Barbara's best white couch. Barbara watches the men carry out chairs, pictures, a clock. She approaches the CREW LEADER, an older black man with a more sympathetic face.

BARBARA
Excuse me, sir. If you could go a
little slower. Give me more time.
The minister from my church might be
coming to pay everything off.

The Crew Leader doesn't believe it for a second, but he looks at his watch.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CREW LEADER

Okay, I'll try and slow it down a little. But you haven't got much time.

One of the Movers reenters and wants the chair Barbara is sitting on. Cedric watches from his doorway, as if guarding his bedroom.

CREW LEADER (CONT'D)

She says some minister may be coming with some money.

The Coffee Woman rolls her eyes. Another Mover tries to get past Cedric to his room. Cedric blocks the doorway with his 6'1" frame.

CEDRIC

You're not comin' in here.

MOVER

(shrugs)

We'll be in there eventually.

Barbara walks out on the patio, looks to the sidewalk below.

BARBARA'S POV - SIDEWALK

The contents are piling up and a crowd is gathering, getting ready to feast on their neighbor's misfortune. They check out the TV. A WOMAN picks up a lamp, like it's a yard sale.

WOMAN

Is there a match to this?

Steve comes out and addresses the crowd with his hand on his gun.

STEVE

No one touch anything until the eviction is complete.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Barbara wanders back inside. The Crew Leader approaches.

CREW LEADER

Can I borrow your phone? I have to call the main office for our next address.

Barbara nods. Steve reenters. She realizes he's no longer guarding their things.

INT. CEDRIC'S BEDROOM - DAY

Cedric still sits on the bed with his head in hands. Barbara enters.

BARBARA

Cedric, you have to come outside and help guard our stuff.

Cedric follows her out.

EXT. APARTMENT - DAY

People are starting to aggressively move on the possessions. A WOMAN grabs a coffee table. A MAN goes for the boom box. Cedric comes out with Barbara.

CEDRIC

Hey, put that down!

The Man drops the boom box. It breaks and he backs off. Cedric picks up the pieces. The pain is visible. Feeling guilty, the Woman puts down the coffee table. But the crowd doesn't disperse. They're waiting for the inevitable. Barbara stares at the chaos. Cedric puts an arm around her shoulder.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

(not believing it for a second)

It's all right.

BARBARA

No, it'll never be all right again. This is my fault. All my fault.

Cedric is shaken by his mother's despair. She's always been the rock. Then a HORN HONKS and a murmur goes through the crowd. A gold Town Car slaloms past the moving trucks to park in front of the apartment house lawn. The door opens and Bishop Long steps out.

BISHOP LONG

All right, y'all. Put that stuff down!

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Three men are trying to lift a faux mahogany wall unit when Bishop Long walks in. He wears a plaid suit with a "I am a Positive Thinker" pin on his lapel.

BISHOP LONG

(booming)

I got the money right here!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He thrusts forward a cashier's check for \$2,790.00. Barbara can't believe her eyes. Cedric is still too humiliated to feel anything more than simple relief.

BARBARA
(low, to Bishop Long)
Thank you, thank you.

Steve takes the check, studies it.

STEVE
Okay. Looks fine to me.

BISHOP LONG
I'll pay the work crew \$80 if they
move the stuff back in.

Steve goes out to organize it, and Barbara crosses to Bishop Long. She's still shell-shocked and deeply ashamed. He pats her hand.

BISHOP LONG (CONT'D)
You'll pay me back a little bit at a
time.

She nods a mute thanks. So does Cedric. Then he follows the workers out to start carrying things inside.

EXT. APARTMENT - DAY

The migration of the furniture begins. The crowd groans in disappointment. Cedric grabs a lamp. Barbara comes up beside him.

BARBARA
Cedric, you okay?

He nods.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
Don't you understand, baby? You don't
belong here anymore.

Cedric pauses, puts down the lamp, and wraps his arms around his mother. He does understand.

INT. CHEMISTRY CLASSROOM - DAY

Mr. Taylor is wiping down the blackboard in a free period between classes. Cedric sits at a desk surrounded by college brochures. He opens the one that says YALE. Tosses it. Picks up another for a small college.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MR. TAYLOR

Mr. Momen can give you some books to study so you can retake the SATs.

CEDRIC

Mr. Momen told me to 'shoot low'.

MR. TAYLOR

He didn't mean anything by that. Probably just that you should cast your net wider. Look at other schools. Like Emory. Howard University. Florida A&M.

Cedric picks up a brochure for Florida A&M.

CEDRIC

This is where James wants to go.

MR. TAYLOR

Good school. And I got another one. Have you thought about Brown?

CEDRIC

(dismissive)

Brown's Ivy League.

MR. TAYLOR

Yeah, but it's different. It's more... I don't know, liberal. They got a lot of minorities there. It's one of the best schools in the country. Right up there with Yale and Princeton and the rest of 'em.

Taylor brings over Barron's College guide and opens it to Brown.

MR. TAYLOR (CONT'D)

It's in Providence, Rhode Island. Just about an hour south of Boston. The math and science departments are strong. But the curriculum is loose. You can take courses pass-fail. Go at your own speed.

CEDRIC

(reads, discouraged)

Average SAT 1,290.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MR. TAYLOR

There's always the exception to the rule. And Brown is more accepting of different types of people. They want diversity.

CEDRIC

They want rich black kids from good schools.

Taylor frowns. He's tired of Cedric's attitude.

MR. TAYLOR

Won't get anywhere thinkin' like that. So what if you apply to Brown and don't get in? Something terrible gonna happen? You get a letter. Big deal. 'Dear Cedric, we regret to inform you...' So what? Who cares? But if you don't try, man, you will never know, for the rest of your life, what might have been.

Mr. Taylor walks out. Cedric is stunned. This guy never gets angry. Cedric seems to reconsider. He takes the Barron's College book and looks up Brown.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JENNINGS APARTMENT HALLWAY - DAY

Cedric, just home from school, picks up the mail. There are several applications from colleges. He sifts the one from Brown to the top.

INT. CEDRIC'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Cedric sits with the Brown application. He wears gym shorts and a T-shirt. At his elbow is dinner, a cup of Oodles of Noodles. He puts on some MUSIC as he starts to work, Patti LaBelle singing "Come What May". The MUSIC CONTINUES:

DISSOLVE TO:

LATER

Cedric's made progress on the Brown application. Several pages are already filled in with awards and extra-curricular activities. Now he's working on the personal essay page.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC (V.O.)

Being a black male in a single-parent home is sometimes tough without that male figure to help in the growing process. But I have been blessed with a wonderful mother. It's because of her that my life has taken a different path than many of my friends.

Cedric pauses. He hears the FRONT DOOR CLOSE.

BARBARA (O.S.)

Cedric, I'm home.

CEDRIC

In here, Mom. I'm workin'.

Barbara walks in and kisses him. He barely looks up as he writes.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

There are many situations that could have been my downfall. I could have dropped out of school or gotten into all kinds of trouble. But my mother always taught me there is greater work for me to do.

BARBARA

You want anything to eat, honey?

CEDRIC

No, Mom, I'm fine.

Barbara takes the Oodles of Noodles container and goes out. We MOVE IN ON the essay, SEEING bits of Cedric's words as his hand flies across the page.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

I even see some of my peers that have a mother and a father, but are headed in the wrong direction.

INT. PHOTO MACHINE - DAY

Cedric buttons his shirt, slicks back his hair, and feeds in a dollar. He tries to look respectable and sober as the pictures flash.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC (V.O.)

Some of them are into drug dealing and others try to be 'cool' by not doing good in school and not going to classes. But my mother has instilled so many positive values in me, it would be hard to even try to get on the wrong track.

INT. APARTMENT - DINING AREA - DAY

Barbara makes out a check for Brown University for \$50.00.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

I know that I am what is called a 'long shot' for getting into Brown. And I guess you think if you let me in, you'd be taking a big chance. That's not true. Because I will succeed at Brown or wherever I end up. I know this because of the most important lesson my mother ever taught me. She taught me to believe in myself.

Cedric paperclips the check to his application and puts it in the envelope with a picture from the photo booth. He looks at his mother.

BARBARA

If it's meant to be, it will be.

MUSIC ENDS.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SPIRITUAL CATHEDRAL - NIGHT (SEVERAL MONTHS LATER)

Snow falls. Christmas decorations cover the church.

INT. SPIRITUAL CATHEDRAL - NIGHT

The choir is singing "Silent Night", Cedric among them. Barbara watches from her usual spot in the congregation. There's a pretty girl next to Cedric, CELIA. She has makeup on and sparkley jewelry. Her hair is filled with braids. She smiles at Cedric. He locks onto her eyes and they hold the contact as they sing.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. STREETS - NIGHT

Cedric and Barbara walk home from church in the wintry air. Christmas lights and decorations fill store windows.

BARBARA

Sister Sharp told me tonight that you were very mannerly. 'I don't know what he does at home,' she said to me, 'but he has very good manners. You done a good job.' And what I told her, Cedric, is when a child knows right from wrong, you don't have to worry about him.

CEDRIC

I'm not a child. I'm a man now, Mama.

BARBARA

Oh, you think so?

CEDRIC

I'm eighteen years old. That's a man.

BARBARA

What did I tell you a man was?

CEDRIC

What?

BARBARA

A man takes care of himself physically, financially and spiritually. And I mean totally. Nobody else helping.

CEDRIC

I take care.

BARBARA

Not financially you don't. Not yet. You will someday.

They walk in silence a moment. She feels the need to soften her words with praise, so she adds:

BARBARA (CONT'D)

And you'll be a fine man, Cedric. Find yourself a fine woman, too.

CEDRIC

(after a moment)

Mama, how do you know what love is?

She looks over, surprised at the turn in the conversation.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARBARA

You know because you can be yourself
with that person.

CEDRIC

But how would you know it's not just
lust?

BARBARA

'Cause if it's love, you don't want to
sleep with the person. You
understand, it's too precious a thing
for that. You need to know who you
are and you need to know who they are.
And that's enough. Really knowing
another person of the other sex can be
very exciting.

CEDRIC

Have you ever been in love?

Barbara stops. He's really thrown her a curve ball.

FLASH CUT:

OF BARBARA, young and carefree, sitting in Cedric Gilliam's
convertible. He looks at her, so handsome, and flashes a
beautiful smile.

BACK TO BARBARA

BARBARA

(soft)

I thought I was, once.

She starts walking again. Cedric follows.

CEDRIC

I'm never gonna fall in love.

They go up the steps to their apartment.

BARBARA

What you saying, fool?

CEDRIC

Maybe I'll just adopt some kids.

They go in.

INT. LOBBY - JENNINGS APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Barbara opens the mailbox with her thumbnail key and pulls out a fistful of envelopes.

BARBARA

All right then, how you gonna take care of kids while you work? Think of that.

CEDRIC

I don't know. Hire a nanny.

BARBARA

No, you'll send them to me!

They laugh as she sorts the mail. Suddenly, she stops, holds up a creamy-white envelope. Cedric's eyes lock onto it. They know what it is. She smiles.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

I'm not giving it to you. I'm just going to throw it away.

CEDRIC

Hey, come on. I'm not playing. Give it to me.

Cedric lunges around her and gets the precious envelope. He takes it in his hands.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

It's thick. I think that means I got in.

He neatly tears it open and unfolds a multicolored packet with a white letter on top.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

(reads)

'I hope you are as pleased to get this letter as I am to send it to you. You have been admitted to the 232nd class to enter the College of Brown University.'

Cedric's face is calm and dreamy, as if he's just witnessed a miracle.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

I got a full ride. Twenty-thousand-dollar scholarship.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARBARA

Lord in heaven, that's about what your mother makes a year.

Cedric heads upstairs, Barbara follows.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

The mood remains curiously quiet as they enter.

CEDRIC

God, I'm glad that's over with.

Barbara goes into the kitchen as Cedric slumps on the sofa to read the letter again.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Barbara pours them ginger ale. In a moment, she feels a peck on her cheek. Cedric has come up behind her.

BARBARA

Whatcha doing?

CEDRIC

Ma... ummmm... thanks.

She gently cups his cheek in the palm of her hand, knowing there's nothing she needs to say.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

You know, I'm kind of tired. I think I'll turn in.

BARBARA

Yeah, me too.

He goes to his room and we HOLD ON Barbara. All her work has come to this quiet, simple moment.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT FIVE

ACT SIX

FADE IN:

INT. BALLOU HALLWAY OUTSIDE THE GYM - DAY

CLOSE ON A LIST OF NAMES under "CLASS OF '95 COLLEGE ACCEPTANCES."

We SEE 64 names and next to them the colleges. Most names are followed by the words University of the District of Columbia, the local school that takes all comers. A few say Howard University or Lincoln University. A small number have asterisks after them. Only one name on the list is followed by multiple colleges, each with an asterisk:

Cedric Jennings. Brown*, Howard University*, George Washington University*, Brigham Young University*, and Florida A&M*.

WIDEN TO SEE Cedric looking at the list with Trevor. Inside the gym beyond them, James is shooting hoops.

TREVOR

What does the asterisk mean?

CEDRIC

It means scholarship money.

TREVOR

Look, James got into Florida A&M.

Cedric checks. There's no asterisk.

CEDRIC

Yeah, but he needed a scholarship.

They look into the gym and watch James shooting one foul shot after another, each shot all net. But James seems to take no pleasure in it. His face is expressionless.

INT. BALLOU HALLWAYS - DAY

Cedric gets his books from his locker. Phillip comes by with Janeece.

JANEECE

Brown University. You can't hang there, Cedric. You probably won't last a year. Definitely won't last two. No way.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PHILLIP

You should stick to your own. You're betrayin' your people, leaving them all behind. You'll never be accepted by whites. You're just being used by the white power structure to make them feel good, like they're doing their part and giving a few select Africans a chance.

Cedric tries to go by, but Phillip blocks his path.

CEDRIC

(firm)

Excuse me. I have to get to class.

Cedric simply walks past Phillip. Phillip is paralyzed, and Janece glances at him with disdain for the first time.

INT. ADVANCED PHYSICS - DAY

The kids are doing work sheets. Cedric uses an advanced Texas Instruments T-18 calculator. Phillip takes the seat behind him. Mr. Momen steps out of the room. Phillip makes his move, snatches Cedric's calculator.

CEDRIC

Phillip, I need my calculator.

PHILLIP

You're so smart, figure it out yourself.

CEDRIC

(with a new power and assurance)

Give me my calculator.

Cedric rises and faces Phillip.

PHILLIP

Who do you think you're talkin' to, white boy?

CEDRIC

I'm talkin' to someone who's gonna be flippin' burgers for the rest of his life.

Phillip lunges at Cedric. Cedric catches Phillip's hand. Trevor, emboldened to help, jumps up and comes to Cedric's defense.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TREVOR
Leave him alone, Phillip.

CEDRIC
It's all right, Trevor. He can't hurt
anymore.

Cedric grabs his calculator from Phillip and sits. Phillip
still stands, stunned. Mr. Momen reenters.

MR. MOMEN
Sit down, Phillip.

Nothing.

MR. MOMEN (CONT'D)
You heard me!

Phillip turns and walks out of the class.

EXT. SCHOOL YARD - LATE AFTERNOON

Cedric comes out as the sun is going down, ready to take the
familiar walk home. Head is at his usual spot in the parking
lot by his Lexus, doing business. But today he has a new
girlfriend with him, Janeece.

Cedric cuts through the parking lot and passes the basketball
courts. James sits on a bench. Cedric pauses, enters the
wire gate to the court. James looks up.

JAMES
Hey, Cedric.

CEDRIC
Hey, James.

JAMES
Congratulations, man. I told you.

CEDRIC
Whatever. Thanks.

Cedric doesn't know what to say. Both know James isn't going
and there's nothing anyone can do. To avoid any further
discussion, James goes back to his game.

Cedric drops his backpack and steps onto the basketball
court. James is surprised. Cedric holds up his hands for
the ball and James passes it to him. Cedric looks at the
hoop and fires. His touch is surprisingly expert.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The ball swishes through. James goes after the ball and the boys start to play in the falling afternoon light.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BALLOU HIGH SCHOOL - ESTABLISHING - DAY

Leaves on the trees now. It's a beautiful day, late in the school year.

INT. ENGLISH CLASS - DAY

Cedric is going over his graduation speech with his English teacher, Joanne Nelson. She finishes reading Cedric's paper.

JOANNE NELSON

It's a little rough. But it should work.

She opens an English textbook, spins it and slides it to him.

JOANNE NELSON (CONT'D)

Remember this Langston Hughes poem we read in class? Called 'Dreams'?

CEDRIC

(reads)

'Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken winged bird...'

(looks up)

I guess every person has a dream to walk across that stage at graduation.

JOANNE NELSON

I think you'd feel good saying something like that. It's fine to say what you feel, Cedric, up to a point. Make sure you think about what other kids feel, too.

CEDRIC

I know, Ms. Nelson. I will.

INT. BALLOU HALLWAYS - LATE AFTERNOON

Cedric walks along the familiar graffiti-strewn walls, knowing it's one of the last times he'll be doing this. His fingers trail over the broken lockers. The door is open to the Chemistry room up ahead.

INT. CHEMISTRY CLASSROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

Cedric pauses in the doorway. Mr. Taylor is neatly lining up just-washed beakers, storing everything for the summer.

CEDRIC
Hi, Mr. Taylor.

MR. TAYLOR
(grins)
How's the speech coming?

CEDRIC
It's almost done. Thank God.

Cedric eases into his favorite desk by the window with the familiar names etched in the top.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)
I hear they got some good honor students coming up next year.

MR. TAYLOR
Mostly girls. One sophomore boy looks promising.
(beat)
But there's no one like you.

Mr. Taylor ducks his head, not wanting to get sentimental. But Cedric is touched. Mr. Taylor covers by changing the subject.

MR. TAYLOR (CONT'D)
Hey, did I tell you what happened at the Boston Marathon in April?

CEDRIC
No! Not a story about another race! Got a Bible quote for me, too?

Taylor holds up his finger, comes over and gets into it.

MR. TAYLOR
Listen to what happened. You know that a marathon is 26 miles. And there's a place in this one called Heartbreak Hill. By the time I got there, I felt like my heart was gonna burst. I looked over and this woman was running alongside me. She was white. Older woman. We started to talk. She told me she was a judge in Boston. She was tired, that judge.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MR. TAYLOR (CONT'D)

She pointed out a coffee shop and said she was ready to call it quits, go in there and get herself a cool drink. So I told her, 'I'm feelin' that way, too, sometimes you feel so tired you can't go on, but that's when you got to reach for deeper inspiration!'

CEDRIC

(calls out like in church)

You tell it, Mr. Taylor!

MR. TAYLOR

And then, Cedric, I began to sing to her right there as we ran!

Cedric's jaw drops in surprise and encouragement. Mr. Taylor throws back his head and sings out:

MR. TAYLOR (CONT'D)

'When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrow, like sea billows, roll.
Whatever my lot thou hath taught me to
say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.
It is well, it is well with my soul.'

As Taylor begins to repeat the verse, Cedric wordlessly gets up and moves to the blackboard, all reflex. He begins scribbling sine and cosine, Xs and parentheses. The scribbles are part of a calculus proof.

MR. TAYLOR

The integrating of two whole numbers,
I see! You still got it. Look at
that boy go!

CEDRIC

I wish all integration was this easy.
We'd all be better off.

Taylor laughs and starts singing even louder. Chalk is flying, white chips falling at Cedric's feet as his hand moves in furious arcs, the dark green board filling with arithmetic Sanskrit as it turns olive in the early evening sun.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BALLOU HIGH SCHOOL - ESTABLISHING - DAY

The lot is packed with cars. A banner reads: "CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF '95!" A few black parents are still going in.

INT. BALLOU AUDITORIUM - DAY

1,000 people fan themselves with their programs. The auditorium is packed and sweltering, the crowd raucous. Women, mostly, some casually dressed in jeans and others more formal. Many have come straight from work and wear uniforms: nurse, toll guard, cop. The school band is finishing "Pomp and Circumstance" as the last of the seniors files in. We SEE Phillip, Janeece and Trevor. Trevor does a little tap to "Pomp and Circumstance", waves to his family.

Cedric is near the front, looking tall and thin in his royal-blue silky gown with a gold "Ballou Class of '95" sash. Barbara sits with her friend Louise and a few family members, including Cedric's paternal GRANDMOTHER.

BARBARA

There! See him? God, don't he look good?

Before the last stanza of "Pomp and Circumstance" is over, people are SCREAMING. "We all love you, Tanisha!" "We all with you, Natasha!" "Go, Jamal!" "Pernell!" There are whoops and yells all around. Clearly, there will be none of the usual decorum of suburban graduation ceremonies here. Principal Washington steps forward to admonish the crowd.

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON

Our young people have prepared speeches! If you are quiet, we can continue!

The roar doesn't subside. A svelte, well-dressed woman BOARD MEMBER takes another mike.

BOARD MEMBER

Can you quiet down just a little bit! This is an important day in these students' lives! Maybe if you're quiet, it won't be as hot!

An OBESE WOMAN behind Barbara offers the crowd's reply.

OBESE WOMAN

Oh puleeze! A skinny lady like that talkin' about HOT!

This gets a laugh. Finally, with no point in waiting any longer, Principal Washington proceeds.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PRINCIPAL WASHINGTON

Ladies and gentlemen, our salutorian,
Cedric Jennings.

Barbara is unspeakably happy to be the mother of this boy. Cedric takes the podium, flips his tassel to the far side of his mortar board, rustles the pages of typed notes, and finally clears his throat. From the audience, someone sings out the mocking version of his name that means "nerd".

CLASSMATE

Ceeeedric! Yo, Ceeeedric...

Cedric stops a moment and the WORDS ECHO. There is an uncomfortable murmur in the crowd. Cedric stands taller. He looks down and, quiet but steady, reads from his text.

CEDRIC

Thank you, Principal Washington. I'd first like to start by thanking God for giving me the strength and courage to be where I am today. I would also like to thank the many people who have had a positive impact on my life, especially my mother.

Barbara smiles and Louise pats her hand: but the DIN in the audience rises as murmuring begins. People are flipping their programs and wondering how many speeches there will be. Cedric pushes forward gamely, making his voice louder.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

When I was asked to deliver the salutatory address, I was worried because it seemed an awesome responsibility. Many of us who are going on to college, to work, or to the military feel fear as we face our future. But if we, the class of 1995, are to brave a new day, we must become self-sufficient and determined in rising to the challenges of the 21st century.

A MAN near the stage turns to his daughter and says loudly so everyone can hear:

MAN

Blah blah blah.

Several people laugh. Cedric tries to maintain his composure, but the audience is slipping away. He keeps reading, his hands sweating.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

CEDRIC

In our high school years, we have learned great lessons that will serve us well in the future. Most importantly, we have learned to hold tight to our dreams. In class we read a poem by Langston Hughes that begins, 'Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die life is a broken winged bird...'

Cedric feels his throat tighten and he stops. The speech is already a failure. Cedric looks up at the sea of faces frowning back at him. The silence is agonizing. Barbara is so anxious for Cedric, she almost rises from her seat. Finally, Cedric puts down his prepared text.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Hold fast to dreams. That's a hard thing to do sometimes. You have to fight off the Dreambusters. That's right. Their favorite lines are, 'You cannot' or 'You will not'. Many of us have been called crazy or laughed at for our dreams! They tell us not to shoot too high. They tell us we haven't got what it takes to make it in their world.

In the audience, he can see Phillip listening. Mr. Momen stands in back, stiff with anger. Cedric grabs the edge of the podium.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

(louder)

But the enemy isn't always outside. Sometimes it's one of us. When one of my peers found out I was going to Brown, she told me I wouldn't last two years! She said that because she was jealous. She was afraid of being left behind. She wished that I was staying here with her. But I have a different wish. I wish every one of us was going to college so we could dream bigger dreams. The obstacles never stop coming. All of us have to fight every day of our lives. Because the odds are stacked against us.

The audience starts paying attention. Someone calls out "Amen! You got that right!" Cedric's voice gets even stronger now.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

If we are ever gonna win those fights,
we have to help each other, not hold
each other back.

(voice rising, echoing
Bishop Long)

What we are up against in this world,
the burden seems too heavy sometimes!
Sometimes we feel so tired, we feel
like we can't go on, but that's when
we've got to turn to each other for
help. We have to reach inside
ourselves for deeper inspiration! We
have to keep our goal in sight. Many
times we may want to quit! But we
must remember the words of
Ecclesiastes. 'The race goes not to
the swift nor to the strong, but to he
who endurest to the end!'

People shout out encouragement. Suddenly, the auditorium is
being turned into a tent revival! In back, Mr. Taylor's eyes
shine.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

All of us, no matter what our goals,
are up against the same thing! Alone,
we will be beaten. But there's
nothing we can't handle together! Our
refuge is with each other! Yes. Our
refuge is with each other, and our
refuge is with God! No one should be
left behind. Together, we will
survive and with God's help we will do
more. We will live out our dreams!

The crowd erupts. It's a total turnaround. The sound is
thunderous. Barbara jumps up, screaming:

BARBARA
THAT'S MY SON!

The mothers, powerful church women, cry out from all corners.
Barbara Jennings is beside herself with joy.

And Cedric is at the center of it all. His job is done.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT SIX

ACT SEVEN

FADE IN:

INT. LORTON CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION - DAY

A bull-necked Latino GUARD spins a sign-in book on a Formica counter. Without taking his eyes off the sports page, he says to Cedric:

GUARD

Sign.

Cedric writes his name.

ANOTHER ROOM - SAME

Cedric gets a pat down and a frisk, then goes through BUZZING steel doors.

INT. WAITING ROOM - LORTON CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION - DAY

A WOMAN approaches Cedric, who sits on a hard metal chair. She leans down:

WOMAN

All the rooms are full. Come this way.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

She leads Cedric inside and departs. He wanders around the nearly abandoned office, unwilling or unable to sit. He does a few jumping jacks to loosen up. Like he's preparing to face an opponent. There's a KNOCK and he turns. A black GUARD as wide as a Buick pokes his head in.

GUARD

Listen, you got twenty minutes with him.

He steps back and Cedric Gilliam slides into the room in his prison blues. The door closes and now it's just the two of them.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

(ducks his head)

Well, well, Cedric.

Cedric Gilliam angles across the room towards a small couch, avoiding a hug.

CEDRIC GILLIAM (CONT'D)

It's a surprise you comin'.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC GILLIAM (CONT'D)

I didn't expect it, but you know, it's real good to see you. What's it been? Almost two years?

CEDRIC

I guess.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

(sits)

What brings you here?

CEDRIC

Wanted to see you one last time. Before I go to school. Clear up a few things.

Cedric pulls up a metal chair.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

So, Brown University. You know when you're leavin' yet?

CEDRIC

End of the summer. Real soon.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

How you think you'll do up there? Good, I bet.

CEDRIC

I think I might do all right.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

They got that grade inflation? I read about that somewhere.

CEDRIC

Haven't really thought about it. For my sake, I certainly hope so.

Cedric Gilliam laughs. Cedric studies his father. He's grayer and missing a few teeth. He seems heavier and more vulnerable. Cedric Gilliam struggles to find advice to give his son.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Make sure you take that English training. You can use that in anything.

Cedric nods. Silence for a bit, then:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

CEDRIC

There's something I was wondering.
Something I been wanting to ask you.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Go on.

CEDRIC

Did you love my mother, or was it just
a sex thing?

Cedric Gilliam freezes. This is not the question he
expected. Now he shifts on the sofa and avoids Cedric's eyes.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Huh? What kinda question is that?

CEDRIC

Something I figure I deserve to know.
Did you? Did you love her?

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Well, I'm not much for talkin'
about... for sayin' that sort of
thing, using that word and all.

CEDRIC

(leans forward)

You mean love. The word love.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

That's right. I'm just not the kind
of man who can say those things.

CEDRIC

(beat, then)

Trouble saying it to me, too. I
suppose the key to being able to say
it is being able to feel it.

His father says nothing.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Just a sex thing then. I guess I got
my answer.

Cedric Gilliam is unable to find a place for his eyes. He
gazes up at the cork ceiling. And Cedric looks at this
aging, shrunken man and feels something new for him. Pity.
The balance of power between them has forever shifted.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

CEDRIC GILLIAM

They found me a spot in a real good drug treatment program. When I get out, I'll call and all. If that's okay. I mean, I'd like to. We can get together.

CEDRIC

(rises)

That'll be fine. When I'm home from college maybe.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Yeah.

He stands and faces his son. Cedric is taller than his father now.

CEDRIC

Yeah, well.

(beat)

See you... whenever.

CEDRIC GILLIAM

Thanks for stoppin' by.

Still no physical contact. Not even a handshake. Cedric goes to the door, turns back for a final look, and walks out his own man.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HOMESTYLE RESTAURANT - DAY

It's a hot, late-summer day.

INT. HOMESTYLE RESTAURANT - DAY

Cedric sits across from Trevor.

TREVOR

So I'm gonna take two classes at UDC, you know, and start working. I got a job in the mailroom at a newsletter company. I could use the money.

CEDRIC

Sounds good.

TREVOR

James, you know. He's working there, too.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TREVOR (CONT'D)

I think he's pretty unhappy about it. He wanted so much more. You hear about Marvin?

CEDRIC

Just that he's gonna go to vocational school.

TREVOR

(shakes his head)

He was at his night job at McDonald's with two other guys. All three were killed in a robbery. He's dead, Cedric. I can't believe you didn't hear.

Cedric is speechless. It's so hopeless.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

When you goin' to Brown?

CEDRIC

Next week. I'm headed out next week. Little nervous about it, you know. Now it comes to it. Wasn't all that easy at MIT.

TREVOR

And most of these kids will be white. Should be even tougher, I bet. You think you can hack it?

CEDRIC

(after a moment)

At least I got the chance.

Someone slides a burger and fries in front of Trevor. Cedric looks up. It's Phillip.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

(quiet)

How you doin', Phillip?

Without giving an answer, Phillip goes back to the kitchen.

ON CEDRIC, saddened for his old nemesis.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. JENNINGS APARTMENT - MORNING

It's a beautiful sunny morning. A rental van sits at the curb, packed to the gills.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Barbara fusses, calls out.

BARBARA

Cedric! We have to go. You hear?

No response. She heads to his bedroom.

INT. CEDRIC'S BEDROOM - DAY

It's unrecognizable. Instead of the usual tornado of clothes and books, there are neatly packed bags and empty shelves. Cedric comes up from under the bed as his mother enters.

CEDRIC

I can't find my graphing calculator.
Can't go without it.

BARBARA

I'll find it and mail it. Come on.
We got a lot of driving to do.

The PHONE RINGS. Cedric grabs it.

CEDRIC

Yeah?

JENICA (V.O.)

Cedric? It's Jenica. From MIT.

Barbara puts her hands on her hips. Cedric shakes his head, covers the phone.

CEDRIC

Just a minute, Mama.

Barbara raises her arms in frustration, goes out.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Yo, Jenica. Good to hear your voice.

INT. JENICA'S ROOM - DAY

A pretty, well-furnished young girls' room in an upscale suburban house, in stark contrast to Cedric's surroundings. Jenica sits cross-legged on a canopy bed.

JENICA

Gettin' ready to go to school?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC (V.O.)
I'm goin' right now.

INTERCUT.

JENICA
I just wanted to find out, you know,
where you ended up. So we could keep
in touch.

CEDRIC
Brown.

JENICA
(pauses)
Brown. You're kidding.

CEDRIC
Don't act so surprised.

JENICA
All I mean is that's great, Cedric!
There's where I'm going too!

Cedric is momentarily speechless.

CEDRIC
What happened with Stanford and
everything?

JENICA
Family stuff. I need to stay closer
to home.

CEDRIC
So... we'll be seeing each other.

JENICA
Yeah. I'll find you once you're
settled in. Have a good trip, okay?
See you there.

Cedric hangs up as his mother reenters.

BARBARA
Cedric... you takin' that TV?

Cedric picks up his small Sony Trinitron.

CEDRIC
You kiddin'? This is my best girl.
This was my social life, my date every
Friday night, so she's comin' with me.

EXT. APARTMENT - DAY

Barbara and Cedric get into the van. Trevor's at the curb.

TREVOR

You do good. Hold up the reputation,
you know, of the neighborhood.

CEDRIC

I will.

They exchange their old handshake. Then without any sentimentality or further drama, Cedric and Barbara drive off.

Trevor waves until they're gone. He shoves his hands in his pockets, walks down the familiar streets to what will probably always be his home.

INT. VAN - DAY

The Washington Monument recedes behind them. Barbara is feeling much but saying little.

CEDRIC

When am I coming back?

BARBARA

You're coming for Thanksgiving break. Bishop Long said he'd send the money for the trip. Either way, I'm coming for Parent's Weekend in October.

CEDRIC

That's good.

They drive on without speaking. Both are tense at the parting they know is coming, both full of their own thoughts, hopes and fears. But both want this trip to be joyful. Cedric roots in his bag of cassette tapes, puts in the Mississippi Mass Choir backing up LaShun Pace. We HEAR her belt out "Shelter From the Storm".

The MUSIC rocks the van. Cedric and Barbara begin to feel easier. They put the windows down. Barbara TURNS UP the SOUND and then mother and son start to lustily sing along.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BROWN UNIVERSITY - DAY

The promised land. Brown sits atop the steep slope of College Hill like a cloud city above the gritty ethnic enclaves and aging factories of Providence.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The van bearing Cedric and Barbara parks alongside a beautiful old campus. The ivied brick buildings are grouped in quads. Interspersed are Greek revival buildings bearing dates from the 19th century.

On the curb, families unload possessions. Young people with Brown T-shirts assist the new students in moving their belongings. Cedric gets out, followed by Barbara. Both pause.

BARBARA

Let's get it done, baby, I still gotta drive all the way home.

EXT. ANDREWS HALL - DAY

Cedric's dorm is a three-story horseshoe brick building on a quieter side of campus. As they unload the van, Barbara glances at the parents, mostly white, unloading Lexuses, Volvo wagons, and Range Rovers.

BARBARA

A lot nicer than MIT, ain't it?

CEDRIC

Lot nicer. This place is nothing like MIT.

Cedric notices one beat-up wagon with a bumper sticker: "Your Honor Student Was Beaten Up By My Kid." He points it out to his mother.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Must be from D.C.

INT. ANDREWS HALL - DAY

Cedric and Barbara haul in a trunk. Cedric checks his orientation packet, then finds the right door.

CEDRIC

This is it.

Taped to the door is a small paper that says "Cedric Jennings and Robert Burton". Cedric fumbles with the key.

INT. DORM ROOM - DAY

They enter. The room is empty, but Rob has already been there, settled in and gone.

CEDRIC

Wow.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARBARA
HMMMM. Very nice.

Barbara looks out the window at the quad.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
You gotta nice view and all.

CEDRIC
I'll go get more stuff.

Cedric leaves and Barbara gets out linens, begins making her son's bed.

EXT. BROWN UNIVERSITY - LATE AFTERNOON

Barbara and Cedric walk across campus. He is buoyant and bouncing. She is self-conscious, knowing that she looks nothing like the mostly college-educated, mostly white parents.

A tall, thin Caucasian GIRL with a row of earrings and a shaved head strolls by.

BARBARA
(murmurs)
Isn't that awful. Must be chemotherapy.

Cedric nods sympathetically.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BROWN DINING HALL - LATE AFTERNOON

Barbara sits quietly watching Cedric demolish a ham sandwich. Finally:

BARBARA
Ummm-mmm. Whole 'nother world up here.

Cedric reaches for her untouched sandwich. In his excitement, he barely notices her anxiety.

INT. ANDREWS HALL - LATE AFTERNOON

Barbara and Cedric return to his room. The door is open. Cedric looks in. A white boy with dark hair and a faint goatee is arranging his CDs. He's a vision of shaggy prep in his torn khaki shorts, faded Marblehead Yacht Club T-shirt, and sandals. This is ROB. Cedric smiles broadly.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC
You must be Rob.

ROB
(New England accent)
You must be Cedric.

CEDRIC
This is my mom.

Barbara nods a shy hello.

BARBARA
Where you from, Rob?

ROB
Marblehead.

BARBARA
Where's that at?

Rob tries to hide his shock at their ignorance.

ROB
It's... it's in Massachusetts, about
an hour and a half from here.

BARBARA
Oh, I see. Your folks still around?

ROB
My mom dropped me off this morning.
My dad's on the Cape, birding.

CEDRIC
(beat)
'Birding?'

ROB
You know, bird watching.

Silence. This won't be simple, that's for sure. Cedric
notes the CD in Rob's hand.

CEDRIC
What music you got there?

ROB
Smashing Pumpkins.

CEDRIC
What they sing, Halloween songs?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ROB

You mean you never heard of Smashing Pumpkins?

Watching this exchange, Barbara's heart constricts. A whole new challenge is beginning for her son, and she won't be here to face it with him. Cedric turns to her.

CEDRIC

So Mom, it's late, huh?

BARBARA

Yeah. I guess I gotta go. I got a long drive home. Goodbye, Rob.

ROB

Goodbye, Mrs. Jennings. Nice meeting you.

They leave.

INT. ELEVATOR - ANDREWS DORM - LATE AFTERNOON

Cedric and Barbara ride down in silence, then:

CEDRIC

'Birding.'

BARBARA

(smiles)

Maybe you gonna miss me after all.

CEDRIC

You be okay?

BARBARA

Me? You know me. I'll be fine.

They fall silent. MOVE IN ON Barbara, going back in time.

FLASH CUT:

Young Barbara holds a small baby boy in a dark, dank room. She cradles tiny Cedric in her arms and whispers:

YOUNG BARBARA

I'll save you, baby. I will always, always be there to take care of you.

BACK TO THE ELEVATOR

as the BELL DINGS. The doors open and Cedric waits for Barbara to get off. She doesn't move.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC

Mom.

Barbara comes out of her memory and follows her son outside.

EXT. ANDREWS HALL - EVENING

Cedric and Barbara head to the van. Unconsciously, her pace slows. Cedric stares at the ground. She watches him from the corner of her eye. At the van's bumper, Cedric stops.

BARBARA

You sure you'll be okay?

CEDRIC

Yeah. I'm sure.

BARBARA

Be good.

CEDRIC

I will.

The two look at each other. Cedric is fiddling with his room key.

FLASH CUT: A FINAL MEMORY

It's Cedric's first day of kindergarten. Barbara slips the house key around Little Cedric's neck.

YOUNG BARBARA

Cedric, honey, you gonna do so good.
You're a little man now, goin' to
school.

CUT FROM LITTLE CEDRIC TO:

Barbara's strong, tall, grown-up son. And suddenly, Barbara spreads her arms out wide.

BARBARA

Come here.

All the emotion they've been fighting comes flooding out. They fall together as she presses her cheek hard against his. Everything they've worked out is right here and right now. And yet, at least for Barbara, the moment is bittersweet.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

(whispers)

Trust in God. Let Him guide you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC
I know, Ma. I will.

They hug a good, long time. When they pull apart, Barbara's face is flushed.

BARBARA
Okay, now.

She busies herself, trying to hide her emotions, reaches into the back seat and gives him a Frito Lay assortment pack, uneaten from the trip. She gets into the front seat. He stands by the window as she STARTS THE MOTOR, then she remembers something.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
Wait! I forgot.

She rummages in her purse and pulls out three neatly folded 20s. She presses them into Cedric's hand.

CEDRIC
It's too much.

BARBARA
It ain't near enough.

Barbara squeezes his hand one more time and finally pulls out. Cedric turns and ambles back towards the dorm. But then the van stops.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
Wait!

He turns. She looks at him one last time.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
All right. Bye.

He waves, walks off. She watches in the rear view mirror until he is out of sight.

INT. DORM ROOM - EVENING

Cedric walks in the dark room. Rob isn't there. He sits in the window, looking at the last blazing rays of the setting sun. He's arrived in Oz and the world has gone from black and white to brilliant Technicolor.

In the gathering darkness, Cedric starts to sing softly to himself. The song is "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday" by Boyz II Men.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CEDRIC

'How do I say goodbye to what we had,
The good times that made us laugh
I'll want them back
I thought we get to see forever,
But forever's gone away,
It's so hard to say goodbye to
yesterday.'

INT. VAN - EVENING

The wheels hum. The city lights come on. And Barbara is alone.

CEDRIC (V.O.)

'I don't know where this road is going
to lead,
All I know is where we've been and
what we've been through
If we get to see tomorrow, I hope it's
worth all the wait.'

INT. DORM ROOM - NIGHT

Cedric continues singing as Rob enters. He listens, astonished, to his new roommate.

CEDRIC

'It's so hard to say goodbye to yesterday.
And I'll take with me the memories to
be my sunshine after the rain.
It's so hard to say goodbye to yesterday.'

And we leave these two boys in the soft darkness, their story to be continued as we:

FADE OUT.

THE END