A Hope in the Unseen

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RON SUSKIND

Born in Kingston, New York in 1959, Ron Suskind studied at Colombia University and became a news reporter for *The New York Times* in 1983. He subsequently wrote for the *St. Petersburg Times*, was the editor of *Boston Business* magazine, and then returned to New York to write on the national affairs desk at the *Wall Street Journal*. While he was at the *Wall Street Journal*, Suskind wrote an article about Cedric Jennings, a young man from the inner city of Washington, D.C., who went on to study at Brown University; in 1995, Suskind won a Pulitzer Prize for the article, and then in 1998, he expanded it into a book entitled *A Hope in the Unseen*. Suskind has also written *The Price of Loyalty*, *The One Percent Doctrine*, *The Way of the World*, *Confidence Men*, and *Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism*, which is a memoir about his life with his autistic son, Owen.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A Hope in the Unseen is set mainly in the 1990s, and references a number of important events that took place during that time, especially those events focused on race relations in the United States. Marion Barry is the mayor of Washington, D.C., when Cedric is in high school there; Barry was a prominent civil rights activist, but his political career was mired in scandal when he was caught smoking crack and arrested on drug charges. While Barry spent time in prison, many people within the African American community sided with the former mayor, citing racism in the criminal justice system. Cedric also meets Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, another prominent African American who was caught up in a scandal: a lawyer named Anita Hill accused Thomas of sexual harassment, and public opinion was split. While many believed Anita Hill's story, others believed this was a strategic move to keep an African American from a Supreme Court seat. Finally, during Cedric's time at Brown, celebrity athlete O.J. Simpson was put on trial for the murder of his wife, a white woman. The trial was highly publicized, and when Simpson was found not guilty, the reactions from the public were split along racial lines.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A Hope in the Unseen centers around academic success and upward mobility, and readers interested in stories of educational advancement will be glad to know that Cedric Jennings is not the only student to beat the odds and climb out of poverty. In *And Still We Rise*, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Miles Corwin follows students in a gifted program in South-Central Los Angeles, focusing on many of the same issues from *A Hope in the Unseen*. Wes Moore's memoir *The Other Wes Moore* traces the very different path of two black boys named Wes Moore, both of whom were raised in poverty in Baltimore, but ended up with drastically different futures. There is also Jeff Hobbs's *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*, in which the title character goes from Newark to Yale and back again, but with a tragic twist.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*
- **When Written:** 1995
- **Where Written:** New York, Washington, D.C., and Providence, Rhode Island
- **When Published:** 1998
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Biography
- **Setting:** Washington, D.C., and Providence, Rhode Island
- **Climax:** Cedric Jennings leaves home for Brown, leaving behind his impoverished inner-city life.
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, racism
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Happy Ending. Cedric Jennings graduated from Brown University, and currently works in Washington, D.C., as a clinical social worker and motivational speaker. Upon graduation, he received offers to work on Wall Street, but felt that he would be of more value to his community through social work.

Dreams are Contagious. Cedric's story has inspired a generation of young people, but none more than the students at his old high school, Ballou. In 2017, every single student in the senior class applied to college. Many attribute this impressive move to Jamada Porter, the new college and career coordinator for the school.

PLOT SUMMARY

A Hope in the Unseen follows Cedric Jennings, an African American teenager living in inner-city Washington, D.C., during the 1980s and 90s, as he rises above the violence, poverty, and despair that surrounds him and heads off to Brown University.

Cedric is an intelligent and determined student, which makes him both an anomaly and a target of bullying at Ballou High School, where only about half of the students manage to graduate, and even fewer aspire to attend college. To avoid the wrath of his fellow students, Cedric hides out in the chemistry classroom or the computer lab, where he works on extra credit assignments with his teachers to augment the meager curriculum of his underserved high school. When he does interact with other students, they are aggressive towards him, calling him "nerd" and "whitey," and ridiculing him for his academic ambitions. He shares a tiny apartment with his mother, Barbara, who works at the Department of Agriculture for $5 an hour; his father, Cedric Gilliam, is in and out of the teen's life, as he spends most of the story in prison on drug charges. The few times the two men do meet up, their relationship is strained, as young Cedric aspires to a very different life from the one his father leads, and Cedric, Sr. sees his son as weak and bookish, seeing little value in academic ambition.

Cedric's hard work pays off in his junior year of high school, as he is admitted to a prestigious pre-college program for students of color at MIT. Math is Cedric's best subject, but when he arrives on campus for the advanced math/science program, he realizes how poorly Ballou has prepared him, even with all of the extra support and tutoring from dedicated teachers. He is overwhelmed by the middle-class students who have had the benefit of more challenging curricula, as well as the fact that he sticks out—even among his fellow students of color—for his inner-city background. He refers to himself as "ghetto" as a way of embracing this part of his identity, but also longs to be part of his elite group. As the program ends, the faculty director meets with Cedric to dissuade him from applying to MIT, telling him that it is unlikely that he would be admitted, and that he certainly would not succeed at the college.

Cedric returns to Ballou with a renewed focus on college, applies for early admission to Brown University, and is accepted. In the spring of his senior year, Cedric is invited to meet with Chief Justice Clarence Thomas, one of the most powerful African American men in the United States at this point in time. Cedric is also asked to speak at his high school graduation, and delivers a powerful, sermon-like speech in which he condemns "Dreambusters" who would like to see him fail.

In Cedric's first year at Brown, he is overwhelmed by how different his world has become, and worries that he will not be prepared enough to succeed. He decides to take easier courses that teach topics he is familiar with, and to take all of his classes pass/fail. He makes friends, though his relationship with his roommate, Rob, is rocky at times—he finds it difficult to share such an intimate space with someone so different from him. He finds support in his sponsor, Dr. Donald Korb, who invites Cedric to have Thanksgiving dinner at his home in Boston, and treats him like a member of the family.

When Cedric returns to Washington, D.C., for winter break, he returns to Ballou and spends time with some of his friends from high school, which demonstrates for him how much he has changed after only one semester. When he returns for the spring semester, Cedric challenges himself a bit more, and continues with the education coursework he began in the fall, taking a fieldwork course in education and doing regular observations at Slater Junior High School, an inner-city Providence school that in many ways reminds him of Ballou. He realizes that he feels at home in this space, and begins to realize that he will always live somewhere between two worlds.

Meanwhile, Barbara Jennings has been struggling with depression since her son left for college, and has been spending money she does not have, which leads to threats of eviction from her landlord. She contacts Bishop Long at Scripture Cathedral, hoping that he will be able to help one of his most loyal missionaries. The U.S. Marshall arrives to remove Barbara from her home, moving the furniture out on to the street, when Minister Borden arrives in one of his Cadillacs with the money to pay back rent and fees, narrowly saving her from eviction. This is a triumphant moment for Barbara, who regularly donated her last $20 to the church for decades, and finally saw the money come back to her. That triumph is short-lived, though: the money from Minister Borden will need to be repaid, and when Barbara is evicted a second time, the church does not come to the rescue again.

Cedric's spring semester is much more difficult academically than the fall, but he is also beginning to find himself at Brown. His relationships with his friend Zayd and his roommate Rob are tumultuous, and Cedric begins spending time with the only other African American student in his unit, Chiniqua, even going on a date with her. He also attends events at Harambee House, the African American cultural house on campus, which he has avoided because he did not want to be defined by his race. By the end of the year, he is able to make peace with Zayd and Rob before going home to be with his mother.

His mother's near-eviction upsets Cedric, and will not speak to her for a month, breaking his silence to tell her that she can rely on him, just as he relied on her to support him and help him get to Brown. He also makes an effort to reconnect to his father, visiting him in prison and making peace. In an epilogue to the story, Suskind reports that Cedric is in his junior year at Brown, where he is dating a girl from the basketball team, and is still friends with both Rob and Zayd. He hardly speaks to anyone from Ballou anymore, but is building a relationship with his father, who is out of prison and working as a drug counselor. Cedric finds that he no longer has that anger that defined his high school years—what he called "something to push against"—and he does not miss it.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Cedric Jennings – Cedric is the protagonist of *A Hope in the Unseen*, and the story follows him from his childhood and adolescence in a poor, black neighborhood in Washington, D.C., through his first year at Brown University. He has grown up with his mother, Barbara Jennings, while his father, Cedric, Sr., spend most of his time in and out of prison for taking and dealing drugs. Young Cedric is an intelligent and ambitious young man, and is determined to get into an Ivy League college. This makes him a pariah at his high school, where only about half of the students will graduate at all, and very few of them will go on to college; he is ostracized and bullied for his dedication to academics and his general standoffishness. He is eventually accepted to Brown University, and when he arrives, he is overwhelmed by the new world he encounters, and the amount of knowledge that he has missed out on at his underserved high school. Growing up in poverty, he has had few opportunities to socialize with different classes, and almost no exposure to cultural events and references, making it just as difficult to fit in socially as it is to succeed academically at Brown. He struggles to keep up in his classes and to make friends in such a foreign atmosphere, but manages to find his place by the end of his first year. When he returns home over the summer, Cedric realizes that he no longer belongs there; he makes peace with his father, leaves the church that has long been a staple in his life but he has now outgrown, and begins to forge his own path. Cedric's story is both intensely personal and representative of the struggles that poor, inner-city black students face when they work towards higher education and upward mobility. While Cedric is deeply motivated to propel himself out of poverty, he also learns to ask for help, and accept the support of individuals who believe in him, like his chemistry teacher Mr. Taylor and his patron, Dr. Korb.

Cedric's Mother / Barbara Jennings – Barbara Jennings is Cedric's mother and the most important person in his life. She raised Cedric on her own because the boy's father, Cedric Gilliam, wanted nothing to do with a child, and because he spent most of the boy's childhood in and out of prison for taking and dealing drugs. Barbara focused all of her energy and attention on her son, and they spent most of their time at church, where Barbara serves as a missionary and Cedric used to sing in the choir. She even left her job during the first years of Cedric's life, going on welfare for five years, so that she could spend all of her time with her son. This close relationship between mother and son was strained when Cedric went off to college at Brown, as Barbara no longer had anyone to take care of. She began to feel depressed, and mismanaged the small amount of money she had, neglecting to pay bills and her rent, until she was nearly evicted for nonpayment. Cedric's first year in college is a profound learning experience for Barbara, who must redefine herself after 18 years of centering her world and sense of self around raising and protecting her son. After a painful eviction, she eventually begins to take care of herself, pay off debts, and explore the possibility of a social life, which helps her reconnect with her son.

Cedric, Sr. / Cedric Gilliam – Cedric's father did not want a child in the first place, and when he found out that his girlfriend Barbara was pregnant, he pressured her to have an abortion, and deserted her when she chose to keep the child. He subsequently spent years in and out of prison for taking and dealing drugs. Although he earned two college degrees in prison, he struggled to find work when he was out, leading him back to a life of drugs. He has a difficult time relating to his son, who is focused on academic goals that Cedric Gilliam can hardly understand; the father and son are estranged for most of Cedric's adolescence, and are only able to begin to connect as father and son once Cedric Gilliam completes a drug treatment program.

Bishop Long – Bishop Long is the head of Scripture Cathedral, the Pentecostal church that Barbara and Cedric belong to. He is a central figure in their lives, as they attend services at the church twice a week at minimum, until Cedric leaves for college. He is a complicated figure in the story, because he seems to prey on the poor and downtrodden, preaching that they should literally give their last precious dollar to Scripture Cathedral, with the vague promise that it will return to them tenfold; in contrast to his parishioners, who are mired in poverty, Bishop Long himself lives in a nice house in the suburbs and owns two Cadillacs. He provides necessary moral support to the Jennings while Cedric is young, but Cedric begins to outgrow the church after his first year at Brown and respectfully asks for Long's permission to leave the church. While Bishop Long's brand of religion—focused on complete and total faith in God to solve all of one's problems—is no longer relevant to Cedric's life, Bishop Long's teachings on faith and morality are still a central part of the boy's consciousness.

Zayd Dohrn – Cedric's best friend at Brown during his freshman year, Zayd is the child of two progressive activists (both of whom used to be on the FBI's Most Wanted list), and enjoys befriending someone so different from himself. His motto of "try anything" is jarring to Cedric, who has been raised with strict behavioral rules and moral boundaries; it also causes some tension with Zayd's mother, Bernadine, who sees her son as an unprincipled fun-seeker. Just as Cedric and Chiniqua bond over music, Zayd and Cedric bond over their shared love of rap and hip hop, and Cedric is continually impressed by Zayd's knowledge of musical genres that most white students at Brown knew nothing about, forcing him to confront some of his preconceived ideas about white people. However, Cedric is besieged by worries about his new friend's motives—he accuses Zayd of being friends with a black, inner-city kid in order to seem more edgy and cool. Their friendship is

tumultuous throughout the year, but in the end, Zayd wins Cedric over, as Cedric begins to feel more comfortable with interracial friendships.

Rob Burton – Cedric's white roommate during his freshman year at Brown, Rob comes from a very different background, and the two boys have a number of conflicts based on their different perspectives on life. Cedric compares Rob to Wally Cleaver, the older brother in the 1950s **television** show *Leave it to Beaver*, the epitome of wholesome whiteness and prosperity. But while Rob is laid back, social, and uninterested in keeping his space clean (he's used to having a maid to pick up after him), Cedric is completely the opposite, and they cannot seem to find a way to cohabitate without problems. They reconcile in their second year at Brown, when they no longer have to live together and can put aside their differences.

Chiniqua Milligan – The other black student in Cedric's unit during his freshman year at Brown, Chiniqua also comes from a working-class background. She has spent more time around middle- and upper-class kids, however, because she was picked to attend a prestigious prep school in Manhattan, where she gained the academic and social skills to succeed at a college like Brown. She and Cedric go on a date in the spring of their freshman year, and he begins to see the value of spending time with other black students; Chiniqua takes Cedric to Harambee House, the all-black dorm on campus, and helps him find a way to be comfortable with being black at Brown.

LaTisha Williams – Cedric Jennings's one and only friend throughout high school. Like Cedric, LaTisha is an outcast at Ballou, but this is mainly because she is overweight; while Cedric dreams of attending an Ivy League college, she is not interested in leaving Washington, D.C.; She attends the University of the District of Columbia, but drops out after her first year and ends up selling candy on the streets to raise money for a fundamentalist church she has joined. While LaTisha manages to stay away from drugs, violence, and teen pregnancy, she is a lost soul who does not know what to do with her life. At one point, when she and Cedric reconnect during his winter break from Brown, she realizes that she harbors romantic feelings for him, and even imagines herself finding God just so that she can be closer to Cedric. Unfortunately for her, while Cedric cares about LaTisha, he is too intensely focused on his college success to understand what she is going through, and he eventually leaves her behind, like everyone else from his childhood.

Mr. Clarence Taylor – Cedric's chemistry teacher at Ballou, Mr. Taylor is one of the people who recognizes Cedric's intellect and potential from the beginning, and offered his spare time and energy to help the boy advance beyond the boundaries of their underserved high school. He is a constant source of support, guidance, and inspiration for Cedric during high school, and uses their mutual faith in God to help keep the boy on track. However, when Mr. Taylor visits Cedric while he's at Brown, the teacher gives his student a Bible study magazine, hoping to maintain that connection of faith in God; Cedric has no use for this gift, and leaves it on a stoop, recognizing that he is swiftly moving away from his old life and his connection to the church, though he still believes in God.

Donald Korb – A Boston-based optometrist, Dr. Korb is Cedric's patron. He first read about the boy in a *Wall Street Journal* article and took an interest in him. While they only met once in person before Cedric went off to Brown, Dr. Korb kept in contact through phone calls and letters, and began to send Cedric $200 each month for books and spending money. While at Brown, Cedric spends Thanksgiving with Dr. Korb and his family in Boston, and is treated as the guest of honor, which makes him extremely uncomfortable. To Cedric, this is a strange glimpse into the world that he has suddenly entered upon enrolling at Brown.

Bill Ramsay – The head of the summer program for talented high school students of color at MIT, which Cedric attends. Bill began the program with the goal of bringing some students out of poverty and giving them a path towards studying at MIT, but acknowledges that the gap between those students and middle-class white students is too large, and that he has had to redirect the program towards middle-class students of color, who have a better chance of success at MIT as college students. Cedric is inspired by Bill's presence and encouragement at the beginning of the program, but when the two meet in Ramsay's office later on, Cedric notes how out of place he feels, and expresses surprise that there are not more students like him in the program.

Leon Trilling – A professor at the MIT summer program for talented high school students of color, Leon Trilling is the one who tells Cedric that he is not cut out for MIT. Citing Cedric's lousy **SAT** scores and his struggles during the summer program, Trilling informs the boy that he is simply not on the level of MIT students academically, and he discourages Cedric from applying altogether. He suggests that Cedric consider applying to lower-tier colleges, and even mentions Howard University, a historically black college in Washington, D.C. Cedric finds this extremely offensive and racist, and uses his anger to focus on getting into a different top-tier school: Brown University.

Phillip Atkins – A classmate of Cedric's from Ballou, Phillip goes to great lengths to fit in with everyone during high school, sacrificing his academic success in order to not stand out and run the risk of being bullied. He criticizes Cedric for being standoffish and not making more of an effort to make friends in high school; however, after graduation, Phillip ends up in a dead-end job in the mailroom of a newspaper, while Cedric secures a highly coveted place at Brown University. While at one point, he wanted to become a comedian or a tap dancer, Phillip eventually drops all of his ambitions due to the fact that his father, a devout Jehovah's Witness, believed that personal ambition was sinful. Phillip stands in contrast to Cedric, who

sacrificed fitting in for a better future.

Stephan Wheelock – A black graduate student at Brown, Stephan Wheelock teaches Cedric's seminar on Richard Wright. One afternoon, Cedric overhears Wheelock talking to a friend about how difficult it can be to compete with other Brown students who have had academic and social opportunities that he—a black man from a poor area of Mississippi—did not. This helps Cedric see that he is not the only one who struggles in this atmosphere, but it also gives him hope that he can succeed, just as Wheelock has done.

Bernadine Dohrn – Zayd Dohrn's mother. She is disappointed in her son for his lack of motivation to change the world and the way he sees women as sexual conquests. She was a radical activist as a young woman—even earning herself a spot on the FBI's Most Wanted list—and has raised Zayd to see the world from her very progressive perspective. She is proud of her son for befriending Cedric, and is very excited to meet him and his mother. However, at the end of a long and overwhelming day, Barbara is uninterested in talking to Bernadine, and Cedric is uncomfortable being placed on a pedestal for his race, foreshadowing some of the tensions that will fester between Cedric and Zayd throughout the year.

Helaine Schupack – Cedric's tutor during his first year at Brown. She is an exceptional tutor, and worked with Dr. Korb's son when he was younger; now, when Cedric is struggling academically during his freshman year, Dr. Korb contacts Helaine and arranges for her to tutor Cedric, footing the lofty $40/hour bill. Helaine finds Cedric's writing deeply impactful, and it helps her put aside her professional detachment and truly connect with her student.

Larry Wakefield – One of Cedric's teachers at Brown. When Cedric turns in an impassioned poem instead of the assigned analytical essay, Wakefield is forced to decide what to do. After much debate, he gives Cedric a B for his efforts but implores him to follow directions next time, as critical thinking and analytical writing are things he needs to learn now that he's in college.

Professor Tom James One of Cedric's professors at Brown University. One of James' strongest students is a Latino student named Franklin Cruz, who is adept at stepping in and out of his racial identity, like a coat he can put on and take off depending on his environment. James thinks that Cedric is nothing like this, as Cedric can't get get the same kind of intellectual distance from his identity that Franklin Cruz can—a skill that James believes is essential to thriving at Brown and in the wider world.

Clarence Thomas Chief Justice Clarence Thomas is a black man on the Supreme Court, and the second black justice in the Supreme Court's history. Because of his academic achievements, Cedric Jennings is invited to meet with Justice Thomas. However, the meeting proves unsettling for Cedric, as Justice Thomas tries to get Cedric to set his sights lower than Brown, as he'll "get eaten alive" there, and implores Cedric to ignore his racial identity by thinking of himself as just a man rather than a black man.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Neddy Jennings – Nanette "Neddy" Jennings is Barbara's older daughter. She often went to live with other relatives during Cedric's childhood, but is close with Barbara as an adult. She accompanies Barbara to Brown for Parents' Weekend, and attempts to support her mother when Barbara is nearly evicted for nonpayment of rent.

Mr. Fleming – One of the teachers at the poor school in Providence that Cedric observes for his education fieldwork class. Cedric is furious when Mr. Fleming judgmentally claims that he knows which of his students will die young.

Bill Dohrn Zayd's father and Bernadine's husband. Like his wife, Bill had been a dedicated activist in his youth and was even on FBI's Most Wanted List, which forced him to go into hiding for seven years. Bill and Bernadine believe that Zayd lacks purpose and interest in social issues.

Marion Barry The mayor of Washington, D.C. When Cedric is in college, Barry is caught on video smoking crack cocaine, though Cedric believes that he was "completely framed" by white policemen. Cedric believes that Barry was targeted from day one because of his race.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACE, RACISM, AND IDENTITY

A Hope in the Unseen is set in inner-city Washington, D.C., in the 1990s, where Cedric Jennings seeks to lift himself out of poverty and attend Brown University. The story chronicles Cedric's successes and failures along the way, focusing on the struggles that African Americans face when they aspire to improve their social or economic status. Throughout the story, Cedric works to fit in without losing his sense of self. This proves difficult as Cedric is pigeonholed into certain roles and stereotypes because of his blackness. The story builds on the idea of race as a social construct, highlighting how it is continually reiterated—and thus perpetuated—through learned attitudes and behaviors.

From an early age, Cedric receives messages that he is not black enough, based on his work ethic and ambition. In Cedric's

neighborhood, the concept of being "black" is reinforced through social markers like an indifferent or negative attitude towards academics, lack of emotional expression, and a narrow view of masculinity. Cedric's academic achievement makes him both an outsider and a target of ridicule and occasional violence. At his high school, Cedric begins to skip out on the awards assemblies due to the calls of "nerd," "egghead," and "whitey." Once, when he attended the ceremony and received award money for his achievement, he was almost immediately confronted by a student with a gun, looking to steal his money and his pride. Even Cedric's own father, Cedric, Sr., belittles him, describing young Cedric as a nerdy mama's boy, while Cedric's friend LaTisha jokes that he "just ain't a woman's man." While he actively pushes against the social codes that permeate his environment, Cedric has also internalized them in many ways. Among his peers, African American men are valued for defying authority, demonstrating courage through threats or acts of violence, and rejecting any form of intellectualism. Logically, then, Cedric realizes that all that he embodies—the polar opposite of the ideal African American man in his community—emasculates him entirely.

Once Cedric is exposed to the world beyond his neighborhood, his racial identity is redefined for him. Yet while Cedric's racial identity is inverted at MIT and again at Brown—he is suddenly deemed authentically black rather than not black enough—he is still unable to control that identity and continues to feels like an outsider. In his summer program at MIT, he is seen as authentically black, even among a group of racially diverse students. He uses the word "ghetto" to describe himself, reinforcing an "edgy urban version of blackness." In contrast to his relative whiteness at Ballou, Cedric represents the epitome of blackness in this larger community of students of color through his speech, taste in clothing, and music choices. In his first week at Brown, during a game of "cultural pursuit," Cedric is overtaken by students asking him about Rosa Parks and reflects that he hates having "the identity carrying the highest voltage" in the room. His friendship with a white classmate named Zayd is complicated by the fact that Zayd seems to admire his blackness, while Cedric resents Zayd for the privilege he enjoys and often does not recognize. He sometimes lashes out at Zayd, worried that he is using Cedric as a token black friend in order to make himself seem edgier. This only exacerbates Cedric's impression that he is perceived as a jumble of African-American stereotypes, rather than an individual.

Cedric gradually develops his own sense of identity as the story unfolds. He is able to accept that his academic achievements do not make him any less racially authentic, and to integrate elements of his African American identity into his new, more racially diverse world. His tension eases as he learns to express his concerns about race. For example, Cedric and Zayd talk openly about Zayd's intentions regarding their friendship. Cedric opens up to his roommate, Rob, sharing his experiences with gangs and violence during high school, and begins to appreciate the fact that his white, upper-class roommate is genuinely trying to gain a better understanding of his background. During his freshman year, Cedric watches as his classmates and friends find refuge in clubs dedicated to individual racial or ethnic groups, including the Harambee House, where many black students live and hold social events. Cedric resists joining in because it seems to represent exactly what he was running away from by attending Brown in the first place, though later on he occasionally attends events there. He has trouble balancing his desire to be around a community that feels familiar to him with his fear of being defined and marginalized by his race. Cedric's date with Chiniqua, the other black student in his dorm, helps him feel comfortable as a black student at Brown, as they share their experiences living in two worlds at once. They bond over their shared familiarity with Popular Club, a clothing store popular in low-income areas, and classic R&B music that their white classmates would not have heard of. After watching a film called *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate*, Cedric considers its overly simplified vision of blackness. The film establishes one character, the "ghetto scoundrel," as the epitome of racial authenticity, while the college-educated and principled woman is portrayed as "losing touch with her black soul." Cedric thinks about how far from those stereotypes he has come since leaving home, noting the artificiality of these polarizing images of African Americans, and his alternative interpretation that encompasses elements of both characters.

A large part of Cedric's education is a process of self-discovery, and by the end of the narrative, he is able to place himself outside of the narrow definitions of race that have been imposed on him. Suskind thus reminds readers of one of the main obstacles to success for African Americans—the overly simplified markers of racial identity that strip them of their power to build their own futures.

CLASS VS. WEALTH

Even among African Americans, there are a variety of class distinctions that further complicate Cedric Jennings's sense of self in *A Hope in the Unseen*. In Cedric's community in a poor part of Washington, D.C., class is represented by extravagant displays of wealth. Once he leaves his neighborhood, however, Cedric finds that class is far more complicated than meets the eye, which invariably makes upward mobility more difficult than it may seem.

In Cedric's neighborhood, class is defined narrowly as the outward display of wealth, and the desire to make more money—or to be perceived as someone who makes money by looking the part—is pervasive. Many people covet the trappings of wealth as status symbols. For instance, boys sell drugs to be able to own Lexuses, showing that the luxury item is more

important than the means used to obtain it. Even Cedric's mother yearns to provide more expensive gifts to her son—although she worries that she will not have enough money to pay her rent or buy food for the week, Barbara has purchased a $1,500 **television** for Cedric's room. This becomes an item of immense value to Cedric, and a way for Barbara to provide for her son. In surprising contrast, however, Barbara once made a significant decision that contradicts her community's conflation of class and material goods. When Cedric was young, his mother quit her job to become a stay-at-home mom until he went to school. This meant that they had less money and fewer luxuries, but it set Cedric on a path towards academic success later on in life. While they lacked material wealth, Barbara was able to arm her son with the skills and foundational knowledge to eventually rise above the systemic poverty of their neighborhood. It was only by rejecting certain markers of class that she actually gave her son a chance at upward mobility, reflecting the distinction between class and wealth that is present throughout the book.

Once he leaves his neighborhood, Cedric quickly learns that class distinctions are more complex than just about being able to afford certain luxury items. Class also encapsulates social and educational opportunities, which adds several layers to the differences separating Cedric from his peers. Cedric spends a summer at an elite MIT academic camp for students of color, where he is competing with students who have attended schools with more funding, stronger academic programs, and communities that link academic success to future prosperity. While Cedric has been trying to take in the barrage of new information in his classes, one of the girls comments casually that while some of it is complex, she has already been exposed to it in her high school. Through these interactions, Cedric realizes that education and class go hand in hand, complicating his earlier understanding of class simply being about what a person can buy. Cedric's first days at Brown University provide him with a learning experience outside of the classroom that rivals his academic courses. He feels bombarded with new cultural references—he has to look up both Sigmund Freud and The Grateful Dead—that exhaust him every night. In his classes, he feels that his fellow students are "guided by some mysterious encoded knowledge" to which he is not privy, due to the fact that he has not been exposed to the same set of educational, social, and cultural opportunities. Cedric's relationship with his roommate, Rob, is a jumble of cultural differences that neither of them has ever considered. For example, Rob's messiness suggests that he has grown up expecting someone to clean up after him, while Cedric—a latchkey kid for most of his life—has had to take on his share of family chores from an early age, and is used to keeping his room clean. His friend Chiniqua is also black but has a different experience at Brown due to the fact that she has grown up among middle- and upper-class children in New York City. She has already become accustomed to the generational wealth that Cedric observes at Brown, as well as the sense of entitlement that comes along with it. Likewise, Chiniqua has long been exposed to the social and cultural context that pervades the Brown campus, while Cedric is experiencing it for the first time in his life.

As he attends college during the year and returns for the summers, this class distinction exacerbates Cedric's sense of living in between two worlds. Because it is so multifaceted, it is class—even more so than race—that makes him feel markedly different from everyone around him. In response to the variety of higher-order cultural references at Brown, Cedric uses television and film references to connect with his classmates. Mainstream popular culture provides Cedric with a third way of communicating that helps overcome some of the racial and class distinctions that hold him back. When Cedric visits Slater Junior High School in a working-class area of Providence, he feels strangely at home. He sees his past in the eyes of these students, and begins to take in the complexities of the struggle for upward mobility. Cedric also connects emotionally to the story of Professor Wheelock, a black man who also grew up in poverty. Like Cedric, Wheelock feels that he is "constantly having to play catch-up with guys who've spent the past five years speaking three languages, visiting Europe, and reading all the right books." To Cedric, Wheelock represents the possibility of navigating both the academic and social spheres simultaneously, and an acknowledgement that Cedric's lack of cultural references and educational resources need not be a barrier to academic achievement.

A Hope in the Unseen presents Cedric's struggle to survive in two very different worlds. By the end of the story, however, Cedric begins to recognize that he can balance his past and present, and transition from the depths of his inner-city neighborhood to the heights of the Brown campus and back again. Cedric's experience emphasizes the fact that for students from low-income backgrounds, academics are only one part of a complex struggle for upward mobility.

RELIGION AND HOPE

A Hope in the Unseen charts Cedric Jennings's gentle separation from the Christian church as he develops more confidence in himself and his abilities. While his religious faith has given him the foundation to hold on to hope through difficult times, he eventually finds that it is holding him back from achieving the future that he wants. The book illustrates that religion is both helpful and harmful, providing a source of belonging and purpose while also narrowly confining its adherents to a specific set of values or identity.

Scripture Cathedral, their local Apostolic Pentecostal church, plays a central role in the lives of both Barbara and Cedric Jennings, bringing them a positive sense of belonging and purpose. The church gave Barbara the opportunity to view her

difficult past as a series of challenges of her faith in God and to see the world though simple divisions of right and wrong. This clear set of rules acts as a compass by which Barbara can orient her life, giving her both structure and a sense of justice within a world that is often messy and inherently unjust. She cooks for the church on Sundays in exchange for a free meal for herself and her son, and there are weeks when this is the most nutritious meal either of them has all week. In this way, the church provides both physical and spiritual nourishment, positioning the church as a force for good. Meanwhile, Cedric is moved by the religious fervor he witnesses every week at church, and finds a place at the front of the choir, regularly soloing and performing on local **television**. Even as a teen, sitting in the back pew, he feels the power of Bishop Long's words like "a wave crashing over him," strengthening his hope in the future. The Bishop's encouraging words highlight that, at least in Cedric's youth, the church is a positive force in his life.

For all of the support and faith that the church has to offer, it quickly becomes clear that it is also holding people like Cedric back by condemning individualism and ambition, and by asking community members to make unrealistic sacrifices. While Cedric's role in the choir was one of the only things that kept him motivated during the eighth grade, his relative stardom was too much for some of his fellow churchgoers, and he was eventually asked to step back. He is deeply hurt by this, and feels as if he is being punished for his abilities and for being proud of himself. Thus begins his internal struggle, as he tries to balance his desire to achieve great things with his belief in God. Cedric is not the only one asked to make a great sacrifice on behalf of the church. Scripture Cathedral drills into believers the idea that faith is giving every last dollar to God, and believing that it will be returned tenfold. Thus, Barbara not only puts her faith in the church, but also all of the extra money she has. When Barbara is facing eviction from her apartment for failure to pay her rent, one of the ministers from Scripture Cathedral arrives to pay the $2,790 that she owes, renewing her faith in the church as a support system. But while this is a welcome and much-needed gesture, it also encourages Barbara to continue to depend on the church, and to feel that she owes them a debt of gratitude. Later on, when she is evicted a second time, the church is nowhere to be found, and all of Barbara's trust has been for nothing.

Once Cedric has been exposed to a wider set of values, he recognizes the ways in which the church does not meet his needs, and he eventually leaves. However, Cedric never loses faith in himself or in God, and this tenacity and unshakable faith is a lasting benefit of his religious upbringing. When Cedric returns home on a college break, he visits Bishop Long to discuss his changing feelings about his relationship with the church. Noting that he still believes in God, Cedric informs the pastor that he feels he has "outgrown the church," and would like permission to leave. For all of Cedric's concerns about the church itself, he does not lose his faith in a higher power that guides him in the right direction. As a high schooler, Cedric is desperately focused on a future that he can only envision vaguely, in a world he knows nothing about. He maintains faith in that blurry future thanks to his strong religious foundation. When he speaks with one of his teachers about his desire to attend college in a part of the country he has never even seen, the teacher responds with a biblical quote from Hebrews 11:1: "The substance of faith is a hope in the unseen." Cedric notes that his teacher has misquoted from the Bible, but the sentiment is the same: Cedric's hope in the unseen will bring him far from home, and will carry him into a different world.

Religion plays a complex role in the lives of Cedric's friends and family, as many of them place all of their faith in the church as an institution and support system, in the absence of anything else they can believe in. Cedric, on the other hand, separates his faith in God, and his belief in himself, from the religious institution itself. And as he moves away from Scripture Cathedral, he is able to sustain that sense of faith and hope on his own. The role of religion in *A Hope in the Unseen* demonstrates that it is possible to establish some distance from religious institutions, pursue individualism, and retain a faith in God all at the same time—in other words, Cedric's arc suggests that there isn't necessarily a "right" way to live and be religious.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT SYSTEMS

A Hope in The Unseen follows an African-American student named Cedric Jennings as he grows up in a deeply impoverished part of Washington, D.C., and eventually attends the prestigious Brown University. Cedric's almost herculean leap from inner-city poverty to an Ivy League college is a testament not only to his intellect and ambition, but also to the systems of academic support that helped shepherd him toward success, highlighting that academic success is not just the result of personal effort.

Although the educational system in Cedric's Washington, D.C., community is financially strapped and underserved in many ways, there are a number of dedicated teachers who are on the lookout for talented students and willing to offer them extra time and attention. As Cedric finds, this support network is essential to academic success. Cedric's science teacher, Mr. Taylor, invested a lot of time and energy in him, back when Cedric was "a sullen ninth grader who had just been thrown out of biology for talking back to the teacher and needed somewhere to go." Mr. Taylor saw Cedric's potential, and gave him more challenging and interesting assignments that helped to develop him into a superior student. Cedric is also part of his high school's gifted and talented program, which Suskind notes is "in vogue at tough urban schools across the country." The students in this program take separate and more advanced classes, giving them the opportunity to create a community that is supportive of academic achievement, as well as more of

the school's small pool of resources to help them move on to college. There are smaller sources of support, like Mr. Govan, who runs the computer lab and is willing to come in early to let Cedric get started before the other kids arrive, and Mr. Dorosti, who teaches Cedric computer science on his own time. It is teachers like these who help Cedric climb the ladder of academic success rung by rung, a feat that Cedric could not have achieved without help.

Once Cedric enrolls at Brown, however, the vast majority of those support systems are gone, and he suddenly faces the challenge of a completely new academic atmosphere with no safety net. This, coupled with the differences in class and race that Cedric has to contend with in his first year, create obstacles that are nearly—but not completely—insurmountable for him. Suskind notes that while Brown partakes in affirmative action during this time period—offering admission to less privileged students in the hopes that they will help to diversify the campus—there are few systems in place to support those students once they have arrived on campus. Those students are left to sink or swim, and while there are tutoring and counseling services available to all, students like Cedric are reluctant to take advantage of them for fear of being seen as weak and undeserving of their admission in the first place. While the teachers at Ballou quickly recognized Cedric's potential and were anxious to help him rise above his circumstances, his professors at Brown are faced with entire classes of high achievers from a variety of backgrounds, and not all of them take much notice of Cedric.

Other students at Brown have taken advantage of support systems that have prepared them well for Ivy League, both academically and socially. Cedric's friend Chiniqua, for example, comes from a working-class family in New York City but was enrolled in a program called Prep for Prep. Designed to help gifted black and Hispanic children advance academically, the program sent her to an elite prep school in Manhattan from the seventh through twelfth grade, and—more importantly—provided her with regular tutoring and counseling to help her navigate both the intense academics and the vast cultural differences of her new school. Thus, Chiniqua has already developed the social and academic skills that Cedric struggles with during his first year at Brown. Cedric does have the benefit of a patron, Dr. Kolb, who has taken an interest in him and his success in college. He sends Cedric $200 a month, significantly easing the young man's financial burden; for the most part, however, Dr. Kolb supports Cedric from a distance, offering advice when necessary but rarely intervening. Overall, Cedric comes from a world where many social and economic factors make it difficult to make personal change, and free will seems like a myth. However, he and many of the people around him overcome those seemingly insurmountable obstacles to success. Part of the message of this novel is that the institutional discrimination exists and can make upward mobility incredibly difficult, but not impossible with the support of kind and committed mentors, teachers, and role models.

ANGER

In *A Hope in the Unseen*, many of the characters in Cedric's neighborhood express anger over the circumstances that keep them in poverty. Cedric's narrative demonstrates how anger can actually be a productive and positive force, however, as long as it is channeled appropriately. Cedric's anger fuels his motivation to succeed—he calls it "something to push against"—showing that anger can make a person more tenacious and committed to their goals.

The sense of hopelessness and dependence is omnipresent in Cedric's community, and what most of the residents have in common is their tendency to respond in anger. However, in many of these cases, anger isn't channeled into something productive, like the pursuit of one's goals, making it a harmful rather than helpful force. Cedric's mother is hurt and frustrated at the circumstances that have kept her from a better life. One evening, as both she and Cedric go hungry because her meager $5 per hour wages are not enough to feed them on a regular basis, she lashes out at her son. As her anger bubbles up, she thinks about how she has been "killing herself, her lifeblood channeled through scriptural pieties and long-shot hopes for Cedric's future, leaving her own urges untended and volatile." She regrets that expression of anger, however, and returns to her usual state of resigned frustration and powerlessness. Her anger is unproductive because it makes her combative, sad, and then despondent, rather than fueling her search for a better life.

The young men who surround Cedric are also quick to anger, like the gang member who pulls a gun on another boy at the bus stop in the middle of the afternoon, resorting to violence at the first sign of conflict. The gang activity at Ballou High School is a direct result of anger at a world that has rendered them helpless to escape poverty and violence. Cedric's classmate Delante Coleman, for example, feels marginalized and resents his life circumstances, and channels his anger into making money and rising through the ranks of a school gang. The narrator notes that while Delante and Cedric are matched in their anger and drive, it is "what each does with his fury" that separates them. Both boys' anger stems from the same place, but while Delante's anger is destructive, Cedric's is productive. In response to these same circumstances, Cedric carefully channels his anger so that it's like rocket fuel propelling him up and out of Ballou High School and into a better life. As a ninth grader with Mr. Taylor, Cedric was motivated by a sense of anger and rebellion: the teacher would challenge him with intellectual riddles, which were "combative but productive," capitalizing on the young man's competitive spirit. Anger fuels

Cedric as he advocates for fair grades from teachers and calls out classmates who try to copy his work. This prompts some teachers and administrators to see Cedric as combative, but he feels that this is what is necessary to rise above his circumstances. In fact, it is Cedric's focused anger that pushes him to apply to Brown University: after hearing from the hated Reverend Keels, a science teacher, that his low **SAT** score will never land him in an Ivy League college, Cedric vaguely recalls that Keels had mentioned a former Ballou student attending Brown. From this moment on, Cedric is focused on Brown as a refuge from his life at Ballou and a way of proving to the naysayers wrong. His anger over this teacher's comments could have derailed him entirely, but instead, it makes him even more tenacious about achieving his goals.

Halfway through his freshman year at Brown, however, Cedric begins to realize that he no longer needs that anger, and it slowly begins to dissipate. While it was effective fuel to launch him into better circumstances, it no longer seems to serve a productive purpose for Cedric as a student at Brown. He can now look to the future with hope instead of looking back at the past in anger. One afternoon in February, Cedric reflects on his high school experience and realizes that he has linked his identity to the sense of rejection he felt at Ballou. That rejection—and the anger that he felt towards the classmates who bullied him—set him apart and made him feel special. But there was no such rejection at Brown, no bullying or threat of violence, and therefore, there was no place for Cedric's anger. Later that evening, he notes that he "can't seem to locate his fury." In place of an essay for his education course, Cedric pens a passionate and highly emotional poem, for which his professor nearly fails him. In their subsequent discussion in Professor Wakefield's office, Cedric begins to recognize that a major part of his college education involves building mental skills like rational thought and critical analysis, which help him to look at his own background and life experiences from a distance and to evaluate them with less emotion and more clarity. He quickly internalizes the professor's advice to put away his anger and "not have it bubble up so much" when faced with adversity. Cedric ultimately learns that anger is an effective tool that can push him toward success, but it needs to be channeled carefully and at appropriate times. In the Epilogue of the book, Cedric sits calmly at his desk job in the Brown University Admissions office, recalling the stresses and frustrations of his high school experience. He notes that in some ways, he misses having "something to push against" as he did back then. This anger-turned-motivation was necessary for Cedric during his time at Ballou, especially as he recognized it and used it to grow into the man he wanted to become.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TELEVISION

For Cedric Jennings, television symbolizes the middle-class world that he yearns to join. In his childhood, television serves as his escape from the realities of his poverty-stricken home life, and later becomes a source of references and connections that help him to overcome race and class differences with his classmates at Brown. While he and his mother, Barbara, often had to go without food or heat during his childhood, Cedric had a television in his bedroom, giving him a window into worlds that were vastly different from his own, and allowing him to set aside his concerns about grades, test scores, bullying, and money trouble. During his first weeks as a college student, Cedric found that comparing his new classmates to television characters allowed him to connect with them through shared cultural references, giving him a sense of relevance and belonging. Considering that there were many aspects of middle-class life that Cedric did not know or understand, his television references made this new world much less foreign and confusing for him.

THE SAT

The SAT, or Scholastic Aptitude Test, is a method of evaluating a student's academic progress, and one of the factors that helps to determine whether or not a student should be admitted to a particular college or university. For Cedric Jennings, however, it is much more than a measure of progress or intelligence—for him, the SAT represents his overall value as a person, even after he is enrolled in the college of his dreams. The first time Cedric appears in *A Hope in the Unseen*, he is hiding out in the chemistry classroom, cramming for the vocabulary portion of the exam. He is anxious because he scored lower than expected on his PSAT (a practice test for the SAT that he took in the tenth grade), and is focused on a significantly higher score on the SAT. Each time Cedric interacts with other students who are equally ambitious, the topic of SAT scores always comes up (even at Brown), and each time, Cedric is consumed with shame over his below-average score, which feeds into and symbolizes his low self-esteem.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Broadway Books edition of *A Hope in the Unseen* published in 1998.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ I worked hard. Why should I be ashamed? Ashamed to claim credit for something I earned? I hate myself for not going.

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings (speaker), Mr. Clarence Taylor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Cedric Jennings is sitting in an empty classroom with Mr. Taylor, his chemistry teacher. Cedric has been hiding out from the awards ceremony at Ballou High School, where he is one of the top students, despite the fact that he will be receiving a $100 check for his excellent grades. Personally, Cedric is very proud of his achievement, and definitely needs the money, but he knows that he will be ridiculed and bullied if he attends, and has chosen to hide out instead. Ballou High School is situated in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., and less than half of the students graduate, and even fewer go on to attend college. In this atmosphere, Cedric Jennings is an anomaly, and his intense focus on academics places him on the very bottom rung of the social ladder. He is able to accept this, however, by keeping his focus on the future, and on his dreams of attending an Ivy League college.

❝ Educators have even coined a phrase for it. They call it the crab/bucket syndrome: when one crab tries to climb from the bucket, the others pull it back down. The forces dragging students toward failure—especially those who have crawled farthest up the side—flow through every corner of the school. Inside the bucket, there is little chance for escape.

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

The "crab/bucket syndrome" is a theoretical explanation for the social atmosphere at Ballou High School, especially in relation to Cedric's struggle to climb out of poverty and attend college. Cedric's fellow classmates are uninterested in academics because most of their energy is invested in surviving the minefield of drugs, violence, and poverty that surrounds them. In addition, they are jealous of Cedric's ambition, and the point of their ridicule and bullying is to drag him back down to their level so that he cannot escape either. Even Cedric's friends are skeptical of his plans for the future, questioning why he would want to attend college in a part of the country he has never been to. The author, Ron Suskind, often places Cedric's personal struggles in a larger context, examining the structural obstacles to success for young people like Cedric.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ "Faith is taking the last $10 from your checking account and saying, 'God, I give this to you, because I have *nothing* but faith, I live on faith, and I know in my heart that you'll bring it back to me in ways too grand and too many for me to even imagine.'"

Related Characters: Bishop Long (speaker), Cedric's Mother / Barbara Jennings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This is part of Bishop Long's sermon to the congregation of Scripture Cathedral, his Apostolic Pentecostal church, which is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. Bishop Long knows that his most faithful followers are the poor and downtrodden, and his sermons focus on the role of unmitigated faith in God, and the virtue of surrendering to that faith, regardless of the outcome. In addition, he asks his parishioners to hand over their last dollar to the church, with the vague and unconfirmed promise that it will return to them ten times over. While his followers have complete and total faith in this promise, Bishop Long has plenty of critics who argue that this is the church's method of exploiting the poorest in the congregation, who need the money much more than the church does.

Barbara Jennings is one of the parishioners who believes wholeheartedly in this promise and regularly gives over as much of her money as possible, even though she has very little to begin with. And while she has received support and community from the church, she has not earned any more money in return for her contributions. Later on in the story, the church will rescue Barbara from eviction, bringing nearly $3000 to pay off her debts, but that is only a loan which she must repay—not a return on her investment in the church.

"How can I compete? It's like I'm living in a refrigerator!"

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings (speaker), Cedric's Mother / Barbara Jennings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Cedric Jennings is complaining to his mother, Barbara, about the temperature in their apartment. Barbara makes very little money, and is often unable to pay her bills—this has resulted in their heat being shut off in the winter, leaving them freezing inside of their home. Cedric, who is studying at a good junior high school and hoping to continue with his academic success, finds it hard to study in such conditions. He begins to develop a sense of anger at the world, knowing that most of his classmates do not have to worry about whether or not they will have food on the table or heat in their homes, and that they are free to fully concentrate on school. Later on in the story, this and other circumstances will lead Cedric to rebel, misbehaving enough that he is asked to leave the prestigious junior high and attend Ballou High School, an underserved and underperforming school. Once again, Ron Suskind emphasizes the external factors that determine the success or failure of young students in poor neighborhoods. In consequence, for many of these students, their ability to succeed in school and continue on to college is less a question of personal ambition and more an issue of overcoming the myriad structural obstacles to success.

Chapter 3 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Mr. Clarence Taylor (speaker), Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Clarence Taylor, the chemistry teacher at Ballou High School, is having a conversation with Cedric about college, and specifically about Cedric's ambitious plan to attend an Ivy League college. Many of Cedric's classmates are much less interested in leaving home and trying their luck in a place they have never been to before, and consider him crazy for these ideas. They expect him to fail, and many of them actively hope for his failure, so that they can rub it in his face. But this opposition only strengthens Cedric's desire—he feels the need to prove to his classmates and other people from the neighborhood that he can achieve his dreams.

Mr. Taylor acts as a mentor to Cedric, and he is counseling the young man on how to stay motivated in the face of opposition, beyond the desire to prove everyone wrong. Like Cedric, Mr. Taylor has a strong religious foundation, and often relies on scripture to help him through the tough times in life. He quotes from scripture here to remind Cedric that although his future lies somewhere he has never been before, he should just have faith that it will happen and that he will succeed.

"You're low, you're tired, you're fighting, you're waiting for your vision to become reality—you feel you can't wait anymore! [...] Say 'I'll be fine tonight 'cause Jesus is with me.' SAY IT! SAY IT!"

Related Characters: Bishop Long (speaker), Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 75-76

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bishop Long is preaching during a service at Scripture Cathedral, and Cedric is sitting in the back row of church, preoccupied with his application to Brown University. Cedric has worked hard, agonizing over his SAT scores and grades, and is feeling incredibly anxious as he waits to hear whether or not he has been accepted. Somehow, Bishop Long has tapped into these feelings in his sermon—Cedric is definitely waiting for his vision to become reality, and is suddenly feeling uplifted by the fact that someone has recognized this. One of the hardest parts of Cedric's college application process is that he is all alone in his journey, with no one to commiserate with. Bishop Long's sermon is not specifically tailored to Cedric—many people in the congregation are low, tired, and fighting for something—but Cedric finally feels heard, and is moved by this. Cedric responds strongly to the sermon, jumping up and shouting with Bishop Long. He feels much better after

the sermon, as if he has refilled his faith in God and in himself.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"You sure talk funny, southern, sort of, and you know, slangy."

"For reeeal? What, like I'm slurring my words or something? [...] You mean, I guess, that I talk sort of 'ghetto.'"

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Cedric is studying at MIT for the summer, at a prestigious math and science program for talented students of color. When he meets his fellow students, Cedric realizes that he has less in common with them than he expected—the other black students have grown up in middle-class backgrounds, have college-educated parents, and attend good high schools with more accelerated classes than Ballou can offer. He begins to realize how important class differences are, even among people of color, especially in terms of speech and appearance. One of his classmates notes that he speaks differently than the others, and he offers up the word "ghetto" as a descriptor. This term will come to define Cedric at MIT, and once again separate him from those around him; it is a strange feeling for him, however, as Cedric is considered a nerd back at home, and about as far from "ghetto" as it gets in his neighborhood. This interaction with his classmates at MIT is a new phase in Cedric's evolving sense of identity.

Chapter 5 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks what is undoubtedly the high point of the story, as all of Cedric's work pays off and he is accepted to an Ivy League college, Brown University, thus achieving one of his dreams. The process has been difficult: he considered applying to MIT, but after his experience with the summer program there, he was advised not to apply by one of the professors, because his SAT scores were too low and he likely would not be successful as a student there. Cedric then set his sights on Brown University when he learned of its relatively high percentage of students of color. Cedric applied, hoping that they would be able to look past those SAT scores and consider him as a whole person, especially after penning a heartfelt personal essay that laid out the dismal circumstances of his upbringing. He is amazed to read the letter from Brown, but tells his mother that he knew he would get in, showing the kind of self-confidence that has helped him get through high school.

"I said to myself, 'THERE IS *NOTHING* ME AND MY GOD CAN'T HANDLE.'"

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

As one of the top two students in his graduating class at Ballou High School, Cedric is automatically allowed to give a speech at the graduation ceremony. His English teachers review the speech he has written a number of times, each time asking him to tone down the anger and scorn, and focus on the positive aspects of the time he has spent at Ballou. Cedric knows that he cannot write a happy speech, and desperately wants to take this opportunity to respond to all of the negativity and bullying he has experienced as a student. When graduation day comes, Cedric's speech is sermon-like, both in its content and the way he delivers it. He talks about "dreambusters," or people who would like to see him fail, and responds to them in this speech. The "dreambusters," of course, are many of the students and staff in the audience, and so his speech has a confrontational tone, but it is also inspiring to many who face their own obstacles. He rises to a crescendo with this statement, that he and his God can handle anything, and ends up getting a standing ovation and congratulations from many people in the audience.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The problem stems from a conundrum he's thought through a thousand times. Worldly success—the kind of genuine, respect-in-the-community, house-in-the-suburbs achievement that he finds among his neighbors in Mitchelville—has never fit well inside the doors of Scripture. And going to college is a first step on that path away from here.

Related Characters: Bishop Long (speaker), Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Bishop Long is struggling to reach a specific section of the congregation at Scripture Cathedral—the college-bound students. His church is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., and he has found success by preaching a doctrine of complete and unyielding faith in God, which is particularly meaningful to those who have little faith in themselves. For instance, Cedric's mother, Barbara Jennings, came to the church when she had nothing, and found strength, rules of conduct, and a community; Cedric does not need those things anymore, as his hard work has gotten him into an Ivy League college. Bishop Long is aware of the difficulty of maintaining the loyalty of his young parishioners like Cedric, because they have found ways to help themselves, and usually end up leaving the church behind. He knows that Scripture Cathedral will never help to lift anyone out of poverty, and that young people who want to make something of themselves will likely find that they no longer fit in with the church.

❝ "Come on now, I know Ballou. Some guys in the joint came from Ballou, and I have a cousin who's a teacher there. Ballou's no place for students."

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place in the old neighborhood where Cedric grew up—after his graduation party at an aunt's house, Cedric wanders around town, looking for one of the apartments where he used to live with his mother. He sees some distant relatives sitting outside drinking, and—in search of some male influences at this point in time—chats with them about life. He tells the men that he will be going off to Brown University, and they do not recognize the name, which bothers Cedric. One of the men also mentions that he was planning to go to college, but ended up in jail instead. They finish by affirming what a terrible high school Ballou is, and Cedric decides that he needs to leave.

This conversation is also significant because it's one of the last that Cedric has before leaving for college, and it demonstrates exactly how far he has strayed from the overall mindset of his neighborhood. Mentally and emotionally, Cedric has already left Washington, D.C., and has little in common with the people he is leaving behind. He is annoyed that his hard work does not impress these men, and realizes that he no longer belongs in this neighborhood.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ "I just feel I need to figure out where I stand. I don't want to get in over my head […] Well, I didn't come from that good a school and all, a really bad city school."

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Cedric is preparing to choose his courses at Brown, and after his first week of freshman orientation, he is nervous that he will not be able to keep up with his classmates. During this first week, Cedric realized that many of his classmates have had a more in-depth education than he has, even with this extra credit projects. He doesn't recognize many of the cultural or academic references his classmates make, and is beginning to see that this first semester could be overwhelming to him. In this passage, Cedric speaks to his advisor to try and choose classes that are appropriate for him, knowing that he will likely have to do a lot of catch-up work. His advisor does not have a lot of advice for him, and Cedric ends up taking classes that are especially easy, and also chooses to take them all pass/fail, which is always an option at Brown. Later, he will regret this decision and will choose to challenge himself more in the spring, but this plan was made out of anxiety and fear.

"Your identity, I think, should be something that you are proud of. I wouldn't be *proud* to say that I had only one leg and I could just barely walk, you know, on one leg. That may be true, but I wouldn't let it define who I was."

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, all of the freshmen at Brown are participating in a diversity training session, and the moderators are asking the students in Cedric's unit about identity markers, and what words they would use to identify themselves. While the students all seem quite uncomfortable talking about race as an element of identity—this generation has been taught to be "color blind" and avoid talking about racial differences—but when they discuss other identity markers like sexual orientation or disabilities, they are more forthcoming with their ideas. Cedric's interest is piqued when someone mentions using a disability as an identity marker, and argues that this might not be something a person would be proud of. Under the surface, Cedric is drawing a parallel between disability and his own blackness: in this moment, Cedric does not feel much pride in his race or his cultural background, and therefore feels uncomfortable using it to identify himself.

Cedric, ushered here mostly by adrenaline and faith, realizes he's now facing a living, breathing, credentialed counterpart to his revered Bishop. Nothing theoretical about it. Around here, nothing is exempt from dissembling questions and critical examination—not even religion itself. He can see Bishop's one eye, looking through him, and hear the words, "The only true answers lie with God."

Related Characters: Bishop Long, Cedric Jennings

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Cedric is at the bookstore, choosing books for his fall semester courses—he has one more course to choose, and he is browsing the required readings for ideas. When he comes to the religion section, he is seized by the internal conflict that will eventually lead to his departure from Scripture Cathedral. While he has grown up with a very strict understanding of the world, thanks to Bishop Long's teachings, the religion courses at Brown would involve analyzing and questioning that understanding, and that is nerve-racking to Cedric. At Brown, Cedric is beginning to push at the boundaries of his religious upbringing, and to separate his feelings about God and his connection to Scripture Cathedral in particular. Although he is not yet ready to take a religious studies class, he has already distanced himself from the church, and has chosen not to seek out a new church at Brown. On the other hand, Cedric will maintain many of his beliefs about faith, God, and morality throughout his time at Brown.

He reminisces for a while and throws out a few light aphorisms before turning bleak and discussing Bosnia and balkanism, victims of wars, and conflicts around the globe. "Unless one wants to lie," he says [...] "I am rarely truly hopeful."

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor and well-known writer, is giving the convocation speech at Brown, to kick off Cedric's freshman year. Cedric has finally achieved his big dream of attending an Ivy League college, and has survived freshman orientation, as disorienting as it has felt for him at times. In that context, Cedric sits through Wiesel's talk and comes away uninspired. First of all, he is so intensely focused on his own struggles that he has a hard time relating to the huge historical problems presented by the man before him. Secondly, Wiesel's pessimistic take on the concept of hope is in direct conflict with Cedric's views on the topic—Cedric clung to hope all the way through high school, looking ahead at the possibility of college to keep him sane through the worse moments. Whether that sense of hope is religious—hoping that God will carry him through—or secular, it is a central part of Cedric's life and worldview.

Chapter 8 Quotes

By now, he understands that Maura *knows* what to write on her pad and the sleepers *will* be able to skim the required readings, all of them guided by some mysterious encoded knowledge of history, economics, and education, of culture and social events, that they picked up in school or at home or God knows where.

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cedric's classmates are falling asleep during the lecture, and Cedric wonders how they are able to do this and still pass the course. Cedric is wide awake and furiously taking notes, anxious not to miss a single reference or bit of information. He realizes that this is another byproduct of class differences, which gives his classmates a distinct advantage when it comes to basic cultural knowledge. This realization began during the first week of freshman orientation, when he felt bombarded by information about the world that he had never heard before, and needed to look up references like Sigmund Freud and Jerry Garcia. On another occasion, his teacher mentions Ellis Island, and while his classmates know all about this reference, Cedric knows nothing and is aware that this lack of information will hold him back.

"Are we doing a services to young people to boost them above their academic level and then not offer the services they need? Because, who really can? Who can offer that sort of enrichment? You can hardly blame the university. It would take years, and money, and a whole different educational track to bring some affirmative action students to a level where they could compete."

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

Cedric is having lunch in a café near the Brown campus, and overhears some professors discussing the pros and cons—but mostly cons—of affirmative action, or the practice of giving minority students preference in college admissions. Although the professor is phrasing his ideas as questions, he is stating a clear opinion about admitting students like Cedric to top-tier colleges. The professor argues that this preferential treatment is ultimately doing a disservice to students who will arrive on campus unprepared and eventually drop out. Cedric can relate to this concern, as he has just been struggling to keep up in his introductory courses and feels that he has not received sufficient preparation. However, the professor's assertion that it would be impossible to bring those students up to the level of their more privileged classmates is doubtful—and Cedric will eventually prove him wrong.

"I am constantly having to play catch-up with guys who've spent the past five years speaking three languages, visiting Europe, and reading all the right books. Here, at Brown, they say 'Don't worry, you're all equal, starting on the same footing. Ready, set, go!' They just don't get it. Where I come from, people don't go to France to study. A trip to France is a big deal. I haven't been reading all the right books since I was twelve and then have some Rhodes Scholar Daddy tell me the rest. I didn't have that kind of access, access that could empower me."

Related Characters: Stephan Wheelock (speaker), Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

As Cedric leaves the café near campus, he walks by Stephan Wheelock, the professor who teaches his Richard Wright seminar. Wheelock is a black man, and Cedric is impressed with his teaching skills, but he is not aware of the man's background until he overhears his conversation with a friend. Like Cedric, Wheelock comes from a poor background, and came to college without the kind of social, academic, and cultural background that his classmates possessed. He comments on the idea that all students are equal once they are admitted to Brown, which he considers a dangerous fallacy, as students like Wheelock and Cedric do not feel as empowered as their classmates, causing them to fall behind and lose confidence in their abilities. However, Wheelock himself is proof that this system, while flawed, is not completely broken—with enough hard work and faith, some people can rise above their circumstances and succeed in this academic atmosphere.

Chapter 10 Quotes

It's exciting to work with a kid who is so devoid of irony, so unguarded. And also terrifying. While it's not going to be easy to get him where he needs to be academically, Cedric simply can't afford to fail. He's got everything—God, mother, faith—riding on making it. The thought makes her short of breath.

Related Characters: Helaine Schupack (speaker), Donald Korb, Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

Thanks to Donald Korb, Cedric's benefactor, Helaine Schupack has come to tutor Cedric and help him keep above water in his classes. She is a seasoned tutor, and even helped Dr. Korb's son succeed in college, which is how he knew to contact her for help. In their first meeting, Helaine talks to Cedric and assesses him for any learning disabilities, finding none; she then reads some of his academic writing, and this changes her perspective drastically. His openness endears him to her, breaking down her professional distance—she is immediately emotionally engaged in his success, and also aware of what is at stake for him. Cedric's story is engaging to most of the people he meets, which is why he has had so many people working to support and mentor him.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"You don't understand anything, LaTisha. He's saying you take care of yourself. All right?"

"It don't matter how you look, Cedric—it's what's inside, the spirit in you. That's what matters, that's what matters!"

"Listen to me! He's saying you don't let yourself go! All right?! You make yourself look as good as you can! You hear me? What I'm telling you—you just don't let yourself go!"

Related Characters: LaTisha Williams, Cedric Jennings (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

Cedric is back home for winter break, and he finally decides to contact his friend LaTisha and see how she is doing. They go to a service at Scripture Cathedral, and she is certain that she was filled with the Holy Spirit, which Cedric doubts. They go out to eat afterwards, and then decide to attend another service, where Bishop Long makes a statement about dressing nicely for church. Cedric and LaTisha disagree about what Bishop Long means by this, and whether or not that was an appropriate thing to say to his congregation. LaTisha is annoyed and offended by the statement, because she feels that the church should be able to accept her and others as they are by focusing on what is inside of them. Cedric argues that Bishop Long is simply advising his parishioners to take care of themselves by looking presentable and respectful. This argument mirrors their feelings about each other—while Cedric has lost some respect for LaTisha based on her lack of ambition in life (that is,, she is not taking care of herself), she feels that Cedric should be able to see the good inside of her, and not worry about external presentation.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"You know [...] I can tell the ones that will die when they leave here, when they leave this school. I can see them. You look at them hard enough, long enough, and you can tell. You really can."

Related Characters: Mr. Fleming (speaker), Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Cedric is taking a new education course—a fieldwork seminar that requires him to observe at a school in Providence twice per week, all semester. Cedric has chosen a school in a poorer part of town, far from the Brown campus, where he suddenly feels at home. He sympathizes with the students at the school, many of whom come from working-class backgrounds and are not expected to succeed. He also takes an immediately disliking to the teacher, Mr. Fleming, because he seems to be rough and dismissive of the students. This dislike gets much worse when Mr. Fleming makes the above statement about his students, suggesting that he can somehow see something about them that they cannot see about themselves. Cedric is outraged at this, knowing that if his teachers had made such a snap judgment about him when he was that young, he might not have made it to Brown.

"If you're going to make it here, Cedric, you'll have to find some distance from yourself and all you've been through. The key, I think, is to put your outrage in a place where you can get at it when you need to, but not have it bubble up so much, especially when you're asked to embrace new ideas or explain what you observe to people who share none of your experiences."

Related Characters: Larry Wakefield (speaker), Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 303

Explanation and Analysis

As part of his education seminar, Cedric has chosen to write a poem for his midterm, which greatly diverged from the actual assignment. The students had discussed the format of the midterm in class, and a student mentioned wanting to write something more creative, in order to express her emotions about the things she observed. Cedric agreed, noting that he had a hard time being dispassionate about his observations. He ended up writing an epic poem, which was really quite good, and his professor brought him in to discuss this. While the professor liked the poem, he advised Cedric to find some distance from the subject and think of himself as a scholar for the next assignment. Cedric is still dealing with the anger left over from high school, and has a hard time thinking or writing in such a detached and critical way. However, this is what he will need to succeed at Brown, and he cannot rely on his personal story to carry him through and endear him to all of his professors for the next four years. Cedric understands and takes the advice to heart, writing a much more analytical final paper for the course.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"Like, no one in the unit knows anything about Keith Sweat. It's kind of nice, you know. You have to be *real*. You have to have grown up with it like us, to really know it."

Related Characters: Chiniqua Milligan (speaker), Cedric Jennings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cedric and Chiniqua are on a date—they have wandered off of the Brown campus and into a less affluent part of town, where they decided to browse the CDs at Coconuts, a popular music store. Chiniqua is the only other black student in Cedric's unit at Brown, and while Cedric has been reluctant to spend too much time with other black students, he enjoys Chiniqua's company, and they finally decide to go on a date. When Cedric picks up a CD by an R&B singer from the 1980s, Keith Sweat, he and Chiniqua bond over their shared love of classic R&B music, which they both consider authentically black music. While there are other students at Brown—like Cedric's friend Zayd—who enjoy rap and hip hop, Cedric and Chiniqua agree that only black people would have grown up with Keith Sweat.

More than a romantic connection, Cedric and Chiniqua's date is about re-connecting to their racial identity, which can be difficult to do at Brown, where only 6.5% of the freshman class is black. Chiniqua wants Cedric to come to Harambee House, the all-black dorm on campus, but Cedric is still reluctant, as he has worked very hard to escape his background, and is not sure whether or not he wants to spend his time at Brown surrounded by other black students.

Chapter Quotes

"I still believe in God, that Jesus is my personal savior, and my friend, and my guide, but I just don't feel as tied to the church so much anymore. I like coming and all, but, at the same time, I feel like I'm ready to venture out."

Related Characters: Cedric Jennings (speaker), Bishop Long

Related Themes:

Page Number: 358

Explanation and Analysis

One of the last phases of Cedric's journey of self-discovery is to separate himself from Scripture Cathedral—he has struggled with his feelings about the church for a while, and is beginning to recognize that the doctrine of total and unyielding faith in God is actually antithetical to his sense of personal ambition and his faith in his own abilities. Bishop Long has predicted this, as he understands that when the young people in his congregation go off to college, they often move away from the church in search of success and self-sufficiency, which the church cannot offer and does not promote.

Cedric owes much of his religious foundation to Scripture Cathedral, and he and Barbara consider the congregation an extended family in many ways, so he does not feel comfortable simply hiding from the church. Instead, he meets with Bishop Long to openly discuss his plan to separate from the church, which shows immense respect, both for himself as a man of faith, and for the church as an institution.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: SOMETHING TO PUSH AGAINST

In the gymnasium of Frank W. Ballou Senior High School in Washington, D.C., on a cold February morning in 1994, the school principal holds an awards ceremony for the honors students, complete with a visit from D.C. Mayor Marion Barry and DJs from the local hip-hop station. Few of the honors students are present, however, because they fear the jeers and condemnation of their fellow students, few of whom will even graduate from high school. Out of the school's 1,389 students, about half will transfer or drop out, while only 79 students maintain a B average or higher. Those are the honors students being celebrated at this ceremony—they will each receive a $100 check for their hard work. But for most of those students, even the prize money is hardly worth the threat of ridicule and violence.

A Hope in the Unseen *begins with a sweeping view of Cedric Jennings's world, providing ample proof of how difficult it is for an ambitious young man to rise above his circumstances and succeed academically. The teachers and administrators of Ballou High School care about their students, want them to graduate and attend college, and go to great lengths to stress the value of hard work and academic achievement. The monetary prize for above-average grades is the most recent attempt to honor student achievement (and motivate other students), but as Cedric has learned from experience, this can lead to jealousy and violence.*

Academics are a low priority in this inner-city neighborhood, where gang activity rules and many of the young men aspire to join local "crews" and earn money dealing drugs and stealing. High academic achievers are at the very bottom rung of the social ladder, like junior Cedric Jennings, one of the students who has achieved a straight A average. When the principal calls his name, Jennings is nowhere to be found. He is hiding out in the chemistry classroom on the other side of the building, his usual sanctuary from the slings and arrows of high school, studying for the **SATs**.

While the teachers and administrators at Ballou emphasize the value of academics, the instant gratification of a life of crime—especially drug dealing—is much more enticing to many students. Cedric Jennings is an anomaly in this atmosphere; the fact that the story opens with Cedric hiding out in a classroom studying is a way of emphasizing his total separation from his classmates at Ballou

As Cedric studies his vocabulary words, his chemistry teacher, Mr. Taylor, comes in and informs him that he is disappointed in the boy for not attending the ceremony. Cedric agrees, acknowledging that he should not be ashamed of his hard work. Mr. Taylor replies that Cedric is in a long race, and he simply needs to keep running, regardless of what other people have to say from the sidelines. He then asks about Cedric's application to a special summer program at MIT; Cedric has already mailed the application, of course. He wants nothing more than to spend six weeks of the summer between his junior and senior year preparing for the academic rigor of an Ivy League college, his greatest dream.

Cedric's conversation with his chemistry teacher provides important information about Cedric and his motivations throughout the story: he is academically advanced for Ballou, and has very different plans for his future than the students around him. This makes him a pariah in school, but Cedric is determined not to feel ashamed of his ambitions, which is why he is upset with himself for avoiding the awards ceremony. He wants to be able to take pride in his successes, even at Ballou.

Mr. Taylor has been helping Cedric with his application—in fact, he has been deeply invested in Cedric's academic achievement since they first met when Cedric was a ninth grader, and Mr. Taylor immediately recognized his talent and potential. Since that time, Mr. Taylor has offered Cedric extra credit projects, field trips to museums, and academic competitions with his more talented peers. This has helped Cedric overcome the frustrations of being a gifted student at an underserved school, and allowed him to truly aspire to attend an Ivy League college.

While Cedric is ostracized and ridiculed by his classmates and other people his age in the neighborhood, he is clearly a favorite of many teachers, who go out of their way to help him achieve his dreams. This is a significant boost for Cedric, because without the support and extra work his teachers put in during his high school years, he would not have the resources to get into the college of his dreams.

Cedric is also enrolled in Ballou's advanced math and science program, which is more challenging than the regular academic curriculum at the high school, but falls within the middle range in comparison with schools in better neighborhoods. And while these classes provide Cedric with some refuge, he is still exposed to violence, gang activity, and other negative influences in his high school and the neighborhood in general. He stays at school until after 5 P.M., when he waits for the city bus next to two crack dealers and gang members. There is little danger of Cedric joining in on any of these illegal activities, but he takes it all in, a curious observer of everything around him.

While Ballou is a place of fear and violence for Cedric when he's among his classmates, it's a refuge in his advanced classes and with his favorite teachers. He stays late at school in order to do extra work, of course, but also because it is safer within the walls of the school than it is in his neighborhood, where drug dealers and gang members operate openly, and a straight-laced student like Cedric is not welcome, and at risk of becoming a victim of violence himself.

Cedric enters the apartment he shares with his mother, Barbara—it's small, and there isn't always heat, but it is one of the nicest places they've lived. Cedric has his own room, complete with his own color **television** (that his mother finally paid off, at the exorbitant price of $1,500, after three years). Not long after he gets in, Cedric's mother arrives home from her job at the Department of Agriculture. She asks Cedric to make dinner, and he quickly cooks two plates of beef hash, and they sit down to dinner together. Although they usually sit down in front of separate televisions to eat, tonight they have a chance to catch up with each other.

There is no more important figure in Cedric's life than his mother, Barbara. She works long hours for little pay, but still manages to provide for her son, allowing him to focus all of his attention on his future and academic success. Cedric's $1,500 television is a symbol of Barbara's constant sacrifice for her son; the fact that he cooks and cleans for his mother suggests that he appreciates all she does for him, and desires to support her in some way as well.

Cedric expresses his fear that he will not be accepted to the MIT summer program, and Barbara tells him to pray about it, and to have faith in himself. Barbara's faith in her son is unwavering. Cedric washes and dries the dishes, listening to the sounds of gunshots in the distance. He and his mother do not talk much about the violence in their neighborhood, but Cedric feels it around him, and uses it as "something to push against" in his life. As he makes his way back to his bedroom for the night, his mother offers him some advice: the race is not for the swift, but for who can endure it. Cedric agrees, but jokes that he still wouldn't mind being swift, just for once, and have a break from all of the enduring.

This conversation between Cedric and his mother reveals their basic motivations in life: Barbara combats her struggles with faith and prayer, while Cedric takes inspiration from the poverty and violence around him, as something to escape from. As part of her advice, Barbara compares Cedric's academic work to a race, which is a metaphor that is repeated various times in the story. This engages Cedric's strong spirit of competition yet still places it in a biblical context.


While Cedric sits in his Advanced Physics class, a Code Blue is announced on the speakers, meaning that students must stay in their classrooms, as there is a disruption in the hallway. Earlier in the morning, there was a trash fire in a downstairs bathroom, and two fights in the hallways. The day had an atmosphere of anarchy, but Cedric was concerned with other things, like making sure that his teachers assigned him the grades he earned. He went to complain about a B in his computer science class, and although the assistant principal agreed to look into it, when Cedric left, the man described him to the principal as "nothing but trouble," and too proud for his own good.

Cedric's hard work and ambition are contrasted with the dismal conditions at his school, where disruptions are the norm, and learning is sparse, even in the advanced-level classes. Regardless, Cedric works away and cares about every grade, including a B that he considers unjust. The response from the assistant principal reveals that not all of the Ballou staff are supportive of Cedric's ambition and—in this case—see it as pride and haughtiness.

While Cedric has every reason to be proud of his accomplishments, like his 4.02 grade point average, there is a strong force at work to pull the exceptional students back down, shaming them for their hard work and intellect, and for not fitting in with the rest of the students. In his computer science class, Cedric breezes through his worksheet until he realizes that there is a girl copying from him, and he yells at her for it. His teacher pulls him out of class and scolds him for yelling at his classmate, arguing that he needs to get along better with others. Cedric thinks about this later, and wonders how he can get along with students who hate him—or who hate what he represents, at the very least.

For all of his ambition and hard work, Cedric will soon find that he has neglected some of the finer social skills. At Ballou, he feels that he has little reason to make friends or maintain any sort of support network with his fellow students. To many of the students, and even some staff, this self-imposed isolation is grating, as it suggests that he thinks he is better than those around him. None of this matters to Cedric at this point, however, because he is singularly focused on forging his path out of Ballou.

As he walks to the cafeteria, Cedric passes by classmates who call him names, like "the amazing nerdboy." A popular boy named Phillip Atkins begins to taunt him, and as Cedric pushes past, Phillip pretends to start a fight. They stare each other down until Phillip walks away. Cedric finds his friend LaTisha Williams—at five feet, two inches, and 250 pounds, she is a large girl, which makes her an outcast at Ballou, just like Cedric. LaTisha jokes with Cedric and tells the story of how he was trying to flirt with a pretty girl in their class. She notes that he isn't "a woman's man," and Cedric is too annoyed to respond. He worries that she is right, that he is not masculine enough to attract women, though he suspects it is more about his academic success than anything else.

As much as Cedric tries to hide from his classmates, there are times when he is the target of bullying and even violence. This leads him to spend time with another unpopular student, LaTisha. They really have little in common except for their marginalization within the school, and despite their friendship, LaTisha also makes fun of Cedric. She points out what she considers his lack of attractiveness, and he simply accepts that evaluation of his masculinity, based on what he sees around him.

At the end of the school day, Cedric and LaTisha leave together to walk to the bus stop. It is 3:30 P.M., earlier than Cedric usually leaves, and there are more people around than he is used to. At the bus stop, one boy pulls out a gun and points it at another boy's head. Cedric backs away and flinches at the sight of the gun, but the moment is over quickly, as the boy with the gun runs across the street, and the kids at the bus stop speculate about whether or not the gun was even real. This reminds Cedric of the previous year's awards ceremony when, after picking up his $100 check, he was accosted by a boy with a gun. Cedric fled to the bathroom, and never saw the boy again or told anyone about it. In this moment, he remembers that fear, and suddenly remembers why he didn't want to attend the awards ceremony this year.

This final scene of the first chapter reinforces the idea that the threat of violence permeates Cedric's world, regardless of what he does to avoid being a part of it. These moments are scary but fleeting, and Cedric does manage to insulate himself from actual violence. It is also interesting to note that while earlier in the chapter, Cedric was scolding himself for being too ashamed to attend the awards ceremony; it is clear at the end of the chapter, however, that it was not shame that kept him from accepting his award and money, but fear of violent retaliation.

CHAPTER 2: DON'T LET THEM HURT YOUR CHILDREN

It is rent day for Barbara Jennings, and she must take two buses across town to hand-deliver her check for $445.22. Her bank balance is $478, so she withdraws $30 in cash to last her until payday. She delivers her rent check and then makes her way to church. On her way, she thinks about the $20 she is supposed to give to the church tonight—on one hand, this means that she and Cedric will have to survive the week on just $10, but on the other hand, the pastor always tells her that the money she donates to the church will return to her tenfold.

Religious faith and financial instability are the two main factors that control Barbara Jennings's life. Like many poor residents of the inner city, Barbara lives in fear of her landlord, who makes her jump through many hoops to pay rent, and backs it all up with the looming threat of eviction. On the other hand, Barbara is willing to hand over her last few dollars to her church to show her dedication to her faith and the specific church itself.

Barbara also thinks about her life: how she was expected to raise her brothers and sisters as a child, and was often beaten by her parents, who were poor and overworked. By her twenties, she was an unwed mother of two, when she met and began dating Cedric Gilliam. He had been in prison for bank robbery, but also had a college degree and drove a shiny new green Chrysler. When Barbara got pregnant, Cedric pressed her to have an abortion, as he did not want to have children. She couldn't go through with the abortion, and had her baby boy, Cedric Jennings, in 1977.

Barbara has spent her entire life taking care of other people—even as a child, she was a caretaker, and was taught to connect her self-worth to her ability to support others. This led to a number of decisions that would conspire to keep her in poverty, including her two pregnancies with men who did not stick around. When she meets Cedric Gilliam and winds up being a single mom again, she is repeating this process.

It wasn't long after having Cedric that Barbara found the church. A friend dragged the depressed young mother to a service, and the Apostolic Pentecostals offered her the love and community she had been missing. From that moment on, Barbara gave nearly every free moment to Scripture Cathedral, as well as ten percent of her meager wages. As she sits down for the service, Bishop Long makes his appeal for donations by claiming that giving one's last dollar to God is an expression of true religious faith. As the donation basket passes by Barbara, she makes some quick mental calculations, and puts a $10 bill in, keeping the $20 for herself.

Barbara's discovery of the church is directly linked to her situation in life—she comes to Scripture Cathedral when she is at her most needy and fragile state. This is strategic on the part of this particular church, as they cater to the needs of the downtrodden, while also exploiting them financially. Bishop Long asks his parishioners to express their faith through donations, ensuring that they will stay poor and continue to need the church's services. In this case, however, Barbara chooses to keep some money for herself.

When Cedric was a baby, Barbara decided to quit her job and go on welfare, so that she could be with her son for the first few years of his life. She would take him to museums, buy secondhand books and learning materials, and spend time with her sisters or the women of Scripture Cathedral. For the first five years of Cedric's life, he was protected from the outside influences of his inner-city neighborhood, but Barbara would need to go back to work once he began kindergarten. She warned him against the local drug dealers, gave him a key to wear around his neck, and sent him off to school for the first time.

Barbara's choice to quit her job and spend time with Cedric is possibly the most important decision she will ever make, solidifying her relationship with her son and giving him a stronger educational foundation than many of the children around him. These first five years of Cedric's life are formative in that they create a solid moral foundation for Cedric, insulating him from many of the temptations of easy money and friendship through drugs and gangs.

When Cedric was eight years old, Barbara got a call from Cedric Gilliam, asking to meet his son. The boy had regular visits with his father for a while, until Cedric, Sr., was arrested again. Barbara decided to move them into much nicer neighborhood in the Maryland suburbs, but could not afford the rent and was soon evicted. They moved a number of times after that, each time to increasingly dangerous neighborhoods. All the while, they regularly attended Scripture Cathedral, where Cedric began singing with the church choir and was chosen as a soloist. This seemed to boost his confidence, along with his being admitted to Jefferson Junior High, a magnet school that could place Cedric on a path to college in a few years.

Cedric Gilliam is a complex figure in Cedric Jennings's life, as he represents many of the dangers that Barbara has warned her son about. He is an absentee father, and so Cedric will have a number of stand-in father figures throughout his life. His mother, however, provides the main direction for his life, working hard to give him the right opportunities to succeed. When he finds his voice and confidence in the church choir, and is admitted to a good school, both he and Barbara feel that his life is on the right track.

Barbara and Cedric followed a path that was common among African Americans in the inner city during the 1970s and 80s, leaving mainstream Christian churches for the Pentecostal congregations that were popping up around the country. For these new converts, there were clear delineations between good and evil, rules of conduct, and most importantly, absolution for past sins and failures through loyalty to the church. Faith was highly valued at Scripture Cathedral, and pride and ambition were sins. This helped give Barbara a sense of purpose, and helped her to maintain order and discipline within her household. Cedric was obedient at home, and was becoming a rising star within the church choir and at his new school. Barbara even went out one day and bought him a new shirt that said "Harvard" across the chest.

The author places Barbara's religious fervor in a historical and political context, making it clear that while for her, it seems like a personal choice, there are economic and social factors that have pushed her towards the Pentecostal church. Barbara uses her connection to the church to insulate her from the negative effects of poverty that surround her; this is similar to what Cedric does throughout the story with his schoolwork. Both mother and son have found methods of self-protection, separating themselves from the society where they live.

Money was tight in the Jennings household: Barbara made $5 per hour, and she gave as much as she could to Scripture Cathedral to show her gratitude for the support and community she felt there. But that meant that Barbara often did not have enough money to pay the bills, and she and Cedric had to go without heat, which made it nearly impossible for Cedric to study. Meanwhile, at church, there were complaints about the fact that Cedric was singing all of the solos and receiving so much individual attention for his musical talents. Cedric had to step back and allow others a chance to sing, his choir director told him, so he did. But it bothered him, and he felt that he was being punished for using his God-given talents.

While Cedric has shown promise in both music and academics, there is a steep uphill climb towards improving his station in life. The author notes one of the huge barriers to success, which is the lack of basic necessities like food and heat, and how they can profoundly affect a child's academic success. In addition, Cedric becomes the target of jealousy, which often plagues those who attempt to stand out of the crowd. All of these early events will just make Cedric work harder.

Around the same time, Cedric had an opportunity to go and visit his father, Cedric Gilliam, in prison. Cedric Gilliam and his brother were housed in the same prison, and so young Cedric and his cousin would both go together to see their fathers. This visit ended up being a painful experience for Cedric, as his father only paid attention to the cousin, who was a football player and much more confident. Cedric felt ignored and insulted by his father; not long after that, Barbara began to receive calls from the principal of Jefferson Junior High about her son's misbehavior. Cedric was angry at his father and at the church for letting him down, and he was taking out his frustrations at school. He was eventually asked to leave Jefferson and transfer to Ballou, one of the worst schools in Washington, D.C.

While all of the other factors working against him may not have been enough to break Cedric in these early years, his complex and fraught relationship with his father definitely did the job. Cedric Gilliam is unable to see his son for the unique person that he is, and imposes his own expectations of masculinity onto him. This meeting between father and son is another way in which Cedric's talents and ambitions are invalidated, and this seems to be the last straw. His behavioral problems at Jefferson are unquestionably the result of these setbacks.

Back in the present, Barbara comes home after a long day of work, traveling to hand in her rent check, and church. She reminds Cedric that finances are tight this week, and that he should eat as much as possible at school, as there will be less food available at home. She notices the dirty dishes in the sink and yells at Cedric to come out of his room and wash them. He complies, mumbling under his breath the whole time. This angers Barbara, who snaps and yells at her son, making him cry. She feels bad for snapping at him, but does not apologize; she goes to sleep on the couch, asking Jesus to help her with her anger.

Both Barbara and Cedric are suffering in this environment, as Barbara's financial situation has not gotten better than when Cedric was a young boy. They are both living with a simmering anger that bubbles over every once in a while, as it does here for Barbara. She is ashamed of her anger, and does not know how to control it or use it in her favor; Cedric, on the other hand, will use his anger to propel himself out of Washington, D.C.

CHAPTER 3: RISE AND SHINE

It is March, and Cedric is up and out of the house early. His mother is worried about him, but he says he prefers to get started on his schoolwork, rather than sitting around worrying about MIT, his grades, or the **SATs**. He makes it in to school, where Mr. Govan opens up the computer lab early for him. Cedric is working on one of his many extra credit projects, which he does in order to "compete with kids from other, harder schools," as he realizes that there is little learning that happens during class time at Ballou. He is also worried about the fact that he received a very low score on his PSATs, which are often used to predict what a student will score on the SATs the following year.

Even though Ballou is one of the lowest-achieving high schools in the city, Cedric is able to make use of its meager resources—mainly, the hardworking teachers—in order to achieve his academic goals. He is aware of the position he is in, relative to other students across the country, and is using this vague sense of competition as motivation to work harder. His main concern is his standardized test score, which will likely be the weakest part of his college application.

In his history class, Cedric and one other boy are the only ones present that day among the twenty students on the class roster. As the weather gets warmer, fewer students attend classes, and outside of his advanced math and science classes, Cedric is often the only student to have done any of the homework. In this context, Cedric knows that he is not developing the more advanced analytical skills that he will need in college, where classes are full and spirited discussions are the norm.

Again, Cedric shows that he understands where he stands academically, in relation to other students across the country. He can do as much extra credit work as possible, but that does not make up for the lack of intellectual stimulation from his fellow classmates at Ballou. In some ways, it is as if he is studying in a vacuum, with no peers to communicate with.

In his chemistry class, Cedric talks with his friends LaTisha and Tanya about plans for the future, and the girls are astounded when Cedric mentions wanting to attend an Ivy League college. Their ambitions are much lower, as they set their sights on the University of the District of Columbia or some other local college. They are doubtful that Cedric would like being at an Ivy League, and note that he wouldn't even be able to find them on a map. They realize that their teacher, Mr. Taylor, is listening, and when the girls leave class, Cedric talks to his teacher about what the girls have said to him.

In addition to the lack of intellectual stimulation, Cedric is held back by his classmates' lack of ambition and curiosity about the world. Even in his advanced science class, Cedric's classmates are dead-set against the idea of leaving Washington, D.C., out of fear of the unknown. This kind of mindset promotes mediocrity, and Cedric is not swayed by the girls' arguments. His ambition is stronger than their fears.

Mr. Taylor believes in Cedric and supports his ambitions, and recognizes that the young man has a lot to prove to other people. He reminds him, however, that even attending an Ivy League college will not make others like him or apologize to him. Cedric agrees with this, and notes that he also wants to do this for himself, because he believes that he belongs somewhere else, even if it's a place he has never been before. Mr. Taylor then quotes from the Bible, that "the substance of faith is a hope in the unseen." Cedric informs him that he has misquoted, and then recites the passage correctly for his teacher. They agree, however, that "a hope in the unseen" is a valuable phrase to hold on to.

Cedric's teachers provide him with a strong support system to combat the negativity and anti-intellectual spirit among students at the school. Mr. Taylor is also very religious, and uses some of the same motivational tactics as Barbara Jennings, which may be why he and Cedric get along so well. Mr. Taylor misquotes the Bible here, and while Cedric corrects him, he finds that he likes the misquoted version better, and uses the idea of "a hope in the unseen" to describe his life's struggle.

Cedric Gilliam gets ready to take the bus from his home inside Lorton Correctional Facility to his job in Northeast Washington, D.C., where he has been cutting hair for about eight months on a work-release program. He meets with his girlfriend Leona, and then spends the day at the barbershop. He also sells heroin out of the barbershop, allowing him to make a little bit of money for himself on the side. At the end of his shift, Cedric, Sr., takes out a bag he has purchased for himself and snorts some heroin. He then takes Leona out to dinner, has some time alone with her in her apartment, and manages to catch the 7:30 P.M. bus back to the prison.

Cedric Gilliam is also struggling in his own way, and this passage illustrates the ways in which he attempts to live a normal life, but is pulled down by his surroundings. He is on work-release from prison, and should be working towards getting his life together, but drugs are too easily accessible, and they feed his habit even while he is incarcerated. There is no way for Cedric Gilliam to change his life until he takes refuge in another institution, the rehabilitation center.

When Cedric, Sr., wakes the next morning, however, one of the guards informs him that he will not be going to work that day, because there have been discrepancies between the number of clients in the barbershop and the amount of money he turns in at the end of the day. Cedric, Sr., knows that his work-release will be cancelled, and he will go back to spending his days in prison. He thinks about the fact that he already has two college degrees—one that he earned while in prison in the 1970s, and another from his prison term in the early 90s. But he wonders about the point of these degrees, as few people will hire ex-convicts.

Cedric Gilliam's taste of freedom is short, thanks to the negative influences that surround him. He is unable to resist the temptation to return to a life of drug dealing and drug use, even though he knows he is being closely monitored in the work-release program. He is also a prime example of the futility of higher education without a corresponding change in lifestyle—he may have a degree, but he is also a convict who continually relapses, and therefore will have difficulty finding a job.


Cedric, Sr., then begins to think about a phone call he had with his son Cedric a while back, before he was out on work-release. After half an hour of easy conversation with his son, Cedric, Sr., ran out of things to talk about and suddenly brought up an old memory of when Cedric had told his grandmother to shut up. Cedric, Sr., scolded his son for not being more respectful of his grandmother, despite the fact that the incident happened a handful of years earlier. Cedric responded by claiming that his father has been disrespecting the woman by getting into trouble and going to jail. The two argued, and Cedric, Sr., threatened to shoot his son, who then hung up on him. Thinking back on it, Cedric, Sr., feels bitter and angry at his son, and completely hopeless about his life.

In his mind, Cedric Gilliam takes out his anger and frustration on his son, who represents all of the promise of success that is not available to Cedric, Sr. While later on, he will see his son as an inspiration, he does not have that kind of perspective at the moment. Instead, he thinks about his failed expectations of a father-son relationship in the form of an old argument. Their values clash strongly, as Cedric Gilliam seeks to impose his paternal dominance, while his son sees the man for who he is—a convict and drug user who refuses to change.

Teachers at Ballou High School have pegged Cedric's classmate Phillip Atkins as a future Richard Pryor—a popular black comedian from the 1970s and 80s. Phillip makes lighthearted jokes at Cedric's expense in class, and begins to nag at him in the hallway. He takes a book out of Cedric's locker, and the two boys get into a tussle, with Cedric grabbing onto Phillip's shirt. While Phillip sees this interaction as a game, Cedric certainly does not; Phillip tells him to calm down, claiming that he was only playing around with him. Phillip was once as straight-laced as Cedric is now, following his father around town in pressed pants and a shirt and tie, passing out *The Watchtower* to spread the word of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Tt Ballou, many of the teachers like to take a single attribute—like Phillip Atkins's humor—and expand it to define that person entirely. This is what has happened to Phillip, who can now simply identify himself as a comedian without needing to succeed in other areas of his life. This also gives him the freedom to bully Cedric under the guise of humor. The two boys are alike in some ways—they both grew up in religious homes with strict rules, but Phillip hides that part of himself away in order to fit in.


In the eighth grade, Phillip witnessed a shooting, and fearing retaliation, he began a slow transformation in order to fit in better with the kids in his neighborhood and school. He changed clothes, portrayed himself as a tough kid and a class clown, and began smoking marijuana regularly. When Phillip gets home on the day of his scuffle with Cedric, he overhears his father talking to a friend about the dangers of individual ambition. Their church decrees that followers should not have careers, or professional ambitions, because that amounts to choosing temporal success over divine glory. This means that Phillip's dreams of tap dancing, or a comedy career, or his older brother's goal of being a musician, are forbidden to them. When Phillip performs his tap dancing at the Kennedy Center, his parents are nowhere to be found.

Similar to Cedric's story, Phillip's life changed during his junior high years, when he began to realize what life is like for black men in his neighborhood. But unlike Cedric, Phillip chose to lean into this image in order to fit in with those around him, not having the courage to forge his own path. In addition, Phillip's father suppresses all ambition in his children as part of their religion, forcing Phillip into a life of mediocrity and unrealized talent. Thus, even if Phillip wanted to succeed academically, as Cedric does, he would not be able to dream of college or a career.

Barbara is at Scripture Cathedral on Thursday night, as usual, but she doesn't see Cedric. He slips in the back of the church just after the service starts, not bothering to look for his mother among the 300 parishioners. He is quiet as the people around him yell, raise their arms above their heads, and run down the aisles as the holy spirit catches them. When a song begins that he recalls from his days in the choir, Cedric begins to sing, and the women in front of him look back at him to admire his voice. Bishop Long, who is leading the service, begins to talk about struggle, and it strikes a chord with Cedric. He jumps to his feet and shouts his agreement. When Cedric and Barbara get back home that night, he finds a letter from MIT in the mail: he has been accepted to their summer program.

While much of A Hope in the Unseen *focuses on Cedric Jennings's movement away from the church, it is important to note how integral Scripture Cathedral has been to his life experience. The strong foundation of faith and spirituality is clear in this passage, as Cedric is moved by the music and the sermon, responding viscerally. The fact that he receives his acceptance to the prestigious MIT program immediately after the church service highlights the role of faith and hope in Cedric's academic career, even as he moves away from the church as an institution.*

CHAPTER 4: SKIN DEEP

Cedric arrives at MIT, and he is surrounded by 52 minority math and science students like himself. He has joined the MITES—Minority Introduction to Engineering and Science—and suddenly feels less alone in his academic climb. At their introduction, the students hear from Leon Trilling, the distinguished professor who will be reviewing their progress and meeting with each student at the end of the program to assess their prospects for success at MIT as undergraduates. They are then put to work, and Cedric finds the curriculum much more difficult than anything he has faced at Ballou, in class or as extra credit work.

Cedric's hard work has paid off, and he has finally managed to join a group of students who share his academic dedication and ambition. This will, however, also be the first of many experiences in which Cedric feels like he is an outsider in a world he so deeply wants to access. While he has earned his place in this program, he finds it much more challenging than he expected, and is faced with the possibility of failure, which was not a concern at Ballou.

After the initial testing period, Cedric finds himself placed in basic-level courses, with the exception of calculus, and even so, he spends each class period frantically taking notes on information that is almost entirely new to him. He realizes that not everyone is as intently focused as he is, and when he talks to his classmates, he learns that while it is not easy work for anyone, most of them have covered at least some of the material in their schools. He also realizes that most of them come from middle-class backgrounds, and they comment on his "funny," "southern," and "slangy" language and accent. He describes it as "ghetto," and the other kids agree.

Like many students who excel in high school and go on to rigorous colleges or pre-college programs, Cedric is suddenly faced with a daunting academic challenge, and has not yet developed the skills to cope with this kind of experience. In addition to the difference in academic standards, Cedric is faced with the huge class differences among these nonwhite students that manifest themselves through language, dress, and social interactions.

Once he is more comfortable with the other kids in the program, Cedric decides to ask them about their **SAT** scores, and finds that their scores are much higher than his own. And when he gets up the courage to ask a fellow student for help with his calculus work, the student describes Cedric as academically inferior. Cedric doesn't feel comfortable telling his mother about his troubles, so he calls a friend from Jefferson Jr. High, who tells him that he shouldn't betray his own people by attending a "white" university, and that he will never be accepted by white people in general, even if he is academically successful. Cedric does not argue with him, because he wonders if what he is saying might be right.

Cedric is intensely focused on the SAT score as a measure of his academic abilities, and will constantly compare himself to those around him using this number. This only serves to reinforce his feelings of inferiority, leading to serious anxiety that he cannot even describe to his mother. The advice from a friend from home reiterates the same push towards mediocrity that he has heard throughout high school—he should not attempt to leave his comfort zone, as it will inevitably lead to pain.

Bill Ramsey, who runs the MITES program, is preparing to meet with Cedric—there has been a complaint from a female student that Cedric has been making inappropriate advances towards her, and Ramsey decides to have a talk with him. Before their meeting, Ramsey reviews his file and finds that Cedric is one of their inner-city students; in Ramsey's time running the program, he has found that these students, who were originally the target audience for his program, are just too far behind academically to rise to the level of acceptance to MIT. Instead, he began to bring in more middle-class minority students, most of whom see this as little more than an opportunity to pad their resumes for college applications. In their meeting, Cedric notes that he expected there to be more students like him—inner-city students from low income backgrounds—and Ramsey is at a loss for words.

The director of the MIT program notes that most poor, inner-city students like Cedric are unlikely to succeed at a college like MIT, even with the help of strong academic support systems. This story often shifts back and forth between the story of Cedric as an individual—who is determined to succeed—and the demographic trends that make his future seem so bleak. While Ramsey wants Cedric and students like him to succeed, he knows that statistically, they are doomed to fail. Thus, when Cedric notes the lack of students like him at the program, Ramsey cannot argue with him, but cannot explain why, either.

It is Cedric's birthday, and his MITES classmates surprise him with a paper bag filled with small, inexpensive gifts, including condoms, M&Ms, and a CD. They describe the gift as "ghetto," which is how he has been describing himself in the past few weeks, which gives him a façade of coolness that he certainly has never had at Ballou. The conversation in his room turns to the upcoming trip to Cape Cod, and Cedric is forced to admit that he does not know how to swim, nor does he have a swimsuit. He begins to feel like more of himself during the last couple of weeks of the program, and has even pulled into the middle ranks of his calculus class. His confidence dissolves, however, when he meets with Leon Trilling.

This social experience at MIT foreshadows the experience Cedric will have at Brown—he will have to work hard to succeed academically and socially at the same time. He will have to find his place among students who have grown up in a very different context, and learn a whole new set of social skills in order to fit in. While at Ballou, Cedric was nerdy and effeminate, but in this new context he is seen as completely the opposite, as the epitome of black masculinity.

Professor Trilling has been monitoring the students' work for the previous six weeks, and is meeting with each student individually to discuss their odds of getting into MIT as undergraduate students. When Trilling asks Cedric if he plans to apply, Cedric responds enthusiastically that he has dreamed about it for his entire life. Trilling responds that Cedric is not MIT material, based on his 910 score on the SAT. Cedric responds that he works much harder than anyone else, and that he will succeed because he wants it deep in his heart; Trilling tells him that he is setting himself up for disappointment, and that he should consider Howard University or the University of Maryland. Cedric is angry, and when he returns to his dorm room, he falls on to the bed, closes his eyes, and yells "Racist!"

This meeting between Cedric and Leon Trilling is a pivotal moment in the story, as it is the first time that someone has directly cast doubt on Cedric's academic potential. Cedric is used to being the top student in his high school class, and has received the nearly unmitigated support of teachers and administrators, helping him develop a rock-solid faith in himself. Trilling's assessment is devastating to Cedric, especially due to the racial tone of the conversation; Trilling suggests that Cedric shoot lower, and specifically suggests Howard University, a historically black college.

Back at home in Washington, D.C., Cedric feels restless. He has received offers from some private prep schools, where he could go for his senior year of high school, giving him an advantage when applying for colleges. But after his MIT experience, Cedric is unenthusiastic about spending his final year of high school surrounded by rich white kids in jackets and ties. He feels battered, and confused by his experience meeting other black students who were so drastically different from him, making him question what it means to be black in the first place. He wonders if he belongs at an Ivy League college, despite his burning desire only months earlier. Cedric realizes that for all of his struggles at Ballou, at least he knows who he is and where he stands there.

The experience at MIT has not completely broken Cedric's spirit, but he is confused by the fact that he was such an outsider among other people of color. While he will later learn to navigate the complexities at the intersection of class and race, Cedric's first experience with middle-class minorities has been overwhelming, and makes him question his long-held ambitions. This gives him a different perspective on his position at Ballou, where he will once again be considered the top student, and where his intellect and identity rarely come into question.

CHAPTER 5: TO HIM WHO ENDURETH

One morning, Cedric wakes with a plan: he puts on a pair of baggy black pants, a white polo shirt, and white Nikes, along with a black leather jacket and cap. He strolls into Ballou High School and is immediately scolded by the principal for wearing a hat, which is against the rules. Another student laughs with him, recognizing Cedric's attempt to look cool, and reminds him that he is fine just the way he is. After homeroom, Cedric puts the jacket and hat in his locker, and realizes that he feels relieved not to be wearing them anymore.

Despite his conviction that he does not belong in the Ballou community, Cedric is not immune to the desire to look cool, even for just a few moments. Like many teens, he is trying on different identities, possibly due to his experience at MIT, where he recognized how racially "authentic" he appeared to other black students. He quickly finds, however, that this is not his style.

In his college prep class that afternoon, Cedric notices that has classmates are surprisingly silent, even the ones he considers tough. He realizes the cruelty of the class, where students must look through college admissions guides and fill out applications, despite the fact that few of them will ever go off to college. After his summer at MIT, Cedric is reconsidering his lofty ambitions. He thinks about Reverend Keels, who tutors students wanting higher **SAT** scores, and who made Cedric feel bad about his 910 score. He had informed Cedric that he will not be getting into any Ivy League colleges with such a low score, regardless of his grades. Cedric recalls Keels mentioning that a student from Ballou once attended Brown University, and decides to request more information from the school.

Now that Cedric is no longer interested in applying to MIT, he must find an option that fits his lofty ambitions, but is still feasible for him, given his low SAT score. He uses the memory of a conversation with a harsh critic—a man who would presumably want Cedric to succeed—and uses his anger and frustration towards this man to help him make a decision about his future. This is a prime example of Cedric's ability to shake off criticism and use it to his advantage, turning his anger into motivation. It is also thanks to this man that Cedric chooses Brown University.


When Cedric retakes the **SAT**, his score rises a bit, to 960, but that is still well under the average score for students applying to Ivy League colleges. By this time, he is focused on Brown, with its 22% acceptance rate, strong math program, and relatively large minority population (about 1/3 nonwhite students). He fills out the Brown application, including an essay in which he discusses his background, struggles, and the effort he has made to overcome so many potential obstacles as a young black man in a single-parent household, in a poverty-stricken neighborhood. As he seals the envelope on his application, he asks God for support, noting that if Brown is where he is destined to be, he needs God's help to get there.

Once again, Cedric feels that his low SAT scores hold him back, but knows that they are only one element of a college application. His sense of openness and honesty about his circumstances and his life goals make for a strong personal essay, and will likely pull at the heartstrings of the admissions counselor at Brown. And once again, just as he did for his MIT application, Cedric relies on his religious faith to carry him the rest of the way. In this moment, it is clear that without his faith, Cedric would have a hard time surviving this process.



Barbara thinks about the day that Cedric bounded out of his room to tell her that he had finished his essay for Brown, and all of the complex feelings that accompanied that announcement for her. It was a long shot, but he just might get in, and then he would leave her all alone. She thinks about the years that she stayed home with her little boy, just so that he could leave her to go to college. She and Cedric go to church, though he sits a few rows away from her. When they get home from church, there is a letter waiting for Cedric from Brown—he got in. Cedric tells his mother that he knew he would get it, although he still looks shocked. Barbara can't find the right words to say to him.

For Barbara, this college application season is the beginning of a long and painful process of letting go of her son. She has to come to terms with the fact that she has had few experiences that will be helpful to Cedric at this point, and can only rely on her religious education when offering him advice. Like many mothers, she is aware that she helped him get to this place, but her happiness is tinged with regret that she cannot keep him with her.


In the weeks after Cedric receives his acceptance letter, Barbara wonders how she will help him navigate this new world. When Cedric receives his grades and learns that he has gotten a B in physics, both he and Barbara confront his teacher, and she convinces him to give Cedric another exam. He aces the test and the course; when he tells Barbara of their triumph, she lets him know that she will no longer be there to rescue him once he is at Brown. When he asks if Barbara thinks he will lose his identity at Brown, she does not know how to respond, because she has no idea what it will be like there. She gives her son some general advice of the kind that Bishop Long would offer, and he brushes it off.

Barbara has long been Cedric's protector, and has chosen that identity for herself. Now that he has gotten into Brown and will be leaving the nest, she realizes that she cannot protect him anymore, which is more upsetting to her than it is to Cedric. In addition, she feels more apprehensive about the person he will become, when she is not around to guide him. Their confrontation with the physics teacher marks the last time she will be at his side for this kind of support, and she revels in the joy of it.

In this atmosphere of excitement and insecurity, Cedric is invited to the Supreme Court to meet Chief Justice Clarence Thomas. Justice Thomas meets periodically with exceptional black students in the D.C. area, and Cedric was profiled in the *Wall Street Journal* the previous year, which prompted the invitation. Justice Thomas tells Cedric the story of his St. Jude statue, which he won at a Latin Bee in high school, and which his white classmates would break, over and over, and he would fix, over and over. Decades later, Thomas keeps it to remind himself that he would have glued the statue back together forever, because he was not going to give up or be intimidated by his rich, white classmates.

Cedric's meeting with Chief Justice Clarence Thomas has a significant impact on the way that Cedric understands the intersection of race and class, though he will not recognize it until well into his first year at Brown. Justice Thomas seems to have a lot in common with Cedric, and sees him as something of a protégé—they are both black men who come from poor backgrounds and have beaten the odds to get ahead in a majority-white society. This is initially an inspiring story to Cedric.


Cedric and Justice Thomas spend hours talking, comparing their struggles to get ahead as poor, black men. But when Cedric tells the justice that he will be attending Brown in the fall, Thomas is not impressed, and tells him that he would have done better to set his sights lower, and that he could "get eaten alive." He tells Cedric of a friend of his who attended Holy Cross with him but didn't know who he was, and wound up addicted to drugs and dropping out of the college. He also tells Cedric that he should avoid any racial issues and tell himself "I'm not a black person, I'm just a person." After a little more advice from Justice Thomas, Cedric begins to feel unsettled, as if he is being prepared for battle, when all he wants to do is study among the best of the best. After three hours of conversation, Cedric is happy to go home.

When Justice Thomas begins to discuss more deeply his feelings about race relations in higher education, he reveals a very conservative side of his character. He advises Cedric to ignore his racial identity as much as possible, which is what Justice Thomas had to do in order to succeed at Holy Cross College. In addition, he portrays racial relations as a kind of battlefield, and strikes fear into Cedric's heart when he suggest that the boy will be "eaten alive." Cedric leaves his meeting no more informed about how to succeed in college than when he arrived.


At Ballou's Awards Ceremony in May, Cedric receives recognition for the many scholarships he has earned to help him pay for Brown. In the program, he notices that while some of his classmates have been accepted to college, very few of them have received any kind of scholarship money, meaning that they likely will not attend. Cedric received offers of scholarship money from a number of colleges, and it puts him on edge to know that many of his classmates are feeling jealous and angry. One boy tells him that he will not last a year at Brown, and later they nearly get into a fight in physics class, the boy punching Cedric before two girls intervene.

All of Cedric's hard work has paid off, and not only has he been accepted to Brown, his education will be paid for. This is an important issue at Ballou—even for students who are accepted to college, many will not go for financial reasons. But for students who want to attend college, Cedric's success is frustrating, and highlights the lengths to which a Ballou student must go to be able to actually attend college. These students take their frustrations out on him.



Cedric is preparing his graduation speech, and has already gone through a number of revisions with Mr. Thompson, an English teacher at Ballou. Cedric knows that his speech is spiteful, and that it will anger many of his classmates, but it is genuine. He has another teacher, Ms. Briscoe, look at the speech, which is focused on the concept of "Dreambusters," or people who have focused on the obstacles rather than helping him achieve his goals. This teacher reminds him that everyone has dreams, like the dream of walking across the stage at graduation, and Cedric realizes that he has been so focused on his own ambitions, which seemed so much bigger and more important, that he has forgotten that others might aspire to something as well.

Cedric considers his graduation speech the perfect opportunity to respond to the students who have been ignoring, teasing, and bullying him for years. Of course, this is not what the administration would like from its graduation speaker, and they try to send him in a more positive direction. For a moment, Cedric reflects on his peers' high school experiences, but he is too narrowly focused on his own success to be concerned about others' dreams and ambitions. In addition, he wants to share some of his anger with others.

On the day of graduation, Cedric delivers a speech that stuns the crowd. He talks about the "Dreambusters," who laughed at him for wanting to attend an Ivy League college, or who tell him he will not last at Brown. He responds that there is nothing he can't handle, with God's help. His speech begins to sound like a sermon, as quotes from Scripture make the graduation crowd go wild, like "one big tent revival." Once the ceremony is over, Cedric is overtaken by classmates and strangers, shaking his hand and congratulating him on his powerful and honest speech. He finally makes his way to his family, where his mother engulfs him in a hug and reminds him that he is still her baby.

Cedric's speech is even more dramatic than his teachers could have imagined, and somehow rather than angering the crowd, he inspires them. The majority of the graduation attendees are religious, like Barbara, and Cedric's religious references hit exactly the right notes. The common theme, of course, is the value of faith in God, and rising above temptation to achieve a greater good. This motivational speech makes for a dramatic end to Cedric's high school experience.

CHAPTER 6: THE PRETENDER

Cedric sorts keys at his internship at the Price Waterhouse Accounting office, thinking about his life to come. He feels like he is in between two worlds, finished with the old one, and only a pretender in the one to come. He is wearing a nice new outfit that he bought with his first paycheck from the job, which makes him feel much more comfortable than the two suits that he received from his benefactor Donald Korb, a Boston optometrist. Korb had read about Cedric in the *Wall Street Journal* and began to send him money for books and clothes, and had purchased the two suits—"old white man suits" to Cedric—when he learned that Cedric would be working at an accounting office. Cedric eventually took the suits back and exchanged them for a lot of graduation gifts for the people in his life.

Cedric is finished with high school but has not yet started at Brown. This is a strange transition period for most high school graduates, but is especially difficult for Cedric, as he sees this move as a life-changing one. He is also deeply concerned about developing a sense of belonging, hence his feeling of being a pretender—someone who is looking to fit in, but has not had the chance yet. He also worries about maintaining some sense of self—like not wearing clothing meant for old white people—now that he is joining this new world.

As he leaves the office for the day, Cedric passes by the black receptionist, whom he considers "ghetto" like him, despite the fact that she uses her "Vanna White voice" on the phone and in the office. At home, Cedric talks to his friend LaTisha on the phone. They talk mainly about their friends from high school and what they have been doing in the weeks since graduation. One friend has been killed in a triple homicide while working at McDonald's, and another was killed while dealing drugs. Phillip Atkins is working in the mailroom of a newspaper, and LaTisha comments that while the young man is very smart, they both know that he will never get past the mailroom. The talk of their classmates' various failures tires Cedric, and he tells LaTisha that he has to go.

Cedric's interaction with the black receptionist at his internship is the first of many examples of code-switching, where someone will feel obligated to change their voice, manners, or presentation in order to fit in and succeed in a white world. This is then contrasted with his conversation with LaTisha, who has kept tabs on the other members of their high school class. Most are unlikely to find any sort of traditional success, and will be lucky to get through the next few years without ending up in prison or murdered.

Cedric Gilliam has gotten out on parole, and is making an attempt to connect with his son. He tries to invite him to a concert series with three of Cedric's favorite musicians—Patti LaBelle, TCL, and Mary J. Blige—but Barbara shuts this down immediately, deciding that she cannot take the risk only a month before the boy is headed for Brown. Cedric, Sr., is a recovering drug addict, and there is sure to be alcohol, drugs, and violence at the concert. She refuses to take the risk. She and Cedric spend much of their time together, when they are not working, and Barbara focuses on the details that need to be tied up before her son leaves.

Barbara is still very protective of her son—she intercepts the call from Cedric's father, making sure that he does not get a chance to do any damage before Cedric is safely away at college. She sees Cedric Gilliam's world as a series of temptations, and while Cedric has managed to keep himself separate from this world for the past eighteen years, Barbara will take no chances, even if that means preventing Cedric from connecting with his father.

In the course of one of their conversations, Cedric mentions that he is a man, now that he is 18 years old, but Barbara reminds him that a man is someone who takes care of himself "physically, financially, and spiritually." Cedric protests that he takes care of himself, and Barbara knows that he is anxiously awaiting the moment when she pronounces him a man. She only offers praise when her son truly deserves it, and she is not ready to concede this one yet. She will admit, however, that one of the fellow parishioners at Scripture Cathedral had recently commended her on how "mannerly" Cedric was, and that clearly she had done something right as a mother.

Cedric is anxious to begin this new phase of his life, but Barbara takes every possible opportunity to teach him about the world. This is especially important for her now, as she worries that she will lose her connection to her son when he leaves for college. Barbara's definition of masculinity stands in stark contrast to the image portrayed by Cedric Gilliam, who is more concerned with stereotypical markers of masculinity such as sexual conquest, money, and confidence than he is with manners, spirituality, and self-respect.

Their conversation moves on to some young women that Barbara and Cedric know from church, who they acknowledge are very beautiful. Barbara warns Cedric about making a fool of himself for pretty girls, and he counters with a sharp question: "how do you know what love is?" Barbara explains that in contrast to lust, love is more than sex, and involves really getting to know the other person. However, she does not feel confident telling this to her 18-year-old son, because she has no idea what's going on in his head.

Barbara worries that she has little information to offer Cedric in terms of sex and romance, but in reality, her son is absorbing her advice and values, and will later repeat her advice to a friend at Brown. Cedric's upbringing has impressed itself upon him, and will help him maintain a sense of identity among the many social and emotional difficulties at Brown.

Cedric responds that he will never fall in love, that he wants to be alone and possibly adopt children. Barbara tells him that he can send them to her to raise, and is again hit with the realization that Cedric will eventually leave her for good. Cedric changes the subject, asking Barbara if she has ever been in love. She thinks of Cedric Gilliam and responds that she thought she was, once.

Not only has Cedric internalized his mother's strict teachings on sexual morality, he has doubts about his own sense of masculinity—thus, he heads off any possible rejection by deciding that he wants to be alone. Barbara, of course, does not want to be alone—she wants to be with Cedric.

During the sweltering summer days in Washington, D.C., Scripture Cathedral is an oasis of air conditioning, and many of the services are full. Bishop Long has a hard time controlling the pride he feels in the size of his congregation and the religious empire he has built. In addition to the church, which is large and newly renovated, he has a radio show, his choir appears on a local cable network, and he produces a variety of religious material for distribution. He also manages charity and volunteer work to help drug addicts, the poor, and the illiterate. Some have criticized him for owning a large home in the suburbs, owning more than one Cadillac, and wearing expensive clothes. But Long knows that these criticisms are born of jealousy and presumes that they will blow over.

Scripture Cathedral is both a refuge for the people of this low-income neighborhood, and a highly efficient machine that drains money from its credulous members for its own profit and glory. The image of the church as an oasis can be read literally, because the air conditioning makes it the only bearable place in Washington, D.C., and figuratively, as a space that is free of the violence, fear, and destructive temptations. But while the parishioners are feeding their souls spiritually, Bishop Long is filling his pockets with the last dollars they have to give.

Long begins his sermon by reaching out to the women of his congregation, whom he thinks of as his infantry, because they do the bulk of the work while leaving the men nominally in charge of the church itself. As he preaches, he sees Cedric in the congregation and thinks about how difficult it is to talk to students going off to college. Simply put, Long knows that those young people who go on to achieve real success and land themselves in the middle class will no longer fit in at Scripture Cathedral. Pentecostalism targets people on the bottom rungs of society, who have no idea where to start on the path towards a better life. The church then helps them get on the right track, and they can attribute just about any form of success to their faith, becoming loyal members for life.

Bishop Long is aware that his particular brand of religion is most attractive to the poor and needy, and can foresee Cedric's eventual break from the church. He knows from experience that Cedric will begin to question the strict rules and simple values of the Pentecostal church. Cedric's burgeoning sense of personal ambition is at odds with the idea of giving oneself fully to the religious community, and this is one of the reasons that he will eventually leave. In this moment, however, Bishop Long feels that he has one last chance to influence Cedric.

The ones who experience the most dramatic transformations, according to Long, are those who usually end up leaving the church. They transform their faith in God into an even deeper faith in themselves and their abilities, and no longer see faith as a mysterious force that runs their lives. In contrast to the parishioners who give the church all their extra money in the hopes that it will come back to them tenfold, there are those who have discovered a secular path towards prosperity, involving hard work, a college education, and strategic career development. This knowledge breaks down that sense of unquestioning faith in God, yet that is the foundation of Scripture Cathedral.

Cedric's transition can be seen in the context of many religious high school students who leave their homes and communities for college. Those who have been taught not to question their faith in God may have more difficulty maintaining that belief outside of their churches. They will find that higher education promotes secular values like education, reason, and individual initiative. While these values are not in conflict with all religions, this can be the case for many, like Cedric.

Bishop Long knows that he belongs with the poor and downtrodden, and that he owes his career to them. It is his job to help his parishioners rise up, but when they leave, and laugh at the church, or even badmouth him, Long wonders why they cannot be loyal to him in exchange for all he has done to them. Instead, these people say that Long is just profiting off of people who have so little to give in the first place. When the choir stops singing, Long begins to preach again, and speaks directly to the young people going off to college, reminding them that God may be hard to find on the college campus. He tells them that while they will be taught to trust their minds and education, they must remember that God has all the real answers.

As the head of Scripture Cathedral, Bishop Long is a complex figure—while he appears to be deeply dedicated to the values of the church and the community he serves, he has also separated himself from them. He demands loyalty to the church and to him as its head, yet he has little to offer those around him beyond his good works and promotion of faith. This creates a difficult bind for those who want to remain faithful but would also like to achieve personal success, and Long has very little to offer those members.

Long finishes his sermon with a call to contribute $20 to the church—in fact, he asks people to line up with their money, and those who drop at least $20 in the basket at the front of the church can stand at the foot of the stage to be personally blessed by Bishop Long. He notices that Cedric has not moved from his seat, and intensifies his call until the young man comes up, drops his money in the basket, and reaches his hand out to Long for one final blessing before leaving for college.

Despite the fraught image of Bishop Long, he is clearly an inspirational speaker, selling the promise of future prosperity for the price of $20 in cash. When Cedric is not convinced to donate, Long considers it a personal challenge to ensure that he maintains the boy's faith and money at least until he leaves for college.

It is nearly the end of summer, and much of Washington, D.C., has emptied out as its residents make one last trip to vacation homes or beach houses. Scripture Cathedral is the headquarters for the preparations for the upcoming Million Man March, a national protest march focused on African American rights. Cedric, Sr., is enjoying one of his last days of freedom, as he has failed his most recent urine test and will most likely be going back to jail or rehab for heroin use. Meanwhile, young Cedric is on his way to his aunt Chris's house, where he will celebrate his last days in D.C., before going off to Brown. At the party, Cedric hangs out with the adults and joins in on their jokes; when the children come in to eat, someone suggests that Cedric touch their heads to pass along his intelligence to them.

This sweeping scene portrays the stark contrast between those who are able to leave, and those who are trapped. The leavers achieve this either by virtue of money—like those who can afford to go on vacation—or through their herculean efforts to attend an Ivy League college in the fall. Cedric's family will stay behind, not equipped to pull themselves out of poverty. Cedric's father, for his part, has made a series of choices that will not only keep him from escaping Washington, D.C., but will also have him imprisoned for much of his adult life.

After leaving the party, Cedric wanders the streets of D.C. for a while, until he comes to a house where he lived, on and off, during his childhood years. He sees his uncle Butch on the porch and says hello. Cedric is excited to be in the company of adult men—the party was almost exclusively women. Cedric, Butch, and Butch's friend Cornelius talk casually for a few moments, and Butch asks how Cedric is doing in school. When Cedric tells him he is attending Brown, Butch does not recognize the name and Cedric must explain that it is an Ivy League college, which seems to bother Cornelius, who was accepted to college once but ended up in prison instead. When the men begin to joke about how Ballou is no place for an education, Cedric realizes that he is finally ready to leave Washington, D.C.

On the eve of his new life, Cedric is taking in his old surroundings, saying goodbye—both literally and figuratively—to the people and places he grew up with. He is beginning to see his neighborhood as an outsider already, which is clear from the conversation with Butch and Cornelius. To them, Cedric's life is foreign and difficult to understand—they are not even impressed by an Ivy League college, because they have little context for understanding that kind of academic advancement. This seems to confirm to Cedric that he no longer belongs in his old neighborhood, if he ever did.

CHAPTER 7: GOODBYE TO YESTERDAY

It is moving day, and Cedric is looking for a few important items as he leaves his room—he has lost his graphing calculator, and finally decides he must leave without it and buy a new one at Brown. Barbara is feeling unsentimental as she looks at the nearly empty room and thinks about how so many other families will be packing up and leaving today, but from nicer, happier homes. She has hauled most of Cedric's belongings out herself, and now he is left to pick up his **television**—his "date every Friday night." They leave the apartment and get into a Dodge Caravan. The van rental cost Barbara $232, and she will spend another $96 to stay at the Holiday Inn in Providence, Rhode Island, before returning home.

This special moment in Cedric's life—when he actually moves out of the house and into the college of his dreams—is a serious financial burden on Barbara. She is already aware of and anticipating the vast differences in class and wealth that she will face on the Brown campus during her visit. While Cedric is focused on the big picture of his new life, Barbara has to deal with the details, like the cost of the van rental and hotel. This marks the beginning of a long phase of disconnection between the two.

As Cedric and Barbara drive out of D.C. towards New England, they begin to talk about school breaks. Barbara explains that Bishop Long will be sending money so that Cedric can come home for Thanksgiving, and he responds that he does not plan on coming home for breaks, even Christmas, and that he doesn't plan on calling Barbara very much, either, because he will be very busy. She informs him that she will be attending Brown's parents' weekend in October, because it is her right as a parent. This silences them both, as Barbara spends much of the trip reminiscing about the past, and Cedric is focused on the road—and his life—in front of him. The tension is finally broken around midnight, as they near Providence, when Cedric finds a tape of gospel songs, and together they sing along.

Like many students who leave home for college, Cedric is intent on this new sense of independence from his family and home life; this is much more intense, however, based on Cedric's lifelong rejection of the world he grew up in. He is still using his anger to push others away, including his mother, who wants to hold on to him for as long as possible. This is another example of the vast chasm opening between Cedric and Barbara, as she holds on to the past and he chases his future. Their only connection in this moment is music, which has long been a staple of their life together.


After the long drive, Barbara and Cedric get a late start to the day, and it is nearly lunchtime when they get to Cedric's dorm room in Andrews Hall and begin to unpack. While Cedric is beginning to feel more at ease on campus, Barbara feels tense and pensive, observing the other parents—clearly more affluent, and presumably used to the college atmosphere—and wondering where she fits in. She has sacrificed so much, and now she worries that she will lose Cedric in this new world. They have lunch together, and when they get back to Cedric's room, his new roommate Rob is there, so Barbara decides that it is time for her to leave. Before driving off, she hands him all of the extra money she has—three twenty-dollar bills.

Their arrival on the Brown campus is a historic moment for the both of them—while Cedric has at least had a glimpse of higher education while at MIT the previous summer, Barbara is completely new to this world, and must quickly run through many of the same emotions that Cedric did, but in a shorter time frame. Meanwhile, Cedric meets his white, upper-class roommate, Rob, who will come to represent everything about the world Cedric did not grow up in—it is with Rob that Cedric will learn his hardest lessons about class and race.

With Barbara gone, Cedric sits on his freshly made bed and begins to talk to Rob, his new roommate. Rob tells Cedric that he is from Marblehead, Massachusetts, that his father is currently birding on Cape Cod, and that his sister is away at Harvard. Cedric does not know what birding is, and Rob has to explain it to him. They being to talk about music, finding that they have very different tastes, and then decide how to organize their dorm room. When Cedric notices that Rob has brought a small brown dorm fridge for their room, he is so excited he shakes his roommate's hand.

Up until this point, Cedric has had very little interaction with white people, and this first conversation with Rob serves as a kind of introduction to a very different world. Rob is not necessarily the typical white person, however—he is from an upper-class background, with vacations to Cape Cod and references to bird-watching and other upper-class leisure activities that Cedric does not know about.


The first week is an orientation period for Brown freshmen, with carefully planned activities designed to help them get to know each other and the campus. Cedric begins to read the orientation packet, and focuses on the racial diversity of the 5,559-person class, learning that "black, non-Hispanic" students like him make up 6.5% of the incoming class. Later on, when he meets the other 33 freshmen in his unit, he counts two black students (including himself), roughly corresponding to the 6.5% of the class overall. For the first few days, Cedric is watchful, taking in more than he offers to others, and learning as much as he can about the people who surround him. He is exhausted by the end of each day, feeling like he has been studying for exams.

Cedric is initially obsessed with the specifics of the ethnic makeup of Brown, calculating the percentage of black students in his freshman unit. This need to place each student in a racial category is one way that Cedric will attempt to deal with his insecurities during his first semester at Brown. He is acutely aware of being part of the 6.5% (the percentage of black students on campus), and again, he falls into the role of the outsider, observing those around him without joining in or revealing anything of himself. This is Cedric's way of protecting himself emotionally.

The Brown freshmen are often reminded of how proud they should be to have been accepted to such a prestigious institution, and of how intelligent and diverse they are as a class. This instills a pride of place, and they begin to really think of themselves as Brown students. But one evening, when students begin to discuss their **SAT** scores, Cedric begins to worry. One student announces that he scored at 1200, which must be the lowest score of the group. As the other students share their scores, Cedric finds that they range from 1430 to a low of 970. When it is Cedric's turn, he tries to be casual as he reveals he scored 960, but knows that each one of these students will remember this number and associate it with him forever.

Although he has already been accepted to, and enrolled in, the Ivy League college he has always dreamed of, Cedric is still concerned about his low SAT score. For him, it is much more than a single element of a college application; the SATs are a measurement of his overall intelligence, and therefore his worth as a human being. The other Brown students also seem to feel this connection between SAT scores and self-worth, as each knows their number by heart and carries it with them even once they're in college. Cedric not only fears that he does not belong, but that he will be of less value among his peers for his score.

After this conversation about **SAT** scores, and the handful of references that Cedric does not understand, he gets up early to re-think the courses he will take this semester. He has lost his temporary ID card, so he has a breakfast of Fritos in the dorm lounge while he looks through the catalogue for courses that he feels he can handle. He meets with his advisor, explaining that he does not want to get in over his head. While his grades and test scores would place him in a third-semester calculus class, he decides to take a second-semester course instead; he does the same with Spanish, and he also opts for an English class on Richard Wright, because he has already read *Native Son*.

Not surprisingly, Cedric is shell-shocked by this new world, brimming with cultural knowledge that he could not have obtained in his community or at his high school. While this lack of cultural capital does not necessarily mean that Cedric will have trouble succeeding academically, he is convinced that he is behind already, and needs to stack the deck in his favor during his first semester. This is an about-face from his hunger to learn while in high school, and clearly a protective move.

The last issue Cedric discusses with his advisor is his plan to take all of his courses pass/fail, explaining with a note of shame that he comes from "a real bad city school." His advisor approves this plan, as Brown students are given a lot of autonomy over their academic careers. The college is known for its open curriculum, and allowing students to take as many classes as they want on a pass/fail basis. The idea is to allow students to challenge themselves without fear of bad grades, but for Cedric, this is a chance to take a slightly easier path while he gets used to the new academic and social atmosphere of the college.

While later, Cedric will regret taking all of his classes pass/fail, it may have been one of the best decisions he has made since arriving at Brown. While the transition to college can be trying for most students, it will be particularly difficult for Cedric, as he catches up with his fellow students, both academically and socially. This second layer of education, about the intersection of race, class, and academics, will occupy much of Cedric's time and mental energy.

Friday night is the diversity orientation for Brown freshmen: they are welcomed by the university chaplain, a Rabbi Flam, and a Hispanic third-year student, who will lead them through a number of activities to help them understand Brown's take on diversity and community. Their first activity involves finding other students who know specific cultural facts, like the significance of Cinco de Mayo, which will lead them to lean on their preconceived ideas about their classmates. Cedric is overwhelmed by other students in his unit asking him who Rosa Parks is, and he rightly feels singled out for the color of his skin. This is the point of the exercise, of course: for students to access the prejudices they claim not to have.

This diversity orientation is meant to provoke strong reactions from students, and that is exactly what happens, especially for Cedric. He is hurt that his new classmates are making assumptions about him based on the color of his skin—but this activity intentionally reveals the latent racial biases that students have, but do not want to recognize, for fear of being seen as ignorant. However, for Cedric this is an experience that he has all too often, and it hits close to home, as he is in the middle of trying to come to terms with his racial identity.

The next activity requires students to write down their identity in one word on a piece of paper. Cedric thinks about his conversation with Clarence Thomas, who advised him not to think of himself as black at Brown, and is unsure of what to write. He finds that other students have similar concerns, and very few of them want to use their racial identity as their defining characteristic. This generation of students has grown up with the understanding that "multiculturalism" can cause divisiveness. The third-year student who is leading the conversation digs in further, asking what identities people might have been avoiding, like HIV positive, LGBTQ, abuse survivor, anorexic, and handicapped.

This part of the exercise illustrates just how confused and frustrated Cedric is feeling at this point—he is asked to write down his identity in one word, and he is flooded with the different pieces of advice from friends, mentors, and others. If he follows Justice Thomas's advice, committing to a "color-blind" approach and distancing himself from his racial identity, then what other word would he choose to identify himself? On the other hand, he is uncomfortable being seen as simply the black student, and he especially doesn't want to be the poor black student on campus.

There is a discussion about whether or not it is appropriate to use a limitation (like a handicap) to define oneself, and this strikes a chord within Cedric. He speaks up, arguing that identity should be linked to something that a person is proud of, not just what sets them apart from others. He uses the example of losing a leg—he would consider that a part of himself, but would not want that to define who he is. The third-year counters that identity can be both positive and negative, and is often imposed by others, despite how a person may attempt to define themselves. They move on to other issues, like why Caucasian is not considered an identity, which prompts one student to announce that "Caucasian is the oppressor group," and that most people would rather side with a minority or victim group.

As his fellow students begin to explore other possible identities that do not involve race, Cedric begins to make a parallel between being black and having a disability. He does not want to be defined as the poor black student because it places him on a lower social, academic, and economic level. Yet as the moderator points out, some students may not be able to choose their identity, and instead are labeled by others in a way that is out of their control. Cedric will work hard in this first year to control the way others identify him.

On Saturday afternoon, Rob returns to his room after a morning of playing soccer, and enjoys a moment of rest and relaxation. He thinks about his life in Marblehead, and while he misses home, he is also very confident that this is where he belongs. He begins to write a letter to his parents, and when he mentions Cedric, he begins to think about his roommate, and how this will be a broadening experience for him with a roommate like Cedric. He has never had a black friend, and in most of his interactions with black men, he has felt like he has to be extra careful of what he says or how he sounds. He is not alone in this experience—many of his new friends at Brown are interested in Cedric, because they haven't met many people like him, and he is something of an anomaly at Brown.

This passage is told from Rob's point of view, and offers a different perspective on Cedric's interactions with the white students at Brown. Rob has the privilege of an immediate sense of belonging, in a space that has been created by people like him, and is populated by people like him, for the most part. He has the luxury of being curious and interested in Cedric without worrying about losing his own identity—but, at the same time, this passage makes clear that he is genuinely interested in exploring friendships outside of his class and race boundaries.


Cedric comes into the boys' dorm room, and he and Rob discuss the fact that Cedric has lost his temporary ID and cannot eat in the dining hall at the moment; Rob offers to steal food for him to help him out. Cedric asks if Rob would consider mopping the floors every once in a while, and notes that Rob's feet smell bad. Cedric is disgusted by the fact that Rob walks around barefoot, and when Rob tells him that everyone does the same, Cedric responds, "not where I'm from." Cedric turns on his **tv**, and Rob is annoyed because he can't concentrate on his letter to his parents. Frustrated, he leaves the room to find some friends to hang out with.

Cedric and Rob have their first disagreement, which is rooted in their cultural backgrounds. While Rob is used to having someone take care of him and tend to his surroundings, Cedric has grown up in an environment where he cannot trust anyone else—to clean the trash and heroin needles off of the ground, for example—and must wear footwear to protect himself, and do the cleaning himself if he wants to live in a clean space.

Cedric finally manages to get his permanent Brown ID card and goes off to have a meal with the other students from his unit. They talk about the karaoke party from the previous evening, in which Cedric sang, and everyone is amazed by his voice. They ask if he will be joining any of the singing groups on campus, and while he is not sure if he wants to, he is happy to be recognized for something other than being black. The conversation moves on, and when Rob is talking, Cedric suddenly interrupts to announce that Rob is Wally Cleaver from the old **television** show *Leave it to Beaver*. He realizes that this is a set of references that will connect him to his new classmates, and he continues, giving the other kids at lunch their television identities.

Among the more difficult moments for Cedric in these first days, this set of interactions with his new classmates marks a high point, as Cedric finds a way to connect with them, outside of the boundaries of class and race. While he has his religious background to thank for his vocal skills, Cedric finds that music is something that connects him to this new group of people. Even more useful are his television references—with television as his window into the white world, Cedric finally has a way to connect to his new friends.

Later that day, Cedric goes to the Brown bookstore to pick up his books. As he wanders the aisles, he becomes increasingly anxious about how much he does not yet know. The bookstore will close soon, but Cedric still needs to find a fourth course to take, and is using the required reading to help him decide. He looks at, and disregards, courses on psychology, religious studies, physics, and philosophy. He feels internally conflicted about the religious studies course, because he can feel Bishop Long's eyes on him, reminding him that the only true answers come from God.

Cedric ends up making his decisions about an entire semester at the last minute, in the bookstore. While he has met with his advisor, Cedric is still lost when it comes to making choices about academics. In addition, he feels uncomfortable studying religious topics, as he worries that they will conflict with the teachings of Scripture Cathedral, illustrating some of the conflict between religion and education.


Cedric lands on an education textbook, and likes the practical aspect of the course, so he decides that his fourth course will be the History of American Education with Professor James. In line to purchase all of his books, Cedric looks at the cover of *Rolling Stone*, which announces the death of Jerry Garcia. He opens the magazine and gets a quick lesson on who the man is.

Cedric is most comfortable with the practical and tangible aspects of higher education, and therefore finds education a good fit. Armed and ready for his academic studies, Cedric has one last lesson to go—he must read up on popular culture, in case someone mentions Jerry Garcia.

The next morning, after a highly formal processional, with a strategically diverse set of students carrying the "Class of 1999" banner through campus, the students assemble for the convocation. The speaker is Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, whose message is bereft of hope and faith, and fails to inspire Cedric. After convocation, the students attend their classes for the first time, receive their syllabi, and receive their first assignments. They discuss the classes afterwards, and Cedric tells Rob he is excited about his Richard Wright seminar, and likes his instructor, an African American graduate student named Stephan Wheelock. Rob is excited about his Marine Biology course, because he is hoping to major in it.

Cedric is unimpressed with Elie Wiesel's perspective on hope and faith, mainly because these two values have helped to usher Cedric out of the inner city and to Brown. It is interesting to note, however, that Wiesel survived much more dire circumstances than Cedric could ever imagine, but Cedric's self-absorbed mindset at this point makes it difficult for him to empathize with someone he considers white, and therefore in a more privileged group. Instead, Cedric focuses on his Richard Wright seminar, taught by a fellow black man.

At dinner, Cedric mentions how disgusted he is that some students shower without shoes on, which he considers very dirty. He is met with a knowing smile from the other African American student in his unit, Chiniqua Milligan, and another girl volunteers that she thinks everyone should wear flip-flops to shower. Cedric continues his **television** references, calling one student Casey Kasem. When the question of roommates comes around, Cedric and Rob joke that they have big problems. Back in their room, they are both feeling relaxed and happy, and Cedric suddenly breaks into song—he sings "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday," and Rob is astonished at his voice.

Cedric's connections to his fellow students continue, as he finds support for his feelings about bare feet. In this moment, just about any shared belief, no matter how small, is meaningful to Cedric and helps him to feel less isolated. He feels that he has found his method of interacting with this group, again using pop culture references that allow him to feel like he shares a culture with his classmates. His relationship with Rob is still tenuous, and their joke at dinner may contain some shred of truth.

CHAPTER 8: FIERCE INTIMACIES

Cedric is listening carefully in his History of Education course, held at 8:30 A.M. in a dark basement classroom that has many of his classmates falling asleep. Cedric assumes that these students already know the information the Professor James is teaching, but he certainly does not. James mentions Ellis Island, and Cedric scribbles it down, the references completely going over his head. He has found in his first month at Brown that while he is just keeping his head above water, his classmates seem to know what to do without asking, even the ones who sleep through class, like they are privy to some source of knowledge that Cedric does not have access to. After class ends, he goes to his Spanish class, where at least he feels that he is on the same footing as his classmates.

Now that Cedric has begun his classes, he is faced with the daily work of keeping up with students who are more knowledgeable, and have been exposed to rigorous academics in high school. His only choice in this situation is to put in more work than his peers—while they fall asleep in class, Cedric furiously takes notes that he will dutifully study later on. He has already had this experience at MIT, but the stakes are higher this time. This is the case for many students from underserved schools, who must work twice as hard to play catch up, especially in that critical first year.

When his classes are finished for the day, Cedric decides to treat himself to lunch with the money left over from his monthly support check of $200 from Dr. Korb, his patron. He goes to Café Paragon, which is packed, giving him a good chance to eavesdrop on his fellow diners. The hot topic of the day is affirmative action, especially as there have recently been protests in California in response to the ending of preferential admissions based on race. Brown takes part in affirmative action, offering a select number of places to students from underrepresented groups. But like many colleges and universities that take part in affirmative action, this support does not extend past the offer of admission.

Cedric's lunch at Café Paragon is a perfect opportunity for the author to present the issue of affirmative action, which is central to Cedric's life story in many ways. He has certainly benefitted from local and national programs, as well as help from individuals, in his struggle to lift himself out of poverty. He was likely accepted at Brown through affirmative action policies, helping to complete the process that Cedric started with his intelligence and hard work in school.

Once students like Cedric arrive on the Brown campus, they are left to their own devices. While there are tutoring and counseling services available to students, minority students often avoid taking advantage of those services out of shame and fear that someone will discover that they are struggling. This leads to higher dropout rates among minorities and students from low-income backgrounds. Cedric overhears two professors talking about this topic, and one comments to the other that bringing affirmative action students up to the level of their fellow students would take more resources than most universities have.

Cedric is currently experiencing the aftereffects of affirmative action, in which he must prove his worth without the support systems that were available to him in high school. Yet while Cedric has a wealth of knowledge based on his lived experience with affirmative action, instead of taking part in these conversations that affect him intimately, Cedric must simply overhear the opinions of two white, middle-class professors.

Cedric longs to join the conversation between the two professors, and tell him about his journey and how it has built within him a king of strength and conviction that other students do not have. But he is also filled with self-doubt, as he beings to wonder if this is enough to get him through his college years. As the professors leave, they begin discussing minority professors on campus, arguing that they have only been hired for their perspective and are not real scholars held to the same academic standard.

While many students of color and students from low-income backgrounds benefit from affirmative action policies, it is clear that they also have to face the prejudices of their white, middle-class peers and professors, many of whom will see them as outsiders and undeserving of their position, whether it is college admission or high-level employment.

When Cedric leaves the restaurant, he passes his Richard Wright professor, Stephan Wheelock, who is engaged in a deep conversation with a friend. Cedric overhears him—a black graduate student from Mississippi—talking about his experience with affirmative action and the minority experience at Brown. Wheelock notes that while Brown wants students to think that they are all equal and on the same footing, people like him did not have the same upbringing, advantages, and access that would empower them to be successful in academia. Cedric spends the rest of the day mulling over what he has heard, and wishing that his success or failure at Brown would not be considered representative of the entire African American race.

The author creates a meaningful juxtaposition of the conversation inside the café—in which two white professors discuss the theoretical drawbacks of affirmative action—and Stephan Wheelock outside, who criticizes the inherent inequities of higher education. While Cedric is intensely focused on his own educational experience, he has found himself at the center of a topic of great national interest. He is not the only black man on campus who is swimming upstream, trying to overcome his race and background to succeed academically.

Cedric is still trying to work out some ground rules with his roommate Rob, regarding control of the stereo. They have decided that whoever is in the room first has control of the music, and the other roommate must wait patiently—music control is only given up if the roommate leaves the room. They also disagree about cleanliness: Rob, accustomed to cleaning ladies, is not interested in using his precious free time to mop the floor, while Cedric sees cleanliness as one more aspect of his life that he must control in this new world. He also recognizes that while Rob makes their classmates and neighbors comfortable, and makes friends easily, Cedric has the opposite effect on them, and spends much of his time alone. This bothers Cedric, as he navigates his feelings of anxiety and loneliness.

The story re-focuses on Cedric, and his complex relationship with Rob. While Rob already feels at home at Brown, where the majority of the students are similar to him in many ways, Cedric is overwhelmed by how little he has in common with anyone on campus. This means that Cedric must once again be an observer, letting few people in on what he is thinking or what he wants. However, a silent and withdrawn black man may seem threatening and unwelcoming to white students, which is part of the reason why Cedric has trouble making friends in this first semester.

Back at Ballou, Cedric had built a wall in order to resist the lure of drinking, drugs, and sex. While the peer pressure was strong and often backed up by violence, Cedric also had daily support from his mother and Bishop Long, as well as the constant reminder of the negative consequences of those actions, in the form of his father, Cedric Gilliam. Here at Brown, however, he is faced with the knowledge that even smart and ambitious kids partake in those same activities. The self-denial that was necessary in high school seems strange here, but it has become part of who he is.

At Brown, Cedric is faced with the realization that for Brown students, the consequences are not quite as severe as they would be for a Ballou student or a man like Cedric Gilliam. This highlights a major double standard in American society—drug dealing and use can result in prison and even death for black men in the inner city, while white upper- and middle-class students deal and use drugs on elite college campuses with relative impunity.

One evening, Cedric decides to be social, wandering into the dorm room of John Frank and Zayd Dohrn, two popular white kids from his unit. He doesn't know much about them, because he has been reluctant to get to know many of his classmates at all, and when he looks at Zayd's CD collection, he is surprised and impressed. Zayd listens to rap music, which confuses Cedric to no end, and as the two kids begin to talk about music, Cedric realizes that he has found his first friend. That evening, he lays in bed smiling, thinking about the first time he met Zayd, when the tall blonde boy informed Cedric and another classmate that he enjoyed oral sex. To Cedric, the idea is as strange as a name like Zayd.

Cedric's newfound friendship with Zayd will be one of the highlights of his first year at Brown, and a learning experience for the both of them. Cedric is surprised to find a white student who appreciates rap and hip hop music, which at this point in time was not as mainstream as it would later become. This is the first time that Cedric feels that an outsider has any understanding of his culture, a realization that confuses and delights him. However, later on, Zayd's interest in black culture will also annoy Cedric.

After a short meeting about a group project for their Richard Wright class, Cedric walks back to his dorm with Chiniqua, the other African American student in his unit. He jokingly describes her as a "ghetto girl in disguise," and she is a mixture of two worlds, to a certain extent. She comes from a working-class background—her father is a bus driver and her mother is a teacher's aide—but has spent much of her time in prep schools in Manhattan, thanks to a program called Prep for Prep. She was chosen for the program in the sixth grade, and began to attend Columbia Prep, a prestigious private school, and given both tutoring and counseling on a regular basis. She scored 1100 on her **SATs**, and did not need affirmative action to attend Brown University.

Cedric's friendship with Chiniqua will also teach him some of the skills necessary to transition between two cultures. Cedric sees her as a "ghetto girl" and hopes to connect with her on that level, but she is also able to make friends with the white, middle-class students in a way that Cedric has not. She has benefitted from a robust set of academic support systems that brought her in contact with the kinds of students she would meet at Brown, but gave her the emotional support to connect with them without losing her sense of self.

Cedric and Chiniqua discuss the recent trial of O.J. Simpson, a famous African American athlete who was accused of killing his wife, a white woman, but was acquitted. This story has the Brown campus talking, as many whites are outraged by the perceived lack of justice in the case, and African Americans feel "a swell of jumbled, out-of-context pride." Cedric asks Chiniqua what she thinks of the case, and she responds that she has been surrounded by people who are angry about the outcome, but who will not say anything about it to her. She attended the school's mandatory racial outreach meeting, which Cedric skipped out on, making her the only African American in the room. She left early, and felt that she was letting the group down, now that there would be no African American presence in the group.

Once again, Cedric finds that his personal experience intersects with larger national news, and while both Cedric and Chiniqua feel uncomfortable discussing these issues with their white classmates, they can talk about it openly with each other. Chiniqua becomes an important friend to Cedric, as she offers him the opportunity to stay connected to his identity as a black man within a sea of white students. Chiniqua may feel the same way with Cedric, though she is slightly better equipped to deal with these feelings, having attending a majority-white high school.

Like Cedric, there is more to Chiniqua than meets the eye. But unlike him, she has grown up around white classmates and their families for her whole life, and thus does not consider them special or mysterious. She was the one who would wreck grading curves in school, and she is not feeling intimidated here at Brown, either. She has also begun to spend time at Harambee House, the African American dorm and has invited Cedric, though he mentioned something about spending his whole life around black people and wondering if there was a place for him among non-blacks.

One of the ways that Chiniqua stays connected to her racial identity is through the community of black students at Harambee House; Cedric is still unsure about how he wants to experience his racial identity, however, and is currently determined to separate himself from black communities. This is a profound conflict for Cedric—he both rejects and desperately needs the company of black people at Brown.

Cedric has been spending more time with Zayd, and this evening the two are chatting about the O.J. trial—Zayd thinks that he is guilty, but that overall, black men are often framed by the police. They are discussing Marion Barry when Zayd's roommate comes in and argues that the former D.C. mayor was recorded on video smoking crack cocaine, and therefore it doesn't matter if he was targeted by police. Cedric disagrees, claiming that as a black politician, he was targeted from day one. As he argues his point, a number of other students from the unit come into the room, and Cedric senses that they really want to hear what he has to say.

Cedric is slowly opening up to his classmates with the help of Zayd, who has grown up in more racially and economically diverse neighborhoods in Chicago and New York City. He is also more open minded, and his parents have taught him progressive values, including the tendency to question authority. This gives Cedric the opportunity to talk about issues of race with a white student who might be better equipped to understand his perspective.

Cedric knows that racial differences underlie his relationships with everyone in his unit. He is both black and standoffish, and others worry that he does not like them for being white. This also factors into his tension with Rob: Cedric often has to act as Rob's social secretary, answering the door and the phone to Rob's friends who want to make, change, or cancel plans, and he has screwed up a few times. When Rob confronted him about it, Cedric felt that his roommate's anger and condescension would be less if he weren't black. The argument escalates and the roommates nearly start fighting.

Outside of his conversations with Zayd, Cedric has trouble connecting to his white classmates, many of whom have come to college with preconceived ideas about what black men are like, based on media portrayals. This makes Cedric's race the unspoken element in every conversation, and his awareness of this fact makes it worse, creating a vicious cycle of unspoken assumptions on all sides.

Cedric Gilliam is finally ready to turn himself in for parole violation. For the first few months he was out, things were going well, but then Cedric, Sr., started to use heroin again, and his girlfriend Leona kicked him out of her apartment. He went to treatment, but continued to use drugs, and ended up hiding out at the apartment of another girlfriend, Sherene, while the U.S. Marshals were looking for him. Sherene suggested that he turn himself in, and while he did not want to, he began to think about his son, Cedric, who was managing things so well at Brown. It made Cedric, Sr., realize that he needed to stop running away from his problems, and he called a parole officer and set a time to be picked up and returned to prison.

The narrative's turn to Cedric Gilliam and his struggles to stay out of prison creates a strong contrast to the new life that the younger Cedric is attempting to build for himself. Out on parole, Cedric Gilliam has found few systems of support to help him transition to life outside of prison or to end his drug addiction. And despite the rift between them, Cedric Gilliam uses his son's success as inspiration to lead a better life, even if he must return to prison. At a distance, his anger at his son has turned to admiration.

Cedric Gilliam alternates between feeling good about being responsible and hating the lack of freedom in the medium-security facility. On the day of his hearing, he sees Sherene for a moment, and meets his lawyer briefly before being taken into court. He sizes up the parole board member who will decide his fate, and knows that he favors Hispanics over blacks in these kinds of cases. He listens to the rundown of his entire criminal history and the conversation between his lawyer and the judge, and finally blurts out that he wants to be placed in an inpatient drug program, rather than going back to prison, where drug use is rampant. The judge agrees, though Cedric, Sr., will have to go back to Lorton prison until they can find a spot for him in a yearlong inpatient program.

Cedric Gilliam's court experience demonstrates the scant justice that is available to black men, drug addicts, and repeat offenders within the criminal justice system. He meets with his lawyer for only a few minutes, giving them little opportunity to discuss a strategy for the hearing, and then is ushered into the court, where he will not even be asked to speak on his own behalf. He is at the mercy of the parole board member, who may have prejudices that could seal his fate. When he speaks up, Cedric Gilliam is finally taking control of his life.

Cedric is in the dining hall, looking at the calculus midterm that he aced, and feels bad about the fact that he shot so low for this first semester. And during the midterm study period, he and Rob have been keeping their distance from one another, though Cedric still makes an effort to spend time with the other white kids from his unit. He is confused by their group dynamic, which is nearly the complete opposite of the way that African American men act around one another, at least in Cedric's neighborhood. They are physically affectionate with one another, and tend to be very self-deprecating, as if they do not need to build up their self-images for one another.

At this point in the semester, Cedric has chosen to stay away from the black student groups on campus, and attempt to join in with the white students. In some ways, this seems like a personal challenge, not unlike his struggles to earn higher grades or improve his SAT score. He observes the interactions between his white classmates almost as an anthropologist would do, but through the lens of his background among black men in the inner city.

One afternoon, the guys are all hanging out together in Zayd's room, and the conversation takes a slightly homoerotic turn. They begin to offer to fill each others' gas tanks, and Cedric is the only one who doesn't laugh at the idea, which makes them push a little harder with the joke. He finally tells them all that he doesn't like the conversation, and hides out in his room. He later has a confrontation with one of the kids, and Zayd tries to tell Cedric that not everyone is against him, but Cedric is too upset and just goes back to the safety of his room.

While Cedric has always considered himself an outsider in his Washington, D.C., neighborhood, he has clearly internalized many of the values in that community, especially the fear of effeminacy and male homosexuality, and—by extension—all expressions of affection among men. This, coupled with his strong religious foundation, make this jokingly homoerotic conversation an element of white culture that Cedric cannot accept.

Zayd is the only person brave enough to continue to try to penetrate Cedric's armor. He notes that other kids wonder why he and Cedric are friends, but he likes the fact that they are so different. This may be an effect of his upbringing, a son of two radical professors who have made a point of exposing him to counterculture since childhood. Zayd knocks on Cedric's door, where he has been hiding out for days, and even leaves him a note asking if they are still friends. One day, the door is open and Zayd goes in to talk to Cedric about the new Tupac Shakur album that has just come out, noting that he was named after Tupac's uncle, Zayd Shakur, a radical activist that his parents may have known personally. This helps draw Cedric out of his shell again, and the two go downtown to buy a CD together.

The motives behind Zayd's friendship with Cedric are unclear—while it seems that they get along well, and bond over their shared musical interests, it also seems that Zayd has sought out Cedric as a token black friend and a symbol of difference. Cedric, however, has little choice in the matter, because he has not made many friends at college yet, and is in need of a social connection, no matter how fraught it may be. Regardless of his intentions, Zayd's offer of friendship helps Cedric feel more at home at Brown, and gives him a way to connect with some of the white students.

CHAPTER 9: BILL PAYERS ON PARADE

Bernadine and Bill Dohrn are on the Brown campus, talking with a friend about what it must be like to be 18 years old again. In their youth, they were part of the Weather Underground activist group, and spent time on the FBI's Most Wanted List, which forced them to spend seven years in hiding. They are now middle-aged professionals, and Bernadine thinks about how it is the new generation—Zayd's generation—that is at the forefront. But she is disappointed in his lack of interest in larger social causes, and the way he sees women as possible sexual conquests. But she promises herself that she will not get into a fight with her son this weekend—it is Parents' Weekend, after all.

The arrival of Zayd's parents gives his character some context, especially in terms of Zayd's interest in being friends with Cedric. There is a certain tension between Zayd and Bernadine that reflects a larger generational tension—while there were large, national issues that were worthy of protest in the 1960s, young people in the 1990s tend to look inward, focusing on more selfish issues like personal identity, fitting in, and exploring sexual boundaries.

Barbara has made the trip up to Providence as well, and has been waiting for this weekend for months. After Cedric left home, she seemed to lose her sense of focus, and began missing work and church, and ignoring some of the bills she should have been paying. She couldn't talk to Cedric on the phone anymore because it had been turned off for nonpayment, but the last time they spoke, Cedric had told her he didn't want her to come to visit. But she came anyway, taking the train up with her daughter Neddy. They wait outside of Cedric's dorm until someone lets them in, and wander down the hallway until they find Cedric, still asleep in his room at noon.

In some ways, Cedric's triumph must inevitably lead to Barbara's loss of self, as she spent 18 years defining herself in relation to her son. While for many middle class families, a child moving on to college is a regular part of the life cycle, this is not necessarily the norm in poorer families. Unlike the other parents on campus this weekend, Barbara does not have a job to wrap herself up in, or hobbies she can finally enjoy now that her son is gone; she is simply lonely and lost.


Barbara scolds Cedric for not having his hair cut for her arrival, but he tells her that he needs to get a new set of electric clippers, which gives his mother a mission for the day. She also tells him that Bishop Long would like Cedric to call him, which is something she has arranged out of fear—Cedric does not have a church in Providence, and she worries that he will struggle with temptations at college. He is reluctant, but she convinces him. And as she listens to Cedric and Neddy talk, she realizes that for as anxious as she may be about meeting other, more affluent parents this weekend, Cedric is a Brown student just as much as their children are, and she should be proud to be there. She tells Cedric to get ready to go out.

Barbara and her daughter Neddy bring a much-needed reminder of home to Cedric. This is the first time that Barbara will see her son as a part of the Brown community, and she is inspired by his ability to enter into another world. Her reminder about Scripture Cathedral is not as welcome to Cedric—he does not have a place for church in his life at this point in time. However, Barbara's concerns about temptation are unfounded, as Cedric has fully internalized many of the strict religious rules he learned at home and church.

Cedric, Barbara, and Neddy spend the day outside of the Brown campus, at a local mall where they browse familiar discount shops like Payless and the Dollar Store, and then return for a fancy dinner at a restaurant near campus. They have spent virtually no time with other Brown parents, who seem foreign and confusing to them. Before leaving, they meet Zayd's parents, who greet them enthusiastically and gush over what a great kid Cedric is. Barbara greets them all and then purposely moves past them to get to Cedric's room. Bernadine is disappointed that she doesn't get to spend any more time with them, but Barbara is ready to get home after a long and tiring weekend.

For the Jennings family, Parents' Weekend at Brown is about reconnecting and re-forming the insular relationship that served them so well in Washington, D.C. She has little interest in meeting other parents, including Zayd's mother—and while Bernadine's history of civil rights protests is impressive, Barbara only sees a middle-class white woman, and cannot imagine what they could possibly have in common or what they might want to talk about.


CHAPTER 10: A BURSTING HEART

Helaine Schupack has been waiting for Cedric Jennings for almost 20 minutes when he shows up at her office for their first meeting. Her tutoring services cost $40 per hour, but are worth the money as far as Donald Kolb is concerned. Years earlier, she had tutored Kolb's son, who went on to study at the University of California, Berkeley, and work for Citibank. Kolb has asked her to meet with Cedric Jennings, because he needs a lot of help staying afloat at Brown. When he arrives, Helaine asks him a number of questions to get an idea of any possible learning disabilities, but finds none. She then helps him with some of his writing work—two short essays for his English and education courses, both of which break down her professional detachment from him.

The introduction of Helaine, Cedric's tutor, highlights the ways in which colleges can sometimes fail students who need help the most. Cedric has had to rely on the skills he developed at Ballou, which were more than enough to succeed at an underperforming school, but are inadequate for his college career at an Ivy League school. With limited services available to help him learn how to learn, Cedric has been sent to an outside tutor. This supports the author's overall argument that affirmative action is only effective when paired with robust support systems in college.

In his education essay, Cedric writes about his family and how important his academic success has been to his mother, who lost her opportunity to access higher education when she had her daughter at a young age. He also discusses his father's past, as both a college graduate and a convict. She is taken aback by his desire to succeed, suspecting that everything in his life is riding on his outcomes here at Brown. Helaine knows that at this point, Cedric does not have the kind of dispassionate analytical writing style that Brown expects from its students, but she also suspects that professors will provide him with a lot of leeway based on the inspirational content of his writings—she argues that to "mark him down would be to mark him down as a person," and that will work in his favor overall.

Despite the many gaps in his academic preparation, Cedric's compelling narrative and his ability to communicate his values to others has been central to his success up to this point. It has brought him a sense of triumph over his classmates in his graduation speech, it was likely an important element in his Brown application, and now it has captured the heart of his tutor, who is usually very professionally detached from her clients. However, there is a limit to how much value this can offer Cedric over time, as he will need to develop more concrete skills, as well.

The conflict between Rob and Cedric continues, as they each attempt to stand their ground regarding music and **television** use in their rooms. Cedric comes in and turns on his television to watch one of the many popular talk shows that fill the airwaves in the 1990s; Rob asks him to turn down the volume, but when he leaves to use the bathroom, Cedric takes the opportunity to turn the volume back up again. The two boys begin to wage a war of sound on one another, until the walls begin to shake. Cedric speaks with one of the peer counselors in her unit and they work out a plan for a temporary solution, which involves a pair of $100 earphones for Rob, so that he can study while Cedric watches television.

One of the major difficulties between the roommates is based on Cedric's television viewing, which once again points to differences in social class. For Cedric, television was a way to escape the poverty and violence around him, and is now connected to a familiar sense of comfort. Rob's family, on the other hand, had the means to find more enriching activities that relegated television to a minor activity. Once again, their different cultural practices make living together difficult.

Cedric and Zayn go to the mall outside of town, and on their way there, they talk a little about their childhoods. Zayn tells Cedric about the time when he lived in Manhattan with his parents, who were just beginning to come out of hiding. They were suspected of being involved in the robbery of an armored truck, and Zayn's mother spent a year in jail without being charged for the crime. In the meantime, Zayd went to a public school in Harlem, where he was one of the only white children, and was beaten up by a bully in his class. Cedric wonders how it is possible that Zayd was treated so badly by black children but does not feel any anger towards black people in general now; Zayd responds that he cannot hate everyone for the misdeeds of a few.

This conversation between Zayd and Cedric helps to put Zayd's interest in black culture into context, as he has lived in Harlem. Yet Cedric is surprised that Zayd has not let some isolated incidents with black children determine his feelings towards black people in general. This, however, is one element of being open-minded—knowing that one person, or even a few, do not represent every member of their race. This also helps to give Zayd depth as a friend, as he shares some elements of his life with Cedric, prompting Cedric to do the same.

Zayd and Cedric come to the conclusion that there are bad people of every race, and Cedric mentions Clarence Thomas, the Supreme Court Justice that he met while in high school. He first notes only that Justice Thomas "seems to be upset at a whole lot of people," and later reveals that he actually met the man. Zayd and Cedric talk about what a strange character the man is, and the fact that he is married to a white woman. Zayd loves having these conversations with Cedric, who is both authentic in his feelings and convinced of the distinctions between right and wrong. Zayd also likes the feeling that he has earned Cedric's friendship, which makes it feel that much more valuable.

Cedric's life and search for identity have intersected with another national controversy—this time it is the accusations of sexual harassment that have been brought against Clarence Thomas. As the first black man on the Supreme Court, he is a controversial figure, and some people believe that the accusations are racially motivated. Cedric and Zayd have little concrete information about the case, but use it to find common ground and understand more about each others' values and beliefs.

Cedric has confided in Zayd about his background, including his father's incarceration, and while many of their classmates long to know more about Cedric, Zayd keeps it between the two of them. Zayd reciprocates, telling Cedric the stories of his adventures, allowing his quiet friend to live vicariously through him. He tells Cedric about the two girls he's seeing back home, and how one of them wants to be exclusive, but he has a plan to see both of them in secret. Cedric advises him to choose one and stick by his choice, because trust is something that he must practice, and he is developing a bad habit of betraying trust. Zayd changes the subject, and the two discuss their Thanksgiving plans—Zayd will be back in Chicago with his family, while Cedric will be in Boston with Dr. Korb and his family.

While they have bonded over their musical tastes, Cedric and Zayd have very little in common beyond that. The information they share is drastically different—while Cedric has a complex history that informs his experiences at Brown, Zayd's life seems to be geared towards fun and adventure, with little to hold him back. In their conversation about Zayd's hometown girlfriends, Cedric is able to offer profound advice that echoes Barbara's advice to him before he left home, demonstrating how deeply ingrained those lessons have become for Cedric.

At Dr. Korb's stately Boston home, Cedric is greeted by more than twenty people who are excited to meet him—he is the guest of honor at this year's Thanksgiving meal. Korb keeps up with Cedric as much as possible, and in addition to the monthly $200 check, he calls Cedric regularly and sends him notes. They have only met in person once before, when Cedric was at MIT for the summer, and so this is the second time they have met face to face. Korb talks about the sacrifices that Cedric's mother has made for him throughout her life, especially when he was young and she went on welfare in order to stay home and care for him.

Cedric's relationship with Dr. Korb is solidified by this Thanksgiving visit, as Cedric is welcomed into the extended family. It is slightly overwhelming for Cedric to be the center of attention, but it is also an important opportunity for him to learn how to interact with people of different classes. Dr. Korb is very supportive of Barbara as well, reiterating the wisdom of staying at home with Cedric during his early years.

After Dr. Korb makes a toast to their special guest, he then encourages Cedric to call Barbara, who reminds him to watch what others around him are doing and simply imitate them. He does just that when he is seated at the table, and after determining that the soup spoon is the large one, he uses it to try the pumpkin soup. When the young people around him ask him about his major, he tells them that he is considering triple majoring in math, computer science, and education, which impresses them all. He feels like an imposter, and has trouble eating because of the knot in his stomach. He is asked over and over if he has had enough to eat, which makes him feel even more uncomfortable.

While everyone is very excited to meet Cedric, he is still relatively uncomfortable socializing with this class of people—he feels that he still doesn't understand many of their behaviors, and has to work very hard to be as polite as possible. The conversation about academics taps into Cedric's fear of failure, despite the fact that these people know nothing else about him and only want to see him succeed.

Cedric feels slightly more comfortable after dinner and in conversation with Dr. Korb, who asks about his issues with Rob, how things are going with his tutor Helaine, and how he did on a particular paper he was worried about. He has gained Cedric's confidence, but then when Korb asks him about the suits he purchased for the young man, Cedric has to lie, not wanting him to know that he returned them almost immediately. As the evening is winding down, Cedric overhears a conversation between Dr. Korb and some other guests, in which Korb describes religious faith as egotism, noting that while Cedric's faith as admirable, it will not get him where he needs to go, and he must ultimately rely on reason to find his place in the world.

Dr. Korb's genuine interest in Cedric has nearly chipped away at the boy's armor, and at this point Cedric has confided in his benefactor more than his own mother. Nonetheless, Dr. Korb's stance on religion—a conversation not necessarily meant for Cedric's ears—coincides with Cedric's increasing doubts about the role of the church in his adult life. This will give Cedric more to think about in terms of the contrast between the unyielding faith that helped bring him to Brown, and the need to examine the world with reason and rationality.


When it is time to go, Dr. Korb gives Cedric a ride to Cambridge, where he will be visiting some friends from his MIT program who are now studying at Harvard. He spends more than a half hour searching for Thayer Hall, and begins to feel anxious—he is spending the night with his friends Mark and Belinda McIntosh, but at the moment, he also has begun to feel homesick after so much time around white people, and is eager to find refuge in the company of other black people. He finds the dorm and is welcomed in by his friends.

This Thanksgiving experience has given Cedric a lot to think about, and while he appreciates the hospitality of Dr. Korb and his family, he longs for the comfort of his own people. It is interesting to note that at Brown, Cedric resists the temptation to surround himself with other black students, but this scene makes it clear that he needs that sense of familiarity and community.

Back at Brown, Professor Tom James is holding office hours to meet with students and discuss final papers and projects. First he meets with Franklin Cruz, a star student who has already learned to embrace his identity as a Latino student, but also to intellectualize it, using it like a coat that he can put on and take off when necessary. He is learning skills that will make him comfortable among the white professionals he will work with after graduating, but spending free time with other Latinos on campus lessens his guilt about assimilating so thoroughly into a white culture. James compares this process to the history of Jewish students at Yale during the 1920s and 30s, who had to drop some of the more orthodox aspects of their religious practices in order to fit in on campus.

The story changes perspective for this scene, giving some insight into a Brown professor's relationship with his students. Professor James studies education, and therefore has a good deal of experience with the academic structures that help minority students achieve their goals. James seems to support assimilation as the best strategy for advancing in college and afterwards—he is impressed by how much his Latino student is able to transition between two different worlds, "removing" his ethnicity in order to fit in with those around him.


Just as James is getting ready to leave, Cedric knocks on his door and wants to talk. He would like to take James's fieldwork course in the spring, where he will be able to observe a school in Providence. James approves his plan, and then asks how things are going overall for Cedric. As Cedric talks, James thinks about how different this student is from Franklin Cruz—Cedric is still deeply entrenched in his own identity, and cannot get the kind of intellectual distance from it that would help him succeed at Brown. As Cedric leaves, James sends him along with a few words of encouragement, and spends the rest of the day wondering what else he could have said to make things better.

Importantly, James does not see the variety of ways that students of color can maintain a sense of racial identity without *resorting to complete assimilation, but this was a common assumption in the 1990s. Cedric is still looking for a balance between losing his sense of self and being labeled a "poor black student" for the entirety of his college career.*


CHAPTER 11: BACK HOME

Cedric has returned home for winter break, and is looking forward to Alumni Day at Ballou. It has provided him with the motivation that he needed on his most difficult days at Brown, reminding him that he would have to come back and face the students of his high school, and would be letting them down if he failed. He thinks about what he wants to say to them, and feels that he should be honest about the difficulties of that first semester and about being away from home. When he returned to Scripture Cathedral, he was boastful at first, telling everyone he had a 4.0 grade point average, despite the fact that in reality, he had taken all of his classes pass/fail and had no idea what his GPA would be.

Cedric's first trip home after beginning college at Brown is another pivotal moment in this story and in Cedric's development of a sense of self. While he is proud of achieving his goal and attending the college of his dreams, he still feels the need to prove something to everyone in his neighborhood, which leads him to boast and to stretch the truth about his academic progress. Clearly, Cedric has not yet gained the self-confidence to stop worrying about how others see him.

When Cedric arrives at Ballou for Alumni Day, he is more nervous than he expected to be, and quickly repeats the 4.0 lie, and tells the teachers that he will be coming back as the school's principal someday, after he has made his fortune as a software designer. When he gets up to speak, he attempts to talk about practical matters to the sparse group of about ten seniors in attendance. He tells them to take advantage of the rest of their time at Ballou because there are fewer people to hold their hands in college, and they will need to build their own support networks. When it is over, Cedric goes to find Mr. Taylor, his beloved chemistry teacher, but when he sees the blood stain from a recent knife fight in the hallway, he decides that he needs to leave and never come back.

While Cedric tips his hat to the support systems at Ballou that have helped him achieve his college dreams, he has not outgrown his desire to prove himself, which makes his interactions with his former teachers somewhat uncomfortable, as if he considers himself better than they are, now that he has been at Brown for a while. It is interesting that Cedric chooses not to visit Mr. Taylor, to whom he owes the majority of his success. This is possibly because Cedric is not yet capable of having an honest and authentic conversation with the teacher yet.


Cedric is eating out with LaTisha after taking her to the Sunday service at Scripture Cathedral, where she believes she was taken over by the Holy Spirit. She got on stage with Bishop Long, and something came over her, though Cedric is skeptical about whether or not the Holy Spirit actually entered her body. Either way, LaTisha feels that something has changed for her, and she hopes that she has found the key to Cedric's passion and drive. She has missed him during his first semester away at college, and realizes that their friendship was something more than that, and that she may have developed romantic feelings for him after all of these years. She is hurt that he has not called her earlier, as soon as he got home, and his explanation is vague—he has been at home with nothing to do.

The story pivots slightly to present LaTisha's perspective, which gives readers an idea of what it is like to be left behind once Cedric is off at Brown. She is eager to reconnect with him, while he has little interest in the world he has escaped from. She uses religion as their common ground, hoping that she can get Cedric to respond to her romantically, or if not, maybe she can use religion as a way to absorb some of Cedric's ambition. What she does not understand is that while Cedric is physically present with her, mentally and emotionally he has left the neighborhood behind for good.

They return to church that evening for a second service, and LaTisha stews in her sense of disappointment over her time with Cedric. He had mentioned that he was feeling less enthusiastic about his connection to the church, and she wonders if she could find her faith and use that to help him. When the service is over, they begin to talk about what Bishop Long said about looking presentable when coming to church, and before long they are screaming at each other. She suddenly sees herself as Cedric must see her: overweight, clingy, and stuck in Washington, D.C., forever. She is sure that he used to see beyond all of that, into her soul, and know that she is a good person. However, he has changed, and he no longer belongs to this part of the world—to her world.

The argument between Cedric and LaTisha shows how much they both have to learn about themselves, and how much more growing they need to do. Cedric is no longer able to connect to his high school friends because he has spent so much mental and emotional energy trying to fit in at Brown, and has come to define himself by his college experience. LaTisha, on the other hand, hopes that her sense of "being a good person" is enough to overcome the massive differences between the two friends at this point in their lives.

Back at Brown, Cedric is surprised by how comfortable he feels, and how he has come to see this place as home. He also resolves to never take an entire semester's worth of classes pass/fail, because he should not be so fearful anymore. When he begins to show more initiative in his calculus class, answering three questions in a row and worrying about showing off, Cedric begins to think about conversations he has had with Bishop Long about the sin of pride. He wonders where the line is between using one's gifts to glorify God and being prideful. He is not sure, but he knows that very few Brown students got there by simply putting their faith in God.

Cedric is finally beginning to confront his questions about the relationship between his faith and his individual ambition. While he has had his doubts about his connection to the church in the past, Cedric is finally beginning to intellectualize these questions and separate them from his emotional connection to Scripture Cathedral. This is the goal of college, of course: to teach students to question ideas they had previously taken for granted.

In another math class he is considering taking, Cedric sees one of the smarter students in the class, and realizes that he was the student at Ballou who had gotten into Brown. He had boundless confidence at Ballou, which he immediately lost upon coming to Brown. Cedric also realizes something even more profound about why he felt so terrible about taking easy classes pass/fail last semester. While pride has always been considered a sin in the church, in his neighborhood, and at Ballou, it is exactly that—self-centered, boastful pride—that got him to Brown, and he has no reason to shelve that quality now. He decides to take five classes, including the more challenging math class.

At Ballou, Cedric used his sense of anger and frustration to help him succeed, but at Brown, those feelings were overtaken by a fear of failure, which caused him to lower his standards and take an easy set of classes. He needed to develop that confidence by proving to himself that he could survive in that crucial first semester, in order to regain his pride. While taking easy classes on a pass/fail basis was not necessarily a bad idea, Cedric is ready to regain his old passion for learning and achievement.

Cedric and Zayd are hanging out at The Gate, a popular eatery on campus, and Cedric notices his friend's boots, which are very similar to a style that Cedric wears. He notes that Zayd originally did not like the style, and suggests that he is mimicking Cedric's style, which grates on him. Zayd explains that their styles will naturally rub off on one another, but Cedric is bothered by the idea that Zayd is copying his inner-city look in a way that is inauthentic. Zayd brings up a book he read about children in the housing projects of Chicago, where he is from, but Cedric responds by asking if Zayd's "professor dad" had him read the book. Eventually, their tension turns to laughter, and all is well between them.

This conversation with Zayd demonstrates some of Cedric's developing concept of his racial identity in relation to his Brown classmates. While he wants his friends to respect his background, he also wants to establish clear boundaries that Zayd seems to cross with his intense interest in Cedric's fashion choices. While Zayd is his closest friend in college up to this point, Cedric still sees him as a white middle-class student, and the son of a professor, and has a hard time looking beyond those differences, despite Zayd's protests.

Cedric still holds on to his feelings of frustration, though, and when Zayd's friend joins them, Cedric remarks that he should not be seen around two white guys, because people will think he is selling out. He apologizes for his rudeness, but then adds that he does not expect that the white people around him will be supportive of him. Zayd tells him that he supports him, just as Cedric supports Zayd, and Cedric puts that latter statement in doubt. Finally, Zayd tells Cedric that he, as a white man, wants to be friends with Cedric, a black man, and that should be enough. Cedric tells him that he has a lot of work to do, and leaves.

Cedric considers Zayd a friend, but not necessarily an ally at this point, which is upsetting to Zayd, who does not know how to prove to his friend that he supports him completely. In addition to his struggles with racial identity, Cedric has little experience with close friendships, as he has spent much of his time in high school studying and hiding out from his fellow students.

CHAPTER 12: LET THE COLORS RUN

Cedric has arrived at Slater Junior High, a long bus ride from the Brown campus into a working-class neighborhood of Providence. He is conducting his research for the Fieldwork and Seminar in High School Education course, and will be attending the school two days per week for the entire semester. While he knows that he is supposed to take on the role of the dispassionate observer at the school, Cedric feels right at home. He meets Mr. Fleming, the eighth-grade math teacher, who Cedric thinks treats the students a little too harshly.

In this scene, Cedric is taking his first step towards a concrete understanding of his own educational circumstances by observing another underserved school in a poor, inner-city neighborhood. This process will be difficult for Cedric, who has only been separate from his experiences at Ballou for a few months, and is still feeling a strong emotional connection to that time of his life.

After the class is over, the students crowd around Cedric and ask him about Brown. They have never heard of anyone attending Brown, despite the fact that it is just across town. Mr. Fleming talks to Cedric privately after the class is over, and tells him that he knows which students will die when they leave the school. This sends Cedric into a tailspin of emotions, and makes him like Mr. Fleming even less for his judgmental comments and behavior. He leaves thinking about punching the teacher in the face.

Rather than being the poor, black student surrounded by middle-class white college students, Cedric is now the Brown University student, surrounded by working-class children at Slater. And because he empathizes with so many of these students, Cedric reacts emotionally to their teacher's dismissive comments about them and their futures.

Meanwhile, Barbara is talking to one of the middle managers at work about Cedric, and when she tells the man that her son is at Brown University, he expresses surprise and asks if he has an athletic scholarship. He is from India, and has boasted about his daughter for years, but for as smart as he has made her out to be, she is at the University of Maryland, which is not nearly as good of a school as Brown. Barbara responds that Ivy League colleges do not give out athletic scholarships, and that her son is there for academics.

Cedric is not the only one who is struggling with prejudice—while he attempts to find his place at Brown, Barbara must deal with the surprise of those around her, who simply assume that her son could not possibly earn a place at an Ivy League college. Her manager mentions sports, referencing the wrongheaded belief that black men are more likely to be athletes than scholars, without knowing Cedric at all.

Barbara chats with her other coworkers—black women like herself—about the possibility of a slave museum. The women joke that their office *is* a slave museum, not only because the building once housed slave quarters, but because it is a place where black women cast aside their ambition and work in administrative positions for the majority of their lives. She thinks about how things have changed with Cedric, how she tries to offer him advice about trusting in God, but she is not sure he is listening to her, and sometimes wonders if he has any reason to. One of her few joys in life at this point is her shoe collection, though she sometimes feels uncomfortable when her fellow parishioners at Scripture Cathedral compliment her, as material wealth can be a touchy subject in church.

Barbara continues to struggle without Cedric around to care for and protect. With less to occupy her time and mental energy, she is more acutely aware of the fact that she is stuck in a dead-end job, even jokingly referring to it as the "slave museum." And her dedication to sacrifice and self-denial has waned, as the reason for all of her sacrifice has left her to achieve his dreams on his own. Barbara is able to have something for herself, but she is not used to this kind of freedom, and goes overboard, splurging on items she does not need and getting into financial trouble.

When Barbara gets home from church, she finds a Notice of Eviction in her pile of mail. She knows that this has been coming, and she even attended a Housing Court hearing in which her landlord explained that she was three months behind on her rent. Rather than explain where her meager salary went during that time, she simply promised that she would get back on track, and was ordered to double-pay her rent for the next two months to make up for it. But she did not pay, and the eviction notice has come again. She thinks about the shoes she has been able to buy with the extra money that has not gone toward her rent, and the other bills that she has been able to pay on time. She thinks about how getting her back rent is a test from God, and then goes to sleep.

Although Barbara is responsible for mismanaging her money and failing to pay rent, it is important to note that she is also in an exploitative situation, with a landlord who does not seem to understand or care about his tenants and their financial situations. And not unlike Cedric Gilliam's day in court, Barbara's hearing strips her of the confidence to advocate for herself—instead of explaining her circumstances or asking for help, Barbara passively accepts the situation and the unrealistic consequences.

Back at Brown, there has been a positive change in the relationship between Cedric and Rob since they returned from break. One night, with the lights off, they talked about their lives, and Cedric opened up to Rob, while his roommate asked questions and really tried to understand what Cedric's life must have been like. They agree that the conversation was good, and that they should have had it much earlier in the year. This morning, they go to breakfast together, and Rob tells Cedric about a "wall of shame" that lists black male students who engage in interracial dating, and how it is unfair to shame black people in that way. Cedric appreciates Rob's outrage at this topic, and the fact that they are talking about race at all.

In the rollercoaster of a relationship between Rob and Cedric, there is a moment of calm, when the two of them discuss some of the issues of race and class that are underlying their constant disputes. Rob makes it clear to Cedric that he is not racist, at least in theory, and that he is open enough to try and understand Cedric's background. This is a good first step, though their differences in living styles will keep them in constant conflict, until they can find space from one another.

Cedric has been estranged from Zayd, who had become more or less his best friend, since they had a fight in January and went their separate ways. This makes Cedric feel strangely lonely, as now is the time when students begin to establish their groups of friends and thus their identities. Many of the students on campus are part of groups, like the feminists or the LGBTQ Alliance. Cedric is beginning to feel more open minded about homosexuality, which had seemed very shocking to him when he first arrived. He has met a number of students, like one of the peer counselors for his unit, who are gay or bisexual, and aren't bad people at all. There are also the racial and ethnic groups that attract Brown students, including the Latin American Students Association, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, and of course Harambee House, the all-black dorm.

It is clear that Cedric's relationship with Zayd is unbalanced, with Cedric needing Zayd much more than Zayd needs Cedric. Without his friend, Cedric must start over and try to find a place to fit in—but in order to fit in, Cedric must have some idea of who he is, which is proving difficult. On one hand, he has opened his mind a bit regarding homosexuality, which was a strict cultural taboo back at home. For black men in the inner city at this time, masculinity was defined in relation to heterosexual conquests, with men like Cedric Gilliam—with his many girlfriends—exemplifying masculinity.

Cedric wanders down to Café Paragon, where Rob and his friends are celebrating Rob's 19th birthday. Cedric realizes that he needs to overcome his tendency to shut himself off from other people, and that is his biggest challenge. At the café, he engages in friendly conversation with the people he knows from his unit, and feels energized by the experience. When some of the students pull out their driver's licenses and fake IDs to order beer, Cedric decides that it is time to go, because he does not have a driver's license and has no interest in drinking beer.

Once again, Cedric is faced with the reality that his new college friends engage in many of the same illegal activities that Ballou students did, but with relatively impunity. Far from being tempted by the lure of alcohol, Cedric falls back on the strict rules of his religious upbringing, and rejects the activity. In this time of insecurity, Cedric relies on the simple divisions of right and wrong.

In Larry Wakefield's education class, the students are arguing about the midterm paper, suggesting that they should have the opportunity to do something more creative, like a play or a poem, rather than an analytical essay. He reminds the students that they are at Brown to develop their writing and analytical skills, but Cedric comments that he feels so angry and passionate about what he has seen at the school, that he will have a hard time being intellectual about it. A few weeks later, Wakefield reads Cedric's assignment, which is a two-page poem. Wakefield is intrigued and also horrified, wondering how Cedric made his way into Brown with this kind of work.

The midterm for Cedric's education class will be another opportunity for Cedric to passionately rehash his feelings about his upbringing in the inner city, which has been his most effective tool up to this point. However, as his professor notes clearly in class, these students are in college to develop their analytical skills, and this will require Cedric to leave his comfort zone and try something different.

In class, Wakefield passes out the midterms and Cedric's does not have a grade on it. He asks Cedric to come to his office to discuss it. The professor has spent a lot of time thinking about what to do about Cedric's poem, and it makes him rethink his entire career in education. When Cedric arrives in his office, Wakefield tells him that he loved the poem and was moved by it, but that Cedric also needs to work on his analytical skills, and find some distance from the topic he is studying. He gives Cedric a B on the assignment, but makes him promise to write a more traditional research paper for the final. He finishes with advice to gain some distance from all that he has been through, and to put away some of the anger that he feels, in order to see the work from an academic perspective.

Cedric's very personal poem is moving to his professor, who gives him a B; he also gives Cedric his long-overdue opportunity to finally push himself to think critically and write analytically. While Cedric already possessed the skills to succeed at Ballou, here at Brown he will need to take risks, both academically and socially. He has begun to take some of those social risks, interacting with people from drastically different backgrounds; it is now time for him to stop relying on his emotionally charged writing and begin to think and write critically like a college student.

CHAPTER 13: A PLACE UP AHEAD

Cedric decides to make peace with Zayd, calling him on the phone to talk. He has realized a lot of things about himself after writing that two-page poem in his education class, and he is ready to let down his guard a little. Zayd reads the poem and likes it, and then the two friends go downtown to shop for CDs. Their conversation is similar to before—disagreements about music—but there is not the same edge there was before, and when it comes time to buy the CDs, Zayd casually lends Cedric the money without worrying about being paid back.

Although it was not exactly appropriate for his education course, Cedric's poem served an important purpose for the young man, providing some much-needed catharsis. With his feelings out and on paper, he shares the poem with Zayd, which is both a peace offering and another test of his friend's authenticity. When Zayd understands and accepts Cedric, they are once again friends.

In Cedric's psychology class, Cedric finds that he has received a 30% on his midterm, a failing grade and the lowest in the class. He worries about passing the course, and decides that he needs to take it pass/fail, because he is also struggling in his math class, which he may end up dropping. He was being ambitious by taking five courses this semester, and it definitely got him off to a strong start, and helped him get over his fear of failure. In his calculus class, his professor decided that they would do a project in place of a second midterm, but Cedric had already started studying for the midterm exam, so the professor let him take it with another section of the class down the hall. He has done well in this class so far, but he will still study hard for this exam.

In his second semester, when he is finally challenging himself academically, Cedric receives his first failing grade. This is a rite of passage for many college students, and the real test is how they respond to this setback. Cedric is worried, of course, but chooses not to drop the psychology class and to work harder to pass the class. This is a big change from his strategy in the fall, when he was solely focused on surviving and unwilling to take any risks with his grades or classes. He is regaining some of the confidence he had at Ballou.

After all of his studying, Cedric is still worried about the exam, and comes into his regular calculus class a few minutes early. His professor reminds him that he is supposed to be taking the midterm down the hall, and Cedric admits that he is worried, and wishes he had just done the project. His professor tells him he will be fine, and Cedric goes in to take the test. Once he has started, he realizes that one of the five questions on the test is something they have not covered in his class yet, but he does not feel comfortable telling this other professor—whom he does not know—about this issue. Instead, he tackles the problem and manages to solve it. When he receives the test back a few days later, he receives a 98, even acing the question that wasn't covered in his class.

While Cedric is feeling more confident than before, he is still a little lost when faced with the higher academic standards at Brown. He flails around a bit in his calculus class—choosing to take the final exam in place of the final project, and then suddenly changing his mind at the last minute—and is clearly relying on his professor to help him decide what is best for him. It is a testament to his drive and ambition that he aces the exam, answering a question not covered in class, but which he has studied on his own out of desire and interest.

Cedric spends most of spring break sleeping, with some trips to church and a special outing to a mall outside of D.C., and lots of reading to prepare for the end of the semester at Brown. He is back on campus, and getting ready for a date with Chiniqua. They get more comfortable as they walk further from campus, and end up at a shopping mall that is not popular among Brown students. Chiniqua wants to go to Popular Club, a clothing chain more often found in inner cities and low-income areas, so that she can return a pair of boots. This makes Cedric feel better, knowing that they can always explain away the date as simply a trip out to make an exchange. They continue on to Coconuts, a music store, where they browse the titles and discuss music from their childhood.

Cedric's return to Washington, D.C., is hardly mentioned in this section of the story, and this clearly demonstrates how deeply connected to Brown he has become. The place that was once his home is now only a pit stop, and his mind has remained on Brown throughout the entire spring break. Once he is back at school, he takes another step into the world by going on a date. This date with Chiniqua, however, seems to be more about connecting to his racial identity than about creating any kind of romantic connection.

Chiniqua and Cedric bond over their love of Keith Sweat, an R&B artist who is not popular among their fellow Brown students. Chiniqua describes the music as "real," and they feel closer for their shared experiences. Cedric knows that Chiniqua's upbringing was still slightly different from his own—she comes from a very diverse working-class neighborhood, with African Americans, Dominicans, and Irish, Italian, and Jewish populations spread among them. Cedric is excited about how the date is going, but when he moves away from Chiniqua, he is confronted by a large white man, and the two enter into a shouting match for no apparent reason. Chiniqua is unimpressed and runs off to a different section of the store.

Cedric has a lot to learn about the different expressions of blackness, as he has only really understood his racial identity in relation to being poor and living in the inner city. He and Chiniqua have a lot in common, including their musical tastes—though it seems clear that her interest in his favorite music is more "authentic" than Zayd's because she grew up with it—but they also have very different ideas about how black men should behave themselves. Chiniqua has no interest in his expression of masculinity through violence.

They continue their date at McDonald's, where they lean across the booth to talk. Cedric continues his attempt to look tough, telling her about how he has shoplifted small things like candy and soda before the movies, but Chiniqua is uninterested, and shifts the conversation to their friends in the unit. The two decide that a movie about their unit would be called "Clique," and Chiniqua talks about how she would like to go skiing sometime, because "black people like to ski, too." When they both realize that they have recently been to Boston, Cedric asks her why she didn't invite him along on her last trip, to which she replies that she has invited him out many times, and he never wants to go. He responds that now, he is finally ready.

It seems that Chiniqua is less tied to some of the more traditional racial and social boundaries that have ruled Cedric's life. In addition to her rejection of violence as a central part of black masculinity, she has no problem with taking part in activities that would be considered "white," like skiing, and does not see that as negating her black identity. This will be a learning experience for Cedric, who has internalized some of the norms of his neighborhood without even realizing it.

Cedric and Chiniqua go to see a movie, *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate*, starring Martin Lawrence as a "ghetto scoundrel" who seduces a highly educated executive played by Lynn Whitfield. Cedric is taken aback by how overly simplistic the movie's take on race relations feels to him, portraying Lawrence's character as more racially authentic, in contrast to an educated and well-mannered woman who has lost touch with her roots. After the movie, they discuss another popular film, *Waiting to Exhale*, and Cedric condemns Wesley Snipes for wanting to have an affair with a married woman. Chiniqua disagrees, arguing that they are both adults and should be free to do what they choose, and this throws Cedric off. The two part at the entrance to their dorm, ending the date and making Cedric wonder what happens next.

The film that Cedric and Chiniqua watch on their date gives them the opportunity to talk more directly about their conceptions of racial and class identity, and to compare their morals and boundaries. Cedric has now moved past the simplistic equation of black as "ghetto," in contrast to the image of educated blacks as less authentic, and it is clearly his time at Brown that has helped him see how painfully simplistic these identities are. He is still deeply rooted in his unyielding ideas about right and wrong, which Chiniqua tries to question when discussing sexual freedom.

Cedric feels that April is turning out to be his month: in addition to his date with Chiniqua, he feels that things are going well with Rob, and he and Zayd are getting along very well now. The musical act for Brown's spring concert has been announced—the Fugees, a band that Zayd likes but has drawn skepticism from Cedric—and the two friends have engaged in a lighthearted debate about the fact that Zayd "discovered" them first. At dinner one evening, Cedric longs to tell Zayd about the date with Chiniqua, but is worried about gossip spreading throughout the unit. Instead, he talks about another girl he finds attractive, and then Zayd tells Cedric about a girl he really likes, more seriously than his previous conquests. Cedric advises him to hold off on sleeping with her, and Zayd tells him that he might be right about that.

Cedric's journey of self-discovery has gone through a series of ups and downs, and will continue to do so throughout his college career—but in this moment, he feels comfortable with himself and proud of what he has been able to build at Brown. This is a high point in the narrative, as Cedric feels comfortable disagreeing with Zayd without letting it weigh on him, and without questioning his entire friendship. Again, Cedric returns to his religious upbringing and the advice from his mother about sex and love, which Zayd says that he agrees with, but which he likely considers outdated.

The weekend of April 12th is a major party weekend at Brown, and Cedric is looking over the various flyers for events at the different houses on campus. He is rethinking his earlier belief that these houses were designed to divide students—after his date with Chiniqua, he realizes how much comfort he derived from being with someone like him, who understands some of what he has been through and experienced. While in high school, he was so fixated on getting away from the black community, he now feels an urge to be with his fellow black students at Brown. Chiniqua has told him about a party at Harambee House, and he is unsure whether or not he wants to go.

The next important point in Cedric's journey is to explore the possibility of enjoying the company of his fellow black students, without worrying about losing his individual identity. He has resisted being with other black students, despite the fact that he craves the connection and understanding that they can offer him. When he visited his MIT friends, and on his date with Chiniqua, Cedric felt more at home than ever.

Cedric's reluctance to join in with his classmates came to a head the previous evening, when Rob invited him to join some of the kids from their unit at the Underground, the club on Brown's campus. Cedric agreed to go, and stood in line with his friends, but then slipped away at the last minute. He realizes now that this made him look like he is afraid to join their world, and feels embarrassed. When he discusses the upcoming sexual assault awareness meeting, Cedric reminds Rob that the easiest way to avoid getting into trouble is to avoid those kinds of situations altogether. Rob, however, wonders what the point of life is, if he can't try anything. Cedric takes this point to heart, and when Molly Olsen invites him to see a comedy show at the Underground, he simply goes, and finds that he is actually enjoying himself and not feeling self-conscious anymore.

It is at this point that Cedric begins to realize that not all of his reluctance to join in with his classmates is due to racial or class differences. Whether he is worried about the possible temptations of a campus bar and club, or he thinks that too much socializing will take him away from his studies, Cedric is clearly more nervous than he needs to be. Rob wonders about the wisdom of living such a sheltered and closed life, without the freedom to experiment or take risks. This echoes what Zayd has said to Cedric in the past, and it seems to get through to him at last—but his adventure is not without its consequences.

The following day, Cedric feels uneasy about his evening at the nightclub, and goes for a walk, creating distance from the Brown campus. He ends up at the Salvation Army downtown, and buys a coat that makes him look a little like his father, Cedric Gilliam. He begins to think about his father, and how he is back in prison after a little bit of time on the outside, and how he will have a lot of trouble finding employment once he gets out again. When Cedric thinks about how his father abandoned him on a regular basis, he does not feel the same anger that he used to feel, and wonders why. He also wonders if his father is still using drugs—Cedric's mother says that there are plenty of drugs to be found in prison. Cedric also begins thinking about an old friend from Jefferson Junior High, who suddenly disappeared about a week after school started.

After finally deciding to join the Brown social scene for a night, Cedric must balance out this experience by escaping on his own. He often wanders off of the Brown campus to explore the greater Providence area—especially the poorer parts, which feel familiar to him. This is his time to think about his life back home and how it fits in to his new identity. In this case, he realizes how much his feelings about his father have changed, as he begins to create emotional distance between himself and the circumstances of his childhood. He is beginning to shed his anger at the world.

As Cedric wanders back to campus, he wonders why he needed to get off campus alone, and thinks about a line from W.E.B. DuBois about the "double-consciousness" of the black man, in which he is always looking at himself through the eyes of others. He wonders if seeing oneself through other people's eyes—which all people do, to some degree—really means that there is no way to find true self-consciousness. He also realizes that he is pushing towards a true sense of self as he casts off his mistrust and fear of others, and that his need to spend some time alone is part of that process. As if to confirm his need to connect his past and present, Cedric buys a package of Oodles of Noodles, to remind him of home.

Cedric's studies have finally come full circle, informing his personal sense of racial identity—this demonstrates one of the most valuable parts of a college education, connecting one's studies to their lived experience. Cedric is beginning to understand his place at Brown in terms of his class and race, but he is also learning about himself as a person, separate from these larger societal roles. He connects to his childhood through the noodles, which remind him of the times when money was tight back at home.

Back in his dorm room, Cedric receives a call from Clarence Taylor, his old chemistry teacher, who happens to be in Providence as he is traveling to Boston for a marathon. They meet up briefly, and talk about academics, until Mr. Taylor hands Cedric a Bible study magazine as a gift. Cedric thanks him for the gift but does not seem to know what to do with it. Before he leaves, Mr. Taylor then recites a line from scripture, and Cedric knows that the teacher expects him to respond with something equally profound. He simply tells Mr. Taylor that yes, he has indeed quoted the Bible correctly (unlike in the past), but that he actually appreciates it when the man gets a few of the words wrong.

Cedric did not go to visit Mr. Taylor when he returned to Washington, D.C., for break, implying he was not ready to face his former teacher and mentor yet, because he still felt that his sense of self was in flux. The fact that Mr. Taylor decides to visit Cedric demonstrates how much of an impact this student has had on his teacher, and how far this teacher will go to check up on Cedric. This deep connection is a testament to the dedication of teachers at Ballou.

Cedric then reminds Mr. Taylor of one of his quotations, about "a hope in the unseen," and tells him that it has always stuck with him. He has imagined the unseen as a place, but he knows that before he can arrive at that place, he must know who he is, and deal with the issues he has brought with him to Brown. Mr. Taylor responds that the unseen may be a place in his heart, rather than a geographical space. With that, Mr. Taylor leaves, hugging Cedric and wishing him well; Cedric leaves the Bible study magazine on a stoop, having little need for it and leaving it for someone who might find a use for it.

Cedric's brief interaction with Mr. Taylor helps him to articulate some of his feelings about his time at Brown, and gives him just a little bit more perspective on his journey. And while they discuss topics related to religion—like the scripture that Mr. Taylor usually misquotes—Cedric is not particularly interested in engaging with his former teacher on the topic of religion, and avoids it altogether.

Cedric decides to go to Harambee House with Chiniqua and some friends, and he has dressed up for the party, wearing his new beige coat and a leather hat that his mother bought for him. Chiniqua tries to convince him to dance at the party, despite the fact that he doesn't dance in public. Cedric finds a spot on the couch, and watches Chiniqua and another friend dance on the nearly empty dance floor. But when two young men join them, Cedric is annoyed at himself for being inept. All of his life, he has worked against the expectations of a drug dealer's son, and did not dance, play sports, drink, or do drugs. He is still paying for this alternative path he forged for himself, he thinks.

After agonizing over this decision for nearly the entire year, Cedric has finally decided to try visiting Harambee House and surrounding himself with other black students at Brown. This experience starts off badly, as Cedric has actively chosen to avoid the activities associated with black men, and the fact that everyone else is dancing sends him into another identity crisis. Despite the fact that he has chosen to dress the part exacerbates the problem, as it seems that he does want to fit in, but can't.

As he watches the dance floor fill up with middle-class black students, wearing clothes that only a few years ago would have been more appropriate for drug dealers and crew members in his high school, Cedric realizes that there is not much difference between these students and the suburban white kids, in terms of privilege. But these black kids were able to pick and choose their identities, co-opting authentic black characteristics and looks, while he had little choice in the matter. He is worried that even at Harambee house, he is a fake, an inferior imitation of these confident black men. He decides to leave the party and walk home alone.

Cedric is once again concerned with the appropriation of black culture. Earlier in the story, Cedric criticized Zayd for copying his clothing style without truly understanding what it is like to be black; now, it is the black students at Brown, most of whom come from middle class backgrounds, who are co-opting the styles that Cedric associates with the inner-city past he wants to move away from.

CHAPTER 14: MEETING THE MAN

The school year is nearing its end, and Cedric is able to partake in another first—the Fugees performance is his first pop concert. He feels completely at home in the crowd, and realizes that he now needs to finish out this first year by passing his classes. He is most concerned about psychology, and goes to meet with his professor, who gives him good advice about taking notes and studying. In addition, the professor—who has seen many of his African American students drop out after freshman year—agrees to consider "demonstrated progress" when calculating Cedric's grade for the semester, allowing him to pass despite his failing grade on the first midterm.

The fact that the Fugees are performing at Brown is significant, as they are a group of black performers who enjoyed immense success among white college students, echoing Cedric's integration into the majority-white student population at Brown. In his academic work, Cedric has challenged himself, but his psychology professor still ends up seeing him through the lens of race, offering to help boost his grade in order to maintain diversity on the Brown campus.

The only other task at hand is Cedric's final paper for his education class—he needs to do well on this paper if he wants to double major in education. He thinks about his experience at Slater Junior High School, and with Mr. Fleming, whom he has come to appreciate a little more than when he first met the man, especially because he seems to be able to get through to the students. Cedric also recalls searching through the hallways of the school to see if he could pick out a future Cedric, and wondering how many students there might be whose potential is dimmed by the despair of their surroundings. He begins to write his paper, focused—as always—on getting an A.

Cedric's possible education major is fitting, as much of his life has been focused on academic achievement and making the most of the underserved schools in his neighborhood. His major stumbling block is finding the emotional distance from the topic to shake off his anger and take on the perspective of a scholar. While he is focused on the grade he will earn in the class, the larger outcome is that he is developing college-level skills.

Nearing the very end of the year, the relationship between Rob and Cedric is strained again. They have been at war over their dorm sink, after Rob shaved and neglected to clean out his hairs. Cedric responded by adding baby powder and lotion, and Rob followed up with chocolate syrup, and then Cedric added hair from his freshly shaven head, and so on. Rob realizes that this work of modern art is their way of expressing their frustration at each other. He leaves the sink alone for the moment, noting that it could use a dash of ketchup and getting back to his schoolwork. He is worried about exams, although he knows that even if he were to fail, his family would still love him just the same.

The battles between Rob and Cedric are now becoming comical, and are beginning to look more the typical tensions between roommates, outside of race and class differences. While the origin of this particular disagreement is still cultural in nature—based on Rob's disdain for cleaning that conflicts with Cedric's need for tidiness and organization—their inability to communicate at a time when they are stressed over finals is a very common story among freshman-year roommates.

After his chemistry final, Rob wanders down to Café Paragon for a beer and some social time with friends before leaving in the morning. He has painted his fingernails blue, along with some of his friends from the unit, and enjoys the looks he is getting from people at the café, knowing that there may be more to Rob than they have come to expect. In the morning, his father comes to pick him up and Rob says his goodbyes to the friends who are still left on campus. He also attempts to say goodbye to Cedric, but his roommate hardly looks up from his calculus book and says nothing in return. In fact, Cedric does respond to Rob, but only once he is nearly out the door, and Cedric cannot be sure that his roommate has heard him.

As the perspective shifts briefly towards Rob and his final days of freshman year, it is interesting to see that he, too, has opened up and changed. While they may seem frivolous in comparison with Cedric's momentous struggles at the intersection of race and class, the changes in Rob are not insignificant. For this straight-laced, affluent college student, painting his fingernails blue offers a small way to visually represent his rebellion and openness to new people and experiences. This openness, and Cedric's changes, will allow them to make friends in the future.

Cedric is frustrated at himself, and at his inability to reciprocate Rob's offer of peace until it was too late. He knows that he will replay the conversation throughout the summer, and it will eat at him. Barbara recently told him that his conflict with Rob was a test from God, and that he would continue to have these same types of conflicts until he got it right. Cedric agrees, and promises himself that he will reach out to Rob next year, when they no longer have to live together. Later that afternoon, Cedric returns to his dorm to see Zayd waiting for him, ready to leave but wanting to say goodbye. Zayd reaches out to hug Cedric, and although this is a level of intimacy that Cedric is not used to, he returns the hug.

When Cedric views his conflict with Rob as a test from God, he is able to create some emotional distance from it, and resolve to do better in the future. Although Cedric has been doubting his connection to Scripture Cathedral throughout this year, he certainly has not lost his religious foundation, and still uses his faith as a compass to direct his actions. He has, however, become more open to displays of affection that he would have previously considered un-masculine.

Back in Washington, D.C., Barbara is making a last-minute attempt to find money to cover her back rent and penalties. She is at the United Planning Office, where she learns that while she needs to pay $2,790 to keep from being evicted, they can only offer her $491 this month. She returns home, panicked and noticing a tingling feeling in her left side, when she realizes that she has one more option. She calls Minister Borden, the assistant pastor at Scripture Cathedral, and explains her predicament. He is unsure if he can help, but he promises to try. She hangs up the phone and Cedric comes into the living room, and she finally musters the courage to tell him what is happening.

Barbara is making a last-ditch attempt to save herself from eviction, when she should have asked for help months earlier, when the problem was still manageable. When the government fails to come through with a miracle, she reaches out to Scripture Cathedral in the hopes that all of the money she has given to the church will finally be returned to her, tenfold, as Bishop Long has always promised. She has also been keeping this information from her son, out of fear and shame.

Barbara feels ashamed, but she has to tell Cedric, because if Minister Borden doesn't come up with the money, they will be evicted at 1 P.M. Cedric is furious with her, telling her that she has committed "the sin of pride" by refusing to tell anyone or ask for help. He reminds her that he could have used the money from Dr. Korb, that he wouldn't have spent that money on CDs, but now he is facing the prospect of homelessness because his mother did not want to burden him with her problems. She acknowledges that she has handled this badly, and that the stress has been causing her medical problems—she had chest pains recently, and was sent to a cardiologist. Cedric can do nothing but go to his room and cry alone.

This conversation between Barbara and her son demonstrates how much they have both changed in the past year: Barbara is no longer Cedric's protector, and Cedric no longer needs his mother to take care of him. Instead, he is in a position to help—he could give his money from Dr. Korb to Barbara for rent—but she is not yet ready to accept these new roles. Barbara has suffered emotionally since Cedric left, and her inability to share her feelings with Cedric makes him feel sad and alone.

At 12:40 P.M., Barbara opens the door to Steve Turner from the U.S. Marshals, who has come to evict her, along with a moving crew. They are ready to take all of her belongings and place them on the street, and lock the door behind them, sealing Barbara out of the place she has called home. However, Barbara still has until the door is locked to come up with the money, though there is no guarantee that they will return her belongings to her apartment. She decides to tell Steve Turner that a minster from her church might come with the money, and he asks the movers to slow down a bit. When they move towards Cedric's room, he blocks the doorway and keeps them out for the moment.

While this is not the first time that Barbara has ever been evicted, it is a much more difficult experience—she has already lost Cedric to college, and she is losing her home as well. The interaction between Barbara, the U.S. Marshal, and the movers is an interesting display of class differences. The Marshal takes pity on Barbara as she holds on to her last hope, but the movers—who are working-class people like her—have no interest in waiting around or hearing Barbara's excuses.

Steve Turner's assistant is guarding Barbara's belongings outside on the street, because until the move is finished, she and Cedric are still officially tenants. There is a growing crowd waiting for the process to finish so that they can pick through the items and take them home—one woman is already checking out a lamp, wondering if there is a match to it. Turner comments to Barbara that even though the movers are going as slowly as they can, the process will end soon. At that moment, Minister Borden barges in with a cashier's check for the full amount, but it is made out to the Marshal's Service and not the realty company, so he must go back to the bank and make the change. He even offers the movers $80 to move the items back into the apartment.

When someone's belongings are moved on to the street during an eviction, the neighbors often come crowd around to pick at the items like vultures, calling into question any loyalty among the residents of this neighborhood. The Marshal and his assistant are keeping the scavengers at bay, maintaining order and respect in the process. But luckily for Barbara, the church does come through for her at the very last minute. Barbara has put her faith into Scripture Cathedral, and the minister's actions have only increased her faith and dependence.

Minister Borden returns with a new check, but he is short $40, so he pays the rest in cash. This money was part of the $80 he promised the movers, and they are upset when they realize they will only be getting half as much as they thought. Neddy, who has shown up only a few minutes earlier, pitches in with another $40, and the movers leave, pacified. Barbara goes back into her apartment, happy to have a place to live, even though she knows that this money from Minister Borden is a loan she must repay. Neddy offers to take out a bank loan to help her, and then goes in to talk to Cedric. He tells her that he doesn't belong there anymore.

Despite the fact that Barbara has given her last dollar to the church on many occasions, the money to save her from her eviction is just a loan that she must repay, proving that her contributions will not actually come back to her. This series of events had taught Barbara nothing, and she will continue to be irresponsible with money and beholden to the church, secure in the faith that she will be saved again—but the church will not save her a second time.

In the days since the near-eviction, Cedric has not talked to Barbara at all. He is angry, and this anger has overtaken the guilt he has been feeling about leaving his old neighborhood and life behind. He knows that he no longer belongs in Washington, D.C., and that he must find his own way from now on. He first goes to visit his father, whom he has not seen in two years. He feels different about their relationship—less intimidated, and ready to have a more direct conversation with Cedric, Sr., and ask some questions that have been bothering him for a while.

Cedric has learned a lot about personal responsibility during his time at Brown, and much of this wisdom directly contradicts what he sees around him in Washington, D.C., signaling that he has outgrown the world where he grew up. In middle-class families, leaving the nest is a normal part of life, but for the Jennings, this is a painful separation. To make a truly clean break, Cedric must also speak with his father.

Cedric Gilliam greets his son, and immediately asks about the girls at Brown, which is exactly what Cedric expected from him. They move on to talk about academics for a moment, and then Cedric launches in with his questions. He asks if Cedric, Sr., loved Barbara, which catches the man off guard. He responds that he is not much of one to talk about it or use "that word," which makes Cedric repeat the word—"*love*. The word *love*." Cedric takes this non-answer as proof that it was just about sex for his father. They sit in silence for a moment, and then Cedric, Sr., announces that he's getting out of prison the very next day, and has a spot in a drug treatment program. Cedric congratulates him, and then leaves.

Cedric's conversation with his father illustrates the vast difference between the two men in terms of their conceptions of masculinity and value in society. While Cedric is particularly proud of his academic achievement, his father has little interest in that, and only wants his son to prove his manliness through sexual conquest. Cedric learns that his father never loved his mother, and that she was merely a victim of Cedric, Sr.'s toxic masculinity. This ensures that Cedric and his father have nothing in common.

Cedric receives his grades from Brown: he got an A in calculus, a B in his education fieldwork seminar, and two S's (for satisfactory), in Spanish and psychology. He is proud to have completed his first year at Brown, and he knows that his mother would be happy to know about his grades, but he does not want to tell her. He does not want her to live through him anymore—she must find her own happiness, and start taking better care of herself. He knows that she has not been to the doctor about her chest pains, and instead has simply been praying about it.

Cedric's mother would like nothing better than to bask in the glow of her son's success, this is another way in which she has become dependent on others and has shortchanged herself in the past year. Cedric has little sympathy for his mother's struggles, and decides that the best way to teach her a lesson is by withholding the thing she wants most—her source of pride.

A few weeks later, Cedric dresses and goes to church to speak with Bishop Long. They talk about Barbara first, and Bishop Long tells Cedric that she must rely on her faith to get her out of her financial difficulties. When Cedric expresses shame over what has happened, Long replies that there have been many people in the church who have gone through the same experiences. Finally, Cedric gets around to what he really wants to say: he still believes in God, but no longer feels a connection to the church, and is ready to leave permanently. Long understands this, and tells Cedric that as long as he carries God within him, he will be fine.

Cedric's conversation with his pastor is long overdue, and Bishop Long has expected that this college-educated young man would begin to see the weaknesses in the church's philosophy. The fact that Cedric has come to have this conversation with Bishop Long demonstrates the deep respect that he has for the man and for the church, despite the fact that it is no longer meeting his needs. Long knows that Cedric's mother will remain faithful, and that is enough for him.

Cedric goes to church on Sunday, without Barbara, who is sleeping in. He does not want to separate from the church entirely, and wants Bishop Long to understand that he will be attending every once in a while. Before the service starts, he sees a good friend of his mother's, and tells her that he is worried about Barbara. The woman tells Cedric that Barbara will be just fine, but he then reveals that she has been having chest pains, and that he gets up during the night to check on her. A few days later, Barbara returns from church, having talked to her friend. She tells Cedric that he doesn't need to worry, and that she will be taking care of herself from now on. And after weeks without speaking, they embrace, and both burst into tears.

Cedric's visit to Scripture Cathedral illustrates the profound social role that the church has had in the Jennings' lives. Even after leaving the church, Cedric attends out of respect for the people who have known him since childhood. He also goes to talk with Barbara's friends, hoping that they will be able to help her when he is not around. Barbara is not often comfortable confiding in others, and so Cedric needs to ensure that someone is available to her, looking after her as she has always looked after Cedric.

EPILOGUE

In 1997, Cedric begins his junior year at Brown, and is beginning to feel more comfortable in this new world he has found for himself. Many of his classmates from Ballou have not had the same success after graduation: Phillip Atkins is still working in the mailroom; LaTisha has dropped out of college and joined a fundamentalist church, later quitting her job to sell candy on the sidewalk to support the church. Cedric's father successfully completed his drug treatment program and has stayed clean, and he is trying to repair his relationship with his son, albeit slowly. Barbara was eventually evicted, and the church did not come to save her a second time; this gave her the motivation she needed to start repaying her debts and take better care of herself. She and Cedric stay in touch and spend time together, now that their relationship has evolved.

This long-range view of the fates of Cedric and his friends and family demonstrates how important—and necessary—college was for Cedric. He continues to work on his academic and social development, while the people he has left behind are no further than they were when he left. Much of what holds his friends back is related to their religious connections—Phillip's ambitions have been crushed by his father's devotion to the Jehovah's Witnesses, LaTisha has given herself over to fundamentalism, and Barbara allowed her faith to cloud her judgment again.

Cedric and Rob did eventually become friends, and laughed together about their passive-aggressive sink decoration from freshman year. Most of Cedric's friends are black, however, and he spends much of his time at Harambee House, and is dating a basketball player named Nicole Brown. He works at the admissions office to supplement the money he receives from Dr. Korb—and it is on those lazy days at work that Cedric thinks about his past, and how he always felt that he had "something to push against." He no longer feels that anymore, and he doesn't miss it, either.

Cedric has finally found the self-confidence to spend time with other black students without losing his sense of self. He has also released the anger that pushed him, and replaced it with a simple sense of ambition that will propel him forward without causing him deep pain at the same time.

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