

Brother To Brother
by
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INT. SUBWAY -- DAY

PERRY, an eighteen year old Black man, writes in a notebook in a hurried yet concentrated manner. Shafts of sunlight from the window dance on his skin and the pages as he writes.

The Manhattan skyline and the architecture of the bridge pass in the background behind him.

PERRY (V.O.)

There are thoughts that have the power to trap me. I write them down to be more honest about them and lessen their potential to do harm. There's a war inside me.

INT. PERRY'S BEDROOM(FLASHBACK) -- DAY

Grainy super-8 image of JULIO, a good-looking Latino guy in his early twenties, propped up on one elbow. He's staring at Perry, who's lying on his back looking at the ceiling. Perry looks over and moves a strand of hair out of Julio's eyes.

PERRY (V.O.)

He stared at me and I felt weightless, like I could crawl under his skin and hide. I needed to solidify the feeling for myself.

INT. SUBWAY -- DAY

Perry notices an ATTRACTIVE, WORKING-CLASS BLACK MAN across from him. He looks at him for a lengthy period of time and the Black man gives him a coy, lustful smile. Perry attempts to avoid staring by looking down but can't resist.

INT. PERRY'S BEDROOM(FLASHBACK) -- DAY

(Super-8) There are the faint, distant sounds of kids playing as Julio tells Perry a secret. Casually placing a warm hand on Perry's chest, he leans over to kiss him.

(Super-8, more jagged and abstract) The door opens and PERRY'S FATHER stares. He enters the room in a rage, grabbing Julio violently and throwing him into a chest of drawers. His father approaches and Perry's arm goes up to block the assault.

INT. SUBWAY PLATFORM -- DAY

With a rush of wind the train speeds into the station.

INT. SUBWAY -- DAY

In the corner opposite Perry, BRUCE, a light-skinned Black man in his eighties, drifts in and out of sleep. His head is leaning dangerously close to the passenger next to him.

He wakes for a moment with the new influx of passengers and then gradually drifts back to semi-consciousness.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BROWNSTONE (NIGGERATTI MANOR) (1926) BLACK & WHITE -- NIGHT

LANGSTON, a handsome, 24-year old, Black man and YOUNG BRUCE, 19, are in the living room. Langston is standing and reciting a poem for Bruce who is seated with his eyes closed, enraptured. The reading is set to a pulsating jazz beat.

LANGSTON

(reciting with verve
and passion)

"This is a song for the genius child
Sing it softly for the song is wild."

INT. SUBWAY -- DAY

Langston's voice is heard throughout these ephemeral images.

Closeup of Bruce as his head falls towards his chest. Dissolving in and out of the closeup of his peaceful face are super-8 images of young Black children playing various street games - stickball, dodgeball, doubledutch, etc.

LANGSTON (O.S.)

"This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly for the song is wild.
Sing it softly as ever you can.
Lest the song get out of hand. Nobody
loves a genius child. Can you love
an eagle, tame or wild?

(into a passionate
finale)

Wild or tame, can you love a monster
of frightening name? Nobody loves a
genius child. Kill him and let his
soul run wild."

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR (1926) -- NIGHT

As the poem ends Young Bruce opens his eyes and applauds.

YOUNG BRUCE

It's incredible.

LANGSTON
 (gazing intently)
 I thought you'd like it.
 (pause)
 It's about you.

EXT. OPENING CREDIT MONTAGE -- DAY/NIGHT

Titles are superimposed over a montage juxtaposing historical/cultural footage from the Harlem of the 1920's with images of present-day Harlem.

Harlem Hellfighters return from WWI marching triumphantly up 5th Ave.

Newspaper headlines about race riots, segregation and lynchings throughout the country.

Throngs of Black people clap in affirmation as Marcus Garvey speaks at a Back-To-Africa rally.

Pans of the same Harlem streets then and now.

Newspaper Headline - "Harlem - Mecca of the New Negro"

The dancers of the Savoy and the Cotton Club intercut with extravagant voguing balls of 2001.

The facade of 267 West 136th St. (Niggeratti Manor) in the past and currently, hauntingly superimposed over one another.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR LIVING ROOM (PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Two paintings are on either side of a crackling fireplace. The first on the left is of Perry and the second on the right is of Bruce, smiling and exuberant. Dolly in to Bruce's face in the painting.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HARLEM STREET -- DAY

(Super-8) Slow-motion image of a young, Black boy playing hop-scotch with two girls as other boys watch from the corner in anger. Fleeting snatches of children's voices rhyming and taunting are heard through street traffic.

INT. SUBWAY -- DAY

The children's voices have become more sparse and haunting. Bruce is now fully awake and noticing the exchange of glances between Perry and the Black man across from him. The ghost of a smile appears across his face as he closes his eyes.

BRUCE (V.O.)

History in the flesh. I needed to help you break it open and excavate. Dig. Boys with pretty eyelashes and taut abdomens; pale and dark like night. Bodies that I was aching for. Being excluded from yet naturally linked to the rhythms of Black life. For most of my folks being gay was what they called "a white man's disease."

(pause)

I could not go home as who I am...and neither can you.

EXT. SUBWAY PLATFORM -- DAY

The train enters the next station. Perry and Bruce exit from different doors and move towards opposite staircases. As they both exit frame the image suddenly dissolves to white.

INT. PERRY'S DORM ROOM -- MORNING

Perry is waking up in his dorm room to the sound of a blaring alarm clock. His eyes open slowly as he fumbles with the clock eventually shutting it off.

He grabs various bathroom supplies and stumbles half-asleep through the hallway to the shower.

INT. BATHROOM/HALL -- MORNING

Perry is waiting for a shower to free up. He fidgets and stamps his foot in frustration as JIM, an attractive and confident nineteen year-old white guy, sings an old R&B song from behind one of the curtains.

PERRY

(remarking to another
guy waiting)

I'm gonna be late for my ten o'clock
for the third time this week and
this guy's wrapped up in some Motown
fantasy.

In the mirror we see another guy move towards the first shower which has just opened up. Jim sticks his head out of the third shower.

JIM

You got a problem with my vocal
stylings?

Perry gestures for him to hurry up.

PERRY
You should be sued for desecrating
songs like that.

JIM
One day you'll be paying hundreds of
dollars to hear this.

He starts singing loudly into his shampoo bottle.

PERRY
Come on you asshole.

Perry throws a plastic soapdish at him with playful, sarcastic
anger.

JIM
Alright, alright.

Jim reaches for a towel as Perry inconspicuously looks him
up and down. Jim shakes his hair and begins gathering his
stuff.

PERRY
What time is it Mr. Sunshine?

JIM
Five of.

PERRY
(Turning to exit)
Shit.

Perry walks out in frustration as Jim follows behind. Jim
crosses the hall and begins to unlock his door. He turns
and watches Perry walk towards his room.

JIM
(pretending to sniff
a foul odor)
Smells like someone needs a good
shower.

Perry casually slips him the finger over his shoulder.

JIM (CONT'D)
Must be all those steamy, wet dreams
you've been having.

Jim smirks to himself as he watches Perry enter his room.

INT. UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM - MORNING

ISIAH, a black professor in his thirties, is teaching a
class of predominantly Black students. Perry and Jim sit in
close proximity to one another.

ISAIAH

Can I have a volunteer to read this passage?

Jim raises his hand.

ISAIAH (CONT'D)

Jim, start at the top of page 98.

JIM

(reading slowly)

"If we - and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must like lovers insist on, or create the consciousness of others - do not falter in our duty, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country and change the history of the world. If we do not do everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a shame is upon us: God gave Noah the sign, no more water the fire next time."

A pause as the students think about the statement.

ISAIAH

Does anyone care to comment on how this passage written in 1963 might relate to the political and cultural climate of today?

A young Black woman, CHANTAL, raises her hand.

ISAIAH (CONT'D)

(pointing to her)

Chantal.

CHANTAL

The L.A. riots for one.

A well-built, authoritative student, RAHSAN, raises his hand. Isaiah points to him.

RAHSAN

Unarmed brothers gettin' shot by the cops. How long's that gonna be tolerated?

PERRY

(jumping in)

Who's writing this? Was James Baldwin tolerated?

(MORE)

PERRY (CONT'D)

He was basically silenced 'cause him being gay was a threat to the major leaders of The Civil Rights Movement.

Another student, SEAN, leans over to Rahsan.

SEAN

(whispered yet audible)
Fuckin' faggot.

Rahsan smirks, shakes his head and rolls his eyes.

CHANTAL

Perry's right. We should look at the experience of the writer. Especially when it's obviously linked to the content of what we're reading.

Another student, KEISHA, speaks quietly as if she's talking to herself.

KEISHA

I didn't even know James Baldwin was gay.

Rahsan raises his hand and doesn't wait to be called on.

RAHSAN

(frustrated and irate)
What does him being gay have to do with his work in the Civil Rights Movement?
(not waiting for a response)
That's completely beside the point.

PERRY

It's not when you think about the ideas he contributed while being silenced. How much more did he have to say? We don't know.

RAHSAN

(cutting him off and increasing in anger)
We talkin' about activism and political struggle not what people do with their sex organs. If you like to take it up the ass then that's **your** business. I don't see why we need to hear about it in this class.

ISAIHAH

(assertive)
Alright, guys. That's enough. Calm down.

Other students in the class stifle laughter as Rahsan slaps Sean's hand.

RAHSAN

(towards Perry)

The majority of people at the time didn't care that Baldwin was gay.

PERRY

(increased anger)

Bullshit. Get real.

ISAIAH

(aggressive, taking control)

Let me remind you both that you're in a University classroom. **My** university classroom. Treat it with some respect.

PERRY

The real things that kept these movements from being effective were things like homophobia and sexism. If we're not talkin' about those things then what's the point of even bein' here.

SEAN

Those are things that you're interested in. Maybe the rest of us aren't.

RAHSAN

(volatile)

We need to be talkin' about why Black people were getting lynched every day across this country.

SEAN

This class is about Black political struggle. Period.

PERRY

(angry, exhausted yet still challenging)

So I guess the things I'm talkin' about have nothing to do with that?

Other students raise their hands as the bell rings. There is still a fiery tension in the air as students gather their belongings. Rahsan whispers to Sean, glaring at Perry.

ISAIAH

Remember those thoughts and we'll continue next week.

(MORE)

ISAIAH (CONT'D)

If you're having trouble finding a topic for your final papers please come see me during office hours.

EXT. UNIVERSITY BUILDING - MORNING

Clusters of students exit and enter different classrooms. Perry emerges from the crowd moving hurriedly as Jim tries to catch up to him.

JIM

Perry slow down, Jesus.

PERRY

That guy's a fucking dick. I hate him.

JIM

Well you got your point across. I think that's the first time you've said anything in that class all semester.

PERRY

That's cause I always feel like if I open my mouth I'll just start screamin'.

JIM

Brush it off, bro. You know he's just tryin' to get a rise out of you.

PERRY

Yeah, well it's working.

JIM

(attempting to calm him)

You got your ticket to the De La concert tomorrow night?

PERRY

I'm actually going to get it right now.

JIM

You better hurry up before it sells out. That shit's gonna be off the meter.

They pound fists.

PERRY

I'll catch you later.

EXT. HOMELESS SHELTER -- MORNING

EVELYN, a black woman in her late thirties, approaches a homeless shelter holding a cup of coffee. BILL, an extremely intoxicated, grungy-looking Black man exits the shelter, almost crashing into her.

EVELYN
 (holding him up,
 attempting to steady
 him)
 Whoa, whoa. Easy. You alright?

Bill mumbles incoherently under his breath. He moves quickly towards the curb, gripping his stomach. Evelyn looks at him with disbelief as he begins vomiting. She's fuming as she stares and then turns and enters the building.

EXT. EAST VILLAGE STREET -- DAY

MARCUS, a 21-year old Black poet, stands talking to Perry who's seated on a porch.

MARCUS
 You ready for the opening next week?

PERRY
 I guess. All the paintings are done.

MARCUS
 My boy steppin' out in his Soho debut.

PERRY
 Please.
 (pause)
 Speaking of debuts, I thought you
 had some new shit for me.

MARCUS
 I do.

PERRY
 Well what are you waiting for?

Marcus closes his eyes getting ready to perform a new piece. Bruce approaches them slowly and tentatively, listening and taking it all in.

MARCUS
 (Essex Hemphill-
 "Romance is Intrigue")
 Amid conflicting reports the truth
 emerges. Coarse edged. An ungentle
 Blade. For peeling back the night's
 skin...It requires great strength in
 the hands.

(MORE)

MARCUS (CONT'D)

A strength not as obvious as muscles.
So I watch you through the eyes of
people I love. The good and the
bad, they tell me, I hear. I believe
what I feel moves unaided in the air
between us. Satellite blackouts.
It is true. Some of the people we
love are terrorists.

PERRY

(slapping Marcus's
hand)

Uh, I'm feelin' that.

Bruce enters their space abruptly. Dignified and confident. Closing his eyes, he speaks as if he's describing a dream, quietly trying to relive it for himself.

BRUCE

(excerpt from "Smoke,
Lilies and Jade")

It was almost as tho' it had journeyed
to meet him. The night was so blue.
How does blue feel. Or red or gold
or any other color. If colors could
be heard he'd paint most wondrous
tunes. Symphonious...Think...the
dulcet clear tone of a blue like
night. He blew a cloud of smoke...
soon the smoke would rise and then
he would clothe the silver smoke in
blue smoke garments. Truly smoke
was like imagination.

Marcus and Perry are stunned and smiling as they stare at each other and then at Bruce.

MARCUS

Damn, even Grandpa got a bag of
tricks.

BRUCE

You think you started this? I been
riffin' on corners like this since
before your mother was even a figment
of your grandmother's imagination.

MARCUS

And you ain't lost nothin'.

BRUCE

We were here before you and they'll
be kids comin' up after you.

(pointing to his head)

So stay sharp and watch your back.

Bruce turns and begins walking away.

MARCUS

Yeah, well tell 'em to bring it on.
I'm ready.

Bruce is halfway up the block. With his back to them he lifts his hand as a good-bye gesture and keeps going.

TIME CUT :

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. STREET (1926)(BLACK & WHITE) -- NIGHT

Young Bruce and Langston laugh as they walk barefoot along a quiet street. They are obviously very comfortable with each other.

LANGSTON

We're gonna get arrested for walking
around here like this.

YOUNG BRUCE

(rebellious)
Who cares.

Langston looks up and points out a specific constellation to Young Bruce.

LANGSTON

(looking up and
pointing)
Do you see it? It's Orion. You see
those three in line to the left.

YOUNG BRUCE

I think you've been smoking something.

LANGSTON

(laughing)
All you have to do is open your eyes.
(pointing to the sky)
It's right there.

TIME CUT:

EXT. HOMELESS SHELTER(PRESENT) -- DAY

As Bruce walks past the homeless shelter, Evelyn can be seen through the window.

INT. OFFICE OF HOMELESS SHELTER - DAY

Evelyn is putting away folders at a filing cabinet when Perry enters.

EVELYN
 (cold and direct)
 Sit down.

He attempts to appear comfortable in his seat yet senses that something is wrong.

PERRY
 So, what's up?

EVELYN
 Perry, I thought there were some basic rules we talked about before you started working here.

PERRY
 There were.

EVELYN
 And what's the main rule we talked about?

Perry begins to understand what's happening.

PERRY
 That if anyone appears under the influence of alcohol or drugs they can't be admitted.

EVELYN
 (visibly angered)
 And I pass Bill this morning wreaking from here to high heaven. Pukin' his guts out on the goddamn curb.
 (matter of
 fact, accusatory)
 You were on duty when he came in last night? Am I right?

PERRY
 Yes.

Perry is looking at the floor avoiding Evelyn's glare.

EVELYN
 You look at me when I'm talkin' to you. I know you need this job for the work-study program. And I love you like a son. But one more mistake and that's it, you're out.

She notices how distanced Perry is. She becomes more intense and focused on getting through to him.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
 Are you listening to me?

PERRY

Yes. It won't happen again.

INT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY -- DAY

Perry is walking through the stacks passing several books on black theater/art : "Shadowed Dreams", "The New Black Poetry", "Black Thunder", etc. He picks up "The Harlem Renaissance Reader ". Flipping through it, he stops on a page with familiar words.

First Perry's voice reads then Bruce's voice from the earlier scene merges with his.

The scene of Bruce reciting on the street dissolves in and out of Perry's eyes reading and the printed words on the page.

PERRY (V.O.)

How does blue feel. Or red or gold or any other color. If colors could be heard he'd paint most wondrous tunes.

(Bruce O.S. layers in here)

Symphonious...Think...the dulcet clear tone of a blue like night. He blew a cloud of smoke... soon the silver smoke would rise and then he would clothe the silver smoke in blue smoke garments...Truly smoke was like imagination.

He goes to the beginning of the poem to see the title : "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" by Bruce Nugent.

EXT. EAST VILLAGE STREET -- DAY

Previous shot of Bruce walking away with his back to them and gesturing good-bye with his hand(slow-motion).

INT. LIBRARY -- DAY

Jim enters with a hard, masculine strut and sets his stuff down. A raucous hip-hop beat, muffled yet very noticeable is coming from his walkman headphones. Perry looks up at him, disturbed yet playful.

PERRY

No home training.

JIM

Whatever.

He sits down and pretends to read notes. His foot casually hits Perry's.

JIM (CONT'D)

Was that your foot?

PERRY

(annoyed)

Yeah it was. You and those big clod-stomper feet.

JIM

You know what they say, big feet, big shoes.

Jim winks and smiles devilishly with a teasing sexiness. Perry shakes his head and laughs to himself.

He continues writing in his notebook. Jim stares at him as he writes. The shot becomes slow-motion as Jim becomes more entranced by Perry's face.

He impulsively reaches for Perry's book that's face down in front of him. He begins reading on a random page. As Jim reads and Perry writes, they both are stealing glances at each other without the other person noticing.

JIM (V.O.) (CONT'D)

(excerpt of "Smoke,
Lilies and Jade")

"...his lips were so
beautiful...quizzical...I would kiss
your lips...he would like to kiss
Beauty's lips...Alex flushed warm
...with shame...or was it shame..."

After a few moments of looking at Jim, Perry gets up with a notebook and walks toward the hall. Jim's eyes follow him as he walks out the door.

INT. UNIVERSITY HALLWAY -- DAY

Perry sits in a corner writing quickly.

INT. LIBRARY -- DAY

Jim is entranced by the words of the poem. This is intercut with Perry writing and thinking in the hall.

JIM

(excerpt of "Smoke,
Lilies and Jade")

"...Beauty's cheek felt cool to his
arm...his hair felt soft...such a
dream...and what did it all mean...did
dreams have meanings...Beauty
stirred..."

EXT. VILLAGE STREET -- DAY

Marcus stands with three ruffneck homeboys.

HOMEBOY#1

(to Marcus)

Yo, you heard that new Jigga shit.
The joint where him and Beanie are
like blandin' and shit.

MARCUS

Yeah. That shit is hot.

Marcus looks over as Perry approaches and enters their space. He nods towards the three homeboys. He embraces Marcus and gives him a kiss on the cheek. Marcus flinches with discomfort. The homeboys look at Perry with disgust.

PERRY

(To Marcus)

You gonna come by later?

MARCUS

(slightly uneasy,
looking at the other
guys then to Perry)

Around four, right?

PERRY

Yeah, it shouldn't take long. Just
some silly-ass school bullshit.

MARCUS

I'll be there.

PERRY

Cool. See you later.

They grab hands and the others look towards Perry as he walks away. They wait awhile before talking but they know he's still in earshot.

HOMEBOY#1

(To Marcus)

Yo, son that nigga is bitch!

He laughs and slaps hands with homeboy #2.

HOMEBOY#2

Why you lettin' that faggot
muthafuckah kiss all over you and
shit?

HOMEBOY#3

I know, son, what the fuck's wrong
with you. We startin' to wonder
what team you battin' for.

HOMEBOY#2
 (singing Buju Banton's
 "Boom Bye-bye" and
 making gun gestures
 towards Marcus's
 head)
 Boom bye-bye in a batty boy head,
 boom bye-bye.

MARCUS
 (knocking the hand
 away)
 So he's a faggot, he's still cool.

HOMEBOY#1
 Yeah right. That shit is nasty, yo.
 I can't even stand lookin' at that
 muthafuckah.

They watch Perry walk from a distance. A few Black men pass Perry, nonchalantly looking him up and down. He quietly returns their stares and then focuses his eyes on the ground.

Bruce sees Perry from across the street and then refocuses his gaze on TWO WELL-DRESSED BLACK MEN in front of him. They are immersed in conversation and enjoying each other's company. Bruce looks towards the ground thinking to himself.

TIME CUT :

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. STREET (1926)(BLACK & WHITE) -- NIGHT

Young Bruce and Langston are seated on a porch, there's an intensity and excitement increasing in Langston.

LANGSTON
 I told you about that awards dinner
 in New York on Tuesday, right?

YOUNG BRUCE
 Yeah.

LANGSTON
 (excited)
 You could come with me. Lord knows
 there's nothing goin' on around here.
 I'm thinking about trying to find a
 cheap place to live there.

YOUNG BRUCE
 Those are some big ideas you have.

LANGSTON
 You're the one that's always talkin'
 about life as one big adventure. So
 why keep talkin' about it when we
 could be livin' it.

Young Bruce is looking contemplative and suddenly gives a radiant, mischievous smile. There's a magic glint in his eyes.

YOUNG BRUCE
What time does the train leave?

INT. SUBWAY STATION 135TH ST. (1926) -- DAY

The train pulls into the station. Young Bruce and Langston are ascending onto the street. Young Bruce is literally spinning around in circles, attempting to take it all in.

Passersby attempting to go about their day become uncomfortable with Young Bruce's eyes fixed on them.

LANGSTON
Didn't your mama teach you it's not
polite to stare.

TIME CUT:

INT. PERRY'S DORM ROOM(PRESENT) -- DAY

Perry is sitting and holding a pencil and his sketchpad. His gaze is focused and concentrated as he stares at something and then looks down towards his work-in-progress. He dashes off a few brisk lines.

A portrait of Marcus is coming into being. Marcus is staring at him becoming inquisitive and restless.

MARCUS
(curious and direct)
When did you first know you were
gay?

PERRY
(looking between the
page and Marcus)
When? I've known all my life.

MARCUS
Like as far back as you can remember?

PERRY
Well I guess my earliest memories
are of like changing with other boys
for gym and always wanting to look
at their dicks but knowing that they
couldn't see me looking. So I'd
look for like a millisecond.

MARCUS
Really?

PERRY

Yup. It's funny how much I'd see in that millisecond. Just from the shape inside their underwear. I'd know the length, the width, cut, uncut.

MARCUS

(laughing)

Damn you got some eyes on you.

PERRY

I was sizin' shit up. Like a muthafuckin' sleuth.

MARCUS

You was pullin' some Nancy Drew shit.

PERRY

Nancy didn't have shit on me!

Perry laughs and then his gaze on Marcus becomes more concentrated.

INT. SUBWAY -- EARLY EVENING

Perry is haphazardly looking through the newspaper and sees a picture of one of his paintings. The caption reads "Bitter Earth by Perry Williams-one of the works in the Flip Mode exhibit at the Jack Preston Gallery in Soho." He quickly skims the article and focuses on one paragraph.

PERRY (V.O.)

"Many of the artists included in the Flip Mode exhibit are so innovative and daring that the viewer is forced into a reconsideration of the visual markers of African-American art. This is most apparent in the work of Konah Johnston, Emma Simms and the young Perry Williams, age 18. These are names I'm sure we'll be hearing alot more from in the not too distant future. The exhibit opens to the public on Friday."

Perry quickly closes the paper, slips it into his bag and exits through the subway doors.

EXT. WEST VILLAGE STREET -- EARLY EVENING

Perry watches Jim on his skateboard as he smoothly works complex moves with bold dexterity. His skills have become second nature and yet he knows Perry's watching so his performance is even better.

Jim skates by a deli fruit stand, swipes an apple and speeds off.

Perry laughs as the angry DELI OWNER exits the store to try and catch Jim whose halfway up the block.

EXT. WEST VILLAGE STREET -- EARLY EVENING

Perry is walking down the street as Jim jumps from around a corner.

JIM
(energized and playful)
Boo!

PERRY
(begins with a startled
breath)
Jesus! Don't do that. You scared
the shit out of me.

JIM
Relax.

PERRY
You know they're gonna lock your ass
up one of these days.

JIM
Yeah well I'll take my chances.

He takes a bite out of the apple and offers some to Perry.

PERRY
Don't gimme your stolen goods.

JIM
You're loss.
(pause)
You wanna go get a beer before the
show. You look like you could use
one. Steady your nerves a little
bit.

PERRY
I really need to try and finish this
paper.

JIM
(tempting)
Oh come on. Live a little.

He grabs Perry's arm and they rush up the street.

INT. VILLAGE BAR -- EVENING

Jim smiles flirtatiously with the female bartender. He brings two tall glasses of beer to the table. Perry lights a cigarette as Jim sits down.

PERRY
She didn't card you?

JIM
(giving a charming grin)
What are you crazy? With a killer smile like this?
(pause)
Even if she did, I have my ways around it.

Jim flips open his wallet on the table to show Perry his very convincing fake I.D..

PERRY
(studying the I.D. in the wallet)
Where'd you get this?

JIM
My peoples take care of me.

Taking a sip of beer he seems to be studying Perry's face. Perry is still staring at Jim's picture in the wallet.

JIM (CONT'D)
So how come a good-lookin' guy like you isn't goin' out with anyone?

PERRY
I don't know. I guess I've never really been the social type. I always feel like I need a good line to approach someone.

JIM
What do you mean? Just be normal.

PERRY
What's normal?

JIM
You know regular shit like "Do you come here alot. This song's incredible, there's something about Billie Holiday's voice." You know just regular talk.

PERRY

But then all the regular talk starts sounding like stupid lines and then I think about that and get self-conscious and don't say anything.

JIM

Well that's pathetic.

PERRY

I guess I'm not that good in the smooth moves department.

JIM

Sometimes it's all about making fun of yourself. They know how nerve-racking and awkward it is. One of my best moves, I was out with this woman for the first time and just looked at her and said "what would you do if I busted a suave move right now?"

Perry laughs in disbelief.

PERRY

You did not.

JIM

I did.

PERRY

And what'd she say?

JIM

She laughed and said I guess it wouldn't be too suave since you just said that. And then I just leaned in and went for it.

PERRY

(smirking and shaking his head)

You're out of you're fucking mind.

JIM

(flirtatious)

Sometimes, it's all about risk.

Perry stares at him for an uncomfortable amount of time and then looks away.

JIM (CONT'D)

Like do you ever walk up the street and look in people's faces and think what a drag it must've been for them to wake up in the morning?

Slow motion shot of a crowded rush hour morning in the financial district plays over Jim's dialogue.

JIM (CONT'D)

They know all the bullshit they're gonna have to deal with all day long but they get up and go through the same crap anyway. Sometimes I just wanna shake 'em, you know.

(grabbing at the air)

Wake up! Like what kinda change would it take to make your life not be such a fucking drag.

We cut back to the bar.

JIM (CONT'D)

(playful urgency)

Do it!

PERRY

Well they're the "normals". Look around you. They're ninety-five percent of the people we sit in classes with.

JIM

I don't know what the fuck I'm gonna be doing in five years but if you run into me on the street looking like one of them, you have to just smack the shit out of me.

(mimicking a slap
with both hands)

Bam! Don't say anything. I'll know. Promise you'll do that.

PERRY

You got it.

Jim looks at his watch.

JIM

Fuck. We're gonna miss the show.

They both drain their beers quickly. Perry goes to get money from his wallet and sees that he has none.

PERRY

(embarrassed)

Do you think you could cover me?

JIM

Yeah, whatever.

(flipping ten dollars
on the table)

You can pay me back later.

They grab their jackets and rush out the door.

EXT. SOHO GALLERY - EVENING

Bruce approaches the bustling entrance of a gallery hosting a Jacob Lawrence retrospective. His clothing is slightly disheveled. He snakes his way through the crowd of young, fashionable art patrons.

As he walks towards the door, THE GALLERY OWNER, a smartly dressed white woman in her forties, looks towards Bruce and whispers to a BLACK SECURITY GUARD. She abruptly leaves as Bruce climbs the short steps to the door.

BLACK SECURITY GUARD
(stepping towards
Bruce)
I'm sorry sir, this is a private
function.

BRUCE
(irate)
I guess my eyes don't work as well
as these other people.

BLACK SECURITY GUARD
(assertive, no-nonsense)
Do you have an invitation, sir? If
not I'm gonna have to ask you to
leave.

BRUCE
So, fancy clothing buys you the right
to look at a painting. Is that how
it works?

BLACK SECURITY GUARD
Look, sir I'm just doing my job.

An older, elegant, Black man in his seventies, STEPHEN, approaches the entrance. The Black Security Guard nods towards him respectfully.

BLACK SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)
Good evening, Mr. Johnson.

STEPHEN
Hello.

BRUCE
Hi Stephen.

STEPHEN
(excited)
Bruce. So good to see you.

He gives Bruce a warm hug.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

I hope our friend here isn't giving you any trouble.

BRUCE

(smiling, triumphant
and cheeky)

Oh no. Just doing his job and such a fine job at that.

The Black Security Guard steps aside and Bruce follows Stephen into the gallery.

EXT. EAST VILLAGE ALLEY - NIGHT

Perry takes a hit of a joint and passes it to Jim. He starts to hum a De La Soul song to himself.

*
*

PERRY

(To Jim)

That's the jam. I was like "hey".

*
*
*

Perry starts doing "the wop" and then breaks into "the snake".

*

JIM

(laughing, checking
him out)

That's some ole Soul Train type shit.

*
*

Jim takes a long drag on the joint and inhales deeply.

PERRY

(pause)

All we need is Don Cornelius.

(imitating the gestures
and voice of the
Soul Train host)

"Until next time, wishin' ya love,
peace and.....soul".

*
*

Jim looks at him and cracks up as the smoke escapes from his mouth.

INT. PERRY'S DORM ROOM -- NIGHT

Perry opens the door to his room as Jim follows behind.

JIM

That dude Thomas is sellin' that ill weed.

PERRY

No shit....God I've never been this fucking hungry before.

(pause)

We should go get some donuts.

(MORE)

PERRY (CONT'D)
 (imagining them)
 Frosted.

JIM
 Man, relax. I need to chill for a
 second.

Jim looks down at several sketches on the floor. One is the
 portrait of Marcus from earlier. He picks it up.

JIM (CONT'D)
 This is good. You really get his
 anger and his sarcasm.

PERRY
 You think?

JIM
 Definitely. Look at that sneer.
 It's like I know something and you
 wish you knew what it was. It's
 perfect.

PERRY
 Thanks.

JIM
 (putting the picture
 down)
 How is Art 10 anyway?

PERRY
 It's alright. I could do without
 the theoretical mumbo jumbo but it
 keeps me working and thinking.

Jim looks at photographs on Perry's wall as Perry starts to
 sing the chorus of a Q-tip song to himself. There's a picture
 of Perry and four friends dressed as the Village People.

PERRY (CONT'D)
 (looking over)
 That was last Halloween.

Jim inspects the picture more closely. Perry is dressed as
 a cop with mirrored sunglasses and a tight tanned shirt with
 rolled short sleeves. His pants are buttless leather chaps.

JIM
 I can't believe you were in public
 like that.

PERRY
 That was a calm year.

Jim looks at him in disbelief.

PERRY (CONT'D)

If it was up to me every day would be Halloween.

(pause)

When I was like twelve I used to put this really ornate lampshade on my head and walk around the block. Just out of boredom.

JIM

(mock announcer's voice)

The big freak of the ghetto award goes to....

Perry grabs a lampshade, puts it on his head and throws a transparent tapestry on top of it. He spins in the center of the room singing Grandmaster Flash's "The Message" at a frantic pace.

He collapses onto his futon laughing, exasperated. Jim looks over his shoulder amused and slightly awed.

JIM (CONT'D)

You all right down there?

PERRY

Just as dandy as can be.

Jim continues looking at pictures on the wall and thinking as Perry sighs in exhaustion.

JIM

I don't get it. You can't talk to a stranger in a bar but you can walk around with your ass hangin' out for all of New York City to see?

PERRY

What? A quiet person can't have a wild side?

Jim looks at him with the lampshade and tapestry laying next to him.

JIM

Obviously they can.

Jim turns back to the wall. He looks at a picture of Evelyn smiling in front of a building.

JIM (CONT'D)

(pointing to the photo)

Is this your mother?

PERRY
 (looking over at the
 picture)
 That's Evelyn. She runs the homeless
 shelter I work at.

Jim looks at a few more pictures of Evelyn in different
 scenarios. The last one is of her and Perry with him resting
 his head on her shoulder.

JIM
 (moving towards Perry)
 There are more pictures of her than
 your own family.

PERRY
 She's all the family I have as far
 as I'm concerned.

Jim sits down next to Perry on the futon.

JIM
 What do you mean?

PERRY
 Let's just say there are certain
 practices that I engage in that my
 parents can't understand.

JIM
 You can't talk to them about it?

PERRY
 It's pretty clear they don't want to
 have anything to do with me. I
 haven't seen them in over a year.
 (pause)
 I guess you could say I've been cut
 off.

JIM
 (after an uncomfortable
 pause--quiet and
 sincere)
 That's fucked up.

Jim notices Perry's eyes becoming teary and he quickly
 attempts to alter the mood.

JIM (CONT'D)
 You must be thinking
 (mimicking Perry's
 voice)
 "Damn this kid is one nosy
 motherfucker."

He gets up and glances at a collection of videotapes. There are three marked P1, P2 and P3.

JIM (CONT'D)

What are these?

PERRY

The finest porn compilations that twenty dollars can buy.

Jim takes one of the tapes out of the jacket.

JIM

(holding the tape
towards the VCR)

You mind?

PERRY

Go for it.

Jim sits next to Perry on the futon.

They both become transfixed by the tape as two well-built Black guys kiss voraciously. One guy unbuttons the other guy's shirt and pushes him forcefully onto the bed.

As we cut back to the futon Perry is on top of Jim kissing him passionately and the shot is strangely similar to the last image on the TV.

PERRY (CONT'D)

Why watch other people doin' it when we got our own live scene goin' on right here.

JIM

You sure you wanna do this?

PERRY

Don't ask so many questions.

Perry gives him a long, slow kiss. His left arm with the remote reaches back and switches the TV off. The shot simultaneously cuts to black.

INT. PERRY'S DORM ROOM -- NIGHT

Fade up on Perry and Jim asleep. Jim is slowly creeping out of bed. He puts on his pants and the sound of keys wakes Perry.

PERRY

(groggy, confused)
Where you going?

JIM

I'm gonna head back to my room.

PERRY
It's three-thirty in the morning.
Why don't you just stay here?

JIM
I feel like being in my own bed.

PERRY
(after a pause)
You didn't feel like that a few hours ago.

JIM
I'll talk to you later.

Jim walks out with no sign of affection.

INT. HALLWAY/BATHROOM -- NIGHT

Jim enters a bathroom in the hall and looks at himself in the mirror. He fixes his hair and notices three huge, dark purple hickies on his neck.

JIM
(rubbing his neck)
Fuck.

He turns on the faucet and begins vigorously rubbing the water on his neck. Realizing this is of no use, his motion slows. He sighs and hangs his head in frustration and then gives a long, hard gaze at his face in the mirror.

INT.- NUYORICAN POET'S CAFE -- NIGHT

The sound of quiet, polite applause is dying down as the YOUNG, BLACK, FEMALE MC, takes center stage. Marcus and Perry sit at a table watching her.

FEMALE MC
Damn, ya'll must need some coffee or somethin'. Where's the love? It's dyin' up in here.

She looks over at her list of poets.

FEMALE MC (CONT'D)
Alright, this next performer has graced the stage a few times. He's gonna rip somethin' new for ya'll. Let's give it up for Marcus.

Marcus gets up and starts to approach the stage as Perry hoots and hollers for him. The crowd's applause is lethargic.

FEMALE MC (CONT'D)
Wait a minute.
(MORE)

FEMALE MC (CONT'D)
 (Towards Marcus,
 stopping him)
 Go back. Let's try this again.
 Ya'll need to show him some love.
 Gracing the stage of the Nuyorican ,
 we bring you, Marcus.

The crowd cheers much more enthusiastically.

FEMALE MC (CONT'D)
 Now that's what I'm talkin' about.

She hands the mic to Marcus.

MARCUS
 (slightly nervous as
 he unfolds his paper)
 This is somethin' I started workin'
 on yesterday. It's still kinda rough,
 so bear with me.

PERRY
 (yelling from his
 seat)
 It's alright. We like it rough,
 baby!

Marcus loses his concentration and starts to laugh.

MARCUS
 Yeah, we know how you like it.

There is murmuring and laughter amongst the crowd. Perry
 hides his face in faux embarrassment and turns around to see
 Bruce standing by the entrance.

EXT. NUYORICAN POET'S CAFE -- NIGHT

Marcus and Perry sit outside sharing a cigarette as the crowd
 exits.

PERRY
 I really like that rapid-fire part
 in the middle. That tongue was
 movin'! The crowd was feelin' it.

MARCUS
 You really thought it was alright?

PERRY
 Have I ever lied to you before? You
 know me, I'll tell you shit straight
 up. If I think your shit needs some
 work I won't beat around the bush
 about it.

DANNY, a young white boy decked out in FUBU and denim, walks over to them.

DANNY

(to Marcus)

Hey, I just wanted to tell you that I really dug your piece.

MARCUS

(slightly skeptical)

Oh yeah? What'd you like about it?

DANNY

It just got to the source of alot of the anger people I know feel.

(apologetic)

Who am I to talk, right?

(tentative)

But...I guess I can 'cause I spent my whole life around that shit. Brothers on lockdown for some petty bullshit. And you watch that and feel like you can't do anything about it and the anger just builds.

Perry notices a book, *The Dutchman*, in Danny's hand.

PERRY

(gesturing to the book)

That's a great play.

DANNY

Yeah, it's the shit. I know when this came out, brothers must've been like "That's it, I don't need to hear no more." Your piece kinda reminded me of it actually.

(pause)

You readin' again anytime soon?

MARCUS

Nah.

DANNY

Well keep me posted.

He nods at Marcus and sticks his hand out towards Perry.

DANNY (CONT'D)

I'm Danny.

PERRY

(shaking his hand)

Perry. Nice to meet you.

DANNY
 (walking away)
 Yeah, I'll see you around.

They watch as he walks up the block. There is an obvious look of disdain on Marcus's face.

MARCUS
 Caucasoids. They never cease to amaze me.

PERRY
 What? He was complimenting you.

MARCUS
 Like I need that muthafuckah to tell me what my poem's about.

PERRY
 What's the big deal?

MARCUS
 I'm just tired of people like that always tryin' to tell me about my shit. Always tryin' to interpret. Like you to stupid to know what you did. I wrote the muthafuckah. Shit, I lived it.

PERRY
 So, he can't get anything out of it?

MARCUS
 I could give two shits what he gets out of it. Fake-ass, poseur-liberal wannabe. Reminds me of that idiot you be dealin' with.

PERRY
 Who Jim? He's not like that.

MARCUS
 Yeah, right. How many times have I heard that before.

PERRY
 You know all this anger you have towards white people is the same anger that brothers feel towards me for being gay.

MARCUS
 Nah, that's totally different.

PERRY
 Is it?

MARCUS

You know how brothers front. Together they might dis you so that nobody thinks they're that way. But if you ever got in real trouble you'd still be fam and they'd still have your back.

PERRY

I'm not so sure about that.

Marcus tries to think of something to convince him.

MARCUS

Remember in little league when everyone teased you 'cause you threw like a girl. Who stood up for you?

PERRY

Alright, you got me.

MARCUS

(jovial, refreshing his memory)
Championship game?

PERRY

(rolling his eyes)
Now why you gotta go there?

MARCUS

Ninth inning. Bases loaded. Two outs. Tigers were beating us eight to seven and you got up to bat and the other team started yelling "No batter". And you struck out and we lost.

PERRY

Thanks for reminding me.

MARCUS

(reliving the memory)
That kid Ron started pushing you
(mimicking Ron)
"All you had to do is hit the ball just this one fucking time." And you fell on the floor and your eyes started getting all watery and all the other kids are goin' "Yeah, kick his ass. Fuck him up."

(pause)

Who stepped in to break it up?

PERRY

(copping to the truth)
You did.

MARCUS
That's right and don't forget it.

Marcus leans towards him and puts a hand on his shoulder.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Everybody in the world's not out to
get you.

Car horns from the traffic blare next to them.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
(looking at his watch)
Damn, I gotta break out. But I'm a
find you a good brother. I got my
eye out.

PERRY
Well, I can't wait forever. You
know where to find me right?

MARCUS
At the shelter, right.

Perry nods as they grab hands and embrace.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Peace.

PERRY
Later.

Marcus takes off up the block as Perry looks after him
pensively.

MARCUS
(bellowing into the
street)
Keep hope alive my son, keep hope
alive.

INT. HOMELESS SHELTER -- FRONT DESK -- NIGHT

Perry is asleep with a worn copy of a Jean-Michel Basquiat
biography face down next to him.

Bruce enters and watches him sleep. He slowly picks up the
book, staring at the cover. He turns it over for a moment,
then puts it down and enters the other room.

INT. HOMELESS SHELTER -- SLEEPING QUARTERS -- NIGHT

Bruce looks around the large room filled with sleeping men.
He finds one of the few empty beds and lays down. The camera
rests on a close-up of his face as he drifts into sleep.

INT. HOMELESS SHELTER -- SLEEPING QUARTERS -- LATER

Perry is roaming the darkened sleeping quarters with a flashlight. He passes Bruce and notices a pad coming out of a bag next to his bed. He goes over and sees several sketches. One is an unfinished portrait of Perry. Bruce turns in the bed and Perry quickly exits the room.

EXT. HOMELESS SHELTER -- DAY

A brilliant, morning sun shines onto the city streets.

INT. HOMELESS SHELTER FRONT DESK -- DAY

Perry is on duty signing someone out.

PERRY
How've you been Tom? You doin'
alright?

TOM
I'm hangin' in there you know, takin'
it one day at a time.

PERRY
Well, that's all we can do right.

Perry notices someone attempting to leave without being seen.

PERRY (CONT'D)
Excuse me sir, you have to sign out.

He recognizes Bruce as he walks towards him.

PERRY (CONT'D)
I don't remember signing you in last
night.

BRUCE
That's because you were asleep when
I got here.

PERRY
(filling in the sheet)
What's your name?

BRUCE
Bruce.

PERRY
Last name.

BRUCE
Nugent.

Perry gives a knowing glance at him.

PERRY

And what time did you get here last night?

BRUCE

That's information you get paid to know. I certainly don't think I should be doing your job for you.

PERRY

(functional, monotone)

Eleven-thirty. Sounds good to me. Can you sign next to your name.

As Bruce is writing Perry nonchalantly pulls out a book and begins reading. Bruce is frozen as he hears his words.

PERRY (CONT'D)

(excerpt of "Smoke,
Lilies and Jade")

"If colors could be heard he'd paint most wondrous tunes. Symphonious. Think. The dulcet clear tone of a blue like night. Truly smoke was like imagination."

Bruce puts the pen down and slowly looks up at him. Perry holds the book up so that it faces Bruce, the title reads "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" By Bruce Nugent.

PERRY (CONT'D)

(nonchalantly)

This is you, isn't it?

BRUCE

I guess it is.

PERRY

(getting up and
gathering his
belongings)

Well, I want to talk to you. Do you mind if I walk out with you?

BRUCE

You seem ready to whether I want you to or not...and I suppose I never could resist the company of a handsome young man.

He smiles suggestively and turns to leave as an intrigued Perry follows.

EXT. PORCH -- DAY

Perry and Bruce sit next to each other in the harsh sunlight.

PERRY

I really love it. The phrasing, the mood, everything. It's like someone of a completely different time and place but it's exactly how I feel.

BRUCE

Well I hate to be the one to break it to you but I'm here and now, flesh and blood right in front of your very own eyes.

PERRY

(confused, nervous
then more composed)

I know that...I mean...

(pause)

God, I don't know where to start. I mean... What's someone like you doing sleepin' in a shelter?

BRUCE

(slightly offended)

Someone like me?

PERRY

(nervous, tongue-tied)

Ah...you know...a respected, published writer from the Harlem Renaissance.

BRUCE

I slept in hallways and rooftops then, why would things change now.

(slightly angry, yet
amused by Perry's
naivete)

Respected? If you wrote about bein' gay in that time, respect was the last thing you were gonna get.

Bruce rises from the porch and begins walking up the block as Perry follows.

TIME CUT :

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. STREET (1926)(BLACK & WHITE) -- NIGHT

Previous shot of Young Bruce and Langston walking along the street laughing and talking.

PERRY (O.S.)

How'd you get into writing?

BRUCE (O.S.)

Langston Hughes turned me onto it really.

(MORE)

BRUCE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 Night after night, he and I would walk each other back and forth from his house to my house, and if we hadn't finished talking we'd turn right back around and continue. On and on all night long. With Langston you never really ran out of things to say.

PERRY (O.S.)
 So you guys were pretty tight?

BRUCE (O.S.)
 Yeah. I was pretty taken with him. How could I not be? He was good to look at, good to listen to, good to talk to, and at 24 he'd been all over the world to places I'd only dreamed about. And sure enough his powers of persuasion lured me to New York.

TIME CUT:

INT. YWCA(1926)-- DAY

Young Bruce and Langston enter a cafeteria. The smell of good soul food is wafting through the air.

YOUNG BRUCE
 It smells so good and I'm starving.

LANGSTON
 Well, I'll tell you the food doesn't get much better than this.

Langston spots a thin, dark-skinned black man in the corner quietly reading.

LANGSTON (CONT'D)
 Oh, look there's Wally.

YOUNG BRUCE
 Wally who?

LANGSTON
 Thurman.

Langston is heading towards the table. Young Bruce is frozen.

YOUNG BRUCE
 (confused, disturbed)
 That's Wallace Thurman? That's impossible.

(MORE)

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)

(quiet, stunned)
He's the blackest person I've ever
seen.

Langston comes back, grabbing Bruce gently by the arm and
leading him over.

LANGSTON

(warmly)
Wally. How've you been?

WALLY

(smiling shyly, rising
from his chair)
I've been good.

Wally gives Langston a hug.

LANGSTON

This is my friend Bruce. It's his
first time in New York, so he's just
soaking it all in.

WALLY

(extending his hand
to Young Bruce)
Well there's certainly alot out there
to soak in.

After a lengthy pause, Young Bruce grabs his hand reluctantly
with a dumb-struck, hollow-eyed, nervous expression on his
face. Langston looks back and forth between the two of them.

WALLY (CONT'D)

Will you join me?

LANGSTON

Absolutely.

Langston sits next to Wally and immediately engages him.
Young Bruce is visibly disturbed and cautiously takes the
third seat.

LANGSTON (CONT'D)

So how's your new job over at The
Messenger?

WALLY

It's okay. Keepin' a roof over my
head, you know.
(beat)
Thank god I'm a quick reader. 'Cause
I'll tell you some of this stuff the
quicker you get through it the better.

LANGSTON

That bad, huh?

WALLY

Horrendous. But I guess it helps to see exactly the kind of writing you don't want to be doing.

Young Bruce jumps up abruptly from his chair.

YOUNG BRUCE

(awkward)

Excuse me, I'm not feeling very well.

Langston gets up in concern.

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)

No, no. Stay. I just need to get some air.

EXT. YWCA(1926)-- DAY

Young Bruce is leaning up against the side of the building breathing heavily with his eyes closed.

BRUCE (O.S.)

There I was thinking of myself as this open-minded Bohemian and the sight of someone I admired...being so Black.

(pause)

I was sick at the sight, and at my own reaction. It all came crashing down on me. Seeing these prejudices within me...it made my skin crawl.

INT. MESSENGER OFFICES(1926) -- DAY

Wally is at his desk, pen in hand and slashing at pages when a knock interrupts him.

WALLY

Come in.

Young Bruce enters sheepishly.

WALLY (CONT'D)

Hi. I didn't think I'd be seeing you again so soon.

YOUNG BRUCE

(tentative,
apprehensive)

Well. I wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier today.

(MORE)

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)

I just...admire your work so much..and...I know I must have been incredibly rude. I honestly think I've just been a little overwhelmed.

WALLY

(extending his hand)

Well apology accepted.

Young Bruce grasps his hand firmly and warmly with two hands.

WALLY (CONT'D)

Actually, if you don't have any plans, I'd love it if you and Langston would come over for a drink tonight.

YOUNG BRUCE

That would be great.

INT. WALLY'S ROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

A dark hand places the needle of a record into the groove. The dust crackles in a strange rhythm and a Negro spiritual begins playing("Fire", music by Hall Johnson, lyrics by Langston Hughes).

TIME CUT:

EXT. EAST VILLAGE STREET -- DAY

The spiritual blends with the funky trip-hop beat from a passing car. Perry seems sparked by Bruce as Marcus walks towards them.

MARCUS

(To Bruce)

Hey look who it is. Big papa with the stuff. What's goin' on?

BRUCE

Not much. How's the writing?

MARCUS

Oh it's comin' along.

BRUCE

Well keep at it. We need you out here.

MARCUS

I'm not stoppin' no time soon, man.

(to Perry)

You know if you want me to help you carry stuff we should go. I gotta be somewhere at twelve.

PERRY
 You're right.
 (to Bruce)
 Well, I'll catch you later.

EXT. EAST VILLAGE STREET -- DAY

Marcus and Perry turn a corner walking briskly.

PERRY
 That dude's a piece of work.

MARCUS
 What do you mean?

PERRY
 I don't know. I can't get a handle
 on him.
 (pause)
 Strange bird.

EXT. JIM'S DORM ROOM - DAY

Jim enters his room, throws his backpack down and looks over at the blinking light on the answering machine. He reaches over and presses a button.

PERRY (O.S.)
 Hey Jim, it's Perry. I'm not sure
 why you left the other night. I
 hope everything's still cool. If
 you wanna meet me later, I'll be in
 the park at the usual spot around
 4:30. Hopefully I'll see you there.
 Bye.

INT. UNIVERSITY ART STUDIO -- DAY

Perry stands in front of a half-finished canvas. It's abstract yet there's a violent, sexual nature to the imagery. His gaze intensifies as we see brief glimpses of the physical confrontation with his father intercut with closeups of a sexual encounter.

EXT. WASHINGTON SQ. PARK -- DAY

A boombox blasts hip-hop as young children play on the grass. Perry and Jim sit on the grass drinking forties under a tree. Perry thinks to himself and lets out a small laugh.

JIM
 (curious)
 What?

*
 *
 *
 *

PERRY

(slightly embarrassed)

Nothing.

(tentative, laughing
a little)

The summer when I was like nine we had mice in our house. And I'd always have these dreams of them falling on me and gnawing at my face.

JIM

Jesus.

PERRY

I'd fold the blankets and sheets on top of my bed so that they didn't touch the floor. That way the mice couldn't climb onto the bed and get me.

JIM

(non-chalant, jovial)

We didn't have mice on the Upper West Side... But I was always scared that someone was hiding under my bed. I remember being 8 or 9 and having to pee and thinking that as soon as my feet hit the floor an arm would reach out from under the bed and grab me. I was so scared to go and I'd scramble to the bathroom and then leap back onto the bed.

(pause, more animated
at the thought)

Then I thought if I filled up the space under my bed with tons of stuff that they'd have to move stuff to get me.

PERRY

Or that a body couldn't fit under there with everything else.

JIM

Right. That as long as I had all this stuff under there everything was cool.

(laughing)

So for like ten years underneath my bed was just packed with tons of shit.

PERRY

That's amazing.

*
*
*
*

*
*
*

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*
*

JIM
 (raising his beer
 after a beat)
 Well here's to bizarre childhood
 rituals.

*
 *

They touch bottles and drink.

Perry looks at Jim tenderly and reaches over and touches his hair. He starts giving him a massage. Jim closes his eyes, getting lost in the feeling.

*
 *
 *

As Jim opens his eyes Rahsan and Sean walk by glaring at them.

SEAN
 (to Rahsan)
 He's lookin' you up and down like
 you some bitch, yo.

*
 *

Jim looks at them nervously and grabs Perry's hand.

*

JIM
 (to Perry)
 Stop.
 (pause)
 Come on let's go.

*
 *
 *

Perry looks over at Rahsan and Sean as he and Jim exit the park.

INT. JIM'S DORM ROOM -- EVENING

Jim and Perry are in bed under the covers as Jim smokes a cigarette. He leans over and starts touching Perry's hair. He kisses Perry on the cheek.

JIM
 You make me feel so good.

PERRY
 I'm glad. I like making you feel
 good.

JIM
 (caressing his shoulder)
 I love your skin. It's so smooth.

Perry starts to get uncomfortable and moves away slightly. Jim starts touching his face.

JIM (CONT'D)
 And your lips.
 (nuzzling into his
 neck)
 You're so fucking beautiful.

Perry stares out the window at the moonlight.

JIM (CONT'D)
 (looking down)
 And you got the sweetest black ass
 I've ever seen.

Perry rolls his eyes and turns away. A look of hurt registers on his face. After a while he starts getting dressed.

PERRY
 I gotta go.

JIM
 What?

Perry looks at him for a moment and then grabs his shirt and leaves abruptly. Jim lets out a slight, exasperated sigh and falls back onto the bed.

JIM (CONT'D)
 (to himself)
 What the fuck?

INT. SUBWAY PLATFORM -- EVENING

Perry and Marcus are waiting for the train. They are in mid-conversation and Marcus has a look of disbelief on his face.

MARCUS
 I'm not even gonna say it. I hate
 it when them motherfuckers prove me
 right but they always do. Every
 time.

PERRY
 Alright. Shut up already.

MARCUS
 Usually it's not so bold and obvious.
 They at least try to be subtle about
 it. But Jim's blatant enough to say
 shit straight up and then so stupid
 that he doesn't even know he's being
 offensive.

PERRY
 You're not gonna stop are you?

MARCUS
 Alright.
 (pauses and then
 launches back into
 it.)
 But that's the type of shit you need
 to knock those blinders off your
 (MORE)

MARCUS (CONT'D)
 face. The shit's gotta be crystal
 clear to you now.

He waits for a response from Perry who avoids his eyes.

PERRY
 Maybe he's just being honest.

MARCUS
 And I suppose the fact that his
 honesty offends you doesn't mean
 anything.

We notice A BLACK MAN, with bags and a cup on the platform
 watching their interaction.

PERRY
 It could be that he's just not aware.

MARCUS
 There you go again, always givin'
 some white boy the benefit of the
 doubt.

PERRY
 Whatever.

MARCUS
 Damn. This is some deep delusional
 shit goin' on.

The train roars into the station and they enter with an influx
 of people.

INT. SUBWAY -- EVENING

Marcus continues, oblivious to the people around him.

MARCUS
 Sex with homeboy must be real good,
 if you still don't know after some
 racist bullshit like that.

The man who has been watching them with disdain now begins
 walking and soliciting contributions.

MAN
 Good afternoon ladies and gentleman,
 I'm from the Unity Foundation of New
 York City and we're working to provide
 food and shelter for young brothers
 on the street. Anything you can
 spare would be much appreciated.

MARCUS

(quietly to the man)
Sorry.

MAN

A quarter, a dime, anything to turn these young lives around. Help the next generation to prosper. Help them say no to drugs, crime and fornication outside of wedlock.

Marcus and Perry exchange glances as the man receives donations across from them. The man turns around with his cup held out, looking directly into Perry's eyes.

MAN (CONT'D)

Help them to resist the wicked ways that our weaker brothers have fallen into. Young men without the strength to resist lying down with members of the same sex.

(gets louder, looking towards Perry)

Young brothers without the knowledge to know how to follow the teachings of the lord as stated in Leviticus chapter 20 verse 10 - "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them."

MARCUS

(loudly and confidently)
Yo, man why don't you shut the fuck up. Nobody on this train needs to be hearin' that bullshit.

MAN

(more statement than question)
So, now the words of the bible are bullshit?

MARCUS

(bold, confrontational)
Damn right, when it's words like that. I also remember the bible saying let he who is free of sin cast the first stone. I suppose that's you. You've never sinned in your life, is that right my brother?

MAN

I still love you in my heart but the lord does not condone your lifestyle.

MARCUS

Well, maybe you need to get to know
the lord a little better.

MAN

I forgive you but the lord does not.
I will pray for you both.

MARCUS

(aggressive and heated
as they move towards
the doors)

Save your prayers for yourself.

Perry and Marcus exit the train. They pass three workmen, 2
white and 1 black, who are entering. Perry looks back at
the black man who is particularly striking.

INT. SUBWAY PLATFORM -- EVENING

Marcus is incensed as Perry looks at the man through the
doors.

MARCUS

(anger, disbelief)
What the fuck's wrong with you?
Instead of standin' up for yourself
you're busy cruisin' some guy.

PERRY

That's right. I don't give a fuck
what that asshole thinks.

MARCUS

Somebody's basically spittin' in
your muthafuckin' face and you don't
do shit.

PERRY

I don't need to justify nothin' and
I'll cruise guys right in front of
that idiot so he fucking knows it.
(pause)
And what you need to do is learn how
to mind your own goddamn business.

MARCUS

So that's the thanks I get.

PERRY

Look, I can take care of myself. If
I need your protection I'll ask for
it.

Perry looks directly into his eyes and walks toward the
stairs.

MARCUS
Yo, where you goin'?

INT. BAR -- NIGHT

Perry sits at a bar, closes his eyes and downs a shot.

EXT. WEST SIDE CLUB - BATH HOUSE - ENTRANCE -- NIGHT

Perry is pensively smoking a cigarette. He takes one last drag and throws the cigarette onto the ground.

INT. WEST SIDE CLUB - BATH HOUSE - LOBBY -- NIGHT

Perry climbs the stairs and joins the end of the line. A few of the mostly white gay men turn around and assess him.

INT. WEST SIDE CLUB - BATH HOUSE - HALL -- NIGHT

The camera holds on a dark corridor with dim, yellow light emanating from a few open doors. Perry enters frame with a towel wrapped around his waist. He walks slowly, looks into one of the rooms and moves on.

He passes A WELL-BUILT, NEATLY TRIMMED WHITE MAN who catches his glance for a moment and quickly looks away.

Perry approaches a GORGEOUS BLACK MAN WITH DREADLOCKS who is touching his crotch in an attempt to arouse A LANKY BLONDE across from him.

Perry strokes himself and raises a suggestive eyebrow towards him. The dreadlocked Black man rolls his eyes and walks away.

Perry opens the door to a steam room and a rush of steam pours out as he enters. Close-up of clouds of steam as they rise in the air. The camera holds on the door for a few moments.

A HANDSOME, KIND-LOOKING BLACK MAN exits the steam room. Perry is following him closely.

The attractive Black man approaches a door, unlocks it and enters the room with Perry right behind him.

Perry shuts the door abruptly.

INT. WEST SIDE CLUB - SHOWER -- NIGHT

Perry enters the shower area. He turns on the water and closes his eyes feeling the water against his hair and back. He tries to relax yet he's uncomfortable and lost.

Deep sadness and guilt overwhelm him as the camera tracks into his face. His eyes become watery and the beginnings of tears start to develop.

He brushes them away in an almost, embarrassed, "covering up" kind of way.

He turns the water off and grabs his towel.

INT. JIM'S DORM KITCHEN -- DAY

Perry is angrily opening cupboard doors, looking for a glass.

JIM
Why don't you sit down?

PERRY
I feel like standing.

JIM
Fine.
(awkward, tense)
You know, sometimes I say and do things without thinking and I'm sorry.

PERRY
I'm not sure if that's good enough.

JIM
Well what else can I do? What's done is done. I can't change that. Why are you makin' all this drama outta nothin'?

Perry becomes more angry and unsettled but manages to retain his composure.

PERRY
'Cause I need to know you're with me for who I am and not some mythical bullshit inside your head.

JIM
(attacking)
Well I don't wanna feel like I have to monitor every fuckin' thing that comes outta my mouth.
(pauses, trying to remain calm)

PERRY
Do you know how many white guys I meet who don't give a shit about what's goin' on in my mind but only want to sleep with me 'cause they want some sweet black ass or some big black dick?

JIM
And that's what you think I'm like?

PERRY

I don't know. I'm not inside your head.

Jim sighs heavily and closes his eyes, concentrating on getting through to Perry.

JIM

Look, that night you knew I wasn't sure. But I just did it.

(pause)

This is all new to me. I don't know what I'm doin'. You knew that was my first time with a guy. Didn't you?

PERRY

I guess I figured that.

JIM

All I can say is I'm really confused and I need to slow down and figure some shit out for myself.

Perry stares at him blankly, trying to fight back angry tears welling in his eyes.

PERRY

(slow, really hurt
and uncomfortable)

You know...I never meant to put you in an awkward position. But I've been looking for a boyfriend for a really long time and I've been intensely lonely for a really long time and I got kicked out of my parent's house recently which led to alot of emotional shit. And

(slightly uncomfortable
pause)

I need someone in my life whose more than a friend whose willing to.....love me. And I don't have that and I thought you might be that.

(speaks slowly, staring
directly at him)

But I don't think you are.

Perry starts to move towards the door.

JIM

So you're gonna leave? Just like that?

PERRY

Just like that.

Perry stares at him for a moment and then walks out, slowly closing the door behind him.

EXT. SUBWAY PLATFORM -- EVENING

Perry exits the subway in an agitated manner as Bruce enters two doors away from him. Bruce sits down and begins watching three men talk in muffled, quiet tones.

WHITE MAN #1

I can't wait to get home, man. I am dead tired.

BLACK MAN

You can say that again. Have me a hot meal and put this head to rest.

The Black Man is the same man Perry was staring at in the opening train scene. He closes his eyes and leans back.

TIME CUT:

INT. SUBWAY TRAIN (1926) (BLACK & WHITE) -- NIGHT

Young Bruce watches the same Black Man and is completely mesmerized. His eyes roam his finely chiseled bone structure, taut physique and jet black hair.

Young Bruce's POV(slow-motion)- The Black man smiles at his friend, slapping his hand in agreement.

Young Bruce gives him a warm, sly smile while staring for an exceedingly long amount of time.

Young Bruce's POV (slow-motion)- The Black man turns finally catching his gaze. Young Bruce writes on a small slip of paper and slowly approaches.

YOUNG BRUCE

Excuse me, I was wondering if you might be interested in having your portrait done?

WHITE MAN #2

(jokingly to his other friend)

Looks like he finally made it man.

(pushing the other white guy)

Move over, give Mr. Hollywood some room.

BLACK MAN

(to Young Bruce)

What's in it for me?

YOUNG BRUCE

Well, the pleasure of giving me pleasure for one and the ability to see the reflection of your beauty through my eyes for two. Isn't that enough?

The Black man looks at him skeptically. Bruce hands him the note.

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)

You can either come or not. It's up to you.

Opening the sheet of paper he sees Bruce's name and address with a date and time. He looks up as Young Bruce smiles walking through the train doors.

INT. DARK ROOM/BLACK BOX(BLACK AND WHITE)

Two dark-skinned Black men, JAMES and EL, stare at each other from opposite sides of a table.

These monologues are intermittently intercut with Black Panther rally footage and shots of Black Gay men at a gay pride march.

On the soundtrack at the beginning we hear the Black Panthers chanting: "The revolution is now" over and over. El has been sitting with his head bowed in darkness. A light shines on him as he raises his head, stares into the camera and begins talking.

EL

I used to sit and read and think to myself "Damn, preach." I'd flip to the cover and look into those great big eyes. But there was always something there that made me uncomfortable. And for awhile I couldn't really put my finger on it. Until I picked up "Another Country".

JAMES

I picked up a newspaper in Paris and your face was right there. Next to it was another article about a young, black girl fighting to go to school. And I looked around at this French Cafe and thought "what the hell am I doing here." The struggle's goin' down and I'm thinkin' about White America's race problem from overseas. I bought a plane ticket the next day. But even stepping onto the plane there was something strange. I felt really unsettled...unstable.

EL

We wanted fundamental, irrevocable liberation. I looked closer at your words and I knew you weren't with it, man. You hated Black folks.

JAMES

I headed straight down south, met Dr. King and fell in love with the backwoods Black people I met.

The camera begins to dolly around them as if it's a bird circling its prey. They address each other more directly.

EL

It always seemed like you were defending your first love -- the white man. I saw those big eyes staring over your shoulder at him. Like a child-thief staring at the cookie jar.

JAMES

I knew I needed to be home. Medger Evers and I went all over Mississippi for weeks, investigating the murder of a black man.

EL

Self-hatred has alot of forms. It can go undetected by even your closest friends. You got Negroes trying to erase any trace of their Blackness. Trying everything from bleaching their skin to using concoctions to take Africa out of their hair.

(looks towards James)

The extreme example of this self-hatred is the Black fag who takes the white man as his lover. His hatred turns onto Blackness, what he is and all those who look just like him. Even hating the darkness of night.

JAMES

Searching at all hours of the night we never found the Black Man's murderer. And some of the very people whose liberation I was fighting for, did not want me there. I was spat upon because of something I could not control. Because I'm a homosexual. When white people criticized me it sent me into heated, clear articulation.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

But when Black people criticized me it really made me want to break down and cry. It made it really hard to go on.

EL

The relationship between black and white in America is a power struggle. It's there every day in each interpersonal relationship.

JAMES

I know about white men and black men. I've been menaced by both.

EL

(acknowledging James more)

That's right. And the psychic distance between love and hate is the same as the physical distance between a smile and a sneer.

JAMES

(directly towards El)

What did I ever do to you?

EL

(interrupting, intensely angry, staring directly at him and pointing)

You!...You let the white man fuck you in the ass. And you know what that makes you? Huh? That makes you the lowest scum on the earth.

JAMES

And who gives you the right to judge?

EL

(erupts and violently overthrows the table)

I'll show you my right motherfucker!

The table crashes and resounds. They stare at each other, standing face to face. Hatred penetrates every core of their bodies as they both hold their ground.

The soundtrack mixes the Black Panther chant from the beginning with a Gay Pride Chant from the Gay Men of African Descent.

Audio static and cut to the Last Poets snippet: "The revolution will not be televised." Visual and audio static.

Cut to Black

High angle shot of the white outline of a dead body pulls out slowly.

Fade to Black

Fade up on Title over Black : "His work is the fruit of a tree with a poison root. Such succulent fruit, what a painful tree. What a malignant root."

Title Over Black : Native Sons

Title Over Black : Text from the words, thoughts and experiences of James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver.

The film flickers out leaving a blank, white screen.

INT. UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM - MORNING

The class is eerily silent except for the whir of the projector. After a few moments, Perry turns the projector off.

RAHSAN

(To Isaiah)

Why are we watching this in this class?

PERRY

(defensive)

Someone I know made it and I think it's important and relevant.

RAHSAN

So now anyone can show whatever they want and we're forced to watch it just 'cause **they** think it's important.

PERRY

We're supposed to do presentations. That's my presentation.

RAHSAN

Well I don't think I should have to look at it.

PERRY

Why do you care? Maybe 'cause you're afraid to face yourself.

ISAIAH

Perry. Enough.

PERRY
 (To Rahsan)(bemused,
 mocking, defiant)
 Step on out the closet brother.
 Life's alright on the other side.

There is hushed laughter and talk from the other students.

ISAIAH
 (stern, authoritative)
 I've already warned you both. I
 will not tolerate this level of
 discussion in this classroom.

The bell rings and students get up to leave. Perry and Jim glance at each other from across the room as Jim gathers his stuff and quickly exits.

ISAIAH (CONT'D)
 (over the din)
 Perry, come here.

Perry walks towards his desk.

PERRY
 What's up?

ISAIAH
 (direct and
 authoritative)
 Now, whatever personal issues you
 and Rahsan have need to be left
 outside of this classroom. Is that
 understood?

PERRY
 Yeah.

ISAIAH
 Now, it's okay for that to be part
 of your presentation. But I also
 think part of your presentation needs
 to be in your own voice, being clear
 about your thoughts and ideas around
 these issues. How do they affect
 you and society and culture in the
 present.

PERRY
 Fine.

ISAIAH
 You can use the texts we've read in
 class and other outside materials.
 But you need to synthesize them into
 your own ideas.

He sees a look of disappointment and confusion on Perry's face.

ISAIAH (CONT'D)
 (encouraging)
 You're doing some important work.
 Don't let yourself get distracted.

PERRY
 I'm glad someone appreciates it.

They walk and exit as Isaiah holds the door for Perry.

EXT. HOMELESS SHELTER -- LATE AFTERNOON

Perry exits the shelter and sees Bruce looking at him from across the street. He approaches him.

PERRY
 (direct)
 How's it goin'?

BRUCE
 Alright.

PERRY
 (antagonistic and
 aggressive)
 Man, what's your deal?

BRUCE
 Excuse me?

PERRY
 Every time I turn around you're like
 in my face. You know, you seem cool
 but...it's startin' to freak me out.

BRUCE
 Sorry.

PERRY
 Look...no offense but I am a little
 young for you.

BRUCE
 (laughing slightly)
 True.

PERRY
 (confrontational)
 So what do you want?

BRUCE
 A little bit of time maybe. That's
 it.

PERRY

Yeah, well maybe I don't have time to spare.

BRUCE

Suit yourself. If you don't expect nothin' then you won't be let down. There's no money back guarantee.

Bruce gets up, walking away with conviction as Perry tentatively follows.

EXT. NEW YORK CITY STREETS, TIMES SQUARE/HARLEM -- EVENING

Time lapse shots of present-day New York City streets seen as rapid-fire streaks. People and traffic all in a frenetic hustle. These shots dissolve into the same streets seen in archival footage from the 1920's.

EXT. HARLEM - WEST 136TH STREET(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Bruce and Perry walk up a vibrant Harlem street.

BRUCE

Do you ever come up here?

PERRY

Nah, not really. I'm from Brooklyn. Harlem's not really my area.

BRUCE

(gesturing around)

Look at everything you're missing.

Hip-hop is blaring from a car as people laugh and talk in different groups.

PERRY

(unimpressed, looking around)

Looks just like Brooklyn. Alot people hangin' around doin' a whole lotta nothin'.

BRUCE

That's it, huh?

PERRY

Yup.

Bruce and Perry turn a corner.

TIME CUT

EXT. - WEST 136TH ST(1926)(BLACK & WHITE) -- NIGHT

Langston and Young Bruce are walking up the same street and approaching the front of a building. The song "Fire" plays over their walk.

TIME CUT

INT. 267 WEST 136TH ST.(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Bruce and Perry enter a dilapidated building. It's dank, grey and ominous.

BRUCE
 (looking around,
 touching the banister
 of the stairs)
 I can't believe it's still here.

Bruce begins climbing the stairs and turns around noticing a fearful Perry at the door.

BRUCE (CONT'D)
 Look at you. If an old man like me
 is game for a little adventure, you
 should be too.
 (gesturing with his
 hand)
 Come on, you go first.

PERRY
 (walking towards him)
 Whose big idea was this anyway?

BRUCE
 Oh live a little.

Perry goes up the creaking stairs and Bruce follows. As Bruce reaches the top of the stairs he turns around to see....

TIME CUT

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(1926)-- NIGHT

(Slow Motion)Langston and Young Bruce slowly climbing the cleaner, polished version of the same staircase and looking up towards the top landing.

BRUCE (V.O.)
 That night Langston and I came to
 visit we ended up staying off and on
 for two years. This building was
 what we affectionately called
 Niggeratti Manor.

INT. WALLY'S ROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Wally is slowly taking the needle off a record. He sits back down at the typewriter and finishes his last sentence with satisfaction. He reads the letter over.

This is intercut with footage of ZORA, a young, energized Black woman, who's filming Black street children playing different games.

WALLY (V.O.)

Dear Zora -- This is the rough statement of purpose for the magazine. "We of the younger generation are like all other human beings in a period of transition. We are eternally discovering things about ourselves and our environments which our elders have been at pains to hide. We all know that articulate Negroes in the past have been battling down an inferiority complex. They have been so busy justifying their presence in a hostile, racist environment that they've ceased to be human beings. They've become social problems even to themselves. With the new magazine we will cease to look for respectability in the white person's eyes. We will express the beauty and ugliness of our individual selves for ourselves. If anything is deemed disturbing or pornographic then so much the better. We will seek to express ourselves as we see fit." Please let me know what you think. I am also eagerly awaiting your submission.

Wally

TIME CUT:

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Bruce moves towards a door and opens it as Perry follows behind.

TIME CUT:

INT. WALLY'S ROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Wally turns around from his typewriter as Young Bruce and Langston enter the room.

LANGSTON

Looks like we missed all the fun.
The music's turned off. He's
positioned in front of the typewriter
for some serious work.

WALLY

Oh, I'm just posing and waiting for
distraction... and here you are.

YOUNG BRUCE

Well you know what they say about
all work and no play.

WALLY

Well even when I'm working, I'm
playing.
(pointing to his head)
Up here.

Wally begins pouring three glasses of scotch and handing
them out.

YOUNG BRUCE

What's that song you were just
playing?

WALLY

It's called "Fire".

YOUNG BRUCE

Well you can't deprive us of it any
longer.

Wallace puts the record on at low volume as Langston glances
at Zora's name in the letter in the typewriter.

LANGSTON

How's Zora doing?

WALLY

Good. She's been down south
collecting stories and filming all
sorts of things. She's at Barnard
studying with Boas so they're funding
it all.

Zora's archival documentary footage of kids playing street
games is intercut with recreated archival footage of her
shooting with a 16mm Bolex camera.

YOUNG BRUCE

What a life.

WALLY

No kidding. Oh I got a letter from
her last week.

Wally opens his desk drawer, takes out the letter and hands it to Langston. Langston opens it.

WALLY (CONT'D)

You have to look at the numbered part with the five characteristics of the Negro.

We hear Zora speaking her words as Langston reads. The letter reading is intercut with Zora filming and her actual archival footage corresponding to her "laws" as she describes them.

There's background soundtrack music of her and Alan Lomax's field recordings of folk songs.

ZORA (V.O.)

I have come to five general laws but I shall not mention them to Papa Boas, Godmother or Alain Locke until I have them worked out. Godmother has forbid me to publish in exchange for a two hundred dollar salary. But I know you can be trusted. "One-The Negro's outstanding characteristic is drama. That is why he appears so imitative. Drama is mimicry. Note gesture in place of words. Two-Negro is lacking in reverence. Note the number of stories in which God, church and heaven are treated lightly. Three-angularity is everything, sculpture, dance, abrupt storytelling. Four-Redundance. The number of times, usually three, that a feature is repeated in a story. Five-Restrained ferocity in everything. There is a tense ferocity beneath the casual exterior that stirs the onlooker to hysteria. Note effect of Negro music, dancing and gestures on the staid Caucasian." Ideas are swellin' up in me like a barrel of molasses in the summertime. Remember these are between you and me. I'll tell you more soon in person. Love Zora.

INT. WALLY'S ROOM(1926) -- DAY

Langston is smiling and shaking his head contemplating Zora.

WALLY

(to Langston)

We actually have this idea for a new journal that we've been bouncin' back and forth.

LANGSTON
 Something like "Crisis"?

WALLY
 Bite your tongue. No more weepin'
 and moanin' for respect from white
 people. Locke and Dubois have had
 their say. This is about younger
 artists. Something with spunk and
 passion.

Langston looks towards Young Bruce in joint recognition.

YOUNG BRUCE
 Sounds like we've all been having
 the same conversation.

WALLY
 We're talkin' drawing, poetry,
 fiction, essays. Anything by young
 Negroes with something new to say.

YOUNG BRUCE
 (to Wally)
 Well count us in.

Langston nods in agreement. Wally becomes lost in the lyrics
 of the song, closing his eyes and humming along.

LANGSTON
 (to Wally)
 Does it have a name?

Wally lost in the rhythm suddenly opens his eyes.

WALLY
 I hadn't really thought about it,
 But how 'bout "Fire"?

LANGSTON
 (getting up and raising
 his glass)
 Well here's to burnin' it all down.

Young Bruce increases the volume on the phonograph and joins
 the toast. They drink and dance, all three holding each
 other, lost in the boozy reveries with the song.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR (1926) WORK MONTAGE --
 AFTERNOON/EVENING

Swinging jazz music sets the pace for a fast montage of
 different artists greeting each other, moving in, getting
 settled (Young Bruce, Langston, and AARON DOUGLAS, a well-
 groomed handsome painter).

Zora parks her car, slams the door and hollers Wally's name from the sidewalk. Wally rushes down the stairs and gives her a big hug.

Young Bruce and Aaron shake hands.

Langston enters the house carrying luggage and following Wally to a room.

Wally opens the door and Langston looks around at his new room with starry-eyed enthusiasm.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR (1926) WORK MONTAGE(CON'T.) -- EVENING

Jazz continues under vignettes of people at typewriters and canvases, reading to each other, typing feverishly, whiting out paintings, ripping pages and throwing into trash, etc.

Wally looks over Aaron's shoulder at his canvas. It's a nearly completed red and black drawing of a lion inside the profile of a regal face with strong African features.

AARON

(slightly nervous)

Do you like it?

WALLY

Do I like it? I think you just finished the cover of our magazine.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR-LIVING ROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Wally, Zora, Langston, Young Bruce and Aaron are assembled in the living room in front of a coffee table filled with manuscript pages.

WALLY

I think if we put this out it'd be a perfectly respectable magazine.

(eyeing Young Bruce)

But who wants that.

YOUNG BRUCE

We're ready to get lowdown and nasty.

Zora rolls here eyes.

ZORA

(towards Young Bruce)

There you go. Always wanna go muckin' around in the gutter.

WALLY

Wait a minute, he has a point. We need to show things that other magazines won't. If not, then why bother?

LANGSTON

Well it still has to be good writing.

WALLY

(calming him)

Don't worry. Trust us.

(smiling towards Young

Bruce)

Bruce and I were thinking that there are two types of people that upstanding Negroes want no part of.

YOUNG BRUCE

(interrupting)

Queers and whores. The types that we're the most fond of.

WALLY

And we'd like to give them a little token of our appreciation.

Young Bruce throws a coin in the air and slams it onto his hand.

YOUNG BRUCE

Heads, you get the streetwalker.

Tails--the homosexual.

(to Wally)

What's your call?

WALLY

Heads.

Young Bruce peeks at the coin and gives a dramatic pause.

YOUNG BRUCE

It's heads.

(getting up)

Now let's really wreak some havoc.

He flips the coin up towards Wally who snatches it from the air.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR-BRUCE/WALLY BEDROOMS(1926) -- NIGHT

Young Bruce and Wally are at their respective typewriters concocting their stories. Slow-motion close-up of hands moving sensually on the typewriter keys.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR HALL(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Bruce and Perry approach another door.

BRUCE

And if it seems like we worked hard,
lord knows we played even harder.

INT. WALLY'S ROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

The creaking of the bed and the escalating sounds of sex become more heated and furious. Through the keyhole we see Black legs gyrating on top of white legs exposed through the sheets on the side of the bed.

The camera pans to reveal Wally on top of HARALD, a handsome blonde. In the midst of incredible thrusting he is holding Harald's hands down on the bed.

Young Bruce is under the bed and his left cheek is flat against the floor. The box spring comes dangerously close to his face with every thrust as the orgasmic sounds become more intense.

HARALD

(ecstatic)

Please, please don't stop. Uh...

WALLY

It's so good...God....I'm coming

HARALD

So am I...oh god...

Wally arches his back and releases, collapsing onto Harald. They let out sighs of fulfillment and exasperation. Wally snuggles into Harald's neck caressing his cheek.

YOUNG BRUCE

(mocking)

It's so good...oh god...I'm
coming...Me too

Wally leans over and looks under the bed to see Young Bruce groaning and thrusting wildly towards the boxspring. He faux climaxes.

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)

(smiling, applauding
as he slides out
from under the bed)

Bravo...Wally I think that's your
best piece of work yet.

Harald throws a pillow then a shoe at him which he gracefully dodges. He then leaps out of bed chasing Young Bruce down the stairs and into the living room.

WALLY

Harald, relax.

(MORE)

WALLY (CONT'D)
 (under his breath to
 himself, reaching
 for a cigarette)
 He and I share everything else around
 here, why not the men.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR LIVING ROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Young Bruce runs into the living room with Harald chasing him. He can't keep himself from staring at Harald's crotch.

YOUNG BRUCE
 God, are you sure you don't have
 some Negro blood in you? If I had
 known I would've joined you.

HARALD
 (cornering him around
 the couch)
 In your dreams, buddy.

Harald throws a cushion as Young Bruce leaps from around the couch. Harald tackles him and pins his arms to the ground.

YOUNG BRUCE
 (jokingly sexual)
 Please don't stop. Oh, God...I'm
 coming.

Wally enters the room keeping his robe closed with one hand and holding a drink in the other.

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)
 (to Wally)
 Would you get your big Canadian lug
 off of me.

WALLY
 (tussling Harald's
 hair)
 You know these white boys never get
 enough.

Young Bruce struggles to free himself.

WALLY (CONT'D)
 Well, somebody's gonna have to get
 up eventually and buy some gin for
 this party.

HARALD
 What party?

WALLY

The one that's gonna pay the rent for the next month which is supposed to start in less than two hours and as usual it looks like I'm going to be the one to drag all that booze up on the train.

Harald and Young Bruce look at him helplessly, affirming that this will definitely be the case.

EXT. HARLEM STREET(1926) -- NIGHT

Young Bruce is walking up the middle of the dark, desolate, street. His footsteps resound loudly. He glances over his shoulder sensing a strange presence.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR PARLOR(1926) -- NIGHT

The sounds of the quiet beginnings of a party can be heard from the living room.

Wally sips a drink and stares at Young Bruce who is barefoot, sitting on the floor staring at patterns in the carpet. He is about to begin a story.

Zora, Langston and a few others are sitting on the couch. Zora's leg is subtly rubbing against Langston's as she moves her index finger to inconspicuously stroke his knee.

Langston repositions himself, moving his leg away from Zora's. A look of disappointment crosses her face.

She feigns nonchalance and pretends to refocus on Young Bruce.

ZORA

(to Young Bruce)

Are you gonna tell us what happened or what?

EXT. HARLEM STREET(1926) -- NIGHT

Young Bruce looks around the empty street, then continues up the block.

YOUNG BRUCE (O.S.)

I had been walking miles and I didn't feel like coming back home. Sometimes homes can be such boring places when you're not feeling homey. Sometimes it's nicer to just drop in somewhere and see what you find.

We see a blurred image of Perry approaching the dilapidated, present-day Niggeratti Manor. A pulsating, bright light comes from the window next to the door.

YOUNG BRUCE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 This house looked strangely familiar,
 run-down yet warm and inviting. I
 could feel my body going through
 certain motions yet my physical
 presence was unrecognizable to me.

A ghost-like, translucent Perry opens the door.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR PARLOR(1926)-- NIGHT

YOUNG BRUCE
 I found a little cubby hole and began
 drifting into sleep.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT)/FOREST--NIGHT/DAY

Perry is under the staircase which dissolves into a forest
 canopied by thick oaks and surrounded by an assortment of
 flowers. The wind is rustling the trees as shafts of sunlight
 filter through.

Older Bruce approaches Perry's sleeping body, wrapping a
 blanket around him.

YOUNG BRUCE (O.S.)
 I lay still as ever and yet the
 nearness of this physical presence
 kept luring me closer.

Older Bruce reaches over and touches Perry's hand.

YOUNG BRUCE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 And for a brief moment I felt what
 seemed like a complete merging.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR HALL(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Perry is under the dilapidated staircase

WOMAN
 (shrill, screaming)
 Stop it. Somebody help me.

A startled Perry gets up quickly. A bright light shines
 from the top of the staircase. He walks into it as it gets
 larger, enveloping him.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR PARLOR(1926) -- NIGHT

Young Bruce's audience is still enraptured.

As Young Bruce tells the story there is a superimposed montage
 of images of Perry- on the stairs, on the roof, seeing an

INTER-RACIAL WOMAN WITH AN INFANT, and climbing down onto the street.

YOUNG BRUCE

Up the stairs I ran cursing her for having spoiled my dream. I reached the roof and crossed over to the next house, running into my mother quietly rocking a baby and ignoring me. I came down the fire escape and strolled onto the street, finally reaching home. Of course, I was still lamenting the interruption of my exquisite idyll.

There is silence as the listeners muse over the story.

ZORA

(in disbelief)

Did you really dream that?

YOUNG BRUCE

As plain as I sit right here in front of you.

ZORA

I've heard stories from here to Timbuktu, but you always leave me with my mouth hangin' wide open.

YOUNG BRUCE

Well, that's my job.

LANGSTON

And this presence was it male or female.

YOUNG BRUCE

(sly, smirking)

You know as well as I do that that makes no difference to a liberated soul like mine.

A low guttural, moan can be heard as the piercing sting of a guitar reverberates from the other room.

ZORA

It sound like it's about time for a little liberation.

They all rise from the couch eager to be in the center of the action.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR LIVING ROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Opening the door to reveal throngs of people bumping, grinding and swinging to live Blues as a decadent party is at its peak.

Perry and Older Bruce watch from a corner in their contemporary clothing. Bruce whispers to Perry as the raw, sexual energy swirls around them.

Inter-racial and same-sex couples dance and mingle throughout as GLADYS, a 250 pound male impersonator in top hat and tuxedo, is holding a mic singing "Prove It On Me Blues", attempting to seduce a BEAUTIFUL, YOUNG BLACK WOMAN.

GLADYS

"They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me. They sure gotta prove it on me. Went out last night with a crowd of friends. They must've been women 'cause I don't like no men. It's true I wear a collar and tie..."

The camera floats throughout the crowd getting brief snippets of different occurrences throughout the room.

A HANDSOME, BLACK STREET KID is trying to teach a YOUNG ITALIAN ACTRESS the "Black Bottom" dance. His pelvis swings low down to the floor as she watches attentively. She meekly attempts to duplicate his moves without much luck.

BLACK STREET KID

It's all in the hips. You gotta just let it go. Listen and feel it.

She closes her eyes, moving her hips awkwardly. He shakes his head, worrying about her severe lack of rhythm.

A cluster of three people, two Black women and one white man, pass around a joint and erupt in laughter.

AN OLDER, DIGNIFIED, LIGHT-SKINNED BLACK MAN and HIS WIFE enter the room. They take in the above scenarios and look shocked by the unbridled hedonism on display.

The Black street kid is now putting his hands on the white actress's hips.

GLORIA SWANSON, a beautiful black female impersonator, is done up to the hilt in a sequin and silk evening gown. "She" is unbuttoning the top buttons on the shirt of A VERY PRIM AND PROPER, CONSERVATIVE GIRL.

GLORIA

(unbuttoning)

There's one and that's two. Let's go for three. Whatta ya say?

The girl starts refastening the buttons self-consciously.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Oh honey now you have to start to loosen up or mama might have to revoke your invitation to this fine little soiree.

Harald is stumbling and hanging onto strangers as he downs any and all of the random, unfinished drinks he sees. Wally grabs him, holding him up and swaying with him to the rhythm of the song.

The dignified couple has seen enough. The husband whispers to his wife and they head towards the door. They pass Young Bruce in the corner with TWO HANDSOME, UNKEMPT ITALIAN GUYS. He is feverishly kissing one and looks up as they pass.

YOUNG BRUCE

(smirking mischievously)

Leaving already?

The couple is so flustered and disgruntled that they do not know how to respond. The man grabs his wife's arm and makes a beeline for the door.

Young Bruce returns his attention to his friend.

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)

Sorry. Where were we?

They resume kissing passionately.

Gloria is now sharing the microphone with Gladys and suddenly making moves to take over the stage. She starts to sing "Freakish Blues" as the band follows her cue.

Young Bruce breaks away from the lengthy kiss.

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)

Not bad.

He turns to Young Italian #2 and begins kissing him with equal intensity. They kiss for awhile.

YOUNG ITALIAN#1

(towards Young Bruce)

And the winner is...?

YOUNG BRUCE

I think we need to do more research.

He begins to passionately kiss Young Italian #1 again.

CALVIN, a sullen, working class, Black man, sits in a corner, uncomfortable and aloof from the crowd. Zora motions for him to join her and Langston at the other end of the room.

He ignores her.

Zora and Langston turn their attention towards Young Bruce on the couch in the throws of a steamy kiss. Langston whispers something to Zora as she looks towards Wally and Harald.

ZORA
(calling out)
Wally, Harald. We're drinking to
Bruce's newfound loves.

LANGSTON
(raising his glass)
May the best man win.

YOUNG BRUCE
(getting up)
Excuse me. I think my friends are
drinking without me.

WALLY
Here, here.

Wally and Young Bruce join Langston and Zora in the corner. They all raise their glasses together and toast as the white flash of a photographer's camera freezes the frame.

CARL VAN VECHTEN, a thin, sharply, dressed blonde, lowers his camera from his face and motions for Wally and Harald to follow him out.

Zora, Langston and Young Bruce watch the three of them going upstairs together. Wally trips on a stair and falls as Harald attempts to hold him up.

YOUNG BRUCE
(looking towards the
stairs)
Where are they going with that white
monkey?

LANGSTON
Looks like their being lured into
their cages.

Zora tries to hide a slight resentment and hostility.

ZORA
(cold, matter of fact)
Well, boys will be boys.

INT. WALLY'S BEDROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Older Bruce and Perry hide behind a curtain as Wally and Harald begin drunkenly disrobing. Carl looks around the room, taking his camera out of his bag.

HARALD
 (slightly slurred)
 So these are only for you, right?

WALLY
 (interrupting brashly)
 Anything Carl wants he gets.
 (to Carl)
 You're one of the few people who was
 willing to patronize our magazine.
 This is the least we can do.

Wally stumbles to the ground attempting to remove his pants.

HARALD
 (laughing)
 Are you okay?

WALLY
 (rubbing his elbow)
 I think I'll survive...barely.

They finish undressing and seem uncomfortable with their nakedness.

HARALD
 You did say that you're not going to
 show these to anyone right?

CARL
 Absolutely not. They're just for my
 own personal project. It's an
 exploration.

WALLY
 So how do you want us? Standing up,
 kneeling, lying down, erect, flaccid.

CARL
 (smiling)
 Harald turn your back to me and put
 your arm over his far shoulder.

He carefully observes, walks over and adjusts Harald's arm on Wally's shoulder. Wally and Harald look into each other's eyes. There's a sudden flash and the sound of the camera clicking.

Young Bruce stands behind the camera with a grin.

YOUNG BRUCE
 (devilish, sexy)
 I couldn't resist.

CARL
 Bruce, could you excuse us. We're
 trying to work.

HARALD
 (sarcastic, drunken)
 Yeah.

YOUNG BRUCE
 Fine. I know when I'm not wanted.
 (walking out)
 I'm never the one to get in the way
 of art.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR - HALL(1926) -- NIGHT

Calvin is putting on his coat as Zora approaches him.
 Langston is alone in a corner watching the exchange.

ZORA
 Where are you going?

CALVIN
 (cold, hurt)
 Home.

ZORA
 You weren't gonna tell me you were
 leaving? And how am I supposed to
 get home?

CALVIN
 (bitter)
 Seeing that you spent the entire
 night with Langston, I thought you
 might wanna go home with him.

ZORA
 (tense, annoyed)
 So now I have to deal with this
 jealousy crap again.

CALVIN
 You know I hate these parties. I
 don't know why you keep draggin' me
 to 'em.

ZORA
 Well maybe if you did something
 besides sulk in the corner you might
 get to like 'em.

CALVIN
 The only reason you bring me is to
 show off how smart you are with all
 your snotty writer friends. Standin'
 around thinkin' ya'll are better
 than everybody else.

ZORA
 That's not true and you know it.

CALVIN

Yes it is.

ZORA

I invite you 'cause I want you to be part of my life.

CALVIN

Well that part I can do without.

ZORA

(exasperated)

You know what? I really don't feel like ruining a perfectly good night arguing with you. I'm staying. I'll find my way home.

CALVIN

That's fine with me.

He grabs his hat and abruptly exits as Zora rejoins the party.

INT. WALLY'S BEDROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Carl finishes adjusting Wally and Harald's positions to his liking.

CARL

Excellent.

He goes back to the camera and snaps the first shot. White flash into freeze frame of the shot.

INT. DARKROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

In the dim red light of the room the same image is forming in the developer. Carl smiles at the contents. He holds the photo up to the light, investigates and places it into the next bath of chemicals.

INT. WALLY'S BEDROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Wally and Harald hold several different poses and for each there's a white flash into a freeze frame. These are recreations of Van Vechten's stylized erotic photographs.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR-LIVING ROOM(1926) -- AFTERNOON

The remnants of the party are strewn about everywhere. Dirty cups with cigarette butts, overflowing ashtrays, portions or uneaten food on plates, etc.

Young Bruce, Zora, Wally, Langston, Aaron and Harald are all nursing hangovers and looking like hell. A pile of newspaper reviews is stacked in front of Wally and the tension in the air is high.

ZORA

I'm not interested in some high falutin' critics opinions anyway. They are the last people I'm writin' for.

LANGSTON

Well it is going to affect the amount of people that buy the damn thing. We might as well know the battle we're up against.

(to Wally)

Since you've already read them all why don't you start and then we'll take turns sharing the torture.

WALLY

(tentatively)

Alright, you asked for it. These are just some of the highlights.

He swiftly opens the first paper as all the attention focuses on him. There's a close-up of each person as they are being critiqued by the reviewer.

WALLY (CONT'D)

(reading)

"I have just tossed the first issue of Fire into the fire. Aaron Douglas, in spite of the meaningless grotesqueness of his creations, has gained a reputation as an artist. He is permitted to spoil the perfectly good pages and the cover with his ink and pen hodge podge. Langston Hughes displays his usual ability to say nothing in many words. Zora Neale Hurston writing in the slangs of the deep south betrays her own education and that of the vast majority of her readership. Wallace Thurman and Richard Bruce in choosing to write about prostitution and homosexuality, respectively, have decided to drag the Negro race through the muck, the remnants of which will never be fully cleansed."

YOUNG BRUCE

(jovial)

Well this calls for a celebration! I say we all go down to Stella's for brunch and the biggest pitcher of mimosas that money can buy.

EXT. HARLEM STREET(1926) -- DAY

Young Bruce and Zora talk as the rest of the group walks ahead.

YOUNG BRUCE
So what'd you want to talk about?

ZORA
I don't know, I've been worried about you. Did you find a job yet?

YOUNG BRUCE
I been lookin'. There's just not that much out there.

ZORA
Hangin' out with Parker and Auden all day in the Village isn't what I call lookin'. It's not like a job's just gonna show up at Bickford's and bite you on the ass. And don't think we don't know that you been sellin' the magazine and keepin' the money to feed yourself.

YOUNG BRUCE
(feigning ignorance/
joking)
Why young lady. What are you accusing me of?

Zora gives him a skeptical, "don't try to play me" look.

ZORA
It's not right. If anybody should be gettin' that money it's Wally. He's put the most into it.

YOUNG BRUCE
Well, a job'll turn up sooner or later.

Zora takes a pack of Pall mall cigarettes from her purse.

ZORA
I hope so. For your sake.
(slightly devious)
But the more important question is will you still walk with me if I smoke this cigarette on the street?

YOUNG BRUCE
(disbelief)
You're not gonna do that.

ZORA
Like hell I'm not.

Zora lights up and takes her first drag.

YOUNG BRUCE
Well what do I have to lose. It's
not like I have some stellar
reputation to protect.

Zora smokes triumphantly as people stare at her and the
cigarette in horror. She returns their stares with a proud
and confident smile.

INT. STELLA'S CAFE(1926)-- DAY

The waitress clears the last of the dishes from the table
where the group sits.

LANGSTON
(smiling at the
waitress)
Thank you.

TWO BLACK COUPLES at different tables watch them in disgust.
The women lean in to whisper to their partners while glancing
with disdain.

ZORA
I think we should read it here.

AARON
You've lost your mind.

ZORA
Come on. Everyone has to read the
work of the person to the left of
them. You kick the person next to
you when you want them to take over.

WALLY
What about the artwork?

YOUNG BRUCE
You have to pose like the subject in
the drawing.

ZORA
Hot damn, I like it. Langston you
start.

LANGSTON
(tentative)
I don't know about this.

ZORA

Come on. Let's give the people a little taste.

(giving him a swift kick under the table)

Go on!

LANGSTON

Ow! Jesus

(reading)

"And there I saw Cordelia savagely careening in a drunken abortion of the Charleston and surrounded by a perspiring circle of handclapping enthusiasts...Seeing that she was about to leave the room I rushed forward calling Cordelia...Still eager to speak, I heard one of the girls ask "Who's the Dicty kid?...and Cordelia answered "The guy who gimme ma ' firs' two bucks."

Langston kicks Wallace who smoothly takes over.

WALLY

(reciting suddenly with great rhythmic intensity)

"Laughter, suddenly like a taut drum, laughter, suddenly neither truth nor lie, laughter hardening the dusk dark evening. Laughter, shaking the lights in the fish joint, rolling white balls in the pool rooms. And leaving untouched the box car some train had forgotten."

Wallace kicks Young Bruce who is staring at an elaborate illustration in the magazine. He stands on his chair and strikes a pose, flamboyantly imitating the character in the drawing.

Zora throws the magazine on the table and begins clapping and singing as Young Bruce dances on his chair. The rest begin to join in.

ZORA

(singing)

"Fy-ah, fyah gonna burn my soul. I ain't been good. I ain't been clean. I been low-down, stinkin' mean. And baby, Fy-ah, Fy-ah gonna burn my soul.

(others join)

Fy-ah, fy-ah gonna burn my soul. Fy-ah, Fy-ah gonna burn my soul."

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Bruce and Perry are seated on the staircase. Bruce takes a long drag on his cigarette and exhales.

BRUCE

(deep in thought,
waits a moment before
talking)

No matter how bold we were, there were times when you knew your place or you'd end up swingin' from a tree. For me, I knew most Black people wouldn't have my back. Why? 'Cause I was a cocksuckin' faggot. And most white people wouldn't. Why? 'Cause I was a nigger. So you got strong and learned to rely on your wits and instincts to survive.

Bruce takes another contemplative drag of his cigarette.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOUSE(FLASHBACK)(SUPER-8) -- DAY

Perry nervously approaches his parent's house. After a deep breath he gathers up the courage to ring the bell. His father slowly approaches through the screen door.

PERRY

(sensing hostility)
Look, I just need to get some books
from the basement.

MR. WILLIAMS

(stern, cold and
detached)
I told you not to step foot anywhere
near this house.

PERRY

I need them for school.

MR. WILLIAMS

Anything you left in this house does
not exist. Now get out of my sight.

Perry stares into his father's eyes with intense hatred.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

We hear the sound of a door slam as Bruce is eyeing the dilapidated ceilings and walls. He sees small bits of plaster begin to fall.

BRUCE

(weary, forlorn)

God, look at this place. It's funny
how all these things live inside you
until you make your peace with them.

We hear the distant sounds of yelling and violence with brief
POV shots of Perry's father assaulting him throughout these
lines.

PERRY

(mournful)

Like when my dad caught me with this
guy in my room. He was kicking the
shit out of me and he kept screaming
"Not in my house!" Almost like he
was trying to convince himself I was
someone else. Like if he just kept
pounding on me this thing would
disappear. And my mother kept saying
"Everything keeps going over and
over again in my mind and I keep
thinking where did we go wrong." She
said she felt like killing herself.
I thought of the times when the
thought of them finding out I was
gay was enough to make me want to
kill myself. She finally understood
what that must feel like.

Bruce stares at him for a moment not knowing what to say.
He wants to bring himself to hold Perry but for some reason
he can't.

BRUCE

Those similar feelings are metaphoric.

PERRY

What do you mean?

BRUCE

No matter how far you run those
connections will always be there.
Family's the core stuff and you gotta
fight like hell to let 'em know who
you are. The rest is up to them.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HARLEM NEWSSTAND(1926) -- DAY

Young Bruce passes a newsstand and looks past the cashier to
see issues of "Fire" bundled up and hidden in the corner.

YOUNG BRUCE

Excuse me sir, those magazines back there are meant to be displayed and sold, not hidden away.

CASHIER

It's not my doin'. It's the NAACP.

YOUNG BRUCE

What are you talking about?

CASHIER

Apparently there've been alot of complaints from the public. We were told not to display them.

EXT. HARLEM LOT(1926) -- NIGHT

There's a huge bonfire as issues of the magazine burn in the midst of a volatile protest.

BLACK WOMAN #1

(angrily tossing
several issues into
the bonfire)

It's smut and filth and you're nothing but degenerate lowlifes.

ZORA

(boldly confrontational)

We're your children and we're sick and tired of lyin' to impress white people and bourgeois Negroes like you.

BLACK WOMAN #2

(to Zora)

With all your education you should know better. You are sick! And you are no child of mine. My children are trained to know better.

WALLY

(to Black woman #2)

Trained like good, obedient little dogs waiting for the master to throw them a bone. Maybe it's time to feed ourselves.

ZORA

Ya'll need to get up off your knees. My mama always said that was no position for a lady to be in.

BLACK WOMAN #3

(to Black woman #2)

You should be encouraging them. You have no right to tell a writer what they can and can't say. If you don't like it, then don't read it.

BLACK MAN #1

(towards Bruce)

I'm from D.C. and I know you're from a good family. You bring them shame. That's why you can't even write under your real name. Richard Bruce. Ha! You're Richard Bruce Nugent. The Nugents of Washington D.C.. And if I was spreading homosexual filth like that I wouldn't attach my name to it either.

YOUNG BRUCE

You're prejudice is what's filthy! And I do want to spare my family shame. The shame that comes from your fear of looking in the mirror at what we all are!

BLACK MAN #1

(tossing more magazines
in the fire)

There is no "we" in this. There is not a proper Negro in the world that would stand by this. Your father must be turning in his grave.

BLACK MAN #2

This is what proper Negroes do with trash like you.

He throws a magazine into the barrel and violently spits in Young Bruce's face. Wally sees this and becomes incensed.

WALLY

(To Black Man #2)

Who do you think you are?!

The fire rises in the distance as the arguing becomes more volatile and ferocious. As the camera tracks back the voices turn into a dissonant cacophony submerged within the night air.

INT. MANHATTAN OFFICE (1926) -- DAY

A heavy-set white man in his mid-forties, MR. MACALLISTER, stands looking out the window of his office. Wally enters.

MACALLISTER

(turning around)

Mr. Thurman, so glad you could make it please sit down.

WALLY

(taking a seat)

Thank you.

MACALLISTER

Can I get you anything. Coffee, tea..?

WALLY

No, I'm fine. Thanks.

MACALLISTER

Alright. Let's get down to business then. I read the manuscript and with some minor adjustments we would seriously consider publishing it. As you know we're interested in presenting new, important Negro writers such as yourself to the public.

Wally looks at him skeptically, knowing where this is heading.

MACALLISTER (CONT'D)

If Mr. Van Vechten has proven anything with the success of Nigger Heaven, it's that there's a hunger for the reality of Harlem life.

WALLY

I agree.

MACALLISTER

No holds barred. Telling it the way it is. And I think a Negro writer has access to insights into this world that white writers like Van Vechten can never get to. Are we seeing eye to eye on this?

WALLY

Oh, absolutely.

(pause)

So, what were these minor adjustments you were talking about?

MACALLISTER

I'm thinking it'd be interesting to play up the nightclub atmosphere in chapter 5. Making it darker, more menacing. A front for numbers running or drugs.

WALLY

But that's completely untrue to the character. The whole point is him opening up the club to turn his life around and do right by Stella.

MACALLISTER

The public wants danger, sex and violence from Harlem stories. And a good writer has to make concessions to what the public wants.

Zora is now sitting in the same seat Wally was in.

ZORA

But the language of the novel preserves the folklore roots and...

MACALLISTER

(interrupting)

If you're not writing in easy to read English that people can understand then how do you expect people to get it.

ZORA

It is English. The Negro's English.

MACALLISTER

How hard could it be to translate so that everyone can understand?

ZORA

It's the oral Negro tradition. The people that are part of it recognize it. I'm not speaking for these people, I am these people.

MACALLISTER

Look, that's where you're coming from not where you're at now. People want to hear about the speakeasies, the Blues, the wild, dangerous energy of Harlem. You and I both know that.

ZORA

What I'm givin' people is not what they want but what they need.

Macallister is becoming increasingly more frustrated.

MACALLISTER

You know what the best-selling book of the past six months has been?

Zora braces herself for the forthcoming revelation.

MACALLISTER (CONT'D)

It's this.

He throws a copy of Carl Van Vechten's "Nigger Heaven" onto the desk in front of Zora.

MACALLISTER (CONT'D)

And by a white author. Imagine how the public would embrace the authentic Negro perspective.

ZORA

I think you're talking to the wrong writer.

MACALLISTER

Every good writer has to make concessions to what the public wants.

Wally and Zora's voices become layered together. The end is intercut between the both of them exiting.

ZORA/WALLY

Well these are concessions that I'm not willing to make.

Wally stands up extending his hand.

WALLY

I want to thank you for your time Mr. Macallister.

Wally turns towards the door.

ZORA

(nodding)

Good day.

Long dissolve through the both of them exiting as the sound of the door closing resounds twice.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR-ROOF(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

We see an open hatch door on the roof. Perry and Bruce look out over the nighttime cityscape thinking about the previous scene.

PERRY

You all went through so much. Don't you ever think you should write about it so people know?

BRUCE

Oh, it'll live on.

PERRY

God all the shit you must've seen by the time you were my age. What am I doing in school? You guys just learned from each other.

BRUCE

That's what friends do. I think Langston really taught me about kindness. Zora taught me how to listen. And Wally...He showed me how to use words like weapons. And how to have fun with them. Actually maybe I taught him that. It got pretty confusing with Wally. You know, who taught what to whom.

PERRY

(thinking)

I guess I learn from my friends but it's not like I know it when it's happening.

BRUCE

That's life man.

The wind rustles the trees. Perry stares out at the landscape, thinking within the silence. He's becoming more intrigued by a thought and looks over at Bruce.

PERRY

Did you ever go out cruising back then?

Bruce looks at him with faux drama, feigning shock.

BRUCE

I beg your pardon.

Still looking at him, he tries to figure out exactly where Perry's coming from.

BRUCE (CONT'D)

You're such an old soul in that young body.

PERRY

Nice try but don't change the subject.

BRUCE

(pretending to forget)

I'm sorry. What did you ask me?

PERRY

Cruising. Trolling around looking for trade.

BRUCE

Oh yeah. Well I suppose I did do that. I guess you could say I was obsessed with it.

INT. PARK BATHROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

The camera follows a pair of feet slowly striding towards a doorway. Young Bruce is surveying a dimly lit, dank subway bathroom. Against the far wall he catches the eye of a YOUNG MARINE in uniform slowly stroking his crotch.

The marine moves towards the urinals and Young Bruce approaches cautiously and stands at the urinal next to him. He unbuttons his pants seductively and reveals himself.

The marine looks down and assesses.

Young Bruce reaches over and undoes the top button of his pants. He slowly undoes each button on the marine's pants while simultaneously stimulating himself with his other hand. Young Bruce's hand falls to his side as the marine moans with pleasure.

He begins stroking Young Bruce's ass with his left hand, then slips a small silver object out of his back pocket.

The marine reaches over and slams a handcuff tightly onto Young Bruce's hand and pushes him against the wall.

YOUNG BRUCE

(nervous yet aggressive)

Wait a minute!

The marine grabs Young Bruce's other hand and locks the other handcuff around it.

MARINE

The fun's over. We're takin' a little trip.

EXT. PARK BATHROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

The marine pushes Young Bruce towards a car. He shows hostility and resistance.

BRUCE (O.S.)

That was the first and last time I spent the night in a prison cell.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR-ROOF(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

BRUCE

Later when I had to appear in court, the judge asked the "marine" if the sexual encounter was done against

(MORE)

BRUCE (CONT'D)

his will. He said "Yes" and I yelled
" There are thirteen buttons on a
sailor's pants, you could've stopped
me anytime you wanted."

(laughs at his past
behavior)

He dismissed the case and later the
judge asked me if I had a thing for
uniforms. I said "Sailors yes, police
officer's no." He laughed and shook
his head.

(pause)

Come to think of it that judge seemed
like a big closet case himself.

Perry laughs at the new theory Bruce has arrived at.

PERRY

I guess nothing's really changed.

BRUCE

You got that right. So that's my
least successful cruising story.
And there's more where that came
from.

He gives Perry a playful, flirtatious wink.

PERRY

(smiling)

I'm sure there are.

BRUCE

But my memory gets kind of vague
about the details. Those encounters
always seemed kinda the same--You
met him, you found him, fondled him,
fucked him and forgot him.

They both laugh uproariously in joint recognition of the
truth. After a moment Bruce looks at him inquisitively.

BRUCE (CONT'D)

Don't you go out to bars and
bathhouses and things like that?
God do bathhouses even exist anymore?
Maybe it's better that I don't know.

PERRY

Oh they exist alright.

BRUCE

How do you do at them?

PERRY

I do alright. You know they're mostly white and it's different being black in those places. I'm never gonna be the golden prize little white boy. I'm usually like the exotic thing. Like "Hmm, I've never tried that. Some chocolate might be nice tonight." But I guess I do alright.

BRUCE

I'm sure you do just fine.

Perry glances at his watch.

PERRY

You should probably get back to the shelter before it gets too late.

BRUCE

We have some time.

(pause)

I was wondering if you might do something for me.

PERRY

What's that?

BRUCE

Well I haven't been able to paint in a long time and...

There's a sudden, awkward silence.

PERRY

And what?

BRUCE

For some reason you remind me of Wally and he used to always pose for me when I needed and since he's not around...

They both look at each other intrigued by the prospects.

PERRY

All I have to do is sit?

BRUCE

Just sit and be your natural, beautiful self.

PERRY

(after a pause)

I guess I could do that. When do you want to do it?

BRUCE
We could meet here tomorrow around
the same time.

PERRY
That sounds good.

EXT. HARLEM STREET -- NIGHT

Perry and Bruce are rounding a corner and walking up a quiet Harlem street. Perry seems contemplative as Bruce attempts to break the silence.

BRUCE
So how are things going with that
cute white boy I've seen you with?

PERRY
(perplexed and
questioning)
Jim?

BRUCE
Yeah. You know the one.

PERRY
When have you seen me with him?

BRUCE
I keep an eye out.

Perry looks at him quizzically, trying to figure him out.

BRUCE (CONT'D)
(increasingly impatient)
So... come on out with it.

PERRY
(apprehensive and sad)
It's not really working out. I think
I need to just move on.
(pause)
It's like one of those things where
you're almost trying to turn someone
into something they're not.
(pause, gets more
melancholy)
Like anything just to fill the
emptiness and avoid being alone.

Bruce reaches over and pulls him into a hug. Perry lets out a long exhalation.

PERRY (CONT'D)
 (pulls away and looks
 up at Bruce)
 How many times have you seen me with
 him anyway?
 (playful)
 You really are a crazy stalker aren't
 you? I can hear it now
 (faux newscaster voice)
 -- "Remains of young black boy found
 in belongings of elderly black artist--
 Details at 11."

BRUCE
 Elderly? I believe the word you're
 looking for is legendary.

Bruce freezes in a diva pose as Perry laughs.

BRUCE (CONT'D)
 (relaxing from the
 pose)
 You'd be surprised at the things you
 notice when you really start to look.

He walks away nonchalantly as Perry starts to follow.

PERRY
 Where are you going?

Bruce holds up a hand signaling Perry to stay.

BRUCE
 Sometimes a lady needs a moment to
 herself. Gather the thoughts. Attend
 to her business.

PERRY
 I guess she needs a room of her own.

BRUCE
 (walking further on)
 That's exactly right.

Bruce turns and walks away giving a hand gesture similar to
 the initial encounter with Perry and Marcus. Perry begins
 walking in the opposite direction. Rahsan is surreptitiously
 watching them from across the street.

INT. EAST VILLAGE BAR -- NIGHT

Marcus and Perry sit at a table. Marcus seems slightly awe-
 struck by the events Perry's been relaying.

MARCUS
 So you think he's for real?

PERRY

What do you mean?

MARCUS

I mean he could be some nut job with a really vivid imagination.

PERRY

Nah, he's real alright.

MARCUS

(thinking, nonplussed)

Jesus, it's so fucked up that....

PERRY

That what?

MARCUS

That his life turned out the way that it did.

PERRY

You know I thought that too at first. But I just think he has different values. His mind is different. It's like he's old but he's not really. I mean what eighty year old uses words like cocksuckin' faggot.

(chuckles in amazement at the idea)

It's crazy. He's just like wide open and you can tell he doesn't regret shit.

MARCUS

I don't know, man. I don't buy it.

(contemplative pause then looks directly at Perry)

I mean, where's he sleepin' tonight?

INT. HARLEM GAY BAR -- NIGHT

Bruce walks into a dimly lit, sparsely populated bar with the trace of a smile.

A classic Blues song is playing on the jukebox. The bartender, SAM, an older heavy-set Black man in his late fifties, approaches him.

SAM

Well, you look happy tonight.

BRUCE

I met somebody today. Somebody who reminded me of what it felt like to fall in love.

SAM

Uh-oh. Sounds dangerous.

Sam pours a shot of bourbon for Bruce. He places it in front of him as Bruce begins talking.

BRUCE

You ever start talking to someone and you feel like you've known them forever? Their entire past and future flashes right before your eyes. And your heart starts beating faster 'cause you know how hard their life's gonna be and it just tears you up inside.

(pause)

I just listened and stared at him and I wanted to hold him.

SAM

Alright, here we go.

BRUCE

And I looked down at my hand and thought to myself "where'd this come from?" You ever think like that? Like what's a hot piece of ass like me doin' trapped in this old man's body.

SAM

(laughing quietly)

I think it and it's usually right before I do something I'm gonna regret.

BRUCE

But you usually do it anyway.

SAM

You got that right.

BRUCE

(raising his glass)

Here's to lost beauty. May it always be nearby, with the potential to keep you warm.

SAM

(pouring himself a shot)

Wait. That's one I'll have to join you on.

He and Bruce touch glasses and down their shots. Sam shakes his head from the sting of the liquor and Bruce closes his eyes, savoring it's warmth.

INT. PERRY'S DORM ROOM -- NIGHT

Perry looks at himself in the mirror from different angles and fixes the collar of his shirt. He looks uncomfortable as he decides to leave.

INT. GALLERY -- NIGHT

Perry looks around the crowded gallery apprehensively. Isaiah approaches him.

PERRY
Hey. Thanks for coming.

ISAIAH
Thanks for inviting me. I'm impressed.

PERRY
(awkward)
Now maybe you see why I haven't gotten to that final paper.

ISAIAH
I wasn't gonna bring it up. But I am waiting. Grades go in next week.

PERRY
I'm working on it. Have some faith.

ISAIAH
I do. But faith isn't enough to help you pass my class.

PERRY
(uncomfortable)
Right.

Perry sees Evelyn standing across the room, looking at one of his paintings.

PERRY (CONT'D)
Excuse me a second.

He goes over to Evelyn.

EVELYN
(smiling, turning towards him)
You know you're really comin' along.
(leaning in closer to the canvas)
Especially with this one.

PERRY
You're probably the only one that's even looked at 'em.

Evelyn puts an arm around Perry and gives him a kiss on the cheek.

EVELYN
I'm really proud of you baby.

PERRY
(warmly)
Thanks. I'm glad you're here.
(becoming more
uncomfortable with
his surroundings)
I think I need to step outside for a
minute.

Evelyn smiles and watches him walk away and turns her attention back to the paintings.

Marcus is talking to MR. LEWIS, an older, wealthy white man. Perry approaches them as Marcus shows excitement to see him.

MARCUS
(grabbing his hand
and pulling him into
an embrace)
Here he is. Perry, this is John
Lewis. He owns a gallery in Chelsea.
(to Mr. Lewis)
Perry's one of the painters in the
show.

MR. LEWIS
Oh, really. What kind of work do
you do?

PERRY
It's hard to say. It's changing.
Abstract portraits, I guess.
(turning frustrated
and slightly abrasive)
I don't know. I'm not good at summing
it up in little morsels for
consumption.

Marcus gives him a scolding look.

MARCUS
(giving Perry a look
of disdain)
You know, it's probably better if
you just judge for yourself. He did
the three in the back on the left.
I'm sure he'd be happy to show you
more work, whenever it's convenient.

MR. LEWIS
That'd be wonderful.

PERRY

(abrupt)

Excuse me. I need some air.

MR. LEWIS

Well it was nice chatting with you.

Mr. Lewis extends his hand and Perry leaves abruptly without noticing it.

EXT. GALLERY -- NIGHT

Perry leans against a wall smoking a cigarette as Marcus approaches him.

MARCUS

Yo, what's up with you?

PERRY

Nothing, I'm just not interested in packaging myself as the next big deal.

MARCUS

Well you better learn.

PERRY

For someone who's always preachin' about evil whitey you sure know to turn on that stepin fetchit routine when you need to.

MARCUS

You know that starvin' artist bullshit might be a really cool myth but livin' it is not really all that.

PERRY

I'm just not comfortable talking to people like that.

MARCUS

A few months of Ramen noodles and tunafish and you'll start to feel real comfortable, real quick. Fuck all that school bullshit, this is the real deal. You learnin' how to talk the talk, you might as well use it to your benefit.

PERRY

I don't know. It smells like alot of bullshit to me.

MARCUS

I don't care what it smells like.

(MORE)

MARCUS (CONT'D)

It's about what it sounds like.. "Kaching".

PERRY

Is that all you care about?

MARCUS

Look, I'm just not interested in bein' some old man sleepin' in a fuckin' homeless shelter. Do you know how many people would kill to be in this show at your age? While you're still in school. Are you crazy?

PERRY

And how many of 'em would end up goin' through such a mind-fuck that they're dead junkies at 27? But I guess that doesn't matter 'cause their prices are still goin' through the roof. Right? Well I'm not goin' out like that.

Mr. Lewis exits the building and walks over.

MR. LEWIS

Perry, do you think I could have a short word with you?

PERRY

I was just leaving...

MR. LEWIS

I wanted to tell you I think your work has alot of potential.

PERRY

Thanks.

MR. LEWIS

Do you have a gallery?

PERRY

No.

MR. LEWIS

I was thinking, if you approached the same themes in a more accessible way you could do really well.

Perry smirks in disbelief and looks at Marcus.

PERRY

(laughs to himself)
Oh yeah?

MR. LEWIS

Do you have time for a quick drink?

PERRY

(cold)

Nah. I have to meet someone.

MR. LEWIS

Maybe we can get together some time next week.

Mr. Lewis hands him a card and Perry accepts it with a look of disdain.

He walks up the empty street as Marcus and Mr. Lewis watch him in the midst of the night's hollow silence.

INT. NIGGERATI MANOR(PRESENT)-- NIGHT

Bruce is in the living room unpacking and arranging various painting supplies. He lights two candles and walks over to the window to check for Perry.

EXT. LOWER EAST SIDE STREET -- NIGHT

Perry is walking briskly on a darkened street. He hears shuffling behind him. Turning around he sees the street is empty.

He begins walking faster. A sudden blow to his head sends him face down onto the street.

Four Black men in stocking masks attack him from all sides. They are savagely kicking and punching him with all their might.

MAN#1

Faggot motherfucker. I'm gonna fuckin' kill you.

MAN#2

(kicking furiously)

Bitch-ass cocksucker. I bet you keep your fuckin' mouth shut now.

A man has been overseeing the attack, smoking a cigarette and leaning against a car. He watches Perry roll onto his side barely conscious and bleeding.

OVERSEER

Alright that's it.

The other men back off as the overseer approaches. As he raises his mask slightly, we realize it's Rahsan. Revealing only his mouth, he spits onto Perry's face.

OVERSEER/RAHSAN
 (raising his cigarette)
 Here's the fire next time,
 motherfucker.

He puts the cigarette out on Perry's neck and Perry's deep scream resounds through the streets.

INT. NIGGERATI MANOR(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

The moon shines onto Bruce's face as he restlessly adjusts his body on the floor.

EXT. EAST VILLAGE STREET -- NIGHT

Perry limps slowly up the block. His face is bruised and he's having trouble moving. He opens the front door to his dorm.

INT. PERRY'S DORM ROOM -- NIGHT

Perry opens the door to his room. He moves slowly trying to withstand the pain. He begins to remove his clothes.

Perry climbs into bed and gets under the covers. A tear falls down his bruised face as he closes his eyes.

EXT. STREET -- NIGHT

A montage of different homeless people, on the street, on park benches, looking for food in garbage cans, etc. The night sky lapses into sunrise.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SUBWAY -- LATE AFTERNOON

Bruce is asleep on the subway in slightly disheveled clothing. He is coughing and shivering as he adjusts his body. A FIVE-YEAR OLD BLACK KID and HIS MOTHER sit across from him.

BLACK KID
 Mom does God love everyone?

MOM
 Yeah.

The black kid points towards Bruce.

BLACK KID
 Even him.

MOM
 Yes, honey.

The train moves through the dark tunnel and into the light of the next station.

INT. UNIVERSITY DORM LOBBY -- EARLY EVENING

Bruce slips past a UNIVERSITY SECURITY GUARD immersed in conversation on a pay phone.

INT. UNIVERSITY DORM HALLWAY -- EARLY EVENING

Bruce wanders nonchalantly through the hall. He passes a YOUNG STUDENT.

BRUCE

Is there someone named Perry on this floor?

YOUNG STUDENT

First door on the left around the corner. Maybe you can get him to come out. He hasn't left that room in like three days.

Bruce approaches the door, knocks and slowly enters the darkened room.

INT. PERRY'S DORM ROOM -- EARLY EVENING

Perry is under the covers in bed with his back towards the door.

BRUCE

(loudly clears throat
before speaking)

Is this where all the hot, young guys are when they're supposed to be hangin' out with me?

Bruce turns on the light and Perry rolls over and glares at him.

PERRY

(annoyed)

What are you doing here?

As Bruce moves towards Perry, he notices the bruises on his face.

BRUCE

(alarmed, demanding)

What happened?

PERRY

Nothing. I don't want to talk about it.

Bruce kneels by the bed and forcibly turns Perry to face him.

BRUCE
Who did this to you?

PERRY
I couldn't see their faces. They
were wearing masks.

BRUCE
Have you told anyone?

PERRY
Why? The cops aren't gonna do
anything. They'll probably want to
get a few hits in themselves.

BRUCE
So you're gonna just stay in this
room in the dark and hide from the
world for the rest of your life.

PERRY
(increasing in anger)
What does it matter?!

BRUCE
It matters 'cause you were supposed
to help me and I was counting on you
and you let me down.

Perry turns away from him facing the wall. This provokes
Bruce to yank the covers off of him.

BRUCE (CONT'D)
Alright, get up.

PERRY
What's your problem?

BRUCE
You're my problem and I'm not gonna
let you ruin my inspiration. 'Cause
at my age inspirations are few and
far between.

He picks up a pair of pants off a chair and throws them at
Perry.

BRUCE (CONT'D)
A deal's a deal. I'll meet you
downstairs in five minutes.

Bruce exits abruptly and Perry sighs in exasperation and
begrudgingly starts to get dressed.

EXT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT) -- EVENING

Perry and Bruce approach the house and see a sign which reads "Property of New York City-Do Not Enter". A piece of wood blocks the door.

PERRY
 (gesturing towards
 the door)
 It looks like someone got here before
 we did.

BRUCE
 Well that's never stopped me before.

Bruce begins to physically remove the board, pulling with all his strength. Perry goes over and helps.

BRUCE (CONT'D)
 I've got more rights to this building
 than any fucking city officials.

With one hard pull from Bruce the wood board gives. Perry removes the sign and pushes the door open.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT) -- EVENING

Rats are visible and the floors creak as they walk slowly, getting used to the darkness and the dust. Perry looks towards the corner.

PERRY
 What's this door over here?

BRUCE
 That's Langston's old room.

PERRY
 You know I've had two teachers refer
 to Langston in the past month.
 Weren't you jealous? Didn't you
 ever want what he had?

BRUCE
 Never.

PERRY
 Bullshit.

BRUCE
 No, it's not. You have no idea what
 kind of sacrifices it takes to become
 a spokesperson for the entire Black
 race.

PERRY
 What do you mean?

BRUCE
Nothing. Forget it.

Perry won't let him off the hook.

PERRY
No, tell me.

BRUCE
Look, you may be alot of things but
you're not stupid. Figure it out.

Perry turns and moves slowly towards the door in the corner.

TIMECUT:

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR-LANGSTON'S ROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Langston is standing at his desk madly rustling through two stacks of papers. He turns around as Young Bruce enters the room and closes the door.

YOUNG BRUCE
What's going on?

LANGSTON
Have you read Wally's manuscript?

YOUNG BRUCE
Yes.

LANGSTON
And did anything sound familiar to
you?

Young Bruce avoids eye contact, sensing an argument brewing.

LANGSTON (CONT'D)
He's taken two entire chapters from
you and he's sending it out.

YOUNG BRUCE
So what's your point?

LANGSTON
How can you be taking this so lightly?

YOUNG BRUCE
We both decided that all of us living
together in this house is what we're
interested in writing about.

LANGSTON
So that gives Wally the right to
take credit for your work and get
paid for it?

YOUNG BRUCE

Maybe some of us don't do it for the credit! This isn't school. There's no teacher to impress.

LANGSTON

You're full of shit and you know it. If we can't trust each other then who can we trust.

Young Bruce stares at him blankly.

LANGSTON (CONT'D)

No one. Exactly. It means the people that you think are your brothers and sisters will stab you in the back in the blink of an eye if it serves their purpose. And then Dubois and Locke have won. We've become the vermin that they think we are. Wally's crossed the line.

YOUNG BRUCE

There is no line. We're his family and he's crying out for help. It's all in the manuscript for Chrissake. You're the one that needs to open your eyes.

Young Bruce opens Wally's manuscript and begins reading. Langston moves to the closet, gets a suitcase and starts packing.

YOUNG BRUCE (CONT'D)

(reading from the manuscript)

"As much as he wanted to be a great novelist, he knew deep down that he could only ever be a mediocre journalist. His writing forever encumbered by obsessive rendering of actual occurrences. Never being able to let his imagination run wild and soar to the heights he wished were possible...All of the younger writers of our generation were mired in decadence. We were a curiosity even to ourselves."

LANGSTON

(packing furiously)
Shut up!

YOUNG BRUCE

Paul's suicide at the end. This character's supposed to be me. But it's not me it's him.

LANGSTON

Look, I'm a real writer and I'm trying to build a career. I don't want to have to worry about my friends stealing from me.

Young Bruce stares at him silently. The differences between them were never as clear as they are now.

LANGSTON (CONT'D)

When we started this we wanted to say something important. What happened to that? Where is this going?

(pause as he thinks
about earlier times)

We wanted to make it.

YOUNG BRUCE

No, **you** wanted to make it. That wasn't on anybody else's agenda.

LANGSTON

(raising his hand in
resignation)

I'm leaving.

Langston gets his suitcase and coat and heads for the door.

YOUNG BRUCE

That's it. Run away like you always do. That'll fix it.

The door slams on Langston's exit. Young Bruce flips to the last few pages of Wally's manuscript. As he reads the camera pans out the window. Young Black children are playing in the street as Langston crosses.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR BATHROOM(1926) -- NIGHT

Wally has on a silk, crimson robe and is carefully placing the pages of his manuscript so that they cover the floor. He looks thin and weak, like a ghost of his former self.

He finishes with the last of the pages and turns on the bathtub faucet.

He picks up a straight razor, removes his robe and climbs into the water. He closes his eyes and slashes his wrist with one violent thrust. The blood colors the water as his body slowly becomes limp and submerged in the fluid.

The water overflows onto the floor as the ink of the manuscript pages becomes murky and indecipherable.

BRUCE (O.S.)

And sure enough his prophecy came true. Instead of slashing his wrist he slowly drank himself to death. Grand, immediate gestures like the slashing of wrists could only be done in Wally's fiction. But in two years he was dead at 34. The first of us to go.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

BRUCE

He used to say only a true Negro knows what it's like to be treated like a nigger. And he definitely knew what that felt like. We all did.

PERRY

(after a pause)

So where'd Langston go? And Zora and Aaron and the rest. Did you still see them?

BRUCE

Slowly we all moved out. I still saw them but after that day it wasn't the same. We weren't family.

(pause)

Times changed. The Depression set in and people really thought our excesses was what brought it on.

PERRY

Why?

BRUCE

Well the idea was that we weren't out being good productive workers because we were too busy giving into our base desires. And Blacks and queers became the vices that needed to get cleaned up to get the country back on its feet. And white people ran back downtown almost as quickly as they'd come up. It never really was the same. That sense of risk and magic was gone.

(pause)

In some ways Langston was right. Something got lost.

PERRY
 (picking up a paint
 brush)
 Well maybe you can get a little of
 it back tonight.

Perry gestures towards the paints and the easel.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Perry is nude and fiddling with his fingers nervously as he tentatively approaches Bruce.

Bruce is positioned behind a canvas as he gazes at Perry's face intently.

PERRY
 So how do you want me?

BRUCE
 (playful and smiling)
 I've been waiting to hear you say
 that.

PERRY
 Come on. No funny business, now.

BRUCE
 Alright. Go over by the fireplace.
 On that chair to the right.

Perry sits looking regal as the moonlight and the shadows of the trees form abstract patterns on his skin.

A series of dissolves shows the canvas going from the first touch of paint to the completed portrait of Perry and then back to white.

Perry is now behind the canvas. Bruce sits on the floor next to the fireplace.

BRUCE (CONT'D)
 I'd prefer to stay clothed for this
 one. No one needs to see this sagging
 flesh captured for eternity.

Perry laughs and contemplates the canvas and then Bruce a few times before starting to dash off his first strokes.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR LIVING ROOM(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

The two paintings are on either side of the fireplace. The first one on the left is of Perry and the second on the right is of Bruce, smiling and exuberant. Dolly in to Bruce's face in the painting.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NIGGERATI MANOR LIVING ROOM(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Perry opens his eyes slowly and watches Bruce sleeping peacefully. He kisses him on the forehead and grabs his hand.

He notices Bruce's body is abnormally cold and begins panicking. He touches his face and neck. Perry begins shaking him his movements racked with fear.

PERRY
 (violently shaking
 and touching him)
 Bruce! Oh my god. Bruce, wake up.

He turns around and runs out the door and into the street.

EXT. NIGGERATTI MANOR -- NIGHT

Bruce is strapped to a gurney and Perry follows as the paramedics fling open the back doors of the ambulance and hoist Bruce in. Perry attempts to enter the ambulance.

PARAMEDIC
 (stopping him)
 Only immediate family in the
 ambulance.

PERRY
 (angry and crying,
 forcing his way in)
 I am immediate family god dammit!

EXT. NYC STREETS -- NIGHT

The ambulance swerves wildly through various streets. We see traffic clearing way from the POV of the ambulance driver. The ambulance is seen from above as it snakes its way through the streets.

INT. AMBULANCE -- NIGHT

Perry is holding Bruce's hand. A surreal, aural landscape builds with a heart monitor, children's voices repeating nursery rhymes and snippets of conversations from throughout the film.

The sounds become more dissonant and haunting as the traffic transforms into hallucinatory streaks becoming more jagged and strobed.

The sound becomes deafening and then silent as the image dissolves to white.

INT. HOSPITAL -- DAY

There is absolute silence as Perry sits looking at the empty, perfectly made bed. A NURSE enters.

NURSE
Excuse me Mr. Williams it seems as if you're his only relation and we need to know what kind of arrangements you want to make.

PERRY
What do you mean?

NURSE
For the body.

Perry closes his eyes in disbelief.

PERRY
I haven't thought about that.

NURSE
(sensing her
inappropriate timing)
You don't need to decide right now.

She slowly backs out of the room and Perry stares at the bed thinking of Bruce.

INT. SUBWAY -- NIGHT

Perry sits on the train as the nighttime cityscape passes behind him. He reaches into his pocket taking out a note with his name on it and a key.

INT. NIGGERATTI MANOR(PRESENT) -- NIGHT

Perry ascends the dilapidated staircase. In the middle of the hall there's a small door leading to another small staircase. At the top of the stairs, Perry opens a door to a dusty attic with brilliant shafts of light formed by the moonlight coming through the windows.

He approaches a trunk and opens it. He picks up a pile of photographs which are stills from other previous scenes within the house throughout the film.

There's one of Gladys Bentley performing in top hat and tuxedo and another of Bruce, Wally, Langston and Zora on the couch raising their drinks towards the camera.

Perry dusts off an old canvas to reveal a painting of an abstract, androgynous figure in a confident and sexualized pose.

Deeper in the trunk Perry finds layered, superimposed nude stills of Young Bruce and the other stylized photos of Wally and Harald taken by Carl Van Vechten. He finds a manuscript entitled "Gentleman Jigger" by Bruce Nugent.

A close-up of Perry's hands perusing the manuscript dissolves into:

INT. UNIVERSITY OFFICE -- DAY

Isaiah looks over on his desk and picks up Perry's final paper. The title reads "Richard Bruce Nugent and The Rebel Spirit of the Harlem Renaissance".

INT. BOOK STORE -- DAY

Black male hands pick up a book from a stack. There's a picture of Young Bruce and the title is the same as Perry's paper. Below the title we read "A Selection of Writing - Edited by Isaiah Reed - Introduction by Perry Williams".

As the YOUNG BLACK MAN opens the book we notice a slight resemblance to Wally. He looks at the same androgynous painting that Perry encountered in the previous scene. He flips to the introduction and begins reading.

PERRY (V.O.)

I first met Bruce Nugent on the street doing what he does best, making magic out of words and rhythm. Although I only spent a short amount of time with him, his ability to use words to transport me to different realities would forever alter my perception of the world.

EXT. BEACH -- DAY

Perry walks on the sand towards the water.

PERRY (V.O.)

Through him I learned the complexity of what was inside me was also outside if I was willing to look deeper.

Perry removes ashes from a gold container and releases them into the air. They drift in the wind, dissipating in the mist above the water.

PERRY (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He taught me how to weave spells and conjure myths, the power of which would not be denied. With words and images I could convey the truth of my experience, putting it down and passing it on.

Perry turns away from the water and walks slowly passed the camera which holds on the waves of the ocean.

Title over Black : "I loved my friend. He went away from me. There is nothing more to say. This poem ends as softly as it began. I loved my friend." ("Poem" - Langston Hughes)

Title over Black : "Dedicated to the artistry, legacy and spirit of Richard Bruce Nugent."

Fade To Black.