

FADE IN:

EXT. HOME DRIVE WAY - NIGHT

It's early morning. The sky is its darkest, before dawn.

NATHAN BLAKE, (DAD), 40, a handsome naturally athletic African-American man, locks the front door of his house. He grabs a suitcase that rests beside him and walks toward a SUV, parked on the driveway.

He opens the back cab. A WOMAN, a GIRL and a BOY sit inside. Dad closes the back cab and gets in the driver's seat.

INT. FAMILY SUV - DAWN

Dad holds steady behind the wheel. His wife, BERNADETTE (MOM), 38, sitting beside him, smiles. FOSTER, 12, and his sister MARIE, 11, are in the back seat. A handsome family. Dad starts the vehicle's engine and drives off.

Marie sleeps. Foster stares at the sky through the window.

EXT. ANY RELEVANT CHICAGO EXPRESSWAY - DAWN

AERIAL VIEW-- Cars tooling along, among them, the SUV. Buildings, the lake front, historic museums, eateries, sports arenas; everything synonymous with Chicago comes into view.

INT. FAMILY SUV - DAY

The Blakes travel in silence. Marie awakens.

MARIE

Daddy, are we almost there?

FOSTER

We just left, Marie.

MARIE

No, we didn't.

FOSTER

You dozed off, silly.

MOM

Simmer down, you two.

DAD

Foster's right. We've only been driving for twenty-six minutes. We have about ten hours until we're in Yazoo City, Mississippi.

Marie purses her lips.

MARIE

Ten hours? We're going to be driving forever. Why do we have to go?

MOM

You already know, Marie. I'm sorry your first trip south has to be to attend a funeral, but that's the way it is.

MARIE

I don't like the south.

FOSTER

How do you know? You've never been.

MARIE

All the stories we learned about in school happened in the south, like slavery.

She stares out of the window.

MOM

When I was in school, slavery wasn't talked about at all.

MARIE

I wish it weren't. It makes me scared.

FOSTER

Makes me angry.

MOM

Slavery was primarily in the south, but not solely. And good or bad, it's important to know about our own history.

DAD

And, despite slavery, some good things have come out of the south.

Foster's eyebrow raises with skepticism.

FOSTER

Like what?

Bernadette gives Nathan the side-eye.

MOM

Really Nate, like what?

DAD

Let me rephrase that; slavery was undoubtedly bad and traumatic. But in spite of it, soul food, aspects of our culture, the sense of community were born. Not to mention Jazz, Blues, Gospel Music, those gifts were born out of slavery.

MOM

I've never thought about it like that. But still, all of that was born out of pain.

DAD

For many years I didn't look at it that way either, but after reading I broadened my knowledge and I began looking at our survival as an American success story. It was supposed to kill us, and it didn't.

MARIE

I'm with mum. Sounds like a history of pain.

MOM

Anyway, we have to go to Norman's funeral.

DAD

Who?

MOM

Norman. Your late uncle.

DAD

No one called him Norman. You know everyone goes by their nicknames.

FOSTER

What was his nickname?

DAD

Belch.

FOSTER

Like-

DAD

-Yep.

The kids fall out laughing.

MARIE

Why?

DAD

Who knows? Once your family assigns your name, you don't question it, it's yours till the day you die.

MOM

They have lots of funny nicknames.

MARIE

Dad, what's yours?

Avoiding the subject.

DAD

Didn't you all bring games and work to do while we drive?

Mom turns and WINKS at Marie.

Marie pulls her recorder case from her backpack.

EXT. HIGHWAY - CONT'D

The SUV steadies along the highway CONTINUOUSLY as Marie plays the C Major Scale on her recorder, majestically OFF-KEY.

The camera soars over the car as it passes rolling hills, barns, cows, and bridges.

EXT/INT. FAMILY SUV - CONT'D

Foster wears a headset and watches the film 'Onward'.

Mom and Dad's faces grow weary, agitated by Marie's lousy playing.

Marie hesitantly peels her lips from the instrument. Mom clears her

throat.

MOM

Honey, maybe it's a good time to take a break.

Foster yarns and removes his headset.

DAD

You'll get better. It takes practice. It took me a while, but eventually, I got it.

Mom shoots Dad a considered look.

MOM

Got what?

DAD

You forget that I play a mean harmonica.

MOM

The only thing I've ever heard you play is the radio.

The kids chuckle.

FOSTER

I need to use it.

MARIE

Me too.

MOM

Honey, let's pull off.

DAD

Good call. But let's stop better by Cat's house.

MARIE

Cat?

DAD

Yep. Cat's my great aunt. Belch washer older brother. She's my grandmother's baby sister. When I was a chitlin'-

MARIE

-A chitlin?

MOM
When he was a kid-

DAD
-Anyway, Cat always had good food on the stove. I'm getting shungry just thinking about it.

FOSTER
Shungry?

MOM
Sho'nuff Hungry. They use different words in the south. Sometimes it sounds like an entirely different language. It's pretty fascinating.

FOSTER
Did Belch have children?

DAD
Bunk and Tank, my first cousins.

Foster and Marie's eyes DART open.

FOSTER
Bunk?

MARIE
And Tank?

MOM
You haven't heard the best of it.

DAD
There's JT, JB, JC, John C, John H-

EXT. CAT'S HOUSE - DAY

PULLOUT to the family standing in front of Cat's old frame house in dilapidated condition. The curtains blow out the windows.

Dad introduces his cousins, who're all lined up in the yard.

DAD
Lolly, Shakey, Two-eyed, Bertha, Skeet, Butter Bean, Pop Corn, Billy Boy, King Fish, Bad, Honey and Sweet, Miss Lucy, Big Mama, Top Cat, and Cat.

Dad gives Cat a big hug. The entire family group hugs.

Foster and Marie look at the house then look at each other.

BUNK (O.S.)

Who that it?

TANK (O.S.)

Can't be Snot Pudding?

Foster, Marie, and Mom look around.

MOM

Who?

Dad turns around and:

DAD

Bunk! Tank!

The cousins hug.

TOP CAT

Well, I'll be dog-gone, Snot
Pudding has come to town.

Cat walks up to Nathan.

DAD

Aunt Cat, how are you?

CAT

I'm sort of so.

DAD

You remember my wife Bernadette? These
are our children, Foster and Marie.

CAT

Well that's alright. Y'all come
in. Let's eat.

INT. CAT'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LITTLE LATER

Marie notices the patterns of the ornate wallpaper; it's an old, verdigris green with gold designs.

Although old, the house is clean. The living room blends into the dining room. Chairs are lined up between the two rooms where people are gathered, hot and happy in the dimly lit house. Mismatched sofas are side by side. FOLKS sit around fanning and smiling.

Foster and Marie take it all in.

DAD

You know Cat's husband, Buddy Cat, built this house.

FOSTER

Like literally built it?

Dad nods.

DAD

With his own hands. Banks wouldn't give him a loan to buy a house.

FOSTER

Wow.

DAD

That's what inspired me to want to become an architect.

TANK

Okay y'all, let's pray over this here food.

Everyone stands. Men remove their hats.

TANK (CONT'D)

Go ahead, Bunk.

BUNK

We thank Thee for our daily food/ We thank Thee for Thy love and care/ Be with us, Lord, and hear our prayer.

EVERYONE

Amen.

CAT

Alright, den y'all, let's jeet.

DAD

(to Foster, Marie and Mom)
Means 'let's eat'.

MOM

We understand—these our peeps.

Folks eat, laugh, talk and swat flies.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAT'S HOUSE - FRONT PORCH - LATER

Some folks sit on the porch swing, others sit on the stairs and some stand; fanning and swatting flies. Dad sits on the steps adjacent to Cat's rocking chair. Top Cat nails a piece of loose wood on the front steps.

Cat begins humming then breaks into singing the bluesy gospel song, 'When I've Done the Best I've Done I Want My Crown'.

CAT

When I've done the best I can I want my
crown, Lord knows I want my crown When
I've done the best I can I want my crown,
Lord, my crown Some time I'm stumblin',
falling down Sometimes leveled with the
ground Lord, when I've done the best I
can

Bunk passes Nate a harmonica.

CAT (CONT'D)

I want my crown, Lord knows I
want my crown

Nate gently blows into the instrument as if testing it. Satisfied with the tuning, he begins to play vigorously.

Foster and Marie's eyes gleam as they hear their father play.

MOM

I guess he can play a mean
harmonica.

BUNK

Snot Puddin' still got it.

TANK

It's in his blood, man. It's in
y'all's too.

The kids' smile.

They're approached by sibling cousins, MOOT, 12, and PUT, 11.

MOOT

Hi. I'm your cousin Moot, and this is my
sister, Put.

PUT

Y'all want to come out and play?

The kids look at their Mom.

FOSTER
Can we?

MARIE
Please?

MOM
Where are you going to play?

PUT
Just going swimming down yonder.

MOOT
In the river.

Mom looks a FREIGHT.

MOM
In the river? Oh, I don't think so.

DAD
It's fine, Baby. It's the same place I
used to swim. Foster and Marie are
better swimmers than me.

Mom hesitates.

MOM
You could, except I didn't pack your
suits. I didn't know-

MOOT
We swim in our clothes.

Put gestures at her and her brother's apparel.

Mom shrugs, defeated.

MOM
Okay then.

The kids run off with Moot and Put.

EXT. THE RIVER - LATER

QUICK CUTS of the kids splashing about in the river.

Put shares blueberries she pulls off a bush near the river.

MARIE

Boy, these are sweet.

Foster lays in the grass with his hands behind his head.

FOSTER

Sure is quiet.

A frog LEAPS across Foster's chest.

FOSTER (CONT'D)

What the-?!

MOOT

It's just a frog.

Moot catches the frog and shows it to Foster and Marie.

MOOT (CONT'D)

Put and I catch them all the time.

PUT

They like to hide under the raft.

FOSTER

What raft?

PUT

It's over there. Needs tightening up.

FOSTER

Too bad we don't have any tools.

Moot and Put chuckle at Foster.

MOOT

Don't need no tools; you just need to double knot the edges.

FOSTER

I learned how to double knot in scouts.

MOOT

Let's fix it.

The BOYS fix the raft. The GIRLS fill a basket with blueberries.

Foster and Moot pull the raft to the river then climb on.

PUT

Wait for us!

They abandon the basket, run into the water and hop on.

EXT. MISSISSIPPI RIVER - LATER

The children float along the river.

PUT

What's it like living in a city?

MOOT

Y'all must be scared.

MARIE

What's scary about the city?

MOOT

Everything. The TV always shows sirens and fast-moving cars.

PUT

And the news shows angry people who are always getting arrested and going to jail.

Foster and Marie look shocked.

MARIE

Cause the news we see always show Black folks being run out of town and being tortured in the south.

Moot and Put fall out laughing.

Foster and Marie join in laughing.

EXT. THE RIVER - LATER

They return to shore and pull the raft out of the water.

MARIE

What's you alls real name.

MOOT

Charles Rankin Junior.

PUT

Patricia Rankin. What are your nicknames?

FOSTER

We don't have nicknames.

PUT

Don't?

MOOT

All our kin have nicknames. Gotta give you one.

EXT. CAT'S HOUSE - PORCH - EVENING

Cat, Mom, Dad, and Tank are still on the porch.

Mom's brows tighten.

MOM

The kids ought to be heading back.

CAT

They'll be back reckly.

TANK

I see 'em. They're coming up the way.

Mom quietly sighs relief.

MOM

What do you have in the basket?

PUT

Blueberries.

CAT

I'd make a batch of blueberry muffins, but I'm out of flour.

DAD

It's ok, Cat, it's time, we're going go head out. We'll see you at the church in the morning.

Foster looks up.

FOSTER

Hey, look at how clear the sky is.

TOP CAT

Those bright stars are your ancestors, shining down on you.

The star-studded sky.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE CHURCH - EVENING

People fold out of the church. The BLAKES stand next to their SUV. Moot, Put, Cat, Top Cat, Bunk, and Tank approach them.

MOM

That was a beautiful home going service.

CAT

Indeed. Gave him a good send off.

DAD

We're going to hit the road. Thank you for taking us in and showing us around-

MOM

-For your southern hospitality.

CAT

That's what family is all about.

FOSTER

One question, how'd my Dad get the name Snot Pudding?

CAT

If I recall, it started off as Baby Snot Pudding cause although he was sweet and beautiful brown, like chocolate pudding, his nose was always running.

Laughter.

FOSTER

What kind of kid was our Dad?

CAT

Your father was busy.

BUDDY CAT

Busy? She's being nice, your pops was wild as Friday night, used to get a good tapping on.

MARIE

Our dad?

FOSTER

Really?

Mom checks her watch.

MOM

We'll have to do this again real soon.

PUT

We want to visit y'all in the city.

MARIE

Can they?

MOM

Of course.

DAD

Absolutely.

Hugs. As everyone says good-bye:

MOOT

Bye Junebug.

PUT

Bye Sissy.

MOM

Who?

Dad laughs out loud.

DAD

That's what I'm talking about.

The family gets into the car.

Foster looks up into the evening sky.

One star SHINES especially bright, then BURTS into a shooting star.

The boy smiles.

END