

FADE IN:

EXT. HOME DRIVE WAY - NIGHT

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

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

He opens the back cab. A WOMAN and GIRL sit inside the SUV.

Nathan's son, FOSTER, 12, stands outside the SUV and looks up.

We see a sky full of stars. One star SHINES especially bright then BURTS into a shooting star. The boy smiles.

Dad closes the back cab and gets in the drivers seat.

INT. FAMILY SUV - DAY

Dad holds steady behind the wheel and drinks a smoothy.

His wife, BERNADETTE (MOM), 38, sits beside him. She holds a magazine but doesn't read it. She smiles and gazes out of the window. Foster and his sister, MARIE, 11, are in the back seat. A handsome family.

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

EXT. ANY RELEVANT CHICAGO EXPRESSWAY - DAY

Aerial view: Cars tooling along. Among them, the Blake SUV.

EXT. CHICAGO CITYSCAPES - DAY

Buildings, the lake front, historic museums, eateries, sports arenas. Everything synonymous with Chicago comes into view.

The SUV tools along I57 at a rapid pace and passes out of frame. We STAY on a sign that reads "Memphis."

INT. FAMILY SUV - DAY

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 down south?

MOM
You already know, Marie.

MARIE
I don't like the south.

FOSTER
How do you know? You've never been.

MARIE
Never wanted to go. All the stories we learn about in school happened in the south and they're all sad, 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
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, as a people, we
survived 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.

FOSTER

What changed your mind?

DAD

Reading. After I broadened my
knowledge I began looking at our
survival from slavery as an
American success story. It was
supposed to kill us, and it didn't.

Foster's brows tighten.

MARIE

The Blues are sad!

FOSTER
 (hence)
 DA! -The Blues.

MOM
 Blues tells stories. Another way of
 preserving our rich history.

FOSTER
 I don't know about that.

MARIE
 I'm with Foster. Sounds like a
 history of sadness.

DAD
 You'll change your mind.

MOM
 Think they've paved the streets?

DAD
 I'm sure they have. Country life is
 very different than life in the
 city.

Mom turns and faces Foster and Marie.

MOM
 I'm sorry your first trip south has
 to be to attend a funeral. Your
 Dad's uncle, Norman, was a kind
 man.

DAD
 Who?

MOM
 Norman. Your 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, you accept it and it's yours til 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

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

We're out of the state of Illinois now. The camera soars over the car as it passes rolling hills, barns, cows, and bridges.

EXT/INT. FAMILY SUV

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 every 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.

They pass a 'Rest Area' sign and pull off the highway.

Foster looks at a map and does a math equation.

FOSTER

According to my calculation, we should arrive in three hours.

EXT./INT. REST AREA / COUNTRY TOWN / SUV - DAY

MONTAGE: The Blake's emerge from the car.

Stop at a roadside market. Buy and eat watermelon, peanuts.

They stop at a farm and go for a horse ride.

Mom gets stuck getting on/off her horse.

Marie milks a cow.

Foster gets in the sty with pigs and feeds them.

The family gets back in the car.

Mom and KIDS read books and magazines.

Foster and Marie play chess.

END of MONTAGE.

INT. FAMILY SUV - DAY

The family is back in the car.

DAD

Let's stop by Cat's house.

MARIE

Cat?

DAD

Yep. Cat's my great aunt. Belch was her 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 house.

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.

We see an old frame house in dilapidated condition. The curtains blow out the windows. The porch squeaks.

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, children
 Foster and Marie.

CAT

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

INT. CAT'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

We come in on a lively affair; a dinner party.

Although old, the house is clean. People are hot and happy in
 the dimly lit house. FOLKS sit around fanning and smiling.

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

Mismatched sofas are side by side. One, French Provincial and
 covered in heavy plastic. The other, upholstered and covered
 with a knitted throw.

The living room blends into the dining room. Chairs are lined
 up between the two rooms where people are gathered.

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 he bought the land and built his own.

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.

INT. CAT'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

A very small kitchen with old appliances. There's cooked food all over the kitchen

The kitchen is busy with HELPERS. Cousin MOOT(60s) puts final touches on a chocolate triple-decker cake.

Foster and Marie peak into the kitchen and lick their lips.

MARIE

This must be the most food in the world.

MOOT

This is how we do.

Mom grabs an apron and puts it on.

MOM

You two wash your hands. Moot, what can we do?

Moot opens the oven.

MOOT

(points)

Put on those mitts and help me get this food out.

MOM

(to Foster and Marie)

Go see if your Dad needs help.

EXT. CAT'S HOUSE FRONT PORCH - SAME

The MEN set up tables in the front yard. A parade of folks show up with more food.

Foster and Marie unfold chairs and set them out.

MONTAGE: Folks eat, laugh, and talk and swat flies.

Moments later, the table displays remnants of where food used to be.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAT'S HOUSE - FRONT PORCH

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.

MOM
Oh, okay.

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.

Quick cuts of the kids splashing about in the river.

EXT. 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

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

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

MARIE

What's you all's real name.

MOOT

Charles Rankin Junior

PUT

Patricia Rankin

PUT (CONT'D)

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.

DAD
Did you all have fun?

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.

MOOT
We'll walk to town and get some?

DAD
It's kind of far to walk.

PUT
It's right up the road.

MARIE
Please?

TOP CAT
I reckon we can walk.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD

Foster, Marie, Put, Moot, Dad, and Top Cat walk toward town.

TOP CAT
You know your great grandfather used to be the sherif in town?

FOSTER
The sheriff, really?

TOP CAT

The first Black one. One of his brothers was a barber, one owned the cleaners, and the baby brother owned the store—the Simpson Brothers. There were seven children, four boys and three girls, and they were all big shots when Blacks weren't supposed to be big shots.

FOSTER

Wow. Daddy, did you know this?

DAD

Of course. When we were kids, candy at the store cost a nickel.

FOSTER

A nickel.

MARIE

It must have been a really long time ago. (beat) Top Cat, what did their sisters do?

TOP CAT

Let's see— Atlantis was a school teacher, Josie was a seamstress and owned a dress shop, and Tab owned a hair salon.

Foster and Marie smile with pride.

EXT. DOWNTOWN YAZOO

They arrive into town and marvel at all buildings with 'Simpson' on them.

MARIE

Who runs the business now?

TOP CAT

Their grand children and great grand children.

They enter the store.

INT./EXT. - SIMPSON STORE

Dad hugs his cousin DELLA working behind the counter.

The kids stand outside the store drinking lemonade.
They exit the store with the flour and head toward the house.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Foster and Moot walk ahead of the others and toss rocks.
Marie yawns.

MARIE
Daddy I'm sleepy.

PUT
Me too.

MOOT
Don't let them fool you.

FOSTER
Don't let them fool you.

Dad and Top Cat carry Marie and Put on their shoulders.

EXT. CAT'S HOUSE - FRONT YARD - NIGHT

Mom and Cat sit on the porch. Dad hands Cat the flour.
Mom observes Marie being carried and dozing off.

MOM
Someone's sleepy.

DAD
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.

CUT 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-

MARIE

-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 his 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. Honey we need to get on the road.

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 and smiles.

END.