

YOUNG BLACK JOE

WRITTEN BY

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OVER BLACK

TITLE CARD: "If ever proof were needed, which it is not, that the color of a man's skin has nothing to do with the color of his soul, this twain then and there offered it in abundance...hereafter n-i-g-g-e-r will merely be another way of spelling the word American." - 'Young Black Joe' by: Irvin Cobb.

The quote disappears and we hear multiple voices talking over each other. Another title card appears.

TITLE CARD: 1929 - Washington D.C.

FADE IN ON:

A shiny black and white tiled floor. SNIP. A lock of hair floats to the ground and comes to a rest by the stainless steel base of a chair.

INT. BARBERSHOP - DAY

Sitting in the chair a MAN is getting his hair cut. Sitting in the chair next to him, not so patiently, is his DAUGHTER, 8. Her feet fidget on the ground, a well worn doll lays in her lap.

A faint THUMPING can be heard which draws the child's attention. It gets louder. She runs to the window, pressing her hands and face to the glass, craning her neck to the side, trying to see the source of the noise. With every breath the window steams up and then dissipates.

A crowd has gathered on the sidewalk blocking the child's view of the street. The thumping gets louder, closer. Between people the child can see that something is approaching on the street.

The thumping starts to vibrate the window. The child runs for the door.

MAN

Sophia!

It's too late, she's out the door.

We follow Sophia as she tries to find an opening in the crowd, she finds it and squeezes her way through until she's at the front, on the curb. She cranes her neck to look down the street.

Sophia's father bursts out of the barbershop door, the apron still hanging around his neck. He frantically looks around for his daughter.

Approaching from down the street is a PARADE. A MARCHING BAND in military uniforms leads the way, the thumping of the drums are now accompanied by trumpets.

Behind the band are a caravan of convertibles, soldiers sit in them waving to the crowd. Sophia watches in wide-eyed wonder, but something draws her attention away from the parade.

Across the street, in between the cars passing, she sees someone shuffling behind the crowd in an uneven manner. The caravan passes and continues down the street, the crowd starts to dissipate.

She sees that it's a BLACK MAN in grimy clothes and well-worn boots. He's the only one not paying attention to the parade. She watches as he turns down an alleyway.

Just as her father forces his way through the crowd and reaches out to grab Sophia's arm, she DARTS across the street. Her Father chases her.

The man, HENRY JOHNSON, 36, stumbles down the alleyway, nearly falls, but catches himself on the brick wall. He leans against it and slides down until he's sitting, propped up. He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a BOTTLE, taking a drunken, sloppy swig, he lowers the bottle, trying to set it on the ground, but instead it teeters over and falls, spilling it's contents on the dirty concrete. His eyes, bloodshot and swollen, watch the precious liquid travel along the concrete and stop just before a child's shoes.

Sophia stands a few cautious feet away observing him. Unshaven, he's barely able to hold his head up. They make eye contact for a moment, before his eyelids close and he passes out. Sophia takes a step forward before being grabbed violently by the arm. Her father, half his hair cut, drags her angrily out of the alleyway.

We follow the liquid that is now dripping into a drain to the bottle just beyond his fingers and travel up his body to his chest where DOG TAGS hang from his neck. We move up to his face. His eyes move beneath the lids.

TITLE CARD: 1917 - HARLEM, NYC

MATCH CUT of a clean cut, YOUNG HENRY JOHNSON at 24. He's asleep. He's seated on a bus that's filled to the brim with other young black men. Seated next to him is NEADOM ROBERTS, 17, Henry's best friend.

Neadom is wide-awake, fidgeting with a pair of dice in one of his hands. The bus whizzes down the road and in the distance we see where it's headed - NEW YORK CITY.

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - DAY

The bus drives down the bustling streets of NYC.

INT. BUS

Neadom elbows Henry in the ribs, waking him.

NEADOM
Check this out.

Henry looks out the window and cranes his neck, unable to see the tops of the buildings that tower over them. He's in awe of the grandeur he's never seen before.

CUT TO:

EXT. MARCY AVENUE ARMORY, BROOKLYN - DAY

The bus parks behind the nondescript building with loading docks. No sooner than they come to a rest, the large garage doors slide open violently and white soldiers in uniforms come out BLOWING WHISTLES.

WHITE SOLDIER
Let's go! Off the bus!

Unloaded off the bus like cattle, Henry notices an older white officer, COLONEL HAYWARD, a robust without being fat man in his 50's standing to the side observing. Next to him is a black officer, JAMES REECE EUROPE, sleight, with wire rimmed glasses resting on the bridge of his nose.

Every few moments, Hayward motions to a soldier getting off the bus, says something under his breath to Europe who nods and takes notes on a ratty notepad.

INT. MARCY AVENUE ARMORY - CONTINUOUS

The group of Black Men stand together in the open RECEIVING ROOM in a large, unorganized group.

The drill instructor with a name plate that reads QUINN enters the room. He's a squat, barrel chested man, with a mustache that seems alive.

The group of Black Men have begun to talk amongst themselves, not noticing or paying attention to the soldier in front of them.

QUINN
Attention!

The Black Men stop talking.

QUINN (CONT'D)
You're in the army now! When a higher ranking soldier stands in front of you or merely walks in the room, you give your sole undivided attention and SHUT THE FUCK UP!

Some of the Black Men look at each other with 'what the fuck did we get ourselves into' in their eyes.

When Quinn is satisfied that he has their complete attention he continues.

QUINN (CONT'D)
I am Drill Sergeant Quinn! While you are here I am your momma, your poppa, your grammy, your fucking world! The sun rises and sets with ME!

He waits a moment, letting that sink in.

QUINN (CONT'D)
(motioning to the tables behind him)
On the tables you will find your uniform you will be wearing while you are here! Strip down and throw your old clothes in the middle of the room.

The men look hesitantly at each other.

QUINN (CONT'D)
STRIP!

The men start taking off their clothes, throwing them into a pile in the middle of the floor.

They file into the shower room, which isn't a shower room at all. They stand against the wall as the white soldiers spray them down with fire hoses, wincing from the pressure of the water.

CUT TO:

The men file out of the shower, shivering and naked.

In the middle of the room there are multiple tables with clothes piled on them. Each table has a different garment on them, pants, shirts, shoes, underwear.

Several white soldiers stand in front of them.

QUINN (CONT'D)

On the tables you will find the clothes you will be wearing while you're here!

BLACK SOLDIER

Where are the towels?

QUINN

No budget for towels, air dry!

They grab the clothes, most don't fit, either too big or too small.

They're broken into groups and shown to their sleeping quarters.

INT. SLEEPING QUARTERS - DAY

Bunk beds line the walls in the large room so close together, the men have to shimmy sideways to get to them.

Quinn enters the room.

QUINN

Line up!

They line up at the base of their bunks. The Drill Instructor walks between them, looking them over.

QUINN (CONT'D)

Look at the man standing on either side of you!

They do.

QUINN (CONT'D)

The odds are the person you just looked at will not make it back! Many of you will die, make no mistake!

Henry and Neadom give each other 'what the fuck' looks with their eyes.

CUT TO:

INT/EXT. MARCY AVENUE ARMORY - VARIOUS

We see a MONTAGE of the men and the training they're put through.

- Running laps around the armory.
- Physical labor, unloading and reloading trucks.
- Eating the SLOP they call lunch - quickly. Being yelled to hurry up, lunch is over, running to the doors with trays still in hand, shoveling food in their mouths as fast as possible, throwing their trays in a pile before running out the door.
- More training, being shown their guns, pistol, rifle, machine gun, knife.
- Shooting range, practicing hand to hand combat, using the knife in close quarters.
- Dinner.
- More running.
- Showers.
- Falling into their bunks, asleep before they hit the pillows.

FADE TO:

INT. MESS HALL - DAY

The men are in line getting their dinner, Neadom is in front of Henry in line. He holds out his plate and a ladle of the grey slop is dropped on his plate. His eyes go from the slop to the man who served it.

NEADOM

What's this?

KITCHEN WORKER

Your food. Move along.

NEADOM
No, no, no, I ain't eatin' this
again.

KITCHEN WORKER
Then you're not eating.

Henry nudges Neadom in the back.

NEADOM
No Henry.
(to Kitchen Worker)
You eatin' this?

KITCHEN WORKER
Move along private.

The disturbance has gathered the attention of the rest of the men. One of the White Soldiers approaches.

WHITE SOLDIER
Move!

NEADOM
I want to see you eat this!

He turns the tray upside down and dumps the slop on the counter in front of the Kitchen Worker.

Henry grabs Neadom by the shoulder and shoves him forward, physically pushing him out of the Mess Hall.

As they exit, Europe watches the pair from the Officer's Table.

FADE TO:

EXT. LOADING DOCK - DAY

As the other men congregate, Henry and Neadom are unloading supply trucks by themselves as punishment.

NEADOM
This is some bullshit Henry.

HENRY
Shut up.

NEADOM
This ain't what we signed up for.

Henry shoves a box particularly hard into Neadom's chest and doesn't let go.

HENRY
(hissing)
We're here because you can't keep
your mouth shut, you want to be
over there with them?
(points to the other men)
Shut your fucking mouth.

Neadom, shocked at the sudden change in Henry, nods.

FADE TO:

INT. BUNK ROOM - NIGHT

Henry lays in his bunk, sleeping heavily. He awoken by
whispering coming from the other side of the room.

He rolls over and sees the men in the corner. Neadom's at the
center, rolling dice onto a blanket to make not make noise.

NEADOM
All right, here we go!

He continues to watch as Neadom has a good roll and collects
money from the other men.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Henry and Neadom are working in the kitchen trying to keep up
with the line of soldiers waiting to get food that never
seems to end.

Sweat pours off their foreheads from the sweltering kitchen.
They're now serving the same grey slop Neadom caused a
disturbance about previously.

The same White Soldier who served Neadom originally steps up
and holds out his tray, a sly grin on his face.

Neadom reluctantly scoops the slop onto it.

The White Soldier stares at Neadom for a moment and slowly
turns the tray upside down, splattering the goop on the
counter, some splashing onto Neadom's clothes.

The White Soldier leers at him.

WHITE SOLDIER
Oops.

He drops the tray with a clatter and walks away, reveling in the laughter of the other White Soldiers.

Henry rests his hand on Neadom's shoulder as he glares at the White Soldier's back.

FADE TO:

INT. BACK OF KITCHEN - DAY

Henry and Neadom are washing dishes and cleaning the back of the kitchen after everyone has finished and left.

NEADOM

How do they expect us to eat this
shit, Henry? You seen what it's
made out of.

HENRY

You gotta calm down.

NEADOM

Stuff makes my eyes water.

Henry grabs Neadom's shoulder, looking him in the eye.

HENRY

We don't have no better options,
you like the punishments, on your
hands and knees scrubbing, you keep
complaining.

From the Mess Hall, they hear the door open and clatter close.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Keep cleaning.

Henry leaves the kitchen to see who it is.

INT. MESS HALL - DAY

Henry sees Officer Europe sitting at one of the tables. He wears glasses and sits confidently .

EUROPE

Johnson.

HENRY

Yes sir.

EUROPE
I need a word.

HENRY
(starts to sit)
Ok.

EUROPE
Outside.

Henry looks back into the kitchen where Needom is staring at them. Henry looks back at Europe who stands.

EXT. MESS HALL - DAY

Europe extends his hand, Henry takes it.

EUROPE
Officer Europe. James Reece Europe.

HENRY
I know who you are.

A few White Officers exit another building into the courtyard, drawing Henry and Europe's attention.

EUROPE
(directing Henry to the
alleyway)
Over here.

Europe waits for the White Officers to enter another building.

EUROPE (CONT'D)
I've been watching you, so has
COLONEL HAYWARD.

HENRY
Oh yeah?

EUROPE
The way you work, set an example
for the other men, keep to
yourself.

HENRY
(motions to the Mess Hall)
Looks like it's doin' me a world o'
good.